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THE PILLARS OF THE HOUSE

OR

UNDER WODE, UNDER RODE

BY

CHARLOTTE M. YONGE

VOL. I

ILLUSTRATED BY HERBERT GANDY

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THE PILLARS OF THE HOUSE

OR

UNDER WODE, UNDER RODE

CHAPTER I

THE BIRTHDAY GIFT

'O I've got a plum-cake, and a feast let us make,
Come, school-fellows, come at my call;
I assure you 'tis nice, and we'll all have a slice,
Here's more than enough for us all.'

JANE TAYLOR.

'It is come! Felix, it is come!'

So cried, shouted, shrieked a chorus, as a street door was torn open to admit four boys, with their leathern straps of books over their shoulders. They set up a responsive yell of 'Jolly! Jolly!' which being caught up and re-echoed by at least five voices within, caused a considerable volume of sound in the narrow entry and narrower staircase, up which might be seen a sort of pyramid of children.

'Where is it?' asked the tallest of the four arrivals, as he soberly hung up his hat.

'Mamma has got it in the drawing-room, and Papa has been in ever

since dinner,' was the universal cry from two fine-complexioned, handsome girls, from a much smaller girl and boy, and from a creature rolling on the stairs, whose sex and speech seemed as yet uncertain.

'And where's Cherry?' was the further question; 'is she there too?'

'Yes, but--' as he laid his hand on the door-- 'don't open the letter there. Get Cherry, and we'll settle what to do with it.'

'O Felix, I've a stunning notion!'

'Felix, promise to do what I want!'

'Felix, do pray buy me some Turkish delight!'

'Felix, I do want the big spotty horse.'

Such shouts and insinuations, all deserving the epithet of the first, pursued Felix as he entered a room, small, and with all the contents faded and worn, but with an air of having been once tasteful, and still made the best of. Contents we say advisedly, meaning not merely the furniture but the inmates, namely, the pale wan fragile mother, working, but with the baby on her knee, and looking as if care and toil had brought her to skin and bone, though still with sweet eyes and a lovely smile; the father, tall and picturesque, with straight handsome features, but with a hectic colour, wasted cheek, and lustrous eye, that were sad earnest of the future. He was still under forty, his wife some years less; and elder than either in its expression of wasted suffering was the countenance of the little girl of thirteen years old who lay on the sofa, with pencil, paper, and book, her face with her mother's features exaggerated into a look at once keen and patient, all three forming a sad contrast to the solid exuberant health on the other side the door.

Truly the boy who entered was a picture of sturdy English vigour, stout-limbed, rosy-faced, clear eyed, open, and straight-forward looking, perhaps a little clumsy with the clumsiness of sixteen, especially when conscience required tearing spirits to be subdued to the endurance of the feeble. It was, however, a bright congratulating look that met him from the trio. The little girl started up, 'Your sovereign's come, Felix!'

The father showed his transparent-looking white teeth in a merry laugh. 'Here are the galleons, you boy named in a lucky hour! How many times have you spent them in fancy?'

The mother held up the letter, addressed to Master Felix Chester Underwood, No. 8 St. Oswald's Buildings, Bexley, and smiled as she said, 'Is it all right, my boy?'

'They want me to open it outside, Mamma!--Come, Whiteheart, we want you at the council.'

And putting his arm round his little sister Geraldine's waist, while she took up her small crutch, Felix disappeared with her, the mother looking wistfully after them, the father giving something between a laugh and a sigh.

'Then you decide against speaking to him,' said Mrs. Underwood.

'Poor children, yes. A little happiness will do them a great deal more good than the pound would do to us. The drops that will fill their little cup will but be lost in our sea.'

'Yes, I like what comes from Vale Leston to be still a festive matter,' said Mrs. Underwood; 'and at least we are sure the dear boy will never spend it selfishly. It only struck me whether he would not enjoy finding himself able to throw something into the common stock.'

'He would, honest lad,' said Mr. Underwood; 'but, Mamma, you are very hard-hearted towards the rabble. Even if this one pound would provide all the shoes and port wine that are pressing on the maternal mind, the stimulus of a day's treat would be much more wholesome.'

'But not for you,' said his wife.

'Yes for me. If the boy includes us old folks in his festivity, it will be as good as a week's port wine. You doubt, my sweet Enid. Has not our long honeymoon at Vale Leston helped us all this time?' Her name was Mary, but having once declared her to be a woman made of the same stuff as Enid, he had made it his pet title for her.

Mrs. Underwood's thoughts went far away into the long ago of Vale Leston. She could hardly believe that nine years only had passed since that seven-years' honeymoon. She was a woman of the fewest possible words, and her husband generally answered her face instead of her voice.

Vale Leston had promised to be an ample provision when Edward Underwood had resigned his fellowship to marry the Rector's niece and adopted daughter, his own distant cousin, with the assurance of being presented to the living hereafter, and acting in the meantime as curate. It was a family living, always held conjointly with a tolerably good estate, enough to qualify the owner for the dangerous position of 'squarson,' as no doubt many a clerical Underwood had been ever since their branch had grown out from the stem of the elder line, which had now disappeared. These comfortable quarters had seemed a matter of certainty, until the uncle died suddenly and with a flaw in his will, so that the undesirable nephew and heir-at-law whom he had desired to exclude, a rich dissipated man, son to a brother older than the father of the favourite niece, had stepped in, and differing in toto from Edward Underwood, had made his own son take orders for the sake of the living, and it had been the effort of the young wife ever since not to disobey her husband by showing that it had been to her the being driven out of paradise.

ASSISTANT CURACY.--A Priest of Catholic opinions is needed at a town parish. Resident Rector and three Curates. Daily Prayers. Choral Service on Sundays and Holy-days. Weekly Communion.--Apply to P. C. B., St. Oswald's Rectory, Bexley.

Every one knows the sort of advertisement which had brought Mr. Underwood to Bexley, as a place which would accord with the doctrines and practices dear to him. Indeed, apart from the advertisement, Bexley had a fame. A great rubrical war had there been fought out by the Rector of St. Oswald's, and when he had become a colonial Bishop, his successor was reported to have carried on his work; and the beauty of the restored church, and the exquisite services, were so generally talked of, that Mr. Underwood thought himself fortunate in obtaining the appointment. Mr. Bevan too, the Rector, was an exceedingly courteous, kindly-mannered man, talking in a soft low voice in the most affectionate and considerate manner, and with good taste and judgment that exceedingly struck and pleased the new curate. It was the more surprise to him to find the congregations thin, and a general languor and indifference about the people who attended the church. There was also a good deal of opposition in the parish, some old sullen seceders who went to a neighbouring proprietary chapel, many more of erratic tastes haunted the places of worship of the numerous sects, who swarmed in the town, and many more were living in a state of town heathenism.

It was not long before the perception of the cause began to grow upon Mr. Underwood. The machinery was perfect, but the spring was failing; the salt was there, but where was the savour? The discourses he heard from his rector were in one point of view faultless, but the old Scottish word 'fashionless' would rise into his thoughts whenever they ended, and something of effect and point was sure to fail; they were bodies without souls, and might well satisfy a certain excellent solicitor, who always praised them as 'just the right medium, sober, moderate, and unexciting.'

In the first pleasure of a strong, active, and enterprising man, at finding his plans unopposed by authority, Mr. Underwood had been delighted with his rectory ready consent to whatever he undertook, and was the last person to perceive that Mr. Bevan, though objecting to nothing, let all the rough and tough work lapse upon his curates, and took nothing but the graceful representative part. Even then, Mr. Underwood had something to say in his defence; Mr. Bevan was valetudinarian in his habits, and besides--he was in the midst of a courtship--after his marriage he would give his mind to his parish.

For Mr. Bevan, hitherto a confirmed and rather precise and luxurious bachelor, to the general surprise, married a certain Lady Price, the young widow of an old admiral, and with her began a new regime.

My Lady, as every one called her, since she retained her title and name, was by no means desirous of altering the ornamental

arrangements in church, which she regarded with pride; but she was doubly anxious to guard her husband's health, and she also had the sharpest eye to the main chance. Hitherto, whatever had been the disappointments and shortcomings at the Rectory, there had been free-handed expenditure, and no stint either in charity or the expenses connected with the service; but Lady Price had no notion of taking on her uncalled-for outlay. The parish must do its part, and it was called on to do so in modes that did not add to the Rector's popularity. Moreover, the arrangements were on the principle of getting as much as possible out of everybody, and no official failed to feel the pinch. The Rector was as bland, gentle, and obliging as ever; but he seldom transacted any affairs that he could help; and in the six years that had elapsed since the marriage, every person connected with the church had changed, except Mr. Underwood.

Yet perhaps as senior curate, he had felt the alteration most heavily. He had to be, or to refuse to be, my Lady's instrument in her various appeals; he came in for her indignation at wastefulness, and at the unauthorised demands on the Rector; he had to feel what it was to have no longer unlimited resources of broth and wine to fall back upon at the Rectory; he had to supply the shortcomings of the new staff brought in on lower terms--and all this, moreover, when his own health and vigour were beginning to fail.

Lady Price did not like him or his family. They were poor, and she distrusted the poor; and what was worse, she knew they were better born and better bred than herself, and had higher aims. Gentle Mrs. Underwood, absorbed in household cares, no more thought of rivalry with her than with the Queen; but the soft movement, the low voice, the quiet sweep of the worn garments, were a constant vexation to my Lady, who having once pronounced the curate's wife affected, held to her opinion. With Mr. Underwood she had had a fight or two, and had not conquered, and now they were on terms of perfect respect and civility on his side, and of distance and politeness on hers. She might talk of him half contemptuously, but she never durst show herself otherwise than civil, though she was always longing to bring in some more deferential person in his place, and, whenever illness interfered with his duties, she spoke largely to her friends of the impropriety of a man's undertaking what he could not perform.

One of her reductions had been the economising the third curate, while making the second be always a neophyte, who received his title for Orders, and remained his two years upon a small stipend.

The change last Easter, which had substituted a deacon for a priest, had fallen heavily on Mr. Underwood, and would have been heavier still, but that the new comer, Charles Audley, had attached himself warmly to him. The young man was the son of a family of rank and connection, and Lady Price's vanity was flattered by obtaining his assistance; but her vexation was proportionably excited by his preference for the Underwood household, where, in truth--with all its poverty--he found the only atmosphere thoroughly congenial to him in all the parish of St. Oswald's.

Speedily comprehending the state of things, he put his vigorous young shoulder to the wheel, and, full of affectionate love and admiration for Mr. Underwood, spared himself nothing in the hope of saving him fatigue or exertion, quietly gave up his own holidays, was always at his post, and had hitherto so far lightened Mr. Underwood's toil, that he was undoubtedly getting through this summer better than the last, for his bodily frame had long been affected by the increased amount of toil in an ungenial atmosphere, and every access of cold weather had told on him in throat and chest attacks, which, with characteristic buoyancy, he would not believe serious. He never deemed himself aught but 'better,' and the invalid habits that crept on him by stealth, always seemed to his brave spirit consequent on a day's extra fatigue, or the last attention to a departing cough. Alas! when every day's fatigue was extra, the cough always depart_ing_, never depart_ed_.

Yet, though it had become a standing order in the house, that for an hour after papa came in from his rounds, no one of the children should be in the drawing-room, except poor little lame Geraldine, who was permanently established there; and that afterwards, even on strong compulsion, they should only come in one by one, as quietly as possible, he never ceased to apologise to them for their banishment when he felt it needful, and when he was at ease, would renew the merriment that sometimes cost him dear.

The children had, for the most part, inherited that precious heirloom of contentment and elasticity, and were as happy in nooks and corners in bedroom, nursery, staircase or kitchen, as they could have been in extensive play-rooms and gardens.

See them in full council upon the expenditure of the annual gift that an old admiral at Vale Leston, who was godfather to Felix, was wont to send the boy on his birthday--that third of July, which had seemed so bright, when birthdays had begun in the family, that no name save Felix could adequately express his parent's feelings.

Mr. and Mrs. Underwood had fancies as to nomenclature; and that staircaseful of children rejoiced in eccentric appellations. To begin at the bottom--here sat on a hassock, her back against the wall, her sharp old fairy's face uplifted, little Geraldine, otherwise Cherry, a title that had suited her round rosiness well, till after the first winter at Bexley, when the miseries of a diseased ankle-joint had set in, and paled her into the tender aliases of White-heart, or Sweet-heart. She was, as might be plainly seen in her grey eyes, a clever child; and teaching her was a great delight to her father, and often interested him when he was unequal to anything else. Her dark eyebrows frowned with anxiety as she lifted up her little pointed chin to watch sturdy frank-faced Felix, who with elaborate slowness dealt with the envelope, tasting slowly of the excitement it created, and edging away from the baluster, on which, causing it to contribute frightful creaks to the general Babel, were perched numbers 4, 6, 7, and 8, to wit, Edgar, Clement, Fulbert, and Lancelot, all three

handsome, blue-eyed, fair-faced lads. Indeed Edgar was remarkable, even among this decidedly fine-looking family. He had a peculiarly delicate contour of feature and complexion, though perfectly healthy; and there was something of the same expression, half keen, half dreamy, as in Geraldine, his junior by one year; while the grace of all the attitudes of his slender lissome figure showed to advantage beside Felix's more sturdy form, and deliberate or downright movements; while Clement was paler, slighter, and with rather infantine features, and shining wavy brown hair, that nothing ever seemed to ruffle, looked so much as if he ought to have been a girl, that Tina, short for Clementina, was his school name. Fulbert, stout, square, fat-cheeked, and permanently rough and dusty, looked as if he hardly belonged to the rest.

The four eldest were day-scholars at the city grammar-school; but Lancelot, a bright-faced little fellow in knickerbockers, was a pupil of whoever would or could teach him at home, as was the little girl who was clinging to his leg, and whose name of Robina seemed to have moulded her into some curious likeness to a robin-redbreast, with her brown soft hair, rosy cheeks, bright merry eyes, plump form, and quick loving audacity. Above her sat a girl of fifteen, with the family features in their prettiest development--the chiseled straight profile, the clear white roseately tinted skin, the large well-opened azure eyes, the profuse glossy hair, the long, slender, graceful limbs, and that pretty head leant against the knees of her own very counterpart; for these were Wilmet and Alda, the twin girls who had succeeded Felix, and whose beauty had been the marvel of Vale Leston, their shabby dress the scorn of the day school at Bexley. And forming the apex of the pyramid, perched astride on the very shoulders of much-enduring Wilmet, was three years old Angela--Baby Bernard being quiescent in a cradle near mamma. N.B.--Mrs. Underwood, though her girls had such masculine names, had made so strong a protest against their being called by boyish abbreviations, that only in one case had nature been too strong for her, and Robina had turned into Bobbie. Wilmet's second name being Ursula, she was apt to be known as 'W.'W.

'Make haste, Felix, you intolerable boy! don't be so slow!' cried Alda.

'Is there a letter?' inquired Wilmet.

Yes, more's the pity!' said Felix. 'Now I shall have to answer it.'

'I'll do that, if you'll give me what's inside,' said Edgar.

'Is it there?' exclaimed Cherry, in a tone of doubt, that sent an electric thrill of dismay through the audience; Lance nearly toppling over, to the horror of the adjacent sisters, and the grave rebuke of Clement.

'If it should be a sell!' gasped Fulbert.

'Suppose it were,' said Felix gravely.

'Then, said Edgar, 'you can disown the old rogue Chester.'

'What stuff!' interposed Clement.

'I'd cut him out of my will on the spot,' persisted Edgar.

'But it is all right,' said Cherry, looking with quiet certainty into her brother's face; and he nodded and coloured at the same time.

'But it is not a pretty one,' said little Robina. 'Last year it was green, and before that red; and this is nasty stupid black and white, and all thin crackling paper.'

Felix laughed, and held up the document.

'What!' cried Fulbert. 'Five! Why, 'tisn't only five shillings! the horrid old cheat!'

'It's a five-pound note!' screamed Cherry. 'I saw one when Papa went to the bank! O Felix, Felix!'

A five-pound note! It seemed to take away the breath of those who knew what it meant, and then an exulting shout broke forth.

'Well,' said Edgar solemnly, 'old Chester is a brick! Three cheers for him!'

Which cheers having been perpetrated with due vociferation, the cry began, 'O Felix, what will you do with it?'

'Buy a pony!' cried Fulbert.

'A rocking-horse,' chirped Robina.

'Punch every week,' shouted Lance.

'A knife apiece,' said Fulbert.

'How can you all be so selfish?' pronounced Clement. 'Now a harmonium would be good to us all.'

'Then get some cotton, for our ears into the bargain, if Tina is to play on it,' said Edgar.

'I shall take the note to mother,' said the owner.

'Oh!' screamed all but Wilmet and Cherry, 'that's as bad as not having it at all!'

Maybe Felix thought so, for it was with a certain gravity and solemnity of demeanour that he entered the drawing-room, causing his father to exclaim, 'How now? No slip between cup and lip? Not

infelix, Felix?'

'No, papa, but it's this and I thought I ought to bring it.'

The dew at once was in the mother's eyes, as she sprang up and kissed the boy's brow, saying, 'Felix, dear, don't show it to me. You were meant to be happy with it. Go and be so.'

'Stay,' said Mr. Underwood, Felix will really enjoy helping us to this extent more than any private expenditure. Is it not so, my boy? Well then, I propose that the sovereign of old prescriptive right should go to his menus plaisirs, and the rest to something needful; but he shall say to what. Said I well, old fellow?'

'Oh, thank you, thank you!' cried Felix ardently.

'Thank me for permission to do as you will with your own?' smiled Mr. Underwood.

'You will choose, then, Felix?' said his mother wistfully, her desires divided between port wine for papa and pale ale for Geraldine.

'Yes, mamma,' was the prompt answer. 'Then, please, let Wilmet and Alda be rigged out fresh for Sundays.'

'Wilmet and Alda!' exclaimed Mamma.

'Yes, I should like that better than anything, please,' said the boy. 'All our fellows say they would be the prettiest girls in all Bexley, if they were properly dressed; and those horrid girls at Miss Pearson's lead them a life about those old black hats.'

'Poor dears! I have found Alda crying when she was dressing for church,' mused Mrs. Underwood; 'and though I have scolded her, I could have cried too, to think how unlike their girlhood is to mine.'

'And if you went to fetch them home from school, you would know how bad it is, Mamma,' said Felix. 'Wilmet does not mind it, but Alda cries, and the sneaking girls do it the more; and they are girls; so one can't lick them; and they have not all got brothers.'

'To be licked instead!' said Mr. Underwood, unable to help being amused.

'Well, yes, Papa; and so you see it would be no end of a comfort to make them look like the rest.'

'By all means, Felix. The ladies can tell how far your benefaction will go; but as far as it can accomplish, the twins shall be resplendent. Now then, back to your anxious clients. Only tell me first how my kind old friend the Admiral is.'

'Here's his letter, Father; I quite forgot to read it.'

'Some day, I hope, you will know him enough to care for him personally. Now you may be off.--Nay, Enid, love, your daughters could not have lived much longer without clothes to their backs.'

'Oh, yes, it must have been done,' sighed the poor mother; 'but I fancied Felix would have thought of you first.'

'He thought of troubles much more felt than any of mine. Poor children! the hard apprenticeship will serve them all their lives.'

Meantime Felix returned with the words, 'Hurrah! we are to have the sovereign just as usual; and all the rest is to go to turn out Wilmet and Alda like respectable young females.--Hollo, now!'

For Alda had precipitated herself downstairs, to throttle him with her embraces; while Cherry cried out, 'That's right! Oh, do get those dear white hats you told me about;' but the public, even there a many-headed monster thing, was less content.

'What, all in girls' trumpery?' 'That's the stupidest sell I ever heard of!' 'Oh, I did so want a pony!' were the cries of the boys.

Even Robina was so far infected as to cry, 'I wanted a ride.'

And Wilmet reproachfully exclaimed, 'O Felix, you should have got something for Papa. Don't you know, Mr. Rugg said he ought to have a respirator. It is a great shame.'

'I don't think he would have let me, Wilmet,' said Felix, looking up; 'and I never thought of it. Besides, I can't have those girls making asses of themselves at you.'

'Oh no, don't listen to Wilmet!' cried Alda. 'You are the very best brother in all the world! Now we shall be fit to be seen at the break up. I don't think I could have played my piece if I knew every one was looking at my horrid old alpaca.'

'And there'll be hats for Cherry and Bobbie too!' entreated Wilmet.

'Oh, don't put it into their heads!' gasped Alda.

'No, I'll have you two fit to be seen first, said Felix.

'Well, it's a horrid shame,' grumbled Fulbert; 'we have always all gone shares in Felix's Birthday tip.'

'So you do now,' said Felix; 'there's the pound all the same as usual.'

That pound was always being spent in imagination; and the voices broke out again.

'Oh, then Papa can have the respirator!'

'Felix, the rocking-horse!'

'Felix, do get us three little cannon to make a jolly row every birthday!'

'Felix, do you know that Charlie Froggatt says he would sell that big Newfoundland for a pound? and that would be among us all.'

'Nonsense, Fulbert! a big dog is always eating; but there is a concertina at Lake's.'

'Tina--tina--concertina! But, I say, Fee, there's Whiteheart been wishing her heart out all the time for a real good paint-box.'

'Oh, never mind that, Ed; no one would care for one but you and me, and the little ones would spoil all the paints.'

'Yes, resumed Wilmet, from her throne,--'it would be the worry of one's life to keep the little ones off them; and baby would be poisoned to a dead certainty. Now the respirator--'

'Now the concertina--'

'Now Punch--'

'Now the dog--'

'Now the rocking-horse--'

'Now the cannon--'

'I'll tell you what,' said Felix, 'I've settled how it is to be. We'll get John Harper's van, and all go out to the Castle, with a jolly cold dinner--yes, you, Cherry, and all; Ed and I will carry you--and dine on the grass, and--'

A chorus of shouts interrupted him, all ecstatic, and rendered more emphatic by the stamping of feet.

'And Angela will go!' added. Wilmet.

'And Papa,' entreated Cherry.

'And Mamma too, if she will,' said Felix.

'And Mr. Audley,' pronounced Robina, echoed by Clement and Angela.
'Mr. Audley must go!'

'Mr. Audley!' grunted Felix. 'I want nobody but ourselves.'

'Yes, and if he went we could not stay jolly late. My Lady would make no end of a row if both curates cut the evening prayers.'

'For shame, Edgar!' cried the three elder girls.

While Wilmet added, 'We could not stay late, because of Papa and the little ones. But I don't want Mr. Audley, either.'

'No, no! Papa and he will talk to each other, and be of no use,' said Geraldine. 'Oh, how delicious! Will the wild-roses be out? When shall it be, Felix?'

'Well, the first fine day after school breaks up, I should say.'

'Hurrah! hurrah!'

And there was another dance, in the midst of which Mr. Underwood opened the door, to ask what honourable member was receiving such deafening cheers.

'Here! here he is, Papa!' cried Alda. 'He is going to take us all out to a picnic in the Castle woods; and won't you come, Papa?'

'O Papa, you will come!' said Felix. And the whole staircase bawled in accordance.

'Come! to be sure I will!' said his father; 'and only too glad to be asked! I trust we shall prove to have found the way to get the maximum of pleasure out of Admiral Chester's gift.'

'If Mamma will go,' said Felix. 'I wonder what the van will cost, and what will be left for the dinner.'

'Oh, let us two cook the whole dinner,' entreated the twins.

'Wait now,' said Felix. 'I didn't know it was so late, Father.' And he carefully helped his father on with his coat; and as a church bell made itself heard, set forth with him.

When the service was musical, Felix and his two next brothers both formed part of the choir; and though this was not the case on this evening, Felix knew that his mother was easier when he or Wilmet could watch over Papa's wraps.

And Mamma herself, with one at least of the twins, was busy enough in giving the lesser ones their supper, and disposing of them in bed, so that the discreet alone might remain to the later tea-drinking.

And 'Sibby' must be made a sharer of the good news in her lower region, though she was sure to disbelieve in Alda and Wilmet's amateur cookery.

Sibby was Wilmet's foster-mother. Poor thing! Mr. Underwood had found

her in dire need in the workhouse, a child herself of seventeen with a new-born babe, fresh from the discovery that the soldier-husband, as she thought, and who had at least gone before the praste with her,' and brought her from her Kilkenny home, was previously husband to another woman. She was tenderly cared for by Mr. Underwood's mother, who was then alive, and keeping house for the whole party at the Rectory; and having come into the Vale Leston nursery, she never left it. Her own child died in teething, and she clung so passionately to her nursling, that Mrs. Underwood had no heart to separate them, Roman Catholic though she was, and difficult to dispose of. She was not the usual talking merry Irishwoman; if ever she had been such, her heart was broken; and she was always meek, quiet, subdued, and attentive; forgetful sometimes, but tender and trustworthy to the last degree with the children.

She had held fast to the family in their reverses, and no more thought of not sharing their lot than one of their children. Indeed, it would not have been much more possible to send her out to shift for herself in England; and her own people seemed to have vanished in the famine, for her letters, with her savings, came back from the dead-letter office. She put her shoulder to the burthen, and, with one small scrub under her, got through an amazing amount of work: and though her great deep liquid brown eyes looked as pathetic as ever, she certainly was in far better spirits than when she sat in the nursery. To be sure, she was a much better nurse than she was a cook; but as both could not be had, Mrs. Underwood was content and thankful to have a servant so entirely one with themselves in interests and affections; and who had the further perfection of never wanting any society but the children's; shrinking from English gossips, and never showing a weakness, save for Irish tramps. Moreover, she was a prodigious knitter; and it was her boast that not one of the six young gentlemen had yet worn stocking or sock, but what came from her needles, and had been re-footed by her to the last extremity of wear.

Meantime, Felix and Clement walked with their father to the church. There it was, that handsome church; the evening sun in slanting beams coming through the gorgeous west window to the illuminated walls, and the rich inlaid marble and alabaster of the chancel mellowed by the pure evening light. The east window, done before glass-painting had improved, was tame and ill-executed, and there was, even aesthetically, a strange unsatisfactory feeling in looking at the heavy, though handsome, incrustations and arcades of dark marble that formed the reredos. It was all very correct; but it wanted life.

Mr. Bevan was not there, he had gone out to dinner, and the congregation consisted of some young ladies, old men, and three little children. Mr. Audley read all, save the Absolution and the Lessons; and the responses sounded low and feeble in the great church, though there was one voice among them glad and hearty in dedicating and entrusting the new year of his life with its unknown burthen.

Felix had heard sayings and seen looks which, boldly as his sanguine

spirit resisted them, would hang in a heavy boding cloud over his mind, and were already casting a grave shadow there.

And if the thought of his fivefold gift swelled the fervour of his 'Amen' to the General Thanksgiving, there was another deep heartfelt Amen, which breathed forth earnest gratitude for the possession of such a first-born son.

'That is a very good boy,' the father could not help saying to Mr. Audley, as, on quitting the churchyard, Felix exclaiming, 'Papa, may I just get it changed and ask about the van?' darted across the street, with Clement, into a large grocer's shop nearly opposite, where a brisk evening traffic was going on in the long daylight of hot July; and he could not but tell of the birthday-gift, and how it was to be spent. 'Res angusta domi,' he said, with a smile, 'is a thing to be thankful for, when it has such effects upon a lad.'

'You must add a small taste of example to the prescription,' said Mr. Audley. 'Is this all the birthday present Felix has had?'

'Well, I believe Cherry gave him one of her original designs; but birthdays are too numerous for us to stand presents.'

The other curate half-sighed. He was a great contrast--a much smaller man than his senior, slight, slim, and pale, but with no look of ill-health about him, brown eyed and haired, and with the indefinable look about all his appointments and dress, that showed he had lived in unconscious luxury and refinement all his days. His thoughts went back to a home, where the only perplexity was how to deal with an absolute glut of presents, and to his own actual doubts what to send that youngest sister, who would feel slighted if Charlie sent nothing, but really could not want anything; a book she would not read, a jewel could seldom get a turn of being worn, a trinket would only be fresh lumber for her room. Then he revolved the possibilities of making Felix a present, without silencing his father's confidences, and felt that it could not be done in any direct manner at present; nay, that it could hardly add to the radiant happiness of the boy, who rushed across the road, almost under the nose of the railway-omnibus horses, and exclaimed--

'He will let us have it for nothing, Father! He says it would be hiring it out, and he can't do that: but he would esteem it a great favour if we would go in it, and not pay anything, except just a shilling to Harris for a pint of beer. Won't it be jolly, Father?'

'Spicy would be more appropriate,' said Mr. Underwood, laughing, as the vehicle in question drew up at the shop door, with Mr. Harper's name and all his groceries inscribed in gold letters upon the awning.

'I'm so glad I thought of Harper's,' continued Felix. 'I asked him instead of Buff, because I knew Mamma would want it to be covered. Now there's lots of room; and we boys will walk up all the hills.'

'I hope there is room for me, Felix,' suggested Mr. Audley.

'Or,' suggested Mr. Underwood, 'you might, like John Gilpin, "ride on horseback after we."'

'Felix looks non-content,' said Mr. Audley. 'I am afraid I was not in his programme. Speak out--let us have it.'

'Why,' said Felix, looking down, 'our little ones all wanted to have you; but then we thought we should all be obliged to come home too soon, unless you took the service for Papa.'

'He certainly ought not to go to church after it,' said Mr. Audley; 'but I can settle that by riding home in good time. What's the day?'

'The day after the girls' break-up, if you please,' said Felix, still not perfectly happy, but unable to help himself; and manifesting quite enough reluctance to make his father ask, as soon as they had parted, what made him so ungracious.

'Only, Papa,' said Felix frankly, 'that we know that you and he will get into some Church talk, and then you'll be of no use; and we wanted to have it all to ourselves.'

'Take care, Felix,' said Mr. Underwood; 'large families are apt to get into a state of savage exclusiveness.'

Felix had to bear the drawback, and the groans it caused from Wilmet, Edgar, and Fulbert: the rest decidedly rejoiced. And Mr. Underwood privately confided the objection to his friend, observing merrily that they would bind themselves by a promise not to talk shop throughout the expedition.

It was a brilliantly, happy week. Pretty hats, bound with dark blue velvet, and fresh black silk jackets, were squeezed out of the four pounds, with the help of a few shillings out of the intended hire of the van, and were the glory of the whole family, both of those who were to wear them and those who were not.

On Saturday evening, just as the four elder young people were about to sally forth to do the marketing for their picnic, a great hamper made its appearance in the passage, addressed to F. C. Underwood, Esq., and with nothing to pay. Only there was a note fastened to the side, saying, 'Dear Felix, pray let the spicy van find room for my contribution to your picnic. I told my mother to send me what was proper from home.--C. S. A.'

Mrs. Underwood was dragged out to superintend the unpacking, which she greatly advised should be merely a surface investigation. That was quite enough, however, to assure her that for Felix to lay in any provision, except the tea and the bread she had already promised, would be entirely superfluous. The girls were disappointed of their cookery; but derived consolation from the long walk with the

brothers, in which a cake of good carmine and a lump of gamboge were purchased for Cherry, and two penny dolls for Robina and Angela. What would become of the rest of the pound?

On Sunday, the offertory was, as usual on ordinary occasions, rather scanty; but there was one half-sovereign; and Mr. Underwood was convinced that it had come from under the one white surplice that had still remained on the choir boys' bench.

He stayed in the vestry after the others to count and take care of the offerings, and as he took up the gold, he could not but look at his son, who was waiting for him, and who flushed all over as he met his eye. 'Yes, Papa, I wanted to tell you--I did grudge it at first,' he said hoarsely. 'I knew it was the tithe; but it seemed so much away from them all. I settled that two shillings was the tenth of my own share, and I would give that to-day; and then came Mr. Harper's kindness about the van; and next, when I was thinking how I could save the tenth part without stinting everybody, came all Mr. Audley's hamper. It is very strange and happy, Papa, and I have still something left.'

'I believe,' said Mr. Underwood, 'that you will find the considering the tithe as not your own, is the safest way of keeping poverty from grinding you, or wealth from spoiling you.'

And very affectionately he leant on his son's shoulder all the way home; while Mr. Audley was at luncheon at the Rectory with my Lady, and her twelve years old daughter.

'Mamma,' said Miss Price, 'did you see the Underwoods in new hats?'

'Of course I did, my dear. They were quite conspicuous enough; but when people make a great deal of their poverty, they always do break out in the most unexpected ways.'

'They are pretty girls' said the Rector, rather dreamily, 'and I suppose they must have new clothes sometimes.'

'You will always find,' proceeded Lady Price without regard, 'that people of that sort have a wonderful eye to the becoming--nothing economical for them! I am sorry for Mr. Underwood, his wife is bringing up a set of fine ladies, who will trust to their pretty looks, and be quite above doing anything for themselves.'

'Do you think Wilmet and Alda Underwood so very pretty, Mr. Audley?' inquired Miss Price, turning her precocious eyes upon him.

'Remarkably so,' Mr. Audley replied, with a courteous setting-down tone that was the only thing that ever approached to subduing Miss Price, and which set her pouting without an answer.

'It is a great misfortune to girls in that station of life to have that painted-doll sort of beauty,' added my Lady; 'and what was it I

heard about a picnic party?’

‘No party, my dear,’ replied the Rector, ‘only a little fresh air for the family--a day in Centry Park. Felix spends his birthday present from his godfather in taking them.’

Ah! I always was sure they had rich friends, though they keep it so close. Never let me hear of their poverty after this.’

Answers only rendered it worse, so my Lady had it her own way, and not being known to the public in St. Oswald’s Buildings, did not trouble them much. Yet there was a certain deference to public opinion there, when Alda was heard pouting, ‘Felix, why did you go to that horrid Harper? Just fancy Miss Price seeing us!’

‘Who cares for a stuck-up thing like Miss Price!’ growled Felix.

‘I don’t care for her,’ said Edgar; ‘but it is just as well to have some notion of things, and Felix hasn’t a grain. Why, all the fellows will be asking which of us is pepper, and which Souchong! I wouldn’t have Froggatt or Bruce see me in it at no price.’

‘Very well, stay at home, then,’ said Felix.

‘You could have had the waggonet from the Fortinbras Arms,’ said Alda.

‘Ay--for all my money, and not for love.’

‘For shame, Alda,’ said her twin sister; ‘how can you be so ridiculous!’

‘You know yourself, Wilmet, it is quite true; if any of the girls see us, we shall be labelled “The Groceries.”’

‘Get inside far enough, and they will not see you.’

‘Ay, but there’ll be that disgusting little Bobbie and Lance sitting in the front, making no end of row,’ said Edgar; ‘and the whole place will know that Mr. Underwood and his family are going out for a spree in old Harper’s van! Pah! I shall walk.’

‘So shall I,’ said Alda, ‘at least till we are out of the town; but that won’t do any good if those children will make themselves so horridly conspicuous. Could not we have the thing to meet us somewhere out of town, Felix?’

‘And how would you get Cherry there, or Mamma! Or Baby!--No, no, if you are too genteel for the van, you may walk.’

CHAPTER II

THE PICNIC

'There, on a slope of orchard, Francis laid
A damask napkin, wrought with horse and hound;
Brought out a dusky loaf that smelt of home,
And, half-cut down, a pasty costly made,
Where quail and pigeon, lark and leveret lay,
Like fossils of the rock, with golden yolks
Imbedded and injellied; last, with these
A flask of cider from his father's vats,
Prime which I knew;--and so we sat and ate.'

TENNYSON.

No. 8 St. Oswald's Buildings was a roomy house, which owed its cheapness to its situation, this being neither in the genteel nor the busy part of Bexley. It was tall and red, and possessed a good many rooms, and it looked out into a narrow street, the opposite side of which consisted of the long wall of a brewery, which was joined farther on to that of the stable-yard of the Fortinbras Arms, the principal hotel, which had been much frequented in old posting days, and therefore had offices on a large scale. Only their side, however, was presented to St. Oswald's Buildings, the front, with its arched 'porte cochere,' being in the High Street, as it was still called, though it was a good deal outshone by the newer part of the town.

The next-door neighbours of No. 8 were on the one hand a carpenter's yard, the view of which was charming to the children, and the noises not too obnoxious to their parents, and on the other the rectory garden, which separated them from the churchyard, now of course disused. It had no entrance towards their lane, and to reach the church, it was necessary to turn the corner of the wall, and go in through the south porch, which opened close upon the High Street.

In this old street lay the two buildings that chiefly concerned the young Underwoods, i.e. the two schools. That for boys was an old foundation, which had fallen into decay, and had been reformed and revived in nineteenth-century fashion, to suit the requirements of the town. The place, though in the south of England, had become noted as a pottery, owing partly to the possession of large fields of a peculiar clay, which was so bad for vegetable growth as to proclaim its destiny to become pots and pans, partly to its convenient neighbourhood to the rising seaport of Dearport, which was only an hour from it by railway. The old St. Oswald's school had been moulded under the influence of newcomers, who had upset the rules of the founder, and arranged the terms on the broadest principles of liberality, bringing, instead of the drowsy old clerical master, a very brisk and lively young layman, who had a knack of conveying instruction of multifarious kinds such as had never occurred to his

predecessor.

Mr. Underwood had a certain liking for the man, and when tolerably well, enjoyed the breaking a lance with him over his many crude heterodoxies; but he did not love the school, and as long as he was able had taught his boys himself, and likewise taken a few day-pupils of the upper ranks, who were preparing for public schools. But when his failure of health rendered this impracticable, the positive evil of idleness was, he felt greater than any possible ones that might arise from either the teaching or the associations of the town school, and he trusted to home influence to counteract any such dangers. Or perhaps more truly he dreaded lest his own reluctance might partly come from prejudice in favour of gentlemen and public schools: and that where a course seemed of absolute necessity, Providence became a guard in its seeming perils. Indeed, that which he disapproved in Mr. Ryder's school was more of omission than commission. It was that secularity was the system, rather than the substance of that secularity.

So Felix and Edgar went to school, and were in due time followed by Clement and Fulbert; and their bright wits, and the educated atmosphere of their home, made their career brilliant and successful. Mr. Ryder was greatly pleased to have got the sons of a man whom he could not but admire and respect, and was anxious that the boys should be the means of conquering the antiquated prejudices in favour of exclusiveness at school.

Felix and Edgar were neck and neck, carrying off all the prizes of the highest form but one--Felix, those that depended on industry and accuracy; Edgar, those that could be gained by readiness and dexterity. Both were to be promoted to the upper form; and Mr. Ryder called upon their father in great enjoyment of their triumph, and likewise to communicate his confident certainty that they would do him and Bexley credit by obtaining the most notable scholarships of the University. Mr. Underwood was not a little delighted, grateful for the cordial sympathy, and he fully agreed that his own lads had benefited by the clear vigorous teaching they had received; but though he smiled and allowed that they had taken no harm, he said good-humouredly that 'Of course, he must consider that as the proof of his own powers of counteraction.'

'Exactly so,' said the schoolmaster. 'All we wish is, that each home should exercise its powers of counteraction. We do the teaching, you form the opinions.'

'Oh! are we parents still to be allowed to form the opinions?'

'If you will. Your house is your castle, and the dungeons there may be what you will.'

'Well, I cannot have a quarrel with you to-day, Ryder! As long as I can show up my boys as tokens of God's blessing on their home, you are welcome to them as instances of wits well sharpened by thorough

good instruction.'

Mrs. Underwood had likewise had a congratulatory visit that was very gratifying. The girls' school, a big old red house, standing back from the road at the quietest end of the town, was kept by two daughters of a former clergyman, well educated and conscientious women, whom she esteemed highly, and who gave a real good grounding to all who came under their hands, going on the opposite principle to Mr. Ryder's and trying to supply that which the homes lacked.

And they did often succeed in supplying it, though their scholars came from a class where there was much to subdue, and just at present their difficulties had been much increased by their having been honoured by the education of Miss Price. Seven governesses in succession had proved incapable of bearing with Lady Price; and the young lady had in consequence been sent to Miss Pearson's, not without an endeavour on her mother's part to obtain an abatement in terms in honour of the eclat of her rank.

There her airs proved so infectious, that, as Miss Pearson said, the only assistance she had in lessening their evil influence was the perfect lady-likeness of the Underwood twins, and the warm affection that Wilmet inspired. Alda headed a sort of counter party against Caroline Price, which went on the principle of requiting scorn with scorn, but Wilmet's motherly nature made her the centre of attraction to all the weak and young, and her uprightness bore many besides herself through the temptation to little arts. Both sisters had prizes, Alda's the first and best, and Miss Pearson further offered to let Wilmet pay for her own studies and those of a sister, by becoming teacher to the youngest class, and supervisor during the mid-day recreation, herself and her sister dining at school.

It was a handsome offer for such a young beginner, and the mother's eyes filled with tears of pleasure; and yet there was a but--

'Not come home to dinner!' cried the children. 'Can't it be Alda instead of Wilmet? We do always want Wilmet so, and Alda would do just as well at school.'

Alda too was surprised; for was not she more regular and more forward than her twin sister, who was always the one to be kept at home when any little emergency made Mamma want the aid of an elder daughter? And the mother would almost have asked that Alda might be the chosen governess pupil, if Mr. Underwood had not said, 'No, my dear, Miss Pearson must have her own choice. It is a great kindness, and must be accepted as such. I suppose Robina must be the new scholar. My little pupil will not leave me.'

Geraldine only heard of the alternative, to say, 'I'll be nobody's pupil but yours, Papa.'

While Robina was proportionably exalted by her preferment, and took to teasing every one in the house to hear her spelling and her

tables, that she might not fulfil Edgar's prediction by going down to the bottom of the baby-class; and up and down the stairs she ran, chanting in a sing-song measure--

'Twenty pence are one and eightpence,
Thirty pence are two and sixpence,'

and so on, till her father said, smiling, 'Compensations again, Mother: the less you teach them the more they are willing to learn. The mother shook her head, and said the theory was more comfortable than safe, and that she did not find Lancelot an instance of it.

But there was a general sense of having earned the holiday, when the grocery van came to the door, on a morning of glorious sunshine. Edgar and Alda, true to their promise, had walked on so far ahead as to avoid being seen in the town in connection with it; and Fulbert had started with them to exhale his impatience, but then had turned back half-way, that he might not lose the delicious spectacle of the packing of the vehicle. A grand pack it was: first, the precious hamper; then a long sofa cushion, laid along the bottom; then Geraldine lifted in by Sibby and Felix, and folded up with shawls, and propped with cushions by Mamma, whose imagination foresaw more shaking than did the more youthful anticipation; then Mamma herself, not with 'little baby,' but with Angela on her lap, and Angela's feet in all manner of unexpected places; then a roll of umbrellas and wraps; then Wilmet, Fulbert, Lance, and Robina--nowhere in particular, and lastly Papa, making room for Clement between himself and the good-humoured lad of a driver, who had not long ago been a member of the choir, while Felix, whom nothing could tire on that day, dived rapidly down a complication of alleys, declaring he should be up with the walkers long before they were overtaken by the van.

Next appeared Mr. Audley, with his pretty chestnut horse, offering in the plenitude of his good-nature to give Lance a ride, whereupon vociferous '_me toos_' resounded from within the curtains; and the matter was compounded on ride and tie principles, in which the Underwood juniors got all the ride, and Mr. Audley all the _tie--if that consisted in walking and holding the bridle.

By the time the very long and dull suburbs of Bexley were passed, with their interminable villas and rows of little ten-pound houses--the children's daily country walk, poor things! the two elder boys and their sister were overtaken, the latter now very glad to condescend to the van.

'Oh, how nice to get beyond our tiresome old tether!' she said, arranging herself a peep-hole between the curtains. 'I am so sick of all those dusty black beeches, and formal evergreens. How can you stare at them so, Cherry?'

But Geraldine was in a quiet trance of delight; she had never spoken

a word since she had first found a chink in the awning, but had watched with avid eyes the moving panorama of houses, gardens, trees, flowers, carriages, horses, passengers, nursemaids, perambulators, and children. It was all a perfect feast to the long-imprisoned eyes, and the more charming from the dreamy silence in which she gazed. When Felix came up to the slit through which the bright eyes gleamed, and asked whether she were comfortable and liked it, her answer was a long-drawn gasp from the wells of infinite satisfaction, such as set him calculating how many drives in a bathchair the remnant of his birthday gift would yet produce.

But there were greater delights, corn-fields touched with amber, woods sloping up hills, deep lanes edged with luxuriant ferns, greenery that drove the young folk half mad with delight, and made them scream to be let out and gather--gather to their hearts' content. Only Mamma recommended not tiring themselves, but trusting that Centry Park would afford even superior flowers to those they passed.

They reached the lodge gate at last. They were known, for the Castle had been long untenanted, and they, like other inhabitants of Bexley, had from time to time enjoyed themselves in the Park, but to-day there was a shadow of demur. The gentleman who was going to buy the place was looking over it--but surely--

Horror began to spread over the inmates of the van.

'But did you come by appointment, sir?' added the gatekeeper's wife, coming out; 'the gentleman's name is Mr. Underwood.'

Mr. Underwood was obliged to disclaim any appointment; but he looked round at the children's blank faces, and saw lips quivering, and eyes gazing wistfully into the paradise of green shade, and added, 'If the gentleman has not actually bought it, he could not object. We do not wish to go near the house.'

'Maybe Mr. Audley, who was standing near the gate, added another more substantial argument, for 'Oh, certainly, sir,' at once followed; and the van was allowed to turn down a gravelled road, which skirted an extensive plantation.

Every one now left it, except Mrs. Underwood, Cherry, and Angela; and the children began to rush and roll in wild delight on the grassy slope, and to fill their hands with the heather and ling, shrieking with delight. Wilmet had enough to do to watch over Angela in her toddling, tumbling felicity; while Felix, weighted with Robina on his back, Edgar, Fulbert, Clement, and Lance, ran in and out among the turf; and Alda, demurely walking by her papa, opined that it was 'very odd that the gentleman's name should be Underwood.'

'Less odd than if it was Upperwood,' said her father, as if to throw aside the subject; and then, after a few moments' thought, and an odd little smile, as if at some thought within himself, he began to hand

in flowers to Cherry, and to play with little Angela. Mr. Audley had gone to put up his horse at the village inn, and did not join the party again till they had reached what the children called Picnic Hollow--a spot where a bank suddenly rose above a bright dimpling stream with a bed of rock, the wood opening an exquisite vista under its beech trees beyond, and a keeper's lodge standing conveniently for the boiling of kettles.

Here the van was disposed of, the horses taken out and provided with food, Cherry carried to a mossy throne under a glorious beech tree, and the hampers unpacked by Mamma and Wilmet, among much capering and dancing of the rest of the family and numerous rejected volunteers of assistance. Felix and Alda were allowed to spread the table-cloth and place the dishes, but Edgar was only entreated to keep the rest out of the way.

Meanwhile, Geraldine sat under the silvery bole of her beech tree, looking up through its delicate light green leaves to the blue sky, not even wanting to speak, lest anything should break that perfection of enjoyment. Her father watched the little pale absorbed countenance, and as Mr. Audley came up, touched him to direct his attention to the child's expression; but the outcry of welcome with which the rest greeted the newcomer was too much for even Cherry's trance, and she was a merry child at once, hungry with unwonted appetite, and so relishing her share of the magnificent standing-pie, that Mrs. Underwood reproved herself for thinking what the poor child would be if she had such fare and such air daily, instead of ill-dressed mutton in the oppressive smoke-laden atmosphere.

And meantime, Lance was crowing like a cock, and the other boys were laughing at Robina for her utter ignorance of the white-fleshed biped she was eating.

'No, Clem, chickens have got feathers and wings, and their long necks hang down! This can't be one of them.'

'Perhaps it is a robin-redbreast,' said Felix.

'No, nobody kills robin-redbreasts, because they covered the poor little children with leaves.'

'Will you cover me with leaves, if I am lost, Bobbie?' said Mr. Audley; but as soon as she found that his attention was gained, she returned to the charge.

'Please, did it come from your own home? and what is it, really?'

'Why, Bobbie, I am hardly prepared to say whether it is a Hamburg or a Houdan, or a more unambitious Dorking. Cannot you eat in comfort without being certified?'

'The species will be enough for her without the varieties,' said her father. 'You have given us a new experience, you see, Audley, and we

may make a curious study of contrasts--not of Audley and myself Mother dear, but of the two Underwoods who seem to be in this place together to-day.'

'Who is it?' was of course the cry, and the inquiry was in Mrs. Underwood's eyes, though it did not pass her quiet lips. It was to her that he answered, 'Yes, my dear--Tom; I have little doubt that it is he. He was a very rich man when last I heard of him.'

'Is that the man at Vale Leston?' whispered Alda to Felix.

'Oh, I hope he is not coming here to insult us.'

'Bosh!' said Felix; 'that man's name is Fulbert. Listen, if you want to hear.'

'Twenty years ago,' continued Mr. Underwood, 'I thought myself a prodigiously fine fellow--with my arms full of prizes at Harrow, and my Trinity scholarship--and could just, in the plenitude of my presumption, extend a little conceited patronage to that unlucky dunce, Tom Underwood, the lag of every form, and thankful for a high stool at old Kedge's. And now my children view a cold fowl as an unprecedented monster, while his might, I imagine, revel in 'pates de foie gras.'

'O Papa, but we like you so much better as you are!' cried Geraldine.

'Eh, Cherry!' said Mr. Underwood, 'what say you? Shouldn't you like me better if I were buying that king beech tree, and all the rest of it?'

Cherry edged nearer, mastered his hand, and looked up in his face with a whole soul of negation in her wistful eyes. 'No, no, no--just as you are,' she whispered.

Some mood of curiosity had come over him, and he turned an interrogative look elsewhere.

Alda spoke. 'Of course, it would be horrid not to be a clergyman; but it is a great shame.'

'No,' said Wilmet, 'it can't be a shame for this cousin Tom to have earned a fortune fairly--if he has; but'--and she pressed her hands tightly together as she looked at the thin worn faces of her parents--'one can't help wishing. Why do things always go hard and wrong?' and the tears dimmed her bright eyes.

'Because--they _don't_, ' said her father, with a half-serious quaintness that vexed her, and forced her to turn away to let the tear drop.

Clement said, in his calm voice, 'How can you be all so repining and foolish!'

And Mr. Underwood, almost in lazy mischief, pursued his experiment.
'Eh, Felix, you are the party most concerned--what say you?'

'Most concerned?' Felix looked up surprised, then recollected himself. 'I don't care,' he said, with an appearance of gruff sullenness; but his father could not content himself without continuing in a semi-teasing tone, 'Don't care--eh? 'Why this Centry Underwood once belonged to our family--that's the reason Tom is after it. If I had not scouted old Kedge, you would be prancing about here, a Harrovian, counting the partridges.'

'Don't!' broke in Felix, with a growl.

'Never fear, Fee'' cried Edgar, with his hand on his brother's shoulder; if one man got on in life, another may. If one only was grown up and had the start----' and his blue eyes sparkled.

'I did not know Care's clutch had been so tight,' sighed Mr. Underwood, half to himself, half to his wife. It is not safe, my gentle Enid, to try such experiments. Eh!' rousing himself, what's that? Have the mob there a right to any sentiments?'

'Only,' cried Clement, shouting with laughter, Lance thought you were wanted to hold a high stool for Jack Ketch.'

'For a green goose!' shouted Lance, indignantly.

'Oh! cried Robina, in the tone of one who had made a scientific discovery, 'did the goose have a high stool to lay the golden eggs?'

'A most pertinent question, Bobbie, and much more reasonable than mine,' said Mr Underwood; while his colleague gravely answered, 'Yes, Bobbie, golden eggs are almost always laid by geese on high stools.'

'I've got a picture of one! It has got a long neck and long legs, quoth Bobbie.

'It is only a flamingo, you little goose yourself,' cried Clement.

'Here is the golden egg of the present,' said Mr. Underwood, replenishing the boy's plate with that delicious pie. 'What's that beverage, Wilmet? Any horrible brew of your own?'

'No, it is out of Mr. Audley's hamper.'

'The universal hamper. It is like the fairy gifts that produced unlimited eatables. I dreaded cowslip wine or periwinkle broth.'

'No, no, Papa,' sighed Alda, 'we only once made cowslip tea at Vale Leston.'

'Vale Leston is prohibited for the day.--Master Felix Chester

Underwood, your good health; and the same to the new Underwood of Centry Underwood.'

'Shall we see him, Papa?' asked Alda.

'If either party desires the gratification, no doubt it will come about.'

'Shall not you call on him, Papa?'

'Certainly not before he comes. Mother, some of the wonderful bottle--ay, you covetous miser of a woman, or I'll make a libation of it all. Audley, it must have wrung your father's butler's heart to have thrown away this port on a picnic. What did you tell him to delude him?'

'Only what was true--that I was to meet a gentleman who was a judge of the article.'

'For shame!' he answered, laughing. 'What right had you to know that I knew the taste of Cape from Roriz?'

But his evident enjoyment of the 'good creature' was no small pleasure to the provider, though it was almost choking to meet the glistening glance of Mrs. Underwood's grateful eyes, knowing, as she did, that there were three more such bottles in the straw at the bottom of the hamper. And when baby Angela had clasped her fat hands, and, as 'youngest at the board,' 'inclined the head and pronounced the solemn word,' her father added, 'Gratias Deo, and Grazie a lei. We must renew our childhood's training, dear Mary--make our bow and curtesy, and say "Thank you for our good dinner."'

'Thank Felix for our pleasant day,' said Mr. Audley. 'Come, boys, have a swing! there's a branch too good not to be used; and Ful has already hung himself up like a two-toed sloth.'

Then began the real festivity--the swinging, the flower and fern hunting, the drawing, the racing and shouting, the merry calls and exchange of gay foolish talk and raillery.

Mr. Underwood lay back on a slope of moss, with a plaid beneath him, and a cushion under his head, and said that the Elysian fields must have been a prevision of this beech-wood. Mrs. Underwood, with Felix and Wilmet, tied up the plates, knives, and forks, and then the mother, taking Angela with her, went to negotiate kettle-boiling at the cottage. Geraldine would fain have sketched, but the glory and the beauty, and the very lassitude of delight and novelty, made her eyes swim with a delicious mist; and Edgar, who had begun when she did, threw down his pencil as soon as he saw Felix at liberty, and the two boys rushed away into the wood for a good tearing scramble and climb, like creatures intoxicated with the freedom of the greenwood.

After a time they came back, dropping armfuls of loose-strife, meadow-sweet, blue vetch, and honey-suckle over delighted Cherry; and falling down by her side, coats off, all gasp and laughter, and breathless narrative of exploits and adventures, which somehow died away into the sleepiness due to their previous five-mile walk. Felix went quite off, lying flat on his back, with his head on Cherry's little spreading lilac cotton frock, and his mouth wide open, much tempting Edgar to pop in a pebble; and this being prevented by tender Cherry in vehement dumb show, Edgar consoled himself by a decidedly uncomplimentary caricature of him as Giant Blunderbore (a name derived from Fee, Fa, Fum) gaping for hasty pudding.

'That's a horrid shame!' remonstrated Geraldine. 'Dear old Fee, when the whole treat is owing to him!'

'It is a tidy little lark for a Blunderbore to have thought of,' said Edgar. 'Tis a good sort of giant after all, poor fellow!'

'Poor!' said Cherry indignantly. 'Oh, you mean what Papa said--that he is the greatest loser of us all. I wonder what made him talk in that way? He never did before.'

'I am sorry for _him_, ' said Edgar, indicating his brother. 'He is famous stuff for a landlord and member of parliament--plenty of wits and brains--only he wants to be put on a shelf to be got at. Wherever he is, he'll go on there! Now, a start is all I want! Give me my one step--and then--O Gerald, some day I'll lift you all up!'

'What's that?' said Felix, waking as the enthusiastic voice was raised. 'Edgar lifting us all! What a bounce we should an come down with!'

We were talking of what Papa said at dinner,' explained Cherry. 'What did you think about it, Fee?'

'I didn't think at all, I wished he hadn't,' said Felix, stretching himself.

'Why not?' said Cherry, a little ruffled at even Felix wishing Papa had not.

'There's no use having things put into one's head.'

'O Felix, you don't want to change?' cried Cherry.

'No,' he said; but it was a 'no' in a tone she did not understand. The change he saw that hardship was working was that from which he recoiled.

'That's like you, Blunderbore,' said Edgar. 'Now, the very reason I am glad not to be born a great swell, but only a poor gentleman, is that so much is open to one; and if one does anything great, it is all the greater and more credit.'

'Yes,' said Felix, sitting up; 'when you have once got a scholarship, there will be the whole world before you.'

'Papa got a scholarship,' said Cherry.

'Oh yes!' said Edgar; 'but every one knows what happens to a man that takes Orders and marries young; and he had the most extraordinary ill-luck besides! Now, as Ryder says, any man with brains can shine. And I am only doubting whether to take to scholarship or art! I love art more than anything, and it is the speediest.'

The conversation was broken, for just then Wilmet was seen peering about with an anxious, careful eye.

'What is it, my deputy Partlet?' asked her father. 'Which of your brood are you looking for!'

'I can't see Robina,' said Wilmet anxiously. 'She was swinging just now, but neither she nor Lance is with the big boys.'

'Flown up higher,' said Mr. Underwood, pretending to spy among the branches. 'Flapsy, come down! Bobbie, where are you!'

A voice answered him; and in another moment Robina and Lance stood in the glade, and with them a girl newly come to her teens, whom they pulled forward, crying, 'She says she's our cousin!'

'Indeed,' said Mr. Underwood: 'I am sure you are very much obliged to her.'

'I am Mary Alda Underwood,' said the girl abruptly; 'and I'm sure there must be a very naughty boy here. He had put these poor little things up a tree, and run away.'

'No, no! He only put us up because Tina bothered about it!' screamed Lance and Robina at once; 'he wasn't naughty. We were being monkeys.'

'Black spider-monkeys,' added Robina.

'And I swung about like a real one, Father,' said Lance, 'and was trying to get Bobbie down, only she grew afraid.'

'It was ten feet from the ground,' said Mary Alda, impressively, 'and they had lost their way; but they told me who they were. I'm come down with my father to see the place.'

Mr. Underwood heartily shook hands with her, thanked her, and asked where her father was.

'Gone out with the man to see a farm two miles off,' she said. 'He told me I might stay in the house, or roam where I liked, and I saw you all looking so happy; I've been watching you this long time.'

'Indeed!' said Mr. Underwood, 'till you captured two of us! Well, we are obliged for the introduction, especially if you are to be our neighbour.'

'And my cousins will be friends with me,' continued Mary Alda. 'I'm all alone, you know.'

'No, I did not know,' said Mr. Underwood. 'Are you the only child?'

'Yes,' she said, looking wistfully at the groups around her; 'and it is very horrid--oh dear! who is that pretty one? No, there's another of them!'

Mr. Underwood laughed heartily. 'I suppose you mean Wilmet and Alda,' he said. 'Come, girls, and see your new cousin--Mary, did you say!--Your name backward, Alda Mary.'

'Mary,' she repeated. 'Papa calls me Mary, but Mamma wants it to be Marilda all in one word, because she says it is more distinguished; but I like a sensible name like other people.'

Mr. Underwood was much amused. He felt he had found a character in his newly-discovered cousin. She was Underwood all over in his eyes, used to the characteristic family features, although entirely devoid of that delicacy and refinement of form and complexion that was so remarkable in himself and in most of his children, who were all, except poor little Cherry, a good deal alike, and most of them handsome. There was a sort of clumsiness in the shape of every outline, and a coarseness in the colouring, that made her like a bad drawing of one of his own girls; the eyes were larger, the red of the cheeks was redder, the lips were thicker, the teeth were irregular; the figure, instead of being what the French call *elance*, was short, high-shouldered, and thick-set, and the head looked too large. She was over-dressed, too, with a smart hat and spangled feather, a womanly silk mantle and much-trimmed skirt, from which a heavy quilling had detached itself, and was trailing on the ground; her hands were ungloved, and showed red stumpy fingers, but her face had a bright open honest heartiness of expression, and a sort of resolute straightforwardness, that attracted and pleased him; and, moreover, there was something in the family likeness, grotesque as it was, that could not but arouse a fellow-feeling in his warm and open heart, which neither neglect nor misfortune had ever chilled.

'I think I should have known you,' he said, smiling. 'Here! let me introduce you; here is our little lame white-hearted Cherry, and the twins, as like as two peas. Wilmet, Alda--here!'

'Shall I mend your frock!' was Wilmet's first greeting, as she put her hand in her pocket, and produced a little housewife.

'Oh, thank you! You've got a needle and thread! What fun!'

'The little ones are very apt to tear themselves, so I like to have it ready.'

'How delicious! And you mend for them? I wish I had any one to mend for. Please show me, and let me do it. I tried to tear the nasty thing off, but it would not come. I wish Mamma would let me wear sensible print like yours.'

'Are you laughing at us?' said Wilmet rather bluntly.

'No, indeed, not a bit,' said Marilda, or Mary Alda, eagerly. 'If you only knew how tiresome it all is.'

'What is?'

'Why, being fine--having a governess, and talking French, and learning to dance, and coming down into the drawing-room. Then Grandmamma Kedge tells me how she used to run about in pattens, and feed the chickens, and scrub the floor, and I do so wish I was her. Can you scrub, and do those nice things?'

'Not a floor,' said Wilmet; 'and we live in the town.'

'So have we done till now; but Papa is going to get this place, because he says it is family property; and I hope he will, for they will never be able to screw me up here as they do at home. I say, which is Fulbert! Won't your father punish him?'

'Oh, no! You should not have told, Marilda. We never tell Papa of little tricks of the boys.'

But the little darling might have broken her neck.'

'Oh! life in a large family is made up of _might haves_, ' said Alda.

'Why, I do declare there's a smaller still! What a little duck!' and she pounced upon Angela.

'We have a smaller than that, said Wilmet--'Bernard, only we left him at home.'

'Tell me all your names!' cried Marilda, delighted.

She was perfectly happy, and chattered on in great delight in her downright voice, as much at ease as if she had known them all her life. She shared their tea, and wanted Mr. Underwood to come and see her father at the house; but as she could not promise his early return, and it was necessary to get the van under weigh before five, this could not be.

However, she would not leave them till they were all packed into the van, and then only parted with repeated kisses and auguries of many future meetings; so that the children looked down a vista of

unlimited enjoyment of Gentry Park. Edgar, little gentleman as he was, saw her as far back on the way as he could venture.

CHAPTER III

FORTUNATUS' PURSE

'Out, base mechanical churl!'--SHAKESPEARE.

Weeks went on, and nothing more was heard of 'Marilda' except the wishes and wonderings of the children. Alda decided that she was one of the heartless fine ladies one heard of in books--and no wonder, when her father was in trade, and she looked so vulgar; while Wilmet contended against her finery, and Cherry transferred the heartlessness to her cruel father and mother, and Robina never ceased to watch for her from the window, even when Felix and Edgar for very weariness had prohibited the subject from being ever mentioned, and further checked it by declaring that Marilda looked like a cow.

There was plenty besides to think of; and the late summer and early autumn rolled cheerily away. The wonderful remnant of Felix's birthday gift was partly applied to the hire of a chair for Geraldine upon every favourable evening; and as the boys themselves were always ready to act as horses, they obtained it on moderate terms, which made the sum hold out in a marvellous manner. And not only were these drives delight unimaginable to the little maid, but the frequent breaths of pure air seemed to give her vigour; she ate more, smiled more, and moved with less pain and difficulty, so that the thought of a partial recovery began to seem far less impossible.

The children trooping about her, she used to be drawn to the nearest bit of greensward, tree, or copse, and there would occupy herself with the attempt to sketch, often in company with Edgar; and with a few hints from her father, would be busied for days after with the finishing them, or sometimes the idealising them, and filling them with the personages she had read of in books of history or fiction. She was a sensitive little body, who found it hard not to be fretful, when told that it was very ill-natured to object to having her paints daubed over her drawings by Lance, Robina, and Angel--an accusation often brought against her by rough, kindly Sibby, and sometimes even by Wilmet in an extremity: while Mamma's subdued entreaty, that she would do something to please the little ones, if it could be without mischief to herself, always humiliated her more than anything else, and made her ready to leave all to their mercy, save for deference to Edgar, and gratitude to Felix. Robina would look on soberly enough in admiration; but Lance's notions of art were comic, and Fulbert's were arbitrary, and both were imperiously carried out with due contempt

for the inferior sex, and were sure to infect both the little sisters.

Then, of course, so many holiday boys were hard to keep in order. Clement had a strong propensity in that direction; he was a grave, quiet boy, without much sense of the absurd, and was generally the victim of Edgar's wit; but, on the other hand, he was much in the habit of objecting to anything Edgar or Fulbert proposed, and thereby giving forbidden or doubtful amusements double zest. He was never in mischief, and yet he was never an element of peace.

All this, however, was mitigated when the holidays ended, and Lance was allowed to follow his brothers to school, while Bobbie importantly trotted in the wake of her sisters. Mamma and Cherry felt it no small comfort to have no one at home who did not sleep away two or three of the morning hours; and the lessons that the little girl delighted to prepare for her father went on in peace--the arithmetic, the French, the Latin, and even the verses of Greek Testament, that he always said rested him.

And he was 'quite well,' he said himself; and though his wife never confirmed this reply, he was everywhere as usual--in church, in schools of all kinds, in parish meetings, by sick-beds, or in cottages, as bright and as popular as ever, perhaps the more so that he was more transparently thin, and every stranger started at the sound of his cough, though the Bexley people had grown weary of repeating the same augury for four or five years, and began, like 'my Lady,' to call it 'constitutional.'

So came the autumn Ember Week; and Mr. Audley had to go to receive Priests' Orders, and afterwards to spend the next fortnight with his parents, who complained that they had not seen him once since he had settled at Bexley. The last week was the break-up of summer weather, and Mr. Bevan caught cold, and was rheumatic, there were two funerals on wet and windy days, and when Mr. Audley, on Lady Price's entreating summons, wrenched himself from a murmuring home, and, starting by an early train, arrived half through the St. Michael's Day Service, it was to see Mr. Underwood looking indeed like some ethereal ascetic saint, with his bright eyes and wasted features, and to hear him preach in extempore--as was his custom--a sermon on the blessedness of angel helps, which in its intense fervour, almost rapture, was to many as if it came from a white-winged angel himself. Mr. Audley glided into his own place, and met Felix's look of relief. The sermon was finished, and the blessing given; but before he could descend the steps, the cough had come on, and with it severe haemorrhage. They had to send one startled boy for Mrs. Underwood, and another for the doctor, and it was an hour before he could be taken home in a chair. No one ever forgot that sermon, for it was the last he ever preached. He was very ill indeed for several days, but still hopeful and cheerful; and as the weather mended, and the calm brightness of October set in, he rallied, and came downstairs again, not looking many degrees more wan and hectic than before, with a mind as alert as usual, and his kind heart much gratified by the many

attentions of his parishioners during his illness.

During the worst, Mrs. Underwood had been obliged to keep one of the elder girls at home--Wilmet at first, both by her own desire and that of Alda; but it was soon made a special matter of entreaty by Miss Pearson, that the substitution might not take place; the little class was always naughty under Alda, and something the same effect seemed to be produced on Angela and Bernard. They made so much less disturbance when entrusted to Cherry, that the mother often sent Alda to sit by papa, even though she knew he liked nothing so well as to have his little pupil's soft voice repeating to him the Latin hymns she loved to learn on purpose. Alda read or sang to him very prettily, and they were very happy together; but then Wilmet could do that as well, and also mind the babies, or do invalid cookery, and supplement Sibby's defects, and set the mother free for the one occupation she cared for most--the constant watching of that wasted countenance.

But all was better. He had been able to collect his children for their evening's Bible lesson and Sunday Catechism, and to resume the preparation of Edgar and Geraldine for their Confirmation, though it was at least a year distant, and even had spoken of sending for others of his catechumens. Wilmet and Alda were both at school, the two babies out with Sibby, Mamma at work, Papa dreaming over a Comment on the Epistle to the Philippians, which was very near his heart, and he always called his holiday work, and Geraldine reading on her little couch when there was a sharp ring at the bell, and after an interval, the girl who daily came in to help, announced 'Lady Price.'

Even my Lady had been startled and softened by the reality of Mr. Underwood's illness, and remorseful for having coddled her husband at his expense; she had sent many enquiries, some dainties, and a good many recipes; and she had made no objection to Mr. Bevan's frequent and affectionate visits, nor even to his making it obvious that however little his senior curate might do that winter, he would not accept his resignation for the present.

It was enough to make Mr. Underwood feel absolutely warm and grateful to his old tormentor, as he rose, not without some effort, held out his hand to her, and cheerily answered her inquiries for his cough. She even discussed the berries in the hedges, and the prospects of a mild winter, in a friendly, hesitating tone; and actually commended Mr. Underwood's last pupil-teacher, before she began--'I am afraid I am come upon a disagreeable business.'

Mr. Underwood expected to hear of his own inefficiency; or perhaps that Mr. Audley had adopted some habit my Lady disapproved, or that the schoolmaster was misbehaving, or that some Christmas dole was to be curtailed, and that he would have to announce it because Mr. Bevan would not. He was not prepared to hear, 'Are you aware that--in short--perhaps you can explain it, but has not your son Felix been spending a good deal of money--for him, I mean--lately?'

'Felix had a present from his godfather,' said Mr. Underwood, not at all moved, so secure was he that this must be an exaggeration.

'Last summer, I heard of that. It was laid out on a picnic,' said Lady Price, severely.

'It was intended to be so spent,' said the curate; 'but people were so good-natured, that very little actually went that way, and the remainder was left in his own hands.'

'Yes, Mr. Underwood, but I am afraid that remainder has been made to cover a good deal of which you do not know!'

Mrs. Underwood flushed, and would have started forward. Her husband looked at her with a reassuring smile. My Lady, evidently angered at their blindness, went on, 'It is a painful duty, Mr. Underwood, especially in your present state; but I think it due to you, as the father of a family, to state what I have learned.'

'Thank you. What is it?'

'Have you reckoned the number of times the chair has been hired?' and as he shook his head, 'That alone would amount to more than a pound. Besides which, your daughters have been provided with books and music--fruit has been bought--all amiable ways of spending money, no doubt; but the question is, how was it procured?'

'Indeed,' said Mr. Underwood, still pausing.

'And,' added the lady, 'the means can, I am afraid, be hardly doubted, though possibly the boy may have done it in ignorance. Indeed, one of his sisters allowed as much.'

'What did she allow, Lady Price?'

'That--that it was won at play, Mr. Underwood. You know Mr. Froggatt gives his boy an absurd amount of pocket-money, and when she was taxed with this, your daughter--Alda is her name, I believe--allowed that--'

'Papa, Papa!' breathlessly broke out Cherry, who had been forgotten on her little sofa all this time, but now dashed forward, stumping impetuously with her crutch--'Papa, it's all Alda, how can she be so horrid?'

'What is it, my dear?' said Mr. Underwood. 'You can explain it, I see. Tell Lady Price what you mean, Geraldine,' he added gravely, to compose the child, who was sobbing with excitement and indignation.

'O Lady Price!' she cried, facing about with her hair over her face, 'he earned it--he earned every bit of it! How could any one think he did not?'

'Earned it? What does that mean, little girl!' said Lady Price, still severely. 'If he did the boy's exercises for him--'

'No, no, no,' interrupted Geraldine, 'it was old Mr. Froggatt. He asked Felix to look over the papers he had to print for the boys' work at the Grammar School, because it is all Latin and Greek, and Charles Froggatt is so careless and inaccurate, that he can't be trusted.'

The faces of the father and mother had entirely cleared; but Lady Price coughed drily, saying, 'And you did not know of this arrangement?'

Geraldine's eyes began to twinkle with tears. 'I don't know what Felix will say to me for telling now,' she said.

'It must have come to light some time, though concealment is always a proof of shame,' began Lady Price in a consoling tone that filled the little lame girl with a fresh passion, drawing up her head.

'Shame! Nobody's ashamed! Only Mamma and Felix and Wilmet never will bear that Papa should know how terribly we do want things sometimes.'

And Geraldine, overpowered by her own unguarded words, ran into her mother's arms, and hid her face on her shoulder.

'Thank you, Lady Price,' said Mr. Underwood gravely. 'I am glad my little girl has been able to satisfy you that Felix has honestly earned whatever he may have spent.'

'If you are satisfied,' returned the lady, 'it is not my affair; but I must say I should like to know of such transactions among my children.'

'Sometimes one is glad to have a boy to be perfectly trusted,' said Mr. Underwood.

'But you will speak to him!'

'Certainly I shall.'

Lady Price felt that she must go, and rose up with an endeavour to retract. 'Well, it is a relief to Mr. Bevan and me to find your son not consciously in fault, for it would have been a most serious thing. And in such a matter as this, of course you can do as _you_ please.'

To this Mr. Underwood made no reply, as none was necessary, but only saw her out to the door in that extremely polite manner that always made her feel smallest, and then he dropped into his chair again, with a curl of the lip, and the murmur, 'not consciously!'

'O Papa, Papa!' cried Cherry.

'Dear Felix!' said the mother, with tears in her eyes; 'but what can Alda have been saying?'

Cherry was about to speak again, but her father gently put her aside. A little quietness now, if you please, my dear; and send Felix to me when he comes in. Let me have him alone, but don't say anything to him.'

There was no need to send Felix to his father, for he came in of his own accord, radiant, with a paper containing a report of a public meeting on Church matters that his father had been wishing to see.

'Thanks, my boy,' said Mr. Underwood; 'where does this come from?'

'From Froggatt's father. It was only fourpence.'

'But, Felix, repeated fourpences must exhaust even that Fortunatus' purse of Admiral Chester's.'

Felix coloured. 'Yes, Papa, I wanted to tell you; but I waited till you were better.'

'You will hardly find a better time than the present,' said Mr Underwood.

'It is only this,' said Felix, with a little hesitation. 'You know there's a good deal of printing to be done for the school sometimes--the questions in Latin and Greek and Algebra, and even when Mr. Ryder does have the proofs, it wants some one who really understands to see that the corrections are properly done. Old Smith used to do it, by real force of Chinese accuracy, but he has been ill for some time, and Mr. Froggatt can't see to do it himself, and Charlie won't, and can't be trusted either. So one day, when I was reading in the shop, Mr. Froggatt asked me to see if a thing was right; and it went on: he asked me after a time to take anything I liked, and I did get some school books we all wanted; but after that, just when you were ill, I could not help telling him I had rather have the money. O Father!' cried the boy, struck by a certain look of distress, 'did I do wrong?'

'Not in the least, my boy. Go on; what does he give you?'

'Exactly at the rate he gave Smith for doing the same work,' said Felix: 'it always was an extra for being so troublesome. It was seven shillings last week--generally it comes to three or four and sixpence.'

'And when do you do it?'

'I run in after I come out of school for half an hour. Last Saturday I corrected a sheet of the Pursuivant, because Mr. Froggatt had to

go out, and that made it more. And, Father, Mr. Froggatt says that poor old Smith will never be fit for work again.'

'Then I suppose these welcome earnings of yours will end when he has a successor?'

Felix came nearer. 'Papa,' he said, 'Mr. Froggatt told me that if Charlie would only have taken to the work, he would have done without another man in Smith's place, and got him gradually into editing the paper too. He said he wished I was not a gentleman's son, for if I had not been so I should have suited him exactly, and should be worth a guinea a week even now. And, Father, do not you really think I had better take it?'

'You, Felix!' Mr. Underwood was exceedingly startled for the moment.

'You see,' said Felix rather grimly, leaning his head on the mantelshelf, and looking into the fire, 'any other way I can only be an expense for years upon years, even if I did get a scholarship.'

His face was crimson, and his teeth set. Mr. Underwood lay back in his chair for some seconds; then said in a low voice, 'I see you know all about it, Felix; and that I am going to leave you as heavy a burthen as ever lad took on willing shoulders.'

Felix knew well enough, but his father had never uttered a word of despondency to him before, and he could only go on gazing steadfastly into the fire with an inarticulate moan.

Mr. Underwood opened the first leaf of a volume of St. Augustine, beside him, a relic of former days, the family shield and motto within--namely, a cross potent, or crutch-shaped, and the old English motto, 'UNDER WODE, UNDER RODE.'

'Under wood, under rood,' he repeated. 'It was once but sing-song to me. Now what a sermon! The load is the Cross. Bear thy cross, and thy cross will bear thee, like little Geraldine's cross potent--Rod and Rood, Cross and Crutch--all the same etymologically and veritably.'

'Don't call them a burthen, pray!' said Felix, with a sense both of deprecation and of being unable to turn to the point.

'My boy, I am afraid I was thinking more of myself than of you. I am an ungrateful fool; and when a crutch is offered to me, I take hold of it as a log instead of a rood. I did not know how much pride there was left in me till I found what a bitter pill this is!'

Felix was more crimson than ever. 'Ought I not--' he began.

'The ought is not on your side, Felix. It is not all folly, I hope; but I had thought you would have been a better parson than your father.'

There were tears in the boy's eyes now. 'There are the others; I may be able to help them.'

'And,' added Mr. Underwood, 'I know that to be a really poor priest, there should be no one dependent on one, or it becomes "Put me into one of the priest's offices, that I may eat a piece of bread." It is lowering! Yes, you are right. Even suppose you could be educated, by the time you were ordained, you would still have half these poor children on your hands, and it would only be my own story over again, and beginning younger. You are right, Felix, but I never saw the possibility so fully before. I am glad some inward doubt held me back from the impulse to dedicate my first-born.'

'It shall be one of the others instead,' said Felix in his throat.

Mr. Underwood smiled a little, and put his finger on the verse in his beloved Epistle--'Look not every man on his own things but every man also on the things of others.'

'You really wish this. Do you consider what it involves?' he said.

'I think I do,' said Felix in a stifled voice.

'This is not as if it were a great publisher,' continued Mr. Underwood, 'with whom there would be no loss of position or real society; but a little bookseller in a country town is a mere tradesman, and though a man like Audley may take you up from time to time, it will never be on an absolute equality; and it will be more and more forgotten who you were. You will have to live in yourself and your home, depending on no one else.'

'I can stand that,' said Felix, smiling. 'Father, indeed I thought of all that. Of course I don't like it, but I don't see how it is to be helped.'

'Sit down, Felix: let us go over it again. I suppose you don't know what our subsistence is at present.'

'I know you have 250 pounds a year from Mr. Bevan.'

'Yes, I had 200 pounds at first, and he added the 50 pounds when the third curate was given up. That goes with me, of course, if not before. On the other hand, my poor good uncle, the wisest thing he ever did, made me insure my life for 5000, pounds so there will be 150 pounds a year to depend on, besides what we had of our own, only 2350 pounds left of it now. I have had to break into it for the doctor's bills, but at least there are no debts. Thank God, we have been saved from debt! I think,' he continued, 'that probably it will have to be brought down to twenty-two hundred before you have done with me. On the whole, then, there will be about 180 pounds a year for you all to live upon. Are you understanding, Felix?'

For the boy's anxious look had gone out of his face, and given place

to a stunned expression which was only dispelled with a sudden start by his father's inquiry. 'Yes, yes,' he said recalling himself.

'I have left it all absolutely to your mother,' said Mr. Underwood. 'She will depend more and more on you, Felix; and I have made up my mind to expect that no help will come to you but from yourselves. Except that I hope some of you may be educated by clergy orphan schools, but you are too old for that now. Felix, I believe it may be right, but it is very sore to break off your education.'

'I shall try to keep it up,' said Felix, 'in case anything should ever turn up'

'A guinea a week!' said Mr. Underwood, thoughtfully. 'It would make you all not much worse off than you are now, when I am out of the way. And yet--' A violent cough came on. 'We must wait, Felix,' he said, when he had recovered himself. 'I must have time to think; I will speak to you to-morrow.'

Felix left him, very grave and subdued. He buried himself in his tasks for the next day, hardly looked up or smiled at little Bernard's most earnest attempts at a game of play, and had not a word for even Cherry, only when Wilmet begged anxiously to know if he thought Papa worse, he answered that he believed not particularly so.

Alda was sent to carry some tea to her father that evening. As she set it down on the table before him, he said gently, 'My dear, I want to know what has been passing among you and your school-fellows about Felix.'

'Oh, nothing, Papa,' said Alda rather hastily. 'Some nonsense or other is always going on.'

'Very true, no doubt; nor do I wish to be informed of general nonsense, but of that which concerns you. What have you been saying or hearing said about Felix?'

'Oh, it's nonsense, Papa. Some of the girls will say anything disagreeable.'

'You need not have any scruples on Felix's account, Alda; I know exactly what he has done.' I want you to tell me what is being said--or you have allowed to be said--about it.'

'That horrible Miss Price!' was all the answer he got.

He sat upright--laid on Alda's wrist a long bony burning hand, whose clasp she did not forget for weeks, and forcing her to look at him, said, 'Did you allow it to be believed that your brother Felix was a gambler?'

'Papa! I never said so!' cried Alda, beginning to sob.

'Command yourself, Alda; I am not fit for a scene, and I may not be able to speak to you many times again.'

These words--far more new and startling to Alda than to her brother--appalled her into quietness.

'What did you say, Alda? or was it the deceit of silence?'

She hung her head, but spoke at last.

'I only said boys had ways and means! They did tease and plague so. I do believe Carry Price counts every grape that goes into this house--and they would know how I got my new music--and little Robina would tell--and then came something about Mr. Froggatt; and if they knew--'

'If they knew what?'

'Papa, you have no idea how nasty some of them are.'

'My poor child, I am afraid I have some idea by seeing how nasty they are making you! Gambling more creditable than honest labour!'

Alda had it on the tip of her tongue to say winning things was not gambling, but she knew that argument would be choked down; and she also knew that though she had spoken truth as to her words, she had allowed remarks to pass without protest on the luck and licence that the model boy allowed himself, and she was bitterly displeased with the treachery of Miss Price.

'These old rags of folly don't look pretty on other folk,' he sighed pleasantly. 'Alda, listen to me. What I have heard today gives me more fears for you than for any one of my children. Did you ever hear that false shame leads to true shame? Never shuffle again! Remember, nothing is mean that is not sin, and an acted falsehood like this is sin and shame both--while your brother's deed is an honour.'

Alda was obliged to go away murmuring within herself, 'That's all true: it is very good of Felix, and I should not have equivocated, I know; but those stupid girls, how is one to live with them?'

Felix was not quite dressed the next morning when his mother came to the door of the attic that he shared with Edgar and Fulbert.

'He wants to speak to you before church, Felix. It has been a very bad night, and the sooner this is settled the better.'

'O Mother, I am very sorry--'

'It can't be helped, my dear boy. I think it will really be a great relief to him.'

'And you, Mother, do you mind?'

'Dear Felix, all minding, except to have you all well, and fed and clothed, was worn out of me years ago. I can't feel anything in it but that it will keep you by me, my dear good helpful boy.'

Felix's heart leapt up, as it had not done for many a long day; but it soon sank again. The children had never been admitted to their father's room in the early morning, and Felix thought he must be suddenly worse when he saw him in bed propped by pillows, pale and wearied; but the usual bright smile made him like himself.

'All right, old fellow,' he said brightly. 'Don't come up to me. I'm incog. till I'm up and dressed. Are you in the same mind?'

'Yes, Father.'

'Then ask Mr. Froggatt to do me the favour of coming to speak to me any time after eleven o'clock that may suit him. I must understand what he offers you. The nonsense is conquered, Felix; more shame for me that it has followed me so far: but the sense remains. I must try to be sure that this sacrifice of yours is a right one to be accepted. Any way, my boy, I thank and bless you for it, and God will bless such a beginning. There's the bell, be off,' he concluded.

And, Papa,' blurted out Felix suddenly, 'would you _please_ be photographed. I have the money for it. _Pray--_'

Mr. Underwood smiled. 'Very well, Felix; that is, if I am ever capable of getting up all the stairs to Coleman's sky-parlour.

'Oh, thank you!' and Felix ran away.

Mr. Froggatt came in due time. He was an elderly portly man, well shaven and smooth-faced, intensely respectable, having been brought up to inherit an old hereditary business as bookseller, stationer, and publisher of a weekly local paper, long before Bexley had broken out into its present burning fever of furnaces. He was a very good religious man, as Mr. Underwood well knew, having been his great comforter through several family troubles, which had left him and his wife alone with one surviving and woefully spoiled son, who hated the trade, and had set his heart upon being a farmer--chiefly with a view to hunting. Mr. Froggatt was conscious of having been too indulgent, but the mother and son were against him; and the superior tone of education that the son had received at the reformed grammar school had only set him above the business, instead of, as had been intended, rendering him more useful in it.

Good Mr. Froggatt, an old-fashioned tradesman, with a profound feeling for a real gentleman, was a good deal shocked at receiving Mr. Underwood's message. He kept a reading-room, and was on terms of a certain intimacy with its frequenters, such as had quite warranted his first requests for Felix's good-natured help, and it had been really as a sort of jesting compliment that he had told the young

gentleman that he wished he would take Smith's place, little expecting to see how earnestly the words were caught up, how the boy asked whether he really meant it, and when, on further consideration, he allowed that it might be possible, begging him to wait till his father could be spoken to.

Poor as he was, Mr. Underwood had never lost general respect. Something there was in his fine presence and gentlemanly demeanour, and still more in his showing no false shame, making no pretensions, and never having a debt. Doctors' bills had pressed him heavily, but he had sacrificed part of his small capital rather than not pay his way; and thus no one guessed at the straits of the household. Mr. Froggatt had never supposed he would entertain for a moment the idea of letting his eldest son, a fine clever and studious lad, undertake a little country business, and yet the old bookseller had come to wish it very much on his own account. As he explained to Mr. Underwood, he loved his old business, and knew that with more education he should have been able to make more of it. His elder son had died just as intelligence and energy were opening up plans that would have made both the shop and the newspaper valuable and beneficial; while Charles's desertion left them decline with his father's declining years, and in danger of being supplanted by some brisk new light. Felix Underwood was indeed very young, but he had already proved his power of usefulness, and a very few years would make him capable of being a right hand to the old man, and he might in time make a position for himself. Mr. Froggatt would otherwise ere long be forced by his own infirmity, to dispose of the business at a disadvantage, and this would, he confessed, go to his heart. Mr. Underwood felt greatly reconciled to the project. There was real usefulness in the work, great means of influencing men for good, and though there would be much of mechanical employment, for which it was a pity to give up the boy's education, yet it was a stepping stone to something better, and it gave present and increasing means of maintenance. There was less temptation in this way of life than in almost any that could be devised, and it would give Mrs. Underwood the comfort of a home with him. The great difficulty for the future was, that Felix was never likely to have capital enough to purchase, or become partner in the business; but Mr. Froggatt explained that if he gained experience in the editing of the Pursuivant, he would be always able to obtain profitable employment, and that it was possible that he might eventually take the business, and pay an annual sum out of the profits to the Froggatt family, unless, indeed, something should turn up which would keep him in his natural station. Such was the hope lurking in the father's heart, even while he thankfully closed with the offer; and Felix was put in the way of studying book-keeping till the New Year, when he was to enter upon his duties and his salary.

Mr. Audley was greatly troubled. It was with incredulous vivacity that he inquired of Mr. Underwood if it were indeed true that Felix had accepted such prospects.

'Quite true.' said Mr. Underwood. 'You need not argue it with me,

Audley; my own mind has said all you could say seven times over.'

'I should not venture on interference; but could you not let me try to do--something?'

'And welcome, my dear fellow: there are so many to be done for, that it is well one can do for himself.'

'But Felix--Felix out of them all!'

'As the voice I want to silence has said a thousand times! No; Felix seems capable of this, and it is not right to withhold him, and throw his education upon the kind friends who might be helping the other boys--boys whom I could not trust to fend for themselves and others, as I can that dear lad.'

'What he might be--'

'Who knows whether he may not be a greater blessing in this work than in that which we should have chosen for him? He may be a leaven for good--among the men we have never been able to reach! My dear Audley, don't be a greater ass about it than I was at first!'

For the young curate really could not speak at first for a rush of emotion.

'It is not only for Felix's sake,' said he, smiling at last, 'but the way you take it.'

'And now, I am going to ask you to do something for me,' added Mr. Underwood. 'I have left this magnificent estate of mine entirely to my wife, appointing her sole guardian to my children. But I have begun to think how much has been taken out of her by that shock of leaving Vale Leston, and by that wonderful resolute patience that--that I shall never be able to thank her for. I scarcely dare to let her know that I see it. And when I look on to the winter that is before her,' he added, much less calmly, 'I think she may not be long after me. I must add a guardian. Once we had many good friends. We have them still, I hope, but I cannot lay this on them. Our cousin Tom Underwood does not seem disposed to notice us, and his care might not be of the right kind. Our only other relation is Fulbert Underwood.'

'Who drove you from Vale Leston?'

'Who did what he had every right to do with his own,' said Mr. Underwood. 'But he is not the style of man to be asked, even if I could saddle him with the charge. Probably twelve children to bring up on seven thousand pounds--a problem never put before us at Cambridge.'

'Do you honour me by--' asked the younger man, much agitated.

'Not by asking you to solve that problem! But let me add your name. What I want is a guardian, who will not violently break up the home and disperse the children. I believe Felix will be a competent young head if he is allowed, and I want you to be an elder brother to him, and let him act.'

'You cannot give me greater comfort.'

'Only, Audley, this must be on one condition. Never let this guardianship interfere with any higher work that you may be called to. If I thought it would bind you down to Bexley, or even to England, I should refrain from this request as a temptation. Mind, you are only asked to act in case the children should lose their mother, and then only to enable Felix to be what I believe he can and will be. Or, as it may be right to add, if he should fail them, you will know what to do.'

'I do not think he will.'

'Nor I. But there are ways of failing besides the worst. However, I do not greatly fear this illness of mine taking root in them. It has not been in the family before; and I am nearly sure that I know when I took the infection, four or five years ago, from a poor man in Smoke-jack Alley, who would let no one lift him but me. They are healthy young things, all but dear little Cherry, and I hope they have spirits to keep care from making them otherwise. You will say a kind word to my little Cherry sometimes, Audley. Poor little woman, I am afraid it may fall sorely on her, she is of rather too highly strung a composition, and perhaps I have not acted so much for her good as my own pleasure, in the companionship we have had together.'

So the will was altered, though without the knowledge of anyone but Mrs. Underwood and the witnesses; and Mr. Audley felt himself bound to remonstrate no further against Felix's fate, however much he might deplore it.

Nobody was so unhappy about it as Edgar. The boy was incredulous at first, then hotly indignant. Then he got a burnt stick, and after shutting himself up in his attic for an hour, was found lying on the floor, before an awful outline on the whitewash.

'What is it, old fellow?' asked Felix. 'What a horrid mess!'

'I see, said Lance. 'It is Friday grinning at the savages.'

'Or a scarecrow on the back of a ditch,' said Felix. 'Come, Ed, tell us what it is meant for.'

Edgar was impenetrable; but having watched the others out of the house, he dragged Geraldine up to see--something--

'Oh!' she cried. 'You've done it!'

'To be sure! You know it?'

'It is Achilles on the rampart, shouting at the Trojans! O Edgar--how brave he looks--how his hair flies! Some day you will get him in his god-like beauty!'

'Do you think he has not got any of it, Cherry?' said Edgar, gazing wistfully. 'I did see it all, but it didn't come out--and now--'

'I see what you mean,' said Cherry, screwing up her eyes; 'it is in him to be glorious--a kind of lightning look.'

'Yes, yes; that's what I meant. All majesty and wrath, but no strain. O Cherry--to have such things in my head, and not get them out! Don't you know what it is?' as he rolled and flung himself about.

'Oh, yes!' said Cherry from her heart. 'Oh! I should so like to do one touch to his face, but he's so big! You did him on a chair, and I could not stand on one.'

'I'll lift you up. I'll hold you,' cried Edgar.

The passion for drawing must have been very strong in the two children; for Geraldine was most perilously, and not without pain, raised to a chair, where, with Edgar's arms round her waist, she actually worked for ten minutes at Achilles' face, but his arm she declined. 'It is not right, Eddy! look--that muscle in his elbow can never be so!'

'I can't see the back of mine, but you can,' said Edgar, lifting her down, and proceeding to take off his coat and roll up his shirt-sleeve.

'That's the way. Oh! but it is not such an angle as that.'

'Achilles' muscles must have stood out more than mine, you know. I'll get a look at Blunderbore's. O Cherry, if I were but older--I know I could--I'd save Felix from this horrible thing! I feel to want to roar at old Froggy, like this fellow at the Trojans.'

'Perhaps some day you will save him.'

'Yes; but then he will have done it. Just fancy, Gerald, if that picture was as it ought to be--as you and I see it!'

'It would be as grand as the world ever saw,' said the little girl, gazing through her eye-lashes at the dim strokes in the twilight. O Edgar, many a great man has begun in a garret!'

'If it would not be so long hence! Oh! must you go down!'

'I heard some one calling. You will be a great artist, I know, Edgar!'

It was pleasanter than the other criticism, at bed-time.

'Hollo! Man Friday does not look quite so frightful!' said Felix.

'I'm sure I won't have him over my bed,' said Fulbert, proceeding to rub him out; and though, for the moment, Achilles was saved by violent measures of Edgar's, yet before the end of the next day, Fulbert and Lance had made him black from head to foot, all but the whites of his eyes and his teeth; Robina and Angela had peeped in, and emulated the terror of the Trojans, or the savages; and Sibby had fallen on the young gentleman for being 'so bold' as to draw a frightful phooka upon their walls just to frighten the darlints.

Indeed, it was long before Angela could be got past the door at night without shuddering, although Achilles had been obliterated by every possible method that Felix, Clement, or Sibby could devise, and some silent tears of Cherry had bewailed the conclusion of this effort of high art, the outline of which, in more moderate proportions, was cherished in that portfolio of hers.

Another work of art--the photograph--was safely accomplished. The photographer caught at the idea, declaring that he had been so often asked for Mr. Underwood's carte, that he had often thought of begging to take it gratis. And he not only insisted on so doing, but he came down from his studio, and took Mr. Underwood in his own chair, under his own window--producing a likeness which, at first sight, shocked every one by its faithful record of the ravages of disease, unlightened by the fair colouring and lustrous beaming eyes, but which, by-and-by, grew upon the gazer, as full of a certain majesty of unearthly beauty of countenance.

The autumn was mild, and Mr. Underwood rallied in some measure, so as sometimes even to get to church at mid-day services on warm days.

It was on St. Andrew's Day that he was slowly walking home, leaning on Felix's arm, with the two elder girls close behind him, when Alda suddenly touched Wilmet's arm, exclaiming, 'There's Marilda Underwood!'

There indeed was the apparition of Centry Park, riding a pretty pony, beside a large and heavily-bearded personage. The recognition was instantaneous; Marilda was speaking to her companion, and at the same moment he drew up, and exclaiming, 'Edward! bless me!' was off his horse in a moment, and was wringing those unsubstantial fingers in a crushing grasp. There was not much to be seen of Mr. Underwood, for he was muffled up in a scarf to the very eyes, but they looked out of their hollow caves, clear, blue, and bright, and smiling as ever, and something like an answer came out of the middle of the folds.

'These yours? How d'ye do'--How d'ye do'--Mary, you don't get off till we come to the door!--Yes, I'll come in with you! Bless me! bless me! Mary has been at me ever so many times about you, but we've been had abroad for masters and trash, and I left it till we were

settled here.'

It was not many steps to the door, and there Wilmet flew on prepare her mother and the room, while Alda stood by as her cousin was assisted from her horse by the groom, and the newcomer followed in silence, while Felix helped his father up the steps, and unwound his wraps, after which he turned round, and with his own sunny look held out his hand, saying, 'How are you, Tom? I'm glad to see you--How d'ye do, Mary Alda? we are old friends.--Call your mother, one of you.'

The mother was at hand, and they entered the drawing-room, where, as the clergyman sank back into his arm-chair, the merchant gazed with increasing consternation at his wasted figure and features.

'How long has this been going on?' he asked, pointing to him and turning to Mrs. Underwood, but as usual her husband answered for her.

'How long have I been on the sick list? Only since the end of September, and I am better now than a month ago.'

'Better! Have you had advice?'

'Enough to know how useless it is.'

'Some trumpery Union doctor. I'll have Williams down before you are a day older.'

'Stay, Tom. Thank you, most warmly, but you see yourself the best advice in the world could tell us no more than we know already. Are you really master of old Centry Underwood? I congratulate you.'

'Ay. I'm glad the place should come back to the old name. Mrs. Underwood and myself both felt it a kind of duty, otherwise it went against the grain with her, and I'm afraid she'll never take to the place. 'Twas that kept us abroad so long, though not from want of wishes from Mary and myself. The girl fell in love with yours at first sight.'

'To be sure I did,' said the young lady. 'Do let me see the little ones, and your baby.'

'Take your cousin to see them in the dining-room, Alda,' said the mother; the order that Alda had been apprehending, for the dining-room was by many degrees more shabby than the drawing-room; however, she could only obey, explaining by the way that little Bernard, being nearly two years old, was hardly regarded as a baby now.

Wilmet was in effect making him and Angela presentable as to the hands, face, hair, and pinafore, and appeared carrying the one and leading the other, who never having closely inspected any one in a riding-habit before, hung back, whispering to know whether 'that man was a woman.'

Marilda was in raptures, loving nothing so well as small children, and very seldom enjoying such an opportunity as the present; and the two babies had almost the whole of the conversation adapted to them, till Alda made an effort.

'So you have been on the Continent?'

'Oh yes; it was such a horrid bore. Mamma would go. She said I must have French masters, and more polish, but I don't like French polish. I hope I'm just as English as I was before.'

'That is undeniable' said Felix, laughing.

'Didn't you care for it? Oh! I should like it so much!' cried Alda.

'Like it? What, to hear French people chattering and gabbling all round one, and be always scolded for not being like them! There was a poor dog at the hotel that had been left behind by some English people, and could not bear the French voices, always snarled at them. I was just like him, and I got Papa to buy him and bring him home, and I always call him John Bull.'

'But wasn't it nice seeing places, and churches, and pictures?' asked Geraldine.

'That was the most disgusting of all, to be bothered with staring at the stupid things. Mamma with her Murray standing still at them all, and making me read it out just like a lesson, and write it after, which was worse! And then the great bare shiny rooms with nothing to do. The only thing I liked was looking at a jolly little old woman that sold hot chestnuts out in the street below. Such dear little children in round caps came to her! Just like that,--endeavouring to convert her pocket-handkerchief into the like head-gear for Robina.

'I have always so wanted to come here,' she continued, 'only I am afraid Mamma won't like the place. She says it's dull, and there's no good society. Is there?'

'I am sure we don't know,' said Wilmet.

'Lots of people are coming to stay with us for Christmas,' added Marilda, and you must all of you come and have all the fun with us.'

'Oh, thank you! how charming!' cried Alda. 'If Papa will but be well enough; he is so much better now.'

'He must come for change of air,' said Marilda. 'You can't think how pleased my father was to hear I had met you. He talked all the way home of how clever your father was, and how wickedly Cousin Fulbert at Vale Leston had served him, and he promised me when I came here I should have you with me very often. I would have written to tell you, only I do so hate writing. This is much better.'

Marilda seemed to have perfectly established herself among them before the summons came to her; and as the children herded to the door, her father turned round and looked at the boys inquiringly.

'There,' said Mr. Underwood, 'this is Felix, and this is Edgar, sixteen and fourteen.'

'Bless me, what a number, and as much alike as a flock of sheep,' again exclaimed the cousin. 'One or two more or less would not make much odds--eh, Edward?--Mary, what kissing all round?--D'ye know them all?--I'll look in to-morrow or next day, and you'll give me your answer, Edward.'

They were off, and at Mr. Underwood's sign Felix followed him into the sitting-room, to the great excitement of the exterior population, who unanimously accepted Alda's view, that one of them was going to be adopted. Their notion was not so much out as such speculations generally are, for Mr. Underwood was no sooner alone with Felix and his mother, than he said, 'You are in request, Felix; here's another offer for one of you--the very thing I once missed. What say you to a clerkship at Kedge Brothers?'

'For one of us, did you say, Father?'

'Yes; the answer I am to give to-morrow is as to which. You have the first choice.'

'Do you wish me to take it, Father?'

'I wish you to think. Perhaps this is the last time I shall have any decision to make for you, and I had rather you should make your own choice; nor, indeed, am I sure of my own wishes.'

'Then,' said Felix decidedly, 'I am sure I had better not. Edgar would not, and must not, go to my work, there would be nothing coming in for ever so long, and it would be a shame to throw old Froggy over.'

'I rather expected this, Felix. I told Tom you were in a manner provided for, but when he found you had a turn for business, he was the more anxious to get you.'

'I've got no turn that I know of,' said Felix rather gloomily; 'but we can't all of us set up for gentlemen, and Edgar is the one of us all that ought to have the very best! Such a fellow as he is! He is sure of the prize this time, you know! I only don't think this good enough for him! He ought to go to the University. And maybe when Mr. Underwood sees--'

'Not impossible,' said the sanguine father, smiling; 'and, at any rate, to get put in the way of prosperity early may make his talents available. It is odd that his first name should be Thomas. Besides, I do not think your mother could get on without you. And, Felix,' he

lowered his voice,' I believe that this is providential. Not only as securing his maintenance, but as taking him from Ryder. Some things have turned up lately when he has been reading with me, that have dismayed me. Do you know what I mean?'

'A little,' said Felix gravely.

'I know Ryder would be too honourable consciously to meddle with a boy's faith; but the worst of it is, he does not know what is meddling, and he likes Edgar, and talks eagerly to him. And the boy enjoys it.'

'He does,' said Felix, 'but he knows enough to be on his guard. There can't be any harm done.'

'Not yet! Not but what can be counteracted, if--Felix, you cannot guess how much easier it makes it to me to go, that Edgar will not be left in Ryder's hands. As to the younger ones, such things do not come down to the lower forms. And they will be eligible for clergy orphans. Audley spoke of a choristership for Clement in the clergy-house at Whittingtonia. Was there ever such a raising up of friends and helpers? I am glad to have seen Tom Underwood, hearty, kindly--sure to be always a good friend to you all. What did you think of the girl, Felix?'

'She is a jolly sort of girl,' said Felix; 'not like ours, you know, Father, but not half a bad fellow.'

Mr. Underwood smiled thoughtfully, and asked, 'Have you seen enough of her to judge how she is brought up?'

It was treating his son so much more as a friend than as a boy, that Felix looked up surprised. 'I should think her mother wanted to make her no end of a swell,' he said, 'and that it would not take.'

Mr. Underwood lent back thoughtfully. In truth, his cousin had, in his outburst of affection and remorse at long unconscious neglect, declared his intention of taking home one of the girls to be as a sister to his Mary, and then, evidently bethinking himself of some influence at home, had half taken back his words, and talked of doing something, bringing his wife to see about it, etc.

And when Mr. and Mrs. Underwood were again alone, they discussed the probabilities, and considered whether if the offer were made they would accept it. Mr. Underwood had only seen his cousin's wife once, in his prosperous days, when he had been at the wedding, and his impression was not that of perfect refinement. There was reason to think from the words of her husband and daughter that there was a good deal of the nouveau riche about her, and Mrs. Underwood did not know how to think of trusting a daughter in a worldly, perhaps irreligious household. But Mr. Underwood was a good deal touched by his cousin's warmth and regret; he believed that the family kept up religious habits; he thought that Providence had brought him friends

in this last hour, and his affectionate sanguine spirit would not hesitate in accepting the kindness that provided for another of the children he was leaving. She trusted him as sure to know best; and, after her usual mode, said no more, except 'Wilmet would be safest there.'

'You could spare her least.'

'Yes, indeed, it would be losing my right hand; but poor Alda--'

Poor Alda! but consider if there is not worse evil in keeping her among girls who hurt her, if they do not Wilmet. Beauty and wounded vanity are dangerous in a place like this.'

'Dangerous anywhere!'

'Less so in a great house, with that good honest Mary Alda, and Tom, who will look after her in the main, than here, or as a governess, with an inferior education.'

'It may be so. I know I can spare her better than her sister.'

'Wilmet is doing something for herself too--as Alda cannot, it seems. Justice settles the point, dearest, as it did between the boys--that is, if we have the offer.'

Perhaps the mother still had a lurking hope that the offer would not be made. Her instinct was to keep all her brood round her; but, silent and deferential woman that she was, she said nothing and resolved to be thankful for what so eased her husband's mind.

The handsome carriage tore up to the door, and violet velvet and feathers descended, Mary Alda sprang after, and then came her father, and hampers on hampers of game, wine, and fruits ensued; while Marilda seized on Alda, and turned of herself into the dining-room, bearing a box of sweets. 'Where are the little ones? Little Bobbie, here; and all the rest.'

Not many calls were needful to bring a flock to share the feast, with cries of joy; but Marilda was not yet satisfied.

'Where's the other of you?' she said to Alda. 'I don't know you well apart yet.'

'Wilmet's in the kitchen,' thrust in Lancelot, 'ironing the collars for Sunday.'

'Lance!' uttered Alda indignantly.

'Oh! what fun I do let me go down and see! I should so like to iron.'

'But, Marilda--your Mamma--'

'Oh nonsense, come along, show me the way. That's right, Robins, only your hands are so sticky. What, down here!--Oh, Wilmet, how d'ye do? what delicious work! do you always do it?'

'Generally, if Sibby is busy.'

'Do let me try.'

And she did try for ten minutes, at the end of which the mother's voice was heard calling for Edgar, who, turning crimson, went upstairs, leaving the others standing about the tidy kitchen, fresh sanded for Saturday.

What, not you!' said Marilda, pausing in her smoothing operations, and looking at Felix.

'No,' said he. 'I have got my work.'

'Oh? don't talk of it,' said Alda. 'I can't bear it. I didn't think he was in earnest, or that Papa would let him.'

Marilda turned full round. 'What, you won't go and be my father's clerk, and be one of Kedge and Underwood, and make a fortune?'

Felix shook his head.

'And what is your work instead?'

'Printing,' said Felix stoutly. 'It gives present payment, and we can't do without it.'

Both Marilda's hands seized on his. 'I like you!' she said. 'I wish I were you.'

They all laughed, and Felix coloured, more abashed than pleased. Lance--to make up for his ignominious rescue at their last meeting--performed a wonderful progress, holding on by his fingers and toes along the ledge of the dresser; and Marilda, setting her back (a broad one) against the ironing-board, went on talking.

'And do you know what besides?' looking round, and seeing they did not. 'One of you girls is to come and live with me, and be my sister. I wanted to have this little darling Angela to pet, but Mamma wouldn't have her, and I did so beg for Geraldine, to let her have a sofa and a pony carriage! I do want something to nurse! But Mamma won't hear of anybody but one of you two great ones, to learn and do everything with me; and that's not half the use.'

'But is it really?' cried Alda.

'Yes, indeed! You'll be had up for her to choose from--that is, if she can. How exactly alike you are!'

'She won't choose me,' said Wilmet. 'Hark, there's Edgar coming down.'

Edgar ran in, with orders to the twins to go into the drawing-room. Wilmet hung back. 'I will not be the one,' she said resolutely. 'Let Alda go alone.'

'No,' said Felix, 'it is what you are told that you've got to do now. Never mind about the rest! Let us all come out of this place.' And it was he who took off his sister's ironing apron as they went up to the dining-room together, while Marilda cried eagerly, 'Well, Edgar?'

'Well,' said Edgar, not in the enchanted voice she expected; 'it is very good of your father, and what must be must.'

'Don't you like it!' said Marilda, half hurt; and Edgar, always a boy of ready courtesy, answered, 'Yes, yes, I'm no end of grateful. I'll get rich, and go abroad, and buy pictures. Only I did hope to paint them.'

'Paint pictures!' cried Marilda. What, rather than be a merchant! do such stupid useless things, only to bother people with having to stare at them, when you could be making money?'

'There's no reason one should not make money with pictures,' said Edgar; 'but I'd rather make delight! But it can't be helped, and I am very glad to have done with this stupid place.'

Meantime Wilmet and Alda found themselves before a large, florid, much-dressed lady, with a most good-natured face, who greeted them with 'Good morning, my dears! Just as Marilda told me, so much alike as to be quite romantic. Well, no doubt it is a pity to separate between you, but my Marilda will be a true sister. She has spoken of nothing else. Are you willing, either of you, my dears?'

'Ay!' chimed in Mr. Thomas Underwood; 'we'll make you happy whichever it is! You shall be in all respects like our own child; Mary would see to that, if we didn't.'

As to choice,' said the lady, 'there's none that I can see--pretty genteel girls both, that will do us credit, unless it is their own fault. Excellent governess, London masters--you may be assured everything shall be done for her.'

'Shall we toss up which it shall be?' laughed her husband.

'No,' said Mr. Underwood gently. 'We think that this one,' laying his hand on Alda's arm, 'will value these advantages, and is not quite such a home-bird as her sister. I hope you will find a grateful good child in Alda Mary, and a kind sister to Mary Alda.'

The tears came into Alda's eyes, as her father seemed thus making her over; a great rush of affection for all at home, and contempt for

Mary Alda in comparison with her own twin, seemed to take away any elation, as Mr. and Mrs. Tom Underwood kissed her, and welcomed her, and declared they should like to take her home at once.

'You shall have her soon,' said Mr. Underwood. 'Let me keep her for Christmas Day.'

And for Christmas Day he did keep her, though at the bottom of Alda's heart there were strong hopes of invitations to join the festivities at Centry Underwood. Indeed, such a party was insisted on by Marilda, one that was to include all the little ones, and make them happier than ever they had been in their lives. It was to be on Twelfth Day, but Mrs. Underwood hinted to the twins that they had better not talk to the younger ones about it, for she scarcely believed they would go. She had never before spoken out that conviction which had long crushed her down, and Wilmet's whole soul seemed for the moment scared away by this fresh intimation of the condition in which their father stood; while Alda vehemently repeated the old declaration that he was better. He said he was better. Alas! such a better as it always was.

'How well you ought to be!' said Mr. Audley one day at the reiteration, 'better every day!'

'Yes, and best of all at last!' was the reply, with a sweet smile.

For he was very happy. The partial provision for the four eldest children, two by their own exertions, two through friends, had evidently been received by him as an earnest of protection and aid for the rest, even to the babe whom he scarcely expected ever to see in this world. He said it would be ungrateful not to trust, and he did trust with all his heart, cheered as it was by the tardy cordiality of his cousin, and the indefinable love of kindred that was thus gratified. Thomas Underwood poured in good things of all kinds on the invalid and his house, fulfilled his promise of calling in further advice, and would have franked half the family to Torquay--Nice--Madeira--if the doctors had given the slightest encouragement. It could be of little ultimate avail; but the wine and soup did give support and refreshment bodily, and produced much gratitude and thankfulness mentally, besides lightening some of Mrs. Underwood's present cares.

No one was more anxious to help than Mr. Ryder; he had been assiduous in his inquiries and offers of service ever since the attack at Michaelmas; and it was evident that he really venerated the Curate, while he was a severe and contemptuous judge of the Rector. But when, after a brilliant examination, he became aware that he was to lose both the elder Underwoods at once, his mortification was great, he came to call, and Mr. Underwood had again to undergo an expostulation on Felix's prospects, and an offer of keeping him free of expense. The school-fee was a mere trifle, but Mr. Ryder would willingly have boarded and lodged the boy himself--for the benefit of his authority, as he said, over younger boarders.

'I am afraid,' said Mr. Underwood, kind and grateful as usual, 'that there are too many younger boarders here for Felix to be spared. No, thank you; I am sincerely obliged to you, but the hard cash is a necessary consideration.'

'And you can sacrifice such a boy's prospects--'

'Bread and cheese _must_ be earned, even at the cost of prospects. He cannot afford to wait to make his labour skilled.'

'Forgive me, Mr. Underwood, but I cannot think it is right to throw away his abilities.'

'You can allow that it is a less wrong than to leave the rest to debt or starvation.'

'You should trust--'

'I do trust; but I can do so better when I humble what is nothing but pride and vanity in me, after all. I was foolish enough about it at first, but I am quite content now that my boy should do his duty, without being curious as to where it is to be done.'

'You will tell me a schoolmaster's vanity is concerned; and I allow it is, for I looked to your sons to raise the reputation of the school; but perhaps it is only put off a little longer. Will you let me have Clement or Fulbert, on the terms I proposed for Felix?'

'No, Ryder; with many, many thanks, much feeling of your generous kindness--it cannot be.'

'You do not trust me.' This was said with as much indignation as could be shown to a man in Mr. Underwood's condition.

No. Your very kindness would make the tone I regret in you more perilous. Do not think Felix ungrateful, Ryder; the desire is mine--and remember, it is that of a man who is dying, and who really loves and values you greatly. It is that the younger boys should, as soon as may be, go to schools where older systems prevail.'

Mr. Ryder was exceedingly mortified, and though he tried hard to conceal the full extent of his annoyance, he could not help saying, 'You know how I respect your motives; but let me say that I doubt your finding any place where the ideas you deprecate are not to be found. And--pardon me--may not the finding their progress obstructed by your scruples, the more indispose your sons to them?'

'I hope not,' said Mr. Underwood, calmly. 'I hope it may show them how strong the approach of death makes that faith--nay, rather assurance--with which your party are tampering.'

'You are not doing me justice, Mr. Underwood. You know that my faith

and hope are at the core the same as your own. All our question is what outworks are untenable.' Again he spoke hotly, but Mr. Underwood's gentleness seemed to silence him.

'And that there should be any such question proves--alas!--the utter difference between our belief. Ryder, you are a young man, and as I believe and trust verily in earnest; and some day, I think, you will understand what faith is. Meantime, your uncertainties are doing more mischief than you understand--they pervade all your teaching more than you know. I dread what they may do to such as have not your moral sense to restrain them and bring them back, as I pray--I hope ever to pray--it may be with you. Thank you for all your kindness, actual and intended, to my boys.'

Then rising from his chair, while Mr. Ryder remained uncertain how to speak, he signed to him to remain still while he sought in his bookcase and returned with a small old copy of Jeremy Taylor's Holy Living and Dying; then sitting down again, wrote the schoolmaster's name in it, above his own 'Under-wode, Under-rode' stamp. 'Keep it, Ryder! I do not say that you will care for it now, but some day I think you will, and if I am allowed to know of it, it will be joy.'

Mr. Ryder could only wring the hand that held it out to him, and with a great effort say, 'Thank you.' He saw that Mr. Underwood was too much tired to prolong the conversation; but he wrote a note of warm thanks that evening, promising to do whatever lay in his power for the boys, that their father would not think dangerous for them; and he added, that whatever he should for the future think or say, such an example as he had now seen was a strong weight on its own side. It was warmly and tenderly put, and like everything that befell him, gratified Mr. Underwood.

A very happy man he had been, as he sincerely told those who would have grieved over him, and not without some remorse.

'Yes,' as he said to Mr. Audley, who watched him like a son, 'it is indeed the LORD who hath led me all my life through. I never had a want or a care unfulfilled till nine years ago. Then, just as I had become sluggish and mechanical in fixed habits of easy country work, came this thorough change, break, and rousing. I tell you, I can never be thankful enough for the mercy. Not to leave them all provided for, as the saying is, would I go back to be such a priest as I was becoming. Happy--yes, I have been much happier here, since no choice was left me but working up to my strength.'

'And beyond it,' said Mr. Audley, sadly.

'If so--well; so much the better!' he said. 'It is a blessing to be allowed to be spent in that service. And for the children, I wish only for work and goodness for them--and for that I may well trust my good Master.'

CHAPTER IV

TWILIGHT AND DAWN

'Two Angels, one of Life and one of Death,
Passed o'er the village as the morning broke;
The dawn was on their faces; and beneath
The sombre houses capped with plumes of smoke.

LONGFELLOW.

'Don't, Ful!'

'That's nothing to you, Clem.'

'I say, this won't do. I must have some light.'

'Indeed, Ed, we must not light a candle before five o'clock.'

'Pish!'

'Oh please, Edgar, don't stir the fire. If you knew how few coals
there are!'

'Stuff'

'No, I won't have it done if Wilmet says not;' and Felix reared up in
the gloom, and struggled with his brother.

Felix--Edgar--Oh, don't.'

'Hsh--sh-- Now, you girls are worse than all, screaming in that way.'
A few moments' silence of shame. It had been a weary, long, wet day,
a trial under any circumstances to eleven people under seventeen, on
the 4th of January, and the more oppressive in St. Oswald's
Buildings, because not only had their father been in a much more
suffering state for some days past, but their mother, who had hoped
to keep up for some weeks longer, had for the last two days been
quite unlike herself. In the sick-room she was as tender and vigilant
as ever in her silent way, but towards her children a strange fretful
impatience, a jealousy of their coming near their father, and an
intolerance of the least interruption from them even for the most
necessary cause. Moreover, the one friend and helper who had never
failed them before, Mr. Audley, had not been seen since he had looked
in before early service; and altogether the wretchedness and
perplexity of that day had been such, that it was no wonder that even
Felix and Wilmet had scarcely spirits or temper for the only task
that seemed at present left them, the hindering their juniors from
making themselves obnoxious.

'Wilmet, do you think we shall go to the party at Centry Park?' reiterated Fulbert.

'Do hold your tongue about that. I don't believe there's the least chance,' said Alda fretfully.

'And I don't know how you can think of such a thing,' added Cherry.

'I want to see Cousin Marilda's Christmas tree,' whined Robina.

'Do ask Mamma again,' entreated another voice.

'I shall do no such thing,' said Wilmet, with absolute crossness in her tone.

Robina began to cry.

'Come here, Bobbie,' said Cherry's voice in the dark end of the room; 'I'll tell you a story.'

'I know all Cherry's stories, and they're rubbish,' said Fulbert.

'This is quite a new one. There was once a little match-girl--'

'Bosh! I know that little brute, and I hate her,' broke in Fulbert.

'Hold your tongue,' said Clement; 'but--'

'Oh no, don't let us have the match-girl,' cried several voices.

'Why can't you be good? There was once an old giant that lived in a cave--'

'I hate old giants,' said Cherry's critical public; and her voice grew melancholy.

'But this one had but one eye. Come, do listen; papa told me. He was in an island--' but the voice grew mournful, and was broken by a cry.

'Oh! Fulbert hurt me!'

'Fulbert, for shame! What is it, Angel dear?'

'I only laid hold of her pudding arm,' growled Fulbert. 'Oh! I say, Felix, that's too bad!'

'Hold your row, I say,' said Felix, after his application of fist law. 'Hollo! what's that?' and he sprang to his feet with Angela in his arms, as the door was opened by a hand groping, and Mr. Audley's voice said, 'Darkness visible.'

There was a general scrambling up all over the floor, and Edgar rushed across to light a candle. Wilmet alone had not stirred, as Bernard lay asleep across her lap. The flash of the match revealed a mass of light disordered heads, and likewise a black figure in the doorway.

'Here is a kind helper for you, Wilmet,' said Mr. Audley, 'from St. Faith's, at Dearport. You must call her Sister Constance.'

Wilmet did rise now, in some consternation, lifting her little brother, whose hand was still in the locks, the tangling of which had been his solace. There was a sweet warm kiss on her brow, and her lost net was picked up, her hair coiled into it by a pair of ready tender hands, but she faltered, 'Oh, thank you. Does Mamma know?'

'She was there when I got a sort of consent from your father,' said Mr. Audley.

'She has not said a word,' said Alda, half resentfully. 'We have hardly been in all day except just to fetch and carry.'

'Never mind,' said the Sister, 'it is much better that she did not think about it. Now, my dear, don't! I won't have anything done for me. You don't know how we Sisters sleep on nothing when we do sleep.'

'But you'll have some tea,' said Alda, the only smooth-haired one of the party.

'When you do, perhaps, thank you. Will you come to me, my dear!' relieving Felix from Angela. 'What is your name?' and the child, though ordinarily very shy, clung to her at once; while she, moving over to Cherry, found her in tears, shook up her cushion, arranged her rug, and made her comfortable in a moment. A sense came over them all that they had among them a head on whom they might rest their cares; and as the black bonnet and veil were taken off, and they saw a sweet fair, motherly face beaming on them from the white plain-bordered cap, they gathered round with an outpouring of confidence, small and great, while Mr. Audley went upstairs to announce what he had done. He presently returned, saying, 'All right! Perhaps you had better come up at once.'

There they sat, on either side of the hearth, he pillowed up and in a dressing-gown, more entirely the sick man than he had ever before given up himself to be. Mrs. Underwood rose, and with tears in her eyes, mutely held out her hand, while her husband at once recognised Sister Constance as Lady Herbert Somerville, the wife of the late rector of Dearport. He had last met her when, some six or seven years before he had been invited to preach at festivals at Dearport, and had seen her the sunbeam of her house. He knew that her husband, who was a connection of Mr. Audley's, had since died of the same malady as his own, and had left her, a childless widow, together with all else he had to leave, to the Sisterhood they had already founded in the seaport town. But his greeting was, 'This is very good in you;

but surely it must be too painful for you.'

'The Superior saw how much I wished it,' she said.

'You are like Alexandrine de la Ferronays,' he said, remembering her love for tending a consumptive priest for her husband's sake.

'I am always wishing that I were!' she said.

So they perfectly understood each other, and poor Mrs. Underwood, who had, in her new and extraordinary petulance, fiercely resisted the doctor's recommendation of a nurse, found herself implicitly relying on and trusting Sister Constance with a wonderful sense of relief--a relief perhaps still greater to the patient himself, who had silently endured more discomforts and made more exertions than she knew, rather than tire her or vex her by employing even son or daughter, and who was besides set free from some amount of anxiety.

Indeed the widow had too perfect a sympathy to interfere with the wife's only comfort. When it could safely be done, she left the two alone together, and applied herself to winning the hearts and soothing the spirits of the poor children downstairs, and suggesting and compounding new nourishing delicacies.

She even persuaded Mrs. Underwood to go to the next room for a night's rest while she sat up, and learnt--what the silent wife had never told any one--how trying the nights were even to that spirit! At first the patient liked to talk, and drew out much of the hidden treasure of her spirit respecting her husband, who, though ailing for years, had finally passed away with only the immediate warning of a week--the final cause being harass from the difficulties from those above and below him that beset an earnest clergyman of his way of thinking.

What struck her, as it did all, was Mr. Underwood's perfect absence of all care, and conviction that all the burthen was taken off his hands. Her own husband had, as she could not help telling him, found it hard to resign himself to leaving his plans half carried out to instruments which he had but half formed. He had wished with all his might to live, and though he had resigned himself dutifully, it had been with a real struggle, and a longing for continued service rather than rest, a hope that he should more efficiently serve, and much difficulty in refraining from laying all about him under injunctions for the future.

Mr. Underwood half smiled. 'I am neither head nor principal,' he said. 'Plans have been over long ago. I am only tired out, too tired to think about what is to follow. If I live three days longer I shall have just had my forty years in the wilderness, and though it has blossomed like a rose, I am glad to be near the rest.'

And then he asked for the Midnight Office; and afterwards came fitful sleep, half dreamy, half broken by the wanderings of slight

feverishness and great weakness; but she thought her attendance would not be very brief, and agreed mentally with what Mr. Audley had told her, that the doctor said that the end might yet be many weeks away. When in the dark winter's mornings the wife crept back again to her post, and all that could be done in those early hours had been effected, Sister Constance went to the half-past seven o'clock service with Felix and Clement, imparting to them on the road that the Superior of St. Faith's was expecting to receive some of the least of the children in the course of the day, to remain there for the present.

Both boys declared it would be an infinite relief, but they doubted exceedingly whether either father or mother would consent to lose sight of them, since the former never failed to see each child, and give it a smile and kiss, if no more. If they were to be sent, Felix supposed there was no one but himself to take them; nobody with whom they would be happy could be spared, nor did he show any repugnance to the notion of acting *pere de famille* to three babies on the railway.

It was quickly settled. Mr. Underwood at once confessed the exceeding kindness, and declared it to be much better for everybody. 'Do you not feel it so, Mother?'

She bent her head in assent, as she did to all he said.

'Having them back will be good for you,' he added persuasively; and again she tried to give a look of response. So they were brought-- Robina, Angela, and Bernard--and each stood for a moment on a chair at his bedside. The two little ones he merely kissed and blessed, but to Robina he said a few more words about being good, and minding Mamma and Felix.

'Oh yes, papa! And they'll have a Christmas tree! and I'll save all my bon-bons to make your cough well.'

He watched wistfully as the bright heads passed out of sight, and the long struggling cough and gasping that followed had all the pangs of parting to add to their burthen. Half the family escorted Felix and his charge to the station, and in the quiet that followed, Sister Constance had a good sleep on Wilmet's bed, as much, she said, as she ever required; and she came from it all freshness and brightness, making the dinner-time very charming to all the diminished party, though Wilmet felt greatly lost without the little ones; and afterwards she earned the warmest gratitude from Edgar and Geraldine by looking over their drawings and giving them some valuable hints-- nay, she even devised the new and delightful occupation of ship-building for those three inconvenient subjects, Clement, Fulbert, and Lancelot. Upstairs or down, all was gentle cheerfulness and patience wherever she went.

Felix came home about five o'clock, and his mother was persuaded to go to lie down while he amused his father with the account of the

children's exemplary behaviour, and of their kind welcome at St. Faith's, where he had been kept to dine, feeling, as he said, 'uncommonly queer' at first, but at last deciding, to the great diversion of his father, that the sisters were a set of jolly old girls, but not one equal to '_our_' Sister Constance.' Then he had seen the church, and was almost bewildered with the beauty of the decorations; and Mr. Underwood, though saying little, evidently much enjoyed his boy's refreshment and pleasure. He certainly seemed no worse, and Mr. Audley was allowed, what he had often asked before, to sit up with him.

But there was much to render it a long, anxious, restless night of a sort of semi-consciousness, and murmuring talk, as if he fancied himself at Vale Leston again. However, when Felix crept in, about four o'clock in the morning, anxious at the sounds he heard, he found him asleep, and this lasted for two or three hours; he woke refreshed, and presently said, 'Epiphany! put back the curtain, that I may see the bright and morning star.'

The morning star was shining in the delicate dawn full in view, and he looked at it with quiet pleasure. 'Mother,' he said, then recollecting himself; 'ah, she is resting! Thank you, Audley.'

At that moment a little cry through the thin wall made him start and flush.

'Is it so?' he murmured; 'thank God! That is well!' But his chest heaved grievously as he panted with anxiety, and his two watchers hesitated what to do, until the door was slightly opened, and before the intended sign could be made to Felix, the breathless exclamation, 'How? what?' brought Sibby's half-scared mournful countenance forward.

'How is she, Sibby? don't fear to say,' he said, more collectedly.

'Nicely, sir, as well as can be expected; but--'

'The baby? Alive--I heard--'

'Yes, sir; that is--O Sir, it is two; and it would be a mere mercy if they are taken, as they look like to be--twins, and coming like this!' Perhaps Sibby was a little more lamentable, because, instead of looking shocked, he clasped his hands in eager thanksgiving, as he looked upwards.

Sister Constance followed at the same moment, saying in a far more encouraging voice, 'She is doing very well.'

'It is another great mercy,' he said. 'Much better than longer waiting on me. Will these Twelfth-day gifts live? Or do I take them with me? At least, let me baptize them--now, at once,' he spoke earnestly. 'My full twelve, and one over, and on Twelfth-day.'

Sister Constance had better hopes of the babes than Sibby, but this wish of his was one not to be withstood for a moment; and she went to make ready, while Mr. Audley went down for the little Parian font, and Felix and Sibby arranged the pillows and coverings. Mr. Underwood looked very bright and thankful. 'Birthday gifts,' he said, 'what are they? You have not told me, Sibby.'

'Boy and girl, sir,' she said, 'poor little dears!'

'Jealous for your old twins, Sibby?' he said, smiling.

'Ah! sir, they came in a better time.'

'Better for them, no doubt, but this is the best for these,' he answered brightly. 'See, Sibby, can't you be thankful, like me, that your mistress is sheltered from what would try her? I can bear it all better without her to see.'

Sibby's only reply was a gush of tears, and presently all was made ready; Geraldine was quietly helped into the room by Edgar, and placed in her usual station by the pillow, and the boys stood against the wall, while the two babes, tiny and scarcely animate things, were carried, each by one of the elder pair and the father, as whitely robed as if he had been in his surplice, held out his hands, and smiled with his kindly lips and clear shining blue eyes full of welcome.

'Has your mother any wishes about names?' he asked. 'Wilmet--what--?'

'No, Papa, I think not;' but her eyes were brimming over with tears, and it was plain that something was suppressed.

'My dear, let me hear, I am not to be hurt by such things.'

'It is--it is only--she did say, when we came for them, that we were the children of joy--these are the children of sorrow,' murmured Wilmet, uttering the words with difficulty.

'I thought so,' he said; then after a brief pause, 'Now, Audley--'

For Mr. Audley said all the previous prayers, though with a voice as hard to control as Wilmet's had been. Then Wilmet held her charge close to her father, for, almost inappreciable as the weight was, he could only venture to lay one arm round that grasshopper burthen, as with his long thin fingers he dashed the water. 'Theodore Benjamin, I baptize thee.' Alda brought the other. 'Stella Eudora.' Then the two hands were folded over his face, and they all knelt round till he moved and smiled.

'Give them to me again,' he said.

It was for the father's kiss and blessing now.

'They look life-like,' he said. 'You will keep them. Now mind me. Charge _her_ never to think of them as children of sorrow, but of joy. She will remember how nearly you were called Theodore, Felix. Take him as God's gift and mine--may he be a son of your right hand to you.'

The boy did take the babe, and with a deep resolve in his heart, that his duty to these helpless ones should be his first thought on earth. He did not speak it, but his father saw the steadfast wistful gaze, and it was enough.

Alda ventured to ask, 'Is Eudora a gift too, Papa?'

'Yes. A happy gift. For so she is! Let her be a little Epiphany Star to you all! Tell Mother that I call them a double joy, a double comfort! Poor little maid!' and he kissed her again, 'will no one welcome her, but the father who is leaving her?'

'O Papa! You know how we will love them,' sobbed Wilmet.

'I think I do, my dear;' and he smoothed the glossy hair; but with love comes joy, you know.'

'It is very hard now,' broke from the poor girl.

'Very, he said tenderly; 'but it will if you make the burthen a blessing--the cross a crutch--eh, my Cherry? Now, a kiss and go, I am tired.'

He was tired, but not apparently worse.

Edgar and his three juniors started off directly after church in quest of ice where they might behold skating, and practise sliding; and Wilmet, with a view to quiet, actually ventured on the extravagance of providing them with a shilling, that they might forage for themselves, instead of coming home to dinner.

She regretted Edgar's absence, however, for when Mr. Bevan came in to hold the Epiphany Feast in the sick chamber, her father asked for Edgar and Geraldine, and looked disappointed that the boy was gone. But he murmured, 'Maybe it is best!' and when the little girl came in, flushed and awe-struck, he took her hand, and said, 'May not I have this little one--my last pupil--to share the feast with me? Willing and desirous,' he smiled as he held her, and she coloured intensely, with tears in her eyes.

There could be no denial, and his judgment at such a moment could only be accepted by the Rector; and the child herself durst not say one word of her alarm and awe. Papa knew. And never could she forget that he held her hand all the time that she leant--for she could not kneel--by his bed. Her elder brother and sisters were there too, and he kissed and blessed each tenderly afterwards, and Sister Constance too knelt and asked his blessing. Then he thanked Mr. Bevan warmly,

and called it a most true day of brightness. They heard him whispering to himself, 'Arise, shine, for thy Light is come;' and the peaceful enjoyment seemed so to soothe him, that he was not, as usual, eager to get up.

It was only towards the early dusk that a restlessness came on, and an increase of the distress and oppression of breath, which he thought might be more bearable in his chair; and Mr. Audley, who had just come in, began with Felix to dress him, and prepare to move him. But just as they were helping him towards the chair, there was a sort of choke, a gasping struggle, his head fell on Felix's shoulder, the boy in terror managed to stretch out a hand and rang the bell; but in that second felt that there was a strange convulsive shudder, and--

'Felix!' Mr. Audley's low voice sounded strange and far, away. 'I do believe--'

The figure was entirely prone as they lifted it back to the bed. They needed not the exclamation of Sibby to reveal the truth. It was only an exclamation, it would have been a shriek if Felix had not grasped her wrist with a peremptory grasp. But that bell had been enough; there had been a sound of dismay in the very tinkle, and Sister Constance was in the doorway.

'Felix,' she said, understanding all, 'you must go to her. She heard--she is calling you. You cannot conceal it; be as quick and quiet as you can,' she added, as the stunned boy went past her, only hearing, and that as through a tempest, the feeble voice calling his name. He stood by the bedside; his mother looked into his white face, and held out her hands; then as he bent down, clasped both round his neck. 'He trusted you,' she said.

He sank on his knees as she relaxed her grasp, and hid her head beneath the clothes. A few holy words of commendation of the soul departed sounded from the other room; then at Sister Constance's touch of his hand, he quitted the room.

Presently after, Felix was sitting in the large arm-chair in the dining-room, with his sister Geraldine on his lap, his arms round her, her arms tightly clasped round his neck, her hair hanging loosely down over his shoulder, her head against him, his face over her, as he rocked himself backwards and forwards with her, each straining the other closer, as though the mechanical action and motion could allay the pain. The table was all over baby-things, which numerous neighbours had sent in on the first news of the twins that morning, and which the girls had been inspecting; but no one--nothing else was to be seen when Mr. Thomas Underwood, on his way from the station, finding his knock unheard, and the door ajar, found his way to the room.

'What is this? How is your father?'

Felix raised his face, still deeply flushed, and rising, placed his

sister in the chair.

'What, worse! You don't say so,' said Mr. Underwood, advancing.

'He is gone!' said Felix, steadily, but in an unnatural voice. 'Quite suddenly. Not very long ago,' he began, but he felt unable to guess for what space of time he had been rocking Cherry there.

'Dead! Edward Underwood! Bless me!' said Mr. Underwood, taking off his hat, passing his hand over his forehead, and standing horror-struck. 'I had no idea! You never sent over to say he was worse.'

'He was not; it came on just now,' said Felix, holding by the mantelpiece.

He groaned. 'Poor Edward! Well,' and he was forced to put his handkerchief to his eyes. He spoke more gently after that. 'Well, this is a sudden thing, but better than lingering on. Your poor mother, would she like to see me?'

'She was confined last night.'

Bless me! bless me! What a state of things! Have you got any one to be with you?'

'Yes; a lady from Dearport,' said Felix.

'Humph? Which are you? not my boy?'

'No, I am Felix. O poor Edgar!' he added, still bewildered.

It was at this moment that trampling steps were heard, making Felix spring forward with an instinct to silence them; but the threshold the sight of his face brought conviction to Edgar, and with a loud uncontrollable cry, tired and hungry as he was, he seemed to collapse into his brother's arms, and fainted away.

'_My_ poor boy!' exclaimed his cousin, coming to Felix's help, and himself lifting Edgar to the sofa. Of the other boys, Clement ran for water, Fulbert rushed out of sight, and Lancelot laid his head on a chair choking with tears.

Felix and Clement were, poor children! used enough to illness to attend to their brother with a collectedness that amazed their cousin; and without calling for help, Edgar came shuddering and trembling to himself, and then burst into silent but agonising sobs, very painful to witness. He was always--boy as he was--the most easily and entirely overthrown by anything that affected him strongly; and Mr. Thomas Underwood was so much struck and touched by his exceeding grief, especially now that he looked on him as his own property, that after putting in some disjointed sentences of 'There--there--You'll always have a father in me--Don't, my boy--I tell you, you are my son now,'--which to Felix's mind made it more intolerable,

he said, 'I'll take him home now--it will be all the better for him and for every one, poor lad! So many--'

'The three younger ones were sent to Dearport yesterday,' said Felix; 'but Edgar--'

'To Dearport! Eh! To whom?'

'The Sisters,' said Felix.

A gruff sound followed. 'Come, come, my dear lad, 'tis bad enough, but I'll do my best to make up to you. It will be much the best way for you to come out of this,' he added, glancing round the dreary fireless room, which his entrance had reminded Felix to darken.

'Thank you,' began Felix, not in the least supposing Edgar could go; 'but now--'

'It is not like a stranger,' added his relation. 'Be a sensible lad. One out of the way is something under the circumstances. Stay--whom can I see? I will give orders for you,' he added.

'Mr. Audley and Sister Constance are seeing about things, thank you,' said Felix. 'I'll fetch Mr. Audley,' he added, as another trying grunt at the other name fell on his ear, and he put his arm round Geraldine, and helped her away.

Mr. Audley came, having just parted with the doctor, who had explained the sudden termination as what he had of late not thought improbable, and further shown that it had been most merciful, since there might otherwise have been weeks, if not months, of much severer suffering. He had just looked in at the wife, but she had hardly noticed him, and he saw no dangerous symptoms about her, except an almost torpid calmness.

Mr. Thomas Underwood saw Mr. Bevan, and made it clearly understood that he made himself responsible for all expenses, including mourning for the whole family. He even offered to have the funeral at Vale Leston, 'if it were only to shame Fulbert Underwood;' but the wife was in no state to be asked, and the children shrank from the removal, so it was decided that Edward Underwood should sleep among those for whom he had spent his life, and where his children's lot for the present would be cast.

The cousin carried Edgar back to Centry with him; the boy seemed too unhappy not to be restless, and as if he were ready to do anything to leave his misery behind him.

The others remained with their preparations, and with such consolation as the exceeding sympathy and kindness of the whole town could afford them. Their mother remained in the same state, except when roused by an effort; and then there was an attention and presence of mind about her that gave anxiety lest excitement should

be bringing feverishness, but she always fell back into her usual state of silence, such that it could be hardly told whether it were torpid or not.

They looked out that half-finished comment on the Epistle to the Philippians. It stopped at the words--'Yea, and if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all.'

Mr. Audley took those words for his text on the Sunday, and, not without breaking down more than once, read as much of the comment as there was time for, as the happy-hearted message of the late pastor, for whom indeed there were many tears shed. It seemed to suit with that solemn peace and nobleness that seemed like the 'likeness of the Resurrection face,' bringing back all the beauty of his countenance as he lay robed in his surplice, with a thorny but bright-fruited cross of holly on his breast, when his children looked their last, ere parting with what remained of that loved and loving father.

Poor little Geraldine spent that worst hour of her life sitting by her mother's bed. She had been helped by Felix to that Feast which had been spread for the mourners in the church in early morning; but afterwards she was forced to remain at home, while the white-robed choir, the brother clergy of all the neighbourhood, and the greater part of the parish met their pastor for the last time in the church.

There the first part of the service took place; and then--Cherry could just fancy she could hear the dim echo of the Dies Irae, as it was sung on the way to the cemetery. It was a very aching heart, poor child! full of the dull agony of a longing that she knew could never be satisfied again, the intense craving for her father.

She missed him more really than any of them, she had been so much his companion; and she was the more solitary from the absence of Edgar, who had always been her chief partner in her pursuits. His departure had seemed like a defection; and yet she had reproached herself for so feeling it when he had run upstairs, on arriving with Mr. Underwood, looking paler, more scared and miserable, than any of them; and he was sobbing so much when he took his place in the procession, that Wilmet had made Felix take Alda, that she might support him. None of his mother's steady reserve and resolute stillness had descended to him, he was all sensibility and nervousness; and Geraldine, though without saying this to herself, felt as if 'poor Edgar' might really have been nearly killed by the last few days of sadness, he could bear depression so little. She could hardly have gone through them but for Sister Constance's kindness, and that rocking process from Felix, which she and he called 'being his great baby.' And now, when her mother looked up at her, held out a hand, and called her Papa's dear little Cherry, drawing her to lay her cheek by hers on the pillow, there was much soothing in it, though therewith the little girl felt a painful doubt and longing to know whether her mother knew what was passing; and even while perfectly aware that she must not be talked to nor

disturbed, was half grieved, half angry, at her dropping off into a slumber, and awakening only upon little Stella's behalf. Those few words to Geraldine had been the only sign that day of perception of any existence in the world save that of the twins.

So the time went by, and the little bustle of return was heard; Sister Constance came in, kissed Geraldine, and helped her down that she might be with Edgar, who was to return with the cousin, whispering to her by the way that it had been very beautiful. It was a day of bright sunshine, high wind, and scant sparkling feathery stars of snow, that sat for a moment shining in their pure perfectness of regularity on the black, and then vanished. 'So like himself,' Sister Constance said.

Geraldine found her four elders and the three little boys all together in the dining-room; and while Wilmet anxiously asked after Mother, the others, in a sort of sad elation, told of the crowds present, the number of clergy--Mr. Ryder, too, came home from his holiday on purpose--the sobbing people, and the wreaths of camellias and of holly, that loving hands had made, and laid upon the coffin. And then the last hymn had been so sweet and beautiful, they all seemed refreshed and comforted except Edgar, who, coming fresh back to the desolation of the house, was in another paroxysm of grief.

'But, Edgar,' said Alda timidly, 'you like being there, don't you?'

'As if one could like anything now!'

'Well! but, Eddy dear, you know what I mean. It is not bad being there.'

'Not so bad as being at home. Oh!' and a terrible fit of sobbing came on, which made the other children stand round rather appalled; while Felix, hesitating, said,

'It is no good going on in this way, Edgar. Father would say it was not right; and you are upsetting poor little Cherry.'

'It is worse for him, because he has been away, said Cherry fondling him.

'Yes,' said Edgar between his sobs 'It did not seem _so_ there.'

'And are they kind?'

'Oh, yes. Marilda let me sit in the school-room, and I had books, and things to copy; such an angel, Cherry, I'll bring it to you next time--my copy, I mean.'

Here there was a summons from the other room for Felix.

'Yes,' said Edgar, a good deal reinvigorated by having something to tell; 'I suppose they are going to tell him what is settled. Mr.

Underwood wrote to the man at Vale Leston, and he won't do anything for us; but they are going to try for the Clergy Orphan for one of you two little boys.'

'Oh!' there was a great gasp.

'And about me?' asked Alda.

'You are to come when we all go to London--to meet us at the station. There's a new governess coming, and you will start both together with her; and I think you'll beat Marilda, for she knows nothing, and won't learn.'

'I hope she won't be jealous.'

'I don't think it is in her! She's very jolly.'

'But I can't go till Mamma is better.'

Wilmet felt they were falling into a gossiping kind of way that jarred on her, and was glad of a summons upstairs.

Mr. Thomas Underwood saw Alda before he returned home, told her she was his other daughter, and should join them on their way to London; and he further made arrangements about the christening, contingent, of course, on the mother's consent, and on the possibility of taking the very small delicate babies to the church. He made very extensive promises of patronage for the future, with a full and open heart, and looked as if he should like to adopt the whole family on the spot.

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For the convenience of our readers we subjoin the first page of the family Bible.

Edward Fulbert Underwood married August 1st, 1837--Mary Wilmet Underwood.

Felix Chester . . . born, July 3d, 1838.
Wilmet Ursula)
Alda Mary). . . " Aug. 11th, 1839.
Thomas Edgar. . . . " Oct. 6th, 1840.
Geraldine. . . . " Oct. 25th, 1841.
Edward Clement . . . " Nov. 23d, 1842.
Fulbert James . . . " Jan. 9th, 1844.
Lancelot Oswald. . . " May 16th, 1846.
Robina Elizabeth . . . " Feb. 20th, 1848.
Angela Margaret. . . " Sept. 29th, 1851.
Bernard " Dec. 1st, 1852.
Stella Eudora)
Theodore Benjamin). . . " Jan. 6th, 1854.

CHAPTER V

WORKING FOR BREAD

'Parson's lass 'ant nowt, an' she weant 'a nowt when 'e's dead;
Mun be a guvness, lad, or summut, an' addle her bread.'

TENNYSON.

'Tell, little one,' said Mr. Rugg, the doctor, as he found Geraldine on the landing-place outside her mother's room, and spoke to her in a voice that to her reluctant ears, as well as to those of Sister Constance, who followed him, sounded all the more vulgar because it was low, wheedling, and confidential; 'you are always about the house, you know everything--what accident has your mamma met with?'

Cherry's face grew set.

'She has, then,' said the doctor, looking at Sister Constance. 'I thought so. Now, be a good child, and tell us all about it.'

'I cannot,' she said.

'Come, don't be silly and sulk. No one will punish you: we know it was an accident; out with it.'

'My dear,' said Sister Constance, 'this is a pity. Much may depend on your speaking.'

Cherry began to cry very piteously, though still silently.

'Yes, yes, we see you are sorry,' said Mr. Rugg, 'but there's nothing for it now but to let us hear the truth.'

She shook her head violently, and brow and neck turned crimson.

Mr. Rugg grew angered, and tried a sharper tone. 'Miss Geraldine, this is regular naughtiness. Let me hear directly.'

The flush became purple, and something like 'I won't' came from behind the handkerchief.

'Leave her to me, if you please,' said Sister Constance gently; 'I think she will tell me what is right to be told.'

'As you please, Lady Somerville,' said Mr. Rugg, who, since he had discovered her title, was always barbarously misusing it; 'but the thing must be told. It is doing Mrs. Underwood a serious injury to

let childish naughtiness conceal the truth.'

Constance put her arm round the little girl, a tiny weight for thirteen years old, and took her into the room where she had last seen her father. She was sobbing violently, not without passion, and the more distressingly because she carefully stifled every sound, and the poor little frame seemed as if it would be rent to pieces.

'Cherry, dear child, don't,' said Constance, sitting down and gathering her into her arms; 'do try and calm yourself, and think--'

'He--he--I won't tell him!' sobbed the child. 'He's a bad man--he tells stories. He said he would not hurt me--when he knew he should most terribly. Papa said it was very wrong. Papa was quite angry--he called it deceiving, he did! I won't tell him!'

'My dear child, is there anything to tell? Don't think about him, think about what is good for your mother.'

'She told me not,' sobbed Cherry, but not with the anger there had been before. 'No, no, don't ask me; she told me not.'

'Your mother? My dear little girl, whatever it is, you ought to say it. Your dear mother seems to be too ill and confused to recollect everything herself, and if it is not known whether she has been hurt, how can anything be done for her?'

Cherry sat upon her friend's lap, and with a very heaving chest said, 'If Felix says I ought--then I will. Papa said we should mind Felix--like him.'

'I will call Felix,' said Sister Constance.

Mr. Rugg looked very impatient of the delay; but Felix, who had just come in to dinner, was summoned. He came at once, and was soon standing by Geraldine's chair.

'Yes, Geraldine, I think you ought to tell,' he said as the loyal little thing gazed up at her new monarch. 'What did happen?'

'It was on the day after New Year's Day,' said Geraldine, now speaking very fast. 'You were all at church, and she came out of--this room with Bernard in her arms--and called to me that I might come and sit with--him, because she was going down to the kitchen to make some beef-tea. And just then she put her foot into a loop of whip-cord, and fell. She could not save herself at all, because of Bernard; but she went backwards--against the steps.'

'Did she seem hurt at the time?'

'I did not think so. She pulled herself up by the baluster before I could get up to help her, and she never let Bernard go all the time--he did not even scream. She only said, "Now mind, Cherry, do not say one word of this to Papa or anybody else," and she told me she wasn't

hurt. Oh! was she really?' as the Sister left the room.

'I wonder whose the string was,' said Felix vindictively.

'Oh, never mind! He'll be so sorry! Oh! I hope she won't be very much vexed at my telling!'

'She will not mind now!' said Felix; 'it was only not to frighten Papa.'

And Felix had his little sister in that one position where she felt a sort of comfort--like a baby in his arms to be rocked--when Sister Constance returned with the doctor. He spoke without either the anger or the persuasive tone now, and Cherry could bear it better, though she slipped off her brother's lap instantly, and stood up in dignity.

'So your Mamma told you to conceal this mishap. That is some excuse. Now, tell me, how far did she fall?'

'Not more than four steps, I am sure--I think three.'

'And backwards?'

'Yes.'

'Do you think she struck her head?'

'Yes, the back of it.'

'Ah! And she spoke and moved at once, not like one stunned?'

'Oh no, not at all. She got up and made the beef-tea.'

'The 2d of January? That must have been about the time you began to observe that change of manner--the irritability your sister remarked,' said the doctor, turning to Felix. He nodded, angry as he had been with Alda for remarking it. All that the doctor further said was, that he must have another examination now that he knew a little more about the case; and he went away with Sister Constance, saying to her, 'Mrs. Underwood is a lady of wonderful fortitude and resolution, and really they are the worst kind of patients.'

It was now more than a fortnight since that 6th of January which saw the birth of the twins and the death of their father, and Mrs. Underwood still lay quiet and almost torpid in her bed, seldom speaking, hardly ever originating anything, and apparently taking no interest whatsoever in anything outside her room; and yet there was no symptom unfavourable to her recovery to be detected. Within the last day or two they had tried to rouse her; papers had been brought to her to sign, and she did so obediently, but she did not follow the subject: she did not refuse, but did not second, any proposal for her beginning to sit up; and this was the more remarkable, as, being a woman of much health and energy in her quiet way, she had always

recovered rapidly, and filled her place in the family alarmingly soon. The nurse had begun to suspect that besides the torpor of mind there was some weakness of limb; and with the new lights acquired, Mr. Rugg had no difficulty in coming to the conclusion that there was a slight concussion of the spine, causing excitement at first, and now more serious consequences; and though he did not apprehend present danger, he thought complete recovery very doubtful.

'So they are almost worse than orphans,' said Sister Constance, when the Curate went down from reading to the invalid, and she could tell him the verdict.

'Do they know?'

'The fact? There is no need to lay the future on the shoulders of the present.'

'A very dark present. I feel as if a great bright sun, warming and invigorating, had gone out of my life. Yet I knew him but two years.'

'I can understand it, though I knew him but two days.'

'I hope he may have been the making of me,' sighed Mr. Audley. 'He ought to be.'

'I think he has been,' said she, smiling. 'There is some difference between you and the boyish young deacon that came here two years ago.'

'Who thought life without shooting barely endurable by the help of croquet! I trust so! He was very patient and tolerant--made holidays for me that first summer which it cuts me to recollect.'

'To live and share in a great sorrow does make a great step in life,' said Constance, thoughtfully looking at the much graver and more earnest brow of her husband's young cousin; 'and you were a comfort to them all as no one else could be.'

'Must you go?' he said. 'I wanted to consult you. I am thinking of giving up my present lodgings to this Mowbray Smith, who is coming as curate, and coming here.'

'Here! My dear Charles!'

'I thought I had heard legends of twelve foot square?'

'Not with thirteen children. Besides, we were seasoned!'

'Stay; you don't understand. There are three rooms on this floor. Poor Mrs. Underwood will hardly want to occupy these two just yet. I take them, and put in some furniture--live to myself, but let them board and lodge me. They may as well have what is to be made by it as any one else.'

'But can they? And, forgive me, Charles, are you prepared for the cookery here? Really, some of those children have appetites so small, that I can't bear to see them at dinner.'

'That's the very point. They all say the invaluable Sibby is as good a nurse as she is bad as a cook. Now, if they have no help, Wilmet must stay at home to look after her mother and the twins; and that is not fit for such a young girl. Now, my coming might enable them to get some one who knows the use of meat and fires, and would send upstairs the only woman who would undertake such a charge as that must be.'

'I don't like to say a word against it. It seems excellent for them.'

'I would not live with them, but I should be there to help. I could keep Felix up in his Latin, and--'

Only one suggestion more, Charles. If you do not stay here long?'

Well--if not, every week I am here is so much tided over; and just at this time the charge must be heaviest. Those boys may be disposed of after a time.'

'I wish we could keep those two little girls at St. Faith's, but there is no place yet for children of their class. I am wanted there this day week, and I cannot say but that I shall be glad to leave you here. Only I recollect your mother's feelings.'

'Mothers must draw in the horns of their feelings when their sons are ordained,' he said, laughing. 'I shall consult that notable person, Wilmet.'

'Wilmet started and blushed with pleasure. It would be so much less dreary; and, poor girl! she was feeling as if she were half rent asunder at the thought of Alda's going. So good for Felix, too. Only she must ask Mamma. And she did ask Mamma, and, to her great pleasure, Mrs. Underwood listened, and said, 'It is very kind.'

'And shall it be, Mamma?'

'I shall like for you to have some one in the house. Yes, my dear, I think--' then she paused. 'My dear, you and Sibby and Sister Constance had better talk it over. I do not seem able to consider it. But Sister Constance will tell you. My dear Wilmet, I am afraid you must have a great deal laid on you.'

'Oh, never mind, Mamma; I like doing things. Besides, you are so much better.'

'I'll try to help you more,' added Mrs. Underwood wistfully. 'Which room did you say?'

And she listened, and even made a few suggestions, as Wilmet explained how she thought of making a sitting-room upstairs, and giving the two downstairs front ones to Mr. Audley, using the back room for the boys and children; she was altogether so much more open to comprehension, and ready to speak, that Wilmet was full of hope and assurance that she was really mending.

When Sister Constance came in, the readiness to converse continued. She consulted her friend on the scheme, and its expedience for Mr. Audley, saying that she feared he would be uncomfortable; but she could not reject so great a help for her children. She had even thought of the advantage of keeping Sibby upstairs to attend on the babies and herself--work not fit to rest entirely on Wilmet, though the good girl had fully counted on giving up her work at school.

It was evident that the examination by the doctor and Wilmet's consultation had thoroughly roused her, and she was as clear-headed as ever. Indeed, it seemed to Sister Constance that she was a little excited, and in that mood in which the most silent and reserved people suddenly become the most unreserved.

She was asked at last what Mr. Rugg thought of her, and Sister Constance in reply asked whether she remembered her accident. She thought a little. 'Why--yes--I believe I did slip on the stairs; but it did not hurt me, and I forgot it. Does he think anything of it?'

'I think he fears you gave yourself a shock.'

'Not unlikely,' she said in an indifferent tone, and did not speak again for some minutes; then said, 'Yes, I see! I am thankful it did not tell on me sooner,' and her look brought the tears into Constance's eyes.

'It told more than you did,' said Constance, endeavouring at a smile.

'Not on the babies,' she said; 'and he never knew it, so there is no harm done! Thank God!'

She lay a little longer, and Constance thought her going into her usual state of torpor; but she roused herself to say, 'Would you kindly look into that desk? You will find a green book.'

'Yes.'

'Please tear out the leaves, and burn it for me. I would not have one of the children see it on any account.'

Constance began to obey, and saw that it was a diary. 'Are you sure it ought to be done?' she asked. 'Might it not be better to wait till you are better?'

'I cannot tell that I shall be much less helpless. I know how things like this go,' she said.

Constance was still reluctant, and Mrs. Underwood added, 'I will tell you. It is nothing good, I assure you. When we drove from the door at Vale Leston, the home of all our lives, he turned to me and said, "Now, Mary, that page is shut for ever. Let us never speak a word to make the children or ourselves feel turned out of paradise." And I never did; but, oh! I wrote it. There are pages on pages of repinings there--I could not let them see it!'

'Nay, but you were resigned.'

'Resigned! What of that? I held my tongue! It was all I could do! I never knew things could be worse till I saw it was killing him, and then all I could do was still to keep silence.'

There was an agony in her voice that Constance had never heard there before.

Silence was, no doubt--as things were--an exceeding kindness to him,' said Constance, 'and one that must have cost you much.'

'Once--once, so tenderly, with tears in his eyes, he did beg me as a favour not to complain, or talk of Fulbert Underwood! I did not; but I never could be the companion I was before to him. He was always happy, he did believe me so; but I could often only smile. If I talked, it could only have been of his health and our cares.'

'You kept him happy by taking the weight so entirely to yourself.'

Perhaps; if he had only known how miserable it made me, we might have moved to a healthier place; but after that one time, I never could vex him or trust myself. To hear him console me and grieve for me, was worst of all.'

Constance began to see how the whole woman, brought up to affluence, had been suddenly crushed by the change; and almost the more so for her husband's high and cheerful resolution, which had forced back her feelings into herself. Her powers had barely sufficed for the cares of her household and her numerous family, and her endurance had consisted in 'suffering, and being still.' No murmur had escaped, but only by force of silence. She had not weakened his energies by word or look of repining; but while his physical life was worn out by toil and hardship, her mental life had almost been extinguished in care, drudgery, and self-control; and all his sweetness, tenderness, and cheerfulness had not been able to do more than just to enable her to hold out, without manifesting her suffering. Enid had been a very suitable name for her; though without a Geraint in any respect to blame for what she underwent, she had borne all in the same silent and almost hopeless spirit, and with the same unfailing calm temper: but outside her own house, she had never loved nor taken real interest in anything since the day she drove from the door of Vale Leston; she had merely forced herself to seem to do so, rather than disappoint her eager husband and children.

And now, how much of her torpor had been collapse, how much the effect of the accident, could not be guessed. She herself was greatly roused for the present, dwelt on the necessity of trying to get up the next day, and was altogether in a state excitable enough to make the Sister anxious.

Other troubles too there were that evening, which made all feel that even though Mr. Audley was to live to himself, his presence in the house would be no small comfort.

Fulbert, never the most manageable of the party, had procured a piece of wood from the good-natured carpenter, and was making a sparrow-trap on an improved plan, when Wilmet, impatient to have the room clear for Mr. Audley to come for the final decision--as he was to do in the evening--anxious to clear away the intolerable litter, and with more anxiety for Fulbert's holiday task than for the sparrows, ordered him to bed ten minutes too early, and in too peremptory a tone.

Fulbert did not stir.

'Fulbert, I say, clear up that litter, and go to bed.'

'Don't you hear, Fulbert?' said Felix, looking up from his book.

Fulbert gave a pull to the newspaper that was spread under his works on the table, and sent all his chips and sawdust on the ground.

'O Fulbert! how naughty!' broke out Alda.

'Fulbert, are you going to mind?' asked Wilmet. 'Please remember.'

'I shall go in proper time,' growled Fulbert.

'That is not the way to speak to your sister,' interposed Felix, with authority.

Fulbert eyed him defiantly all over.

Felix rose up from his chair, full of wrath and indignation. There was quite difference enough in their size and strength to give him the complete mastery, for Fulbert was only ten years old; but Wilmet, dreading nothing so much as a scuffle and outcry, sprang up, imploring, 'O Felix! remember, Mamma is wide awake to-night. Let him alone--pray, let him alone.'

Felix was thoroughly angry, and kept his hands off with exceeding difficulty. 'Little sneak,' he said; 'he chooses to take advantage.'

'He always was a sneak; his nose is the shape of it,' said Edgar.

As Felix and Wilmet had the sense to let this amiable observation

drop, Edgar contented himself with making some physiognomical outlines of sneaks' noses on a slate; and silence prevailed till the church clock struck the half-hour, when Clement got up, and taking the slate, where he had been solacing himself with imitating Edgar's caricatures, he was about to make it an impromptu dust-pan, and went down on his knees to sweep up Fulbert's malicious litter, but was rewarded with a vicious kick on the cheek. It was under the table, out of sight; and Clement, like a true son of his mother, made no sign, but went off to bed like a Spartan.

'Fulbert,' said Lance, rising to follow his example, 'it is time now.'

He still sat on; and Felix, in intolerable wrath and vexation, found himself making such deep bites into a pencil, that he threw it from him with shame, just as Mr. Audley's bell sounded, and he ran down to let him in.

'Now, Ful,' said Wilmet coaxingly, 'please go--or Mr. Audley will see.'

'Let him.'

Mr. Audley was there in a moment, and the next, Alda, in all the ruffle of offended dignity, was telling him that Fulbert was in one of his tempers, and would attend to nobody. Fulbert's back looked it. It evidently intended to remain in that obstinate curve till midnight.

'I am sorry,' said Mr. Audley, 'I thought no one would have added to the distress of the house! What is it, Fulbert?' he added, laying his hand on his shoulder, and signing to Alda to hold her peace.

'They bother,' said Fulbert, in the sulky tone; but still, as he regarded the newcomer as less of an enemy than the rest--'I'd have gone at half-past eight if they would let a fellow alone.'

'Then the fellow had better give them no right to bother,' said Mr. Audley. 'Come, Fulbert, no ship can sail unless the crew obey. No mutiny. Here's your captain ready to shake hands and wish you good-night.'

Fulbert could not face Mr. Audley's determined look, but he was not conquered. He took up his tools and his trap, gave a final puff to spread his sawdust farther, and marched off without a single good-night.

'He has the worst temper of us all,' cried Alda.

'You should be very cautious of provoking him, said Mr. Audley.

'I am afraid it was my fault,' sighed Wilmet.

'Nonsense,' said Felix; 'he is an obstinate little dog. I wish I was licking him. I hope he is not pitching into Clem!'

'Clem is the biggest,' said Alda.

'Yes, but he is much the meekest,' added Wilmet.

'Tina's meek sauce is aggravation, itself,' observed Edgar. 'I should hope he was catching it!'

'He is certainly not slow to put in his oar,' said Mr. Audley; 'did you hear of his performance in the vestry the other day?'

'No. I hope he did not make an unusual ass of himself,' said Felix.

'He and Mowbray Smith had last Tuesday's Evensong nearly to themselves, when Master Clem not only assisted Smith in putting on his hood, but expressed his doubts as to the correctness of it (never, of course, having seen any bachelor's but Oxford or Cambridge), and further gave him some good advice as to his manner of intoning.'

'I hope he won't go on in that way at St. Matthew's!' exclaimed Wilmet.

'It is lucky he is going so soon,' said Mr. Audley. 'I doubt if Mowbray Smith will ever get over it!'

'Regular snob that he is,' said Edgar; 'just one of my Lady's sort! What did he do? Go crying to her?'

'O Edgar!' remonstrated Wilmet.

'Well, Mettie, if even our spiritual pastors will be snobs, one must have the relief of expressing one's opinion now and then.'

'I should say it was better to keep any such fact out of one's mind as much as might be,' said Mr. Audley, feeling himself unable to deny what had been so broadly expressed.

'And we, at any rate, had better drop talking of snobs,' said Felix.

'Hollo, Felix! I am sure you for one would not be a snob if you had turned chimney-sweeper, and let Tom Underwood nail me to his office; he'll never make one of me!'

'I trust so,' said Felix; 'but it is not the way to keep from it to throw about the word at other folks.'

'What's that?' cried Alda. 'Really, that boy must be falling upon some of them.'

It was Lance, in great deshabelle, who, opening a crack of the door,

called cautiously, 'Wilmet, please come here.'

Wilmet hastily obeyed, saying anxiously, as the door was shut, 'Never mind, dear Lance, he's in a horrid mood; but do bear it, and not make Felix more in a rage.'

'Bosh about Ful,' said Lance unceremoniously. 'It is Cherry; she is crying so upstairs, and Clem and I can't get a word out of her.'

Cherry, though older than the boys, had to precede them in vanishing for the night, as her undressing was a long operation dependent upon Sibby. Wilmet ran up in haste, and did indeed find poor little Geraldine with her face smothered under the clothes in an agony of weeping, very serious for so frail a little creature.

'Cherry! Cherry, dear, don't! Are you feeling solitary? Are you missing him? Oh, don't! Yes, dear, 'tis so sad; but we all do love you so.'

Wilmet would have kissed and fondled her, but the child almost thrust her away.

'Not that. Oh, not that! I wish it was.'

'My dear Cherry, you can't have been naughty!'

'Yes, yes! indeed I have. And now--'

'I can't think--O Cherry, if you would only tell me what you mean!' cried Wilmet, aghast.

And with agonised sobs. Cherry whispered, 'Mr. Rugg--O Mettie--such things as I said about him to Sister Constance--I made sure I had forgiven--long ago--and now--now, after _that_.'

If Wilmet had not known how deeply both Geraldine and her father had resented what Mr. Rugg had meant as a little friendly gloss to save terror before a painful operation, she would have been utterly at a loss. And now she found herself incapable by any argument or caress of soothing her sister's sense of heinous offence; for that rite, of which she had partaken with her father, had required charity with all men, and now she found she had been deceitful--she hated Mr. Rugg all the time. Oh, what should she do! how could she be so wicked!

Wilmet tried to tell her that she had not known how it was at the time, but this seemed no comfort; and it was plain that that day's solemnity had lessened the inequality between the two girls so much, that for Wilmet to console her as a child was vain; and indeed, her invalid state and constant companionship with her father had rendered her religious feeling much more excitable, and more developed, than were as yet Wilmet's; and meantime, this piteous sobbing and weeping was doing great bodily harm.

Wilmet at last, hearing a door open as if the nurse were taking Sister Constance's place, ran down to take counsel with that kind friend on the way. She whispered her trouble on the stairs, and the Sister was soon kneeling over the little bed; but her comfort was not persuading the child to think less of the fault, but promising that she should tell all to Mr. Audley to-morrow.

Nay, seeing that even this was too long hence for the 'weary soul, and burdened sore,' to look forward to--indeed, that the preparation for the interview would be sleep-destroying--she said, 'Then you shall see him at once, my dear.'

Wilmet opened her eyes in dismay. That little attic, bare of all but beds, was her thought; but Sister Constance, ever an effective woman, had the little black frock, the shoes and stockings, on in no time, and throwing a shawl over all, actually gathered the small light frame up into her arms, and carried her down to the fire in the room now vacated by the nurses and babies. And there she fetched Mr. Audley to her. 'It will not do,' she whispered on the way to Wilmet, 'to treat her as a child _now_.'

'He always made so much of her,' sighed Wilmet.

'Yes; and now she is a Communicant.'

They left her to Mr. Audley, and presently, when the door opened again, it was he who was carrying her upstairs again; and when Sister Constance had taken possession of her, she whispered, 'Yes, thank you. He says I may come on Sunday, and I think it is forgiven. I shall say a prayer about charity always now!' And with a deep sigh, the worn-out little penitent lay down to her sleep.

'O Mr. Audley, it is plain we cannot do without you,' sighed Wilmet, as she came down, not without tears in her eyes.

And then came the conference upon ways and means, rooms and attendance. Mr. Audley had parted with his horse and groom in the autumn, observing that they ate their heads off; and the terms he now proposed for lodging, board, and attendance were what Felix and Wilmet would have known to be wondrously liberal but for their inexperience, especially as he meant to send in some, at least, of the furniture. He was to have his meals, at his own times, in his sitting-room; and Sister Constance had a person in her eye at Dearport, who was likely to do well in the kitchen, and not quarrel with Sibby.

Wilmet had made up her mind that she must remain at home all day, and had even told Miss Pearson so; but that good lady had refused to accept her resignation, and had come to Mr. Bevan about it: and now both the Sister and the Curate united in telling her that she ought not, as long as it was possible, to give up this means of improving herself, as well as lessening the family burthen. To give up her education now would be to sink into a housewifely drudge, who would

hardly be able to maintain herself when the younger ones would be getting out into the world; and as Geraldine must stay at home to be a companion to her mother, there was no need for her being also always in attendance, while Sibby was equal to the charge. Indeed, Mrs. Underwood herself had said something that showed her to contemplate Wilmet's remaining at school.

'You must,' said Felix decidedly. 'Why, you might as well turn nursery-girl at once.'

'I should like it,' said Wilmet. 'I shall be miserable at school--always thinking something is going wrong. And Cherry can never bear with the babies! Oh! please don't tell me I must.'

'I tell you to begin,' said Sister Constance. 'You can always give it up if you feel that the need lies at home; but I think the few hours' change every day--for duty's sake, mind--will give you vigour not to be worn down by the home cares.'

'But Cherry will have them always! She who cares for books and drawing so much more than I!'

'Yes; but if you go on learning, you can teach her,' said Sister Constance.

'Oh!' cried Wilmet; 'Cherry knows more than I do.'

'Little Cherry is the cleverest of us all,' added Felix.

'Still,' said the Sister, 'the mere going over your work with you will give her change and interest. I do feel strongly convinced; dear Wilmet, that to shut yourself up with her, without gathering anything from elsewhere, would be very bad for both.'

'We must see how Mamma is, and how Cherry gets on,' was all that Wilmet would say, but the arrangement was made, and was to take effect in ten days' time, when Mr. Mowbray Smith was coming to be second curate, and Sister Constance must change places with the three absent children, and Alda would be gone to her adopted home.

Then Mr. Audley took leave; and as Felix went to the front door with him, he said, 'Forgive me, Felix; but I am a younger brother myself, and I do hope you do not mean to assert your authority by licking.'

Felix coloured a little; and though he spoke respectfully, it was with some little annoyance. 'There is nothing else that does with Fulbert.'

'Stay, Felix; I am not questioning that he may be the sort of boy for whom flogging may be good from some one.'

'He is!' said Felix. 'He never will behave himself till he has felt his master! It has been so at school; and once, even my father made

himself quite ill for a week with having to flog Fulbert for disobedience. It settled him; but he is not like the others--Clem and Lance are not any trouble; but--I know it will come to it sooner or later; Ful will never mind me or Wilmet till I have done it once.'

'And when his strength is equal to yours?'

'Then I hope he will have more sense.'

'Yes, Felix; but what if by forcing him into dogged submission by your bodily strength you have lost his confidence, and have no moral power over him? Things that can be borne from a father come very differently from a brother.'

Felix was quite crimson now. 'But what shall I do, Mr. Audley, when he defies Wilmet, and teases Cherry and the little ones?'

'Try all you can with his better sense, but don't anger him by tones of authority. What you think needful rule may seem to him domineering. And if necessary, call me. My blows will not leave the after rankling that yours will, even if they are necessary.'

Felix sighed. He was not desirous of beating his brother in the main; but being unhappily master of the house, he was unwilling not to be so entirely. He wished Mr. Audley good-night, not in his most perfectly cordial tone.

However, the next morning he had brought himself to thank Mr. Audley.

'Thank you, Felix,' said the Curate; 'it is a great relief to me. I was afraid you thought you were going to bring a meddling fellow in upon you.'

Felix coloured, and with an effort--for which Mr. Audley liked him the better--said, 'I know I shall always deserve what advice you give me, and I hope another time I may take it better than the last.'

Soon after, one train carried away four of the young Underwoods to begin life elsewhere. The Thomas Underwoods had desired that Alda and Edgar should meet them at the station, and at Felix's entreaty had also undertaken to convoy Clement, who, thanks to Mr. Audley, was to be a chorister, and live in the clergy-house at St. Matthew's, Whittingtonia. It would have been Fulbert, only unluckily he had no ear, and so he was left at home, while Lady Price, Mrs. Thomas Underwood, and all the ladies they could enlist in their service, canvassed desperately, and made the cards of 'Fulbert James and Lancelot Oswald, sons of the Rev. Edward Fulbert Underwood, THIRTEEN children,' a weariness to every friend of a subscriber to clergy orphan schools. Robina was not quite old enough to stand for the like election; but Sister Constance had negotiated with a lady who had devoted herself to educating children of better birth than means, and the little girl was to be dropped at the nearest station to her school at Catsacre. It had all been settled in a wonderfully short

time, by Sister Constance and Mr. Audley, with full though helpless acquiescence from Mrs. Underwood. They felt it well to lessen the crowd of children in the house, and the responsibilities of the elder ones, and acted at once.

As to Alda, she was too miserable at home not to be ready to follow Edgar, though she had at first implored to stay and help Wilmet till their mother was about again; but the Thomas Underwoods were unwilling to consent to this--and after all, Alda was more apt to cry than to be of much real use. Sister Constance saw that she was only another weight on her sister's hands, and that, terrible as the wrench would be between the twins, Wilmet would be freer when it was once over. Poor Wilmet! she had felt as if she could hardly have lived over these weeks save for fondling the younger twins, and waiting on her mother. She was almost passive, and ran up and downstairs, or prepared the wardrobes of the departing children, just as she was bidden, all in one quiet maze of grief. The tears seemed to be always in her eyes, very often dropping, and yet they never hindered her, and she never uttered a word of deprecation or complaint; only she could not eat, and a kiss would bring down a whole shower; and at night, the two sisters would hold each other tight, and cry and kiss themselves to sleep.

So had come the last day--the last for all four. Robina, who had only just come back from St. Faith's, was grave, puzzled, and awestruck, clinging chiefly to Lancelot, and exchanging confidences in corners with him, in which they were probably much less childish than they showed themselves to the outer world. Clement was very grave and unhappy; but seemed to be most distressed at parting with Harry Lamb, a favourite school-fellow of his own quiet stamp, with whom he spent all available time. Alda and Wilmet were hand in hand at every possible moment, and if possible cheek to cheek--each felt as if herself was cut in two.

Then Edgar, who had only come home for that farewell Sunday, had another of his paroxysms of sorrow at the changes at home, which he contrived to forget when at Centry. All that was becoming in a manner usual to the others was a shock to him, and he was so very miserable the whole day, that he treated every attempt of the others to cheer him as a mere token of their hardness of heart. He went in to see his mother, and was so overcome at finding her no better, that he rushed away, and threw himself on a sofa as if he was going to faint; and when at church he saw his father's place filled up he fell into such a fit of sobbing, that half a dozen smelling-bottles were handed across the seats.

However, he had recovered himself on Monday morning, and made it his particular request that nobody would come bothering to the station, to make them look like Fulbert's canvassing-card of the thirteen children--and as the mention of it always affronted Fulbert deeply, it was plain that he would be no good company. However, Felix had been allowed an hour from his business for that very purpose, and he simply said, 'Nonsense, Edgar, I shall take Robin down.' Wilmet

submitted, though with a great pang. She had no assurance that she should not break down, and a crying match at the station--oh no! It might make Bobbie roar all the way.

So Alda clung round her neck and Geraldine's in their own little parlour, and wished her mother good-bye, scarcely knowing whether it were with a full understanding how many were parted from the wing that now seemed unable to shelter them; and then Wilmet went up and quietly lay down by her mother on her bed, feeling as if there was nothing she cared for in all life, and as if youth, hope, and happiness were gone away from her for ever, and she were as much widowed as her mother. She was even past crying--she could do nothing but lie still. But then her mother's hand came out and stroked her; and presently one of the babies cried, and Wilmet was walking up and down the room with it, and all activity with her outward senses, though her heart felt dead. Meantime, the luggage went in the omnibus, the four children walked up together only escorted by Felix, and were passed on their way by the prancing and thundering carriage from Centry.

But the sense of usefulness that came gave strength and energy to Felix and Wilmet Underwood as the first excitement passed away, and they better understood their tasks.

Of the absent ones they heard good accounts. Alda was altogether one with her cousin's family, and seemed to be completely on an equality with Marilda; and Edgar had been sent by Thomas Underwood to acquire modern languages under the care of an Englishman who took private pupils at Louvaine, whence Edgar despatched most amusing letters and clever sketches. Clement was in great favour, both musically and morally, at St. Matthew's; and little Robina was reported to have bewailed her home with floods of nightly tears, but to have soon settled down into the bonnie little pet of the elder girls.

Except for the separation, the cloud had hardly fallen on these, but their departure had made a great hole in the hitherto unbroken family; and while Felix and Wilmet, by the loss of their contemporaries, seemed placed at a point far away from the others, Geraldine was conscious of much loneliness. The twins had always consorted together, and regarded her as a mere child, and her chief companions had been her father and Edgar, so that she seemed left at an equal distance both from the elder and younger party.

Then the world around her was so busy, and she could do so little. She slept in a little inner room beyond the large nursery, where Wilmet kept guard over Angela and Bernard; and long before six o'clock, she always heard the call pass between the eldest brother and sister; and knew that as soon as he was dressed, Felix--it must out--was cleaning the family boots, including those of the lodger, who probably supposed that nature did it, and never knew how much his young landlord had done before joining him in his early walk to St. Oswald's.

Meantime Wilmet conducted the toilette of the two little children, and gave the assistance that Cherry needed, as well as discharging some of the lighter tasks of the housemaid; leaving the heavier ones to Sibby and Martha, a stout, willing, strong young woman, whom Sister Constance had happily found for them, and who was disqualified, by a loutish manner and horrible squint, from the places to which her capabilities might have raised her.

Then Wilmet helped her sister downstairs, and a visit was paid to the mother and the twins, who were Sibby's charge for the night. Mrs. Underwood was still in the same state. It was indeed possible to rouse her, but at the expense of much suffering and excitement; and in general, she was merely tender, placid, and content, mechanically busied about her babies, and responding to what was said, but entirely incapable of any exertion of body, and as inactive in mind as in limb. Wilmet attended to her while Sibby went to her breakfast, returning with that of her mistress in time to send Wilmet down to preside at the family meal, a genuine Irish dish of stir-about--for which all had inherited a taste from their father's Irish mother. Only Cherry was too delicate for such food, and was rather ashamed of her cup of tea and slice of bread.

However, this was one of the few times when she could hope she was useful; for when Felix was gone to the printing-office, the boys to the grammar-school, and Wilmet, first to the kitchen, and then to Miss Pearson's, she remained with bowl and cloth to wash up, in her own peculiarly slow and dainty way, never breaking but always dreaming, while Angela carried them one by one, first to her, then to the kitchen.

'Now, Cherry.'

Mr. Audley's door opened, he would step forward and take the well-worn books in one hand, and hold the doors open with the other as Cherry tardily hopped in, and perched herself by the table. Her confirmation studies had been left in his charge, and then followed a little Greek, some Latin, a page or two of French, the revision of an exercise, and some help in Euclid and fractions--all studies begun with her father, and both congenial and useful to her, as the occupation that (next to drawing) best prevented her from feeling the dreary loneliness of her days; for though he could seldom give her more than an hour, the preparation--after he had helped her upstairs--occupied her during the whole period of tranquillity while the younger children slept. Angela appeared first, and did some small lessons, cat-and-dog readings, and easy hymns, then was generally content to sit on the floor in Mamma's room, admiring or amusing the twins. Then Cherry, according to her sense of duty, drew or worked. There was a horrible never-ending still-beginning basket of mending in the family, which Wilmet replenished every Saturday; and though Mrs. Underwood's instinct for piecing and darning had revived as soon as she was taken out of bed, her work now always needed a certain revision to secure the boys from the catastrophe of which Wilmet often dreamt--appearing in public in ragged shirt-sleeves! Geraldine

knew that every stitch she left undone would have to be put in by her sister in late evening or early morning, and therefore often wrenched herself from the pencil and paints that best beguiled her thoughts from the heartache for her father, and the craving for Edgar, or the mere craving for light, air, liberty, and usefulness. Her only excuse to her own conscience for allowing herself her chief pleasure was, that it was her way of helping an old woman who kept a stall of small wares on market days, and could sometimes dispose of little pictures on domestic and Scriptural subjects, if highly coloured, glazed with gum, and bound with bright paper--pickings and stealings, as Felix called them, gleaned from advertisements and packing-boxes at Mr. Froggatt's; but these did not allow much scope for the dreams of her fancy.

Nor had she much choice when Bernard once awoke and came down, in all the unreasoning tyranny of two years old, when it was an even chance whether he would peaceably look at the old scrap-book, play with Angela, or visit Mamma; or be uproarious, and either coalesce with Angela in daring mischief, fight a battle-royal with her, or be violent with and jealous of the twins.

The urchin had found out that when once Cherry's crutch was out of her reach she could not get at him; and he had ridden off upon it so often, before committing any of his worst misdemeanours, that Cherry always lay down on it to secure it. After all, he was a fine, affectionate, impetuous little fellow, but with a very high, proud, unmanageable will; and she was very fond and proud of him; but never more so than when he slept till dinner-time.

That was the hour which brought Felix home to help Sibby to carry his mother into the sitting-room, pay a little court to the babies, and enliven Cherry with any chance scrap of news or occupation. Best of all were the proofs of that unfinished comment on the Epistle to Philippi, which was being printed by subscription of the congregation, and the clergy of the diocese. It always did Mrs. Underwood good to have these read aloud to her by her little daughter, and she could sometimes find a clue to the understanding of sentences that had puzzled even Mr. Audley.

The two school-boys never appeared till dinner was imminent; and then--one unuttered wish of poor Cherry was that Mr. Audley could have dined with them; but he kept to his own hours, and they were late.

Whereby dinners on five days of the week were apt to be something on this fashion. Bell-ringing--Felix helping Geraldine to her seat, Angela trotting after: a large dish of broth, with meat and rice, and another of mashed potato; no sign of the boys; Angela lisping grace; Sibby waiting with a tray.

Felix filled a soup-plate for his mother, and a basin for Bernard. 'We must begin, I suppose,' and he helped his sisters and himself.

'Here, Angel, push over your plate; I'll cut that.--How did you get on to-day?'

'Very well; the only mistake I made I found out before Smith saw it. I know all the stationery and steel pens apart now, and haven't made a mistake for a week. Yesterday Bartlett junior came in. he stood like a post before Mr. Froggatt till he caught sight of me, and then he shouted out, "O Blunderbore, you know! What is it that Collis wants?"'

'And did you?'

'When he said it was a horrid sum-book all little a's and b's.--What have you been doing, Cherry?'

'I have begun an abstract of the first Punic--'

The door flew open with a bounce, and two hot, wild-locked boys, dust everywhere except in their merry blue eyes, burst in, and tumbled on their chairs. 'I say--isn't it a horrid sell? we ain't to have a holiday for Squire's wedding.--Come, Fee, give us some grub.'

'You have not said grace,' said Cherry.

Lance, abashed, stood up and bowed; Fulbert looked grim, and mumbled something.

'You have not washed your hands,' added Felix.

'What's the good?' said Fulbert.

'They'll be as jolly dirty again directly,' said Lance.

'But you would be more decent company in the meantime,' said Felix.

At that moment there was a splash in his plate, a skip-jack made of the breast-bone of a chicken had alighted there with a leap.

'There's Felix's master come after him,' cried Fulbert, and Lance went off into choking laughter.

'Boys, how can you?' broke out Cherry.

'Look at Blunderbore fishing out his master!' was Fulbert's answer.

'The frog is in the bog,
And Felix is squeamish,'

chanted Lance.

'Bad rhyme, Lance,' said Felix, who could bear these things much better from the younger than the elder. Indeed, he scarcely durst

notice them in Fulbert, lest he should be betrayed into violence by letting out his temper.

'I say!' cried Lance, struck by a new idea, 'what prime stuff it is for making a fort!' and he began to scrape the more solid parts of his plateful to one side.

'Oh, I say, isn't it?' echoed Fulbert: 'but I've eaten up the best part of my castle;' and he grasped at the ladle.

'No, I thank you,' said Felix, putting it on the other side. 'While I am here, you don't play tricks with that.'

Fulbert swallowed a spoonful in a passion, but a bright thought struck Lance, who always cared much more for fun than for food. 'I _say_, we'll empty it all into one, and eat it down.'

'You horrid boys!' plaintively exclaimed Cherry, almost crying--for this return to savage life was perfect misery to her. 'I can't bear it.'

'I will not have Cherry tormented,' said Felix, beginning to be very irate.

'We ain't doing anything to Cherry,' said Lance, amazed.

'Don't you know it spoils Cherry's appetite to see you so disgusting?'

'Then she'll have the more next time,' said Fulbert. 'Get along, Captain--you've splashed my face!'

'Hurrah! the red-hot shot! The rice is the cannon-balls! Where's some bread?'

'O Lance!' entreated Cherry; 'no waste--think of Wilmet and the bills.'

'We'll eat it every bit up,' asseverated Lance; but Fulbert growled, 'If you bother any more, I shall crumble the whole lot out at window.'

'It is wicked to waste bread,' lisped Angela, and Martha at that moment appeared to fetch the tureen for the kitchen dinner.

'Can't you eat any more, Cherry ?' asked Felix gloomily.

'Not a bit, thank you,' she said.

'We've not done!' shouted the boys, seizing on her scarcely-tasted and half-cold plate.

'You must finish after. Come, Cherry!' Then, as they left the room,

and she laid her head on his shoulder--'Little ruffians!' he said under his breath.

'Oh, never mind, Felix. I don't--at least I ought not to mind--they don't mean it.'

'Lance does not, but I think Fulbert does. He'll make me thrash him within two inches of his life before he has done. And then there's no one to take me in hand for it. It is horridly bad for them, too, to live just like young bears.'

But he smoothed his brow as he came into the room where his mother was, and amused her till his time was up.

Mr. Froggatt had explained to his father long ago that Felix's work would not be that of a clerk in a great publishing house, but veritably that belonging to the country bookseller and printer, and that he must go through all the details, so as to be thoroughly conversant with them. The morning's work was at the printing-house, the afternoon's at the shop. The mechanical drudgery and intense accuracy needed in the first were wearisome enough; and moreover, he had to make his way with a crusty old foreman who was incredulous of any young gentleman's capabilities, and hard of being convinced that he would or could be useful, but old Smith's contempt was far less disagreeable to him than the subdued dislike he met with from Redstone, the assistant in the shop, a sharp, half-educated young man, who had aspired to the very post of confidence for which Felix was training--and being far less aware of his own utter unfitness for it than was Mr. Froggatt, regarded the lad as an interloper; and though he durst not treat him with incivility, was anxious to expose any deficiency or failure on his part. Having a good deal of quickness and dexterity, he could act as a reporter, draw up articles of a certain description for the newspaper, and had, since the death of Mr. Froggatt's eldest son, been absolutely necessary to him in carrying on the business; and now, it was a matter of delicate discretion on the master's part to avoid hurting the feelings of the assistant, whom a little more would have made his tyrant, and a dread of the appearance of favouritism made it needful to keep Felix thoroughly in a subordinate post, till real superiority of mind and education should assert itself over elder years and mere familiarity with detail. This reserved ill-will of Redstone's had much increased the natural discomfort of appearing behind the counter to former acquaintance, and had rendered the learning the duties there doubly troublesome and confusing; though, in recalling the day's doings, there was some amusement in contrasting the behaviour of different people, some--of whom Mr. Ryder was the type--speaking to him freely in his own person, others leaving him as an unrecognised shop-boy; and a third favouring him with a horrid little furtive nod, which he liked least of all. But though awkward and embarrassed at first, use soon hardened him, and made the customers indifferent, so that by the spring he had begun to be useful, and to feel no particular excitement about it.

The worst of his business was that it kept him so late, that he had but a very short evening, and no time for exercise. He was on his feet most of the day, but indoors, and his recreation chiefly consisted in choir-practice twice a week. Not that he missed more positive amusement; the cares of life and Edgar's departure seemed to have taken the boyish element of frolic out of him; and left him gravely cheerful indeed, but with no greater desire of entertainment than could find vent in home conversation, or playing with the little ones.

Wilmet and the two boys were at liberty full two hours before him. The latter generally stayed out as long as light and hunger permitted. Mr. Audley continually stumbled on them playing at marbles, racing headlong in teams of pack-thread harness with their fellows, upsetting the nerves of quiet folk--staring contentedly at such shows as required no outlay, or discontentedly at the outside of those that demanded the pennies they never had. They were thorough little street-boys; and all that he could do for them was to enforce their coming in at reasonable hours, and, much to their sister's relief, cause their daily lessons to be prepared in his room. Otherwise their places in their classes would have been much less creditable.

Wilmet's return was always Geraldine's great relief, for the afternoon of trying to amuse her mother, and keep the peace between the children, was almost more than she was equal to; though, on fine days, Sibby always took out the two elder babies, with an alternate twin, for an hour's air, and Mr. Audley daily visited the invalid. Mr. Bevan did so twice a week, with a gentle sympathising tone and manner that was more beneficial than Lady Price's occasional endeavours to make her 'rouse herself.' Miss Pearson and a few humbler friends now and then looked in, but Mrs. Underwood had been little known. With so large a family, and such straitened means, the part of the active clergyman's wife was impossible to her; she had shrunk from society, and most people knew nothing more of her than that the faded lady-like figure they used to see among her little flock at church, was Mrs. Underwood.

Wilmet's coming home was always a comfort; and though to her it was running from toil to care, the change was life to her. To have been either only the teacher or only the house-wife might have weighed over-heavily on her, but the two tasks together seemed to lighten each other. She had a real taste and talent for teaching, and she and her little class were devoted to one another, while the elder girls loved her much better since Alda had been away. The being with them, and sharing their recreation in the middle of the day, was no doubt the best thing to hinder her from becoming worn by the depressing atmosphere around her mother. She always brought home spirits and vigour for whatever lay before her, brightening her mother's face, dispelling squabbles between Angela and Bernard, and taking a load of care from Geraldine.

There was sure to be some anecdote to enliven the home-keepers, or

some question to ask Cherry, whose grammar and arithmetic stood on firmer foundations than any at Miss Pearson's, and who was always pleased to help Wilmet. The evening hours were the happiest of the day, only they always ended too soon for Cherry, who was ordered up by Sibby as soon as her mother was put to bed, and had, in consequence, a weary length of wakeful solitude and darkness--only enlivened by the reflection from the gas below--while Felix and Wilmet sat downstairs, she with her mending, and he either reading, or talking to her.

On Saturday, which she always spent at home, and in very active employment in the capacities of nurse, housemaid, or even a slight taste of the cook and laundress, the evening topic was always the accounts--the two young heads anxiously casting the balance--proud and pleased if there were even a shilling below the mark, but serious and sad under such a communication as, 'There's mutton gone up another halfpenny;' or, 'Wilmet, I really am afraid those boots of mine cannot be mended again;' or again, 'See what Lance has managed to do to this jacket. If one only could send boys to school in sacking!'

'Are not there a few pence to spare for the chair for Cherry? She will certainly get ill, if she never goes out now spring is coming on.'

'Indeed, Felix, I don't know how! If there is a penny over, it is wanted towards shoes for Bernard; and Cherry begs me, with tears in her eyes, not to let her be an expense!'

Poor Geraldine! the costing anything, and the sense of uselessness, were becoming, by the help of her nightly wakefulness, a most terrible oppression on her spirits. Her father was right. His room had been a hot-bed to a naturally sensitive and precocious character, and the change that had come over her as time carried her farther and farther away from him, affected her more and more.

Her brother and sister, busy all day, and scarcely ever at home, hardly knew what was becoming a sore perplexity to Mr. Audley.

A young tutor, not yet twenty-six, could not exactly tell what to do with a girl not fourteen, who fell into floods of tears on the smallest excuse.

'No, no, Cherry--that is not the nominative.'

The voice faltered, struggled to go on, and melted away behind the handkerchief. Then--'O Mr. Audley, I am so sorry--'

'That's exactly what I don't want you to be, Cherry.'

'Oh, but it was so careless,' and there was another flood.

Or, 'Don't you see, Cherry, you should not have put the negative sign

to that equation. My dear Cherry, what have I said?’

‘Oh, oh--nothing. Only I did think--’

‘We shall have you a perfect Niobe, if you go on at this rate, Cherry. Really, we must not have these lessons, if they excite you so much.’

‘Oh! that would be the worst punishment of all!’ and the weeping became so piteously violent, that the Curate looked on in distressed helplessness.

‘I know it is very tiresome of me; I would help it, if I could-- indeed I would.’ And she cried the more because she had cried.

Or, as he came in from the town, he would hear ominous sounds, that his kind heart would not let him neglect, and would find Cherry sitting on the landing-place in a paroxysm of weeping. She always crept out of her mother’s room on these occasions, for the sight of tears distressed and excited Mrs. Underwood; and the poor child, quite unable, in her hysterical condition, to drag herself alone up that steep stair, had no alternative but to sit, on what Mr. Audley called her stool of repentance, outside the door, till she had sobbed herself into exhaustion and calm--or till either Sibby scolded her, or he heard her confession.

She had been ‘so cross’ to Bernard, or to Angel--or, once or twice, even to Mamma. She had made an impatient answer when interrupted in her lessons or in a dream over a drawing, she had been reluctant to exert herself when wanted. She had scolded fretfully--or snatched things away angrily, when the little ones were troublesome; and every offence of this sort was bewailed with an anguish of tears, that, by weakening her spirits and temper, really rendered the recurrence more frequent. ‘The one thing they trust to me, I fail in!’

He was very kind to her. He did not yield to the mannish loathing for girlish tears that began to seize on him, after the first two or three occasions. He thought and studied--tried comfort, and fancied it relaxed her--tried rebuke, and that made it worse; tried the showing her Francois de Sales’ admirable counsel to Philothee, to be ‘doux envers soi,’ and saw she appreciated and admired it; but she was not an atom more douce envers soi when she had next spoken peevishly.

At last he fairly set off by the train, to lay the case before Sister Constance.

‘What is to be done, when a child never does anything but cry?’

Sister Constance listened to the symptoms, and promptly answered, ‘Give her a glass of port wine every day, before you let her out of your room.’

'If I can!'

'Tell her they are my orders. Does she eat?'

'I imagine not. I heard Felix reproaching her with a ghoul's dinner of a grain of rice.'

'Does she sleep?'

'She has told me a great deal of midnight meditation on her own deficiencies.'

'She must be taken out of doors somehow or other! It is of no use to reason with her; the tears are not temper, or anything else! Poor Charlie! it is an odd capacity for you to come out in, but I suppose no one else can attend to her.'

'No, poor child, she is rather worse than motherless! Well--I will find some excuse for taking her out for a drive now and then; I don't know how to speak to the others about having the chair for her, for they are barely scraping on.'

'Poor children! Well, this year is probably the worst. Either they will get their heads above water, or there will be a crisis. But they do scrape?'

'Yes. At Lady-day there was great jubilation, for the rent was paid, the taxes were ready, there was not a debt; and there was sevenpence over, with which Felix wanted to give Cherry a drive; but Wilmet, who is horribly prudent, insisted that it must go to mend Fulbert's broken window.'

'Well--poor Wilmet! one can't blame her. How does she treat Cherry's tears?'

'I don't think she has much pity for them. Felix does much better with Cherry; he rocks her and pets her; though, indeed, she hardly ever breaks down when he is there; but even his Sundays are a good deal taken up--and I always hunt him out for a walk on the Sunday afternoons.'

'Is he still in the choir and teaching at the Sunday school?'

'Yes--though it is not Mowbray Smith's fault.'

'What, is your colleague what you apprehended?'

'My Lady could not have found a curate more to her mind, or more imbued with her dislike to all that bears the name of Underwood. I own it is hard to have one's predecessor flung constantly in one's teeth, and by the very people who were the greatest thorns to dear Underwood himself. Then Clem, who was a born prig, though a very good boy, gave some of his little interfering bits of advice before he

went away, and it has all been set down to Felix's account! One Sunday, Smith made a complaint of Felix having the biggest boys in the school. It was the consequence of his having taken them whenever his father could not, till it came to his having them entirely. He always took great pains with them, and there was a fellow-feeling between him and them that could hardly be with an older person. I said all this--too strongly, most likely--and the Rector put in a mild word, as to his goodness in coming at all. Smith thought there was nothing wonderful in liking what ministered to his conceit; and at last it came out that a baker's boy had met Felix and Smith consecutively in the street, and only touched his hat to one, and that the wrong one.'

'I should have been only thankful that he touched his hat to anybody.'

'That is the very remark by which I put my foot in it, but my Lady was horrified, and the consequence was, that it fell to me to advise Felix to resign the class. I never hated a piece of work so much in my life, for he had worked the lads well, and we both knew that there would be an end of them. Moreover, Felix has some of the true Briton about him, and he stood out--would give up the class if the Rector ordered him, but would relinquish Sunday-school altogether in that case; and the two girls were furious; but, after one Sunday, he came to me, said that he found hostility poisoned his teaching, gave up, and accepted the younger ones.'

'Of course the boys deserted.'

'Which has not softened Smith, though it has made him tolerate Felix in the choir. His voice is of very little use at present; but he is such an influence, that we should be glad of him if he could not sing a note, and he clings to it with all his heart. I believe music is about the only pleasure he has, and it excites his mother too much to have any at home. We have little Lance in the choir now, with a voice like a thrush in a dewy morning.'

Mr. Audley acted on the port-wine prescription, to the horror and dismay of Cherry, who only submitted with any shadow of philosophy on being told that the more she cried the more necessary she rendered it; but on the Saturday, Sister Constance suddenly knocked at Mr. Audley's door. She had been talking the matter over with the Superior; and the result was, that she had set off on a mission to see for herself, and if she thought it expedient, to bring Geraldine back with her. She had chosen Saturday as the time for seeing Wilmet, and was prepared to overlook that the stairs were a Lodore of soap, this being Sibby's cleaning day, while Wilmet kept guard over the mother and the twins.

Geraldine was in the sitting-room, writing a Latin exercise, with a great pucker in her forehead whenever Angela looked up from her wooden bricks to speak to her. And though the sharp little pinched face was all one beam of joy as the visitor came in, Sister Constance

saw at once that the child's health had deteriorated in these last months. She sat down, and with Angela on her lap, questioned anxiously. Cherry had no complaints--she always was like this in the spring. How was her foot? As usual, a falter. Was it really? Well, yes, she thought so. And then, as the motherly eyes looked into hers, there came a burst of the ready tears; and 'Oh, please don't talk about it--please don't ask.'

'I know what you are afraid of,' said Sister Constance, remembering her horror of the Bexley medical attendant, 'but is it right to conceal this, my dear child?'

'I don't think I do,' said Cherry pitifully. 'You know Sibby does it every night, and it only aches a little more now. And if they did find it out, then they would have him, and there would be a doctor's bill, and, oh! that would be dreadful!'

Sister Constance saw that the question of right or wrong would be infinitely too much for Geraldine, and drew off her mind from it to tell of the good accounts of Robina from Catsacre, and Clement from Whittingtonia; but when presently Wilmet was so far free as to come in with only the boy-baby in her arms, and take the guest up to take off her bonnet, it was the time for entering on the subject.

'Cherry? do you think her looking ill? She always is poorly in the spring, you know.'

'I do not like what I hear of her appetite, or her sleep, or her spirits.'

'Oh! but Cherry is always fanciful, you know. Please, please don't put things in her head.'

'What kind of things do you mean?'

'Fancying herself worse, I mean, or wanting things. You know we must be so careful, and Mamma and the babies--'

'My dear, I know you have many to care for, and it is hard to strike the balance; but somehow your voice sounds to me as if Geraldine were the one you most willingly set aside.'

Wilmet did not like this, and said a little bit hastily, 'I am sure Geraldine has everything we can give her. If she complains, it is very wrong of her.'

'She has not said one word of complaint. Her grief and fear is only of being a burden on you. What brought me here was, that Mr. Audley was anxious about her.'

Wilmet was silent, a little abashed.

'Did you know that her ankle is painful again?'

'Sister Constance,' said Wilmet, 'I don't think you or Mr. Audley know how soon Cherry fancies all sorts of things. She does get into whiny states, and is regularly tiresome; and the more you notice her, the worse she is. I know Mamma thought so.'

'My dear, a mother can venture on wholesome neglect when a sister's neglect is not wholesome. I am not accusing you of neglect, mind; only you want experience and sympathy to judge of a thing with a frame like Cherry's. Now, I will tell you what I want to do. I am come to take her back with me, and get her treated by her kind doctor for a month or so, and the sea air and rest will send her back, most likely, in a much more cheery state.'

'Indeed!' cried Wilmet, startled; 'it is very good, but how could we do without her? Mamma and the children! If she could only wait till the holidays.'

'Let her only hear you say that, Wilmet, and it will do her more good than anything.'

'What--that she is of use? Poor little thing, she tries to be; but if Marilda could have had her way, and taken her instead of Alda, it would have been much better for her and all. Ah! there's Felix. May I call him in?'

Felix, dashing up to wash his hands, smooth his hair, and dress himself for the reading-room work instead of the printing-office, had much rather these operations had been performed before he was called to the consultation in the nursery; but he agreed instantly and solicitously, knowing much better than Wilmet what the dinners were to Cherry, and talking of her much more tenderly.

'Yes, poor little dear, she always breaks down more or less in the spring; but I thought she would mend when we could get her out more,' he said. 'Do you think her really so unwell, Sister Constance?'

'Oh, no, no!' cried Wilmet, fearfully.

'Not very unwell, but only so that I long to put her under our good doctor, who comes to any one in our house, and who is such a fatherly old gentleman, that she would not go through the misery the thought of Mr. Rugg seems to cause her.'

'Dr. Lee?' asked Felix. 'Tom Underwood sent him to see my father once. I remember my father liked him, but called it waste for himself, only longed for his opinion on Cherry. Thank you, I am sure it is the greatest kindness.'

'But, Felix, how can she before the holidays?' cried Wilmet.

'Well, Mamma does not want her before dinner; and as to the kids, why can't you take Angel to school with you? Oh, yes, Miss Pearson will

let you. Then Mr. Audley, or Mr. Bevan, is always up in the afternoon, and you come home by four.'

'Perhaps I could earlier on days when the girls go out walking,' said Wilmet. 'If it is to do Cherry good, I don't like to prevent it.'

Wilmet had evidently got all her household into their niches, and the disarrangement puzzled her. A wonderful girl she was to contrive as she did, and carry out her rule; but Sister Constance feared that a little dryness might be growing on her in consequence, and that, like many maidens of fifteen or sixteen, while she was devoted to the little, she was impatient of the intermediate.

So when they went down, and Cherry heard of the scheme, and implored against it in nervous fear of leaving home and dread of new faces, Wilmet, having made up her practical mind that the going was necessary, only made light of that value at home which was Cherry's one comfort, and which made herself feel it so hard to part with her, that this very want of tact was all unselfishness.

Felix was much more comfortable to Cherry when he made playful faces at the bear-garden than the dining-room would become without her, and showed plainly that he at least would miss her dreadfully. Still she nourished a hope that Mamma would say she should not go; but Mamma always submitted to the decrees of authority, and Wilmet and Felix were her authorities now. Sister Constance felt no misgiving lest Wilmet were hardening, when she heard the sweet discretion and cheerful tenderness with which she propounded the arrangement to the sick mother, without giving her the worry of decision, yet still deferentially enough to keep her in her place as the head of the family.

Yet it was with unnecessarily bracing severity that Wilmet observed to Geraldine, 'Now, don't you go crying, and asking questions, and worrying Mamma.'

'I suppose no person can be everything at once, far less a girl of fifteen,' thought Sister Constance, as she drove up to the station in the omnibus with Cherry, who was too miserable and bewildered to cry now; not that she was afraid of either the Sister or the Sisterhood, but only because she had never left home in her life, and felt exactly like a callow nestling shoved out on the ground with a broken wing.

In two months more the omnibus was setting her down again, much nearer plumpness, with a brighter face and stronger spirits. She had been very full of enjoyment at St. Faith's. She had the visitor's room, with delightful sacred prints and photographs, and a window looking out on the sea--a sight enough to fascinate her for hours. She had been out every fine day on the shore; she had sat in the pleasant community-room with the kind Sisters, who talked to her as a woman, not a baby; she had plenty of books; one of the Sisters had given her daily drawing lessons, and another had read Tasso with her;

she had been to the lovely oratory constantly, and to the beautiful church on Sunday, and had helped to make the wreaths for the great May holidays; she had made many new friends, and among them the doctor, who, if he had hurt her, had never deceived her, and had really made her more comfortable than she had ever been for the last five years, putting her in the way of such self-management as might very possibly avert some of that dreadful liability to be cross.

But with all this, and all her gratitude, Geraldine's longing had been for home. She was very happy, and it was doing her a great deal of good; but Mamma, and Felix, and Wilmet, and Sibby, and the babies, were tugging at her heart, and would not let it go out from them. She was always dreaming that Felix's heels were coming through his stockings, that Mamma was calling and nobody coming, or that Bernard was cutting off the heads of the twins with the blunt scissors. And when Dr. Lee's course of treatment was over, and Felix had a holiday to come and fetch her home, it is not easy to say which was happiest. For she was so glad to be at home amid the dear faces, troubling and troublous as they often were, and so comfortable in the old wheel-ruts of care and toil, that it really seemed as if a new epoch of joy had begun. Felix openly professed how sorely he had missed her, and she clung to his arm with exulting mutual delight; but it was almost more triumphant pleasure to be embraced by Wilmet with the words: 'Dear, dear Cherry, there you are at last. You can't think how we have all wanted you! I never knew how useful you are.'

'I suppose,' said Felix quaintly, 'the world would rather miss its axis, and yet that does not move.'

'Yes, it does,' said Cherry, 'it wobbles. I suppose Wilmet says rotates, just about as much as I am going to do now I have got back into my own dear sphere again.'

CHAPTER VI

THE CACIQUE

'Devouring flames resistless glow,
And blazing rafters downward go,
And never halloo, "Heads below!"
Nor notice give at all.'

Rejected Addresses.

It was a warm night in September, and Wilmet had laid herself down in bed in her nursery with a careful, but not an oppressed heart. About many matters she was happier than before. Her mother had revived in some degree, could walk from her bed-room to the sitting-room, and

took more interest in what was passing; and this the hopeful spirits of the children interpreted into signs of recovery. Geraldine's health and spirits had evidently taken a start for the better. Fulbert, too, was off her mind--safe gone to a clergy-orphan foundation; and though Lancelot had not yet been elected, owing, Mr. Audley imagined, to Lady Price's talk about their fine friends, Wilmet could not be sorry, he was such a little fellow, and the house would be so dull without his unfailing merriment and oddities. And though there had been sore disappointment that Mrs. Thomas Underwood had chosen to go to Brighton instead of coming home, there was the promise of a visit from Alda before Christmas to feed upon. Little Robina had come home for the summer holidays, well, happy, and improved, and crying only in a satisfactory way on returning to school. Moreover, Wilmet's finances had been pleasantly increased by an unexpected present of five pounds at the end of the half year from Miss Pearson, and the promise of the like for the next; increasing as her usefulness increased; and she was also allowed to bring Angela to school with her. The balance of accounts at Midsummer had been satisfactory, and Felix had proudly pronounced her to be a brick of a housekeeper. And thus altogether Wilmet did not feel that the weight of care was so heavy and hopeless as when it first descended upon her; and she went to bed as usual, feeling how true her father's words of encouragement and hope had been, how kind friends were, how dear a brother Felix was, and above all, how there is verily a Father of the fatherless. And so she fell fast asleep, but was ere long waked by a voice from the inner room where Cherry slept with the door open.

'Wilmet, Wilmet, what is it?'

Then she saw that the room was aglow with red light from the window, and heard a loud distant hubbub. Hurrying out of bed, she flew to the window of Cherry's room, and drew up the blind. 'O Wilmet, is it fire?'

'Yes,' low and awe-struck, said Wilmet. 'Not here. No. There's nothing to be frightened at Cherry. It is out--out there. I think it must be the Fortinbras Arms. Oh, what a sight!'

'It is dreadful!' said Cherry, shrinking trembling to the foot of her little bed, whence she could see the window. 'How plain one can see everything in the room! Oh! the terrible red glow in the windows! I wonder if all the people are safe. Wilmet, do call Felix.'

'I will,' said Wilmet, proceeding in search of her clothes; but her hands shook so that she could hardly put them on. They longed for Felix as a protection, and yet Cherry could hardly bear to let her sister go out of sight!

'I only hope Mamma does not hear,' said Wilmet.

'How lucky her room looks out the other way! but, oh! Wilmet, don't fires spread?'

'Felix, and Mr. Audley will see about us in time, if there is any fear of that,' said Wilmet trembling a good deal as she wrapped a shawl round Cherry, who sat in a heap on her bed, gazing fascinated at the red sky and roofs. Felix slept at the back of the house; her knock did not waken him, but her entrance startled both him and Lance.

'Felix, the Fortinbras Arms is on fire.--Hush, Lance; take care; the little ones and Mamma! O Felix, do come to our room.'

They followed her there in a few seconds, but they had only glanced from the window before they simultaneously rushed away, to the increased dismay of their sisters, to whom their manly instinct of rushing into the fray had not occurred.

'I'll go down. I'll try to catch them,' said Wilmet; and she too was gone before Cherry could call to her. She found that Felix and Mr. Audley were in the act of undoing the front door, and this gave her just time to fly down with the entreaty that Felix would not leave them. It was a great deal more to ask of him than she knew.

'To the end of the street I must go, Wilmet,' he said.

'Oh! but Cherry is so frightened! and if Mamma wakes,' she said, gasping.

'It is all quiet in her room,' said Felix.

'Tell Cherry there is no danger at all here now,' said Mr. Audley; 'but if it makes her happier you may dress her. Don't disturb your mother. If needful, we will carry her out in her bed; but I do not think it will be.'

'We can only see out in the street,' added Felix, opening the door as he spoke; and that moment out flew Lance, before anybody had thought of stopping him, and the necessity of pursuing the little fellow into the throng, and keeping him out of danger, made both Felix and Mr. Audley dash after him; while Wilmet, abashed at the men hurrying by, could not even gaze from the door, but fled upstairs in terror lest the two little ones should be awake and crying at the appalling red light and the din, which seemed to her one continuous roar of 'Fire! fire!'

To her great relief, they were still asleep, but Cherry was in a chilled agony of trembling prayer for the 'poor people,' and the sisters crouched up together shivering in each other's arms as they watched the rush of flames streaming up into the sky over the brew-house opposite to them.

Presently Wilmet heard feet again downstairs. 'Cherry dear, I must go down, they may want me. Indeed, I don't think there is real danger as long as that brew-house is safe.'

There was a scuffle of feet that frightened her very much. She remembered it last Michaelmas when her father was brought home from church, and as she stood on the stairs--one choking petition in her heart, 'Let it not be Felix!' she saw that the figure, whatever it was, was carried by Mr. Audley and a strange man. And so great a horror came over her, that, regardless of her toilette, and the hair that had fallen over the jacket on her shoulders, she dropped at once among them as they were bearing the senseless form into Mr. Audley's bed-room, with a low but piteous cry, 'Felix! Felix! oh, what has happened?'

'It is not Felix, my dear,' said Mr. Audley; 'he is safe--he is gone for the doctor. This poor boy has fallen from a window. You can help us, Wilmet; call Martha, and get some water made hot. The fire is getting under.'

Wilmet needed no second hint. She was up, reassuring Cherry at one moment; then breaking into Martha's heavy slumbers, impressing upon her the necessity of not shrieking, then downstairs again, reviving the dying kitchen fire, and finding that, as usual, there was some water not yet cold. For, as she now saw, it was not yet one o'clock. She durst not go to her mother's room, where ready means of heating food were always to be found. As she brought the jug to the door, Felix came in with Mr. Rugg, who, living in a street out of sight, and having ears for no sound but his own night-bell, had been ready at once to obey the call. Felix told his sister the little he knew.

'It was a terrible sight. Just as we got to that one big window--a passage one, I believe, which looks out into this street--we saw this poor boy and a black man up on the sill, with all the glare of light behind them, screaming out for help.'

'But where was everybody?'

'In the High Street, round the corner. Crowds there; and here in our street only ourselves and a few men that hurried up after us. Mr. Audley shouted to them that we would get a ladder, but whether they could not hold on any more, or they thought we were going quite away--O Wilmet! I didn't see; but there was the most horrible thump and crash on the pavement.'

'What! down from that window?'

'Yes,' said Felix, leaning against the wall, and looking very pale. 'And there was that good black man, he had got the boy in his arms, as if he had wound himself round to keep him from harm.'

'Oh! And he?'

'Killed--quite killed. Don't ask me about it, Wilmet. It is much too dreadful to hear of;' and he shuddered all over.

'But this boy's head was safe at least, and as there seemed no one to attend to anything, Mr. Audley said he would bring him here, and I went for Mr. Rugg.'

'And where's Lance? Did he go with you?'

'Lance! Is not he in? I never saw or thought of him, I must go and seek for him,' exclaimed Felix, darting off in haste and alarm at the thought of little nine-year-old Lance alone among the midnight crowd, just as Mr. Audley opened the door to try to find a messenger to Mr. Rugg's surgery. He paused to tell Wilmet that it was a lad about Felix's age, moaning some word that sounded like Diego, and with a broken leg and ribs, and then, as Martha was in attendance, she felt herself obliged to return to Cherry, whom indeed she could not leave again, for though the fire had sunk, and only thick clouds of smoke showed the play of the engines, the effects of the terror were not so quickly over in the tender little frame, which was in a quivering hysterical state, so deadly cold, that Wilmet was frightened, and went once more down to warm some flannel; and get some hot drink for her. She intended tea, but meeting Mr. Audley again, he sent up a glass of wine. Even with this in hot water, Cherry could hardly be warmed again, and Wilmet lay down, clasping her round, and not daring to let her know of her own continued anxiety about the two brothers. At last, however, when the red light had almost faded quite away, the cautious steps were heard coming up the stairs, and Felix called into the room in a low voice--

'All right, Wilmet.'

'Oh! come in,' the sisters called. 'Where did you find him, Fee? Is he safe?'

'O Cherry, you never saw such a lark!' cried Lance in a gusty whisper. 'Wouldn't Fulbert have given his ears to have seen it? To see the engines pouring down, and the great hose twining about like jolly old sea-serpents spouting.'

'Hush, Lance; how can you? How could you! Does Mr. Audley know he is safe?'

'Yes,' said Felix, 'he opened the door, and said he might have known Lance was too much of a gamin to come to grief.'

'What's a gamin?' said Lance.

'A street ragamuffin at Paris,' said Wilmet. 'But really, Lance, it was a terrible thing to do.'

'And where do you think I found him?' said Felix. 'In between little Jacky Brown and that big old coal-heaver who was so impudent about the blanket-club, hanging like a monkey upon the rails of the terrace, and hallooing as loud as they.'

"'Twas the coal-heaver that helped me up,' said Lance. 'He's a jolly good fellow, I can tell you. He said, "You be one of Parson Underwood's little chaps, baint you? A rare honest gentleman of the right sort war he--he war!" and he pulled down another boy and put me up instead, and told me all about the great fire at Stubbs's factory. You can't think what fun it was. Roar, roar, up went the flame. Swish, wish, went the water--such a bellowing--such great clouds of smoke!'

'Was everybody saved?' whispered Cherry's tremulous murmur.

There was a silence, then Lance said, 'Weren't they?' and Cherry had another shuddering fit.

'Who?' Wilmet asked.

'Poor Mr. Jones's youngest child and his nursemaid were in an attic room where nobody could get at them,' said Felix in a hurried and awe-struck voice, causing Cherry to renew that agony of trembling and sobbing so convulsive and painful that her elder brother and sister could only devote themselves to soothing her, till at last she lay still again in Wilmet's arms, with only a few long gasps coming quivering up through her frame. Then Wilmet implored Felix to go away and make Lance go to bed, and finding this the only means of reducing the little excited fellow to quiet, he went. And though all were sure they should not sleep, they overslept themselves far into Sunday morning, except Wilmet, who was wakened by the clamours of the undisturbed Angela and Bernard, and succeeded in dressing them without disturbing the other three.

Very tired and stiff, and very anxious she felt, but she was obliged to go down as soon as she was dressed, since she always took charge of her mother before breakfast on Sunday while Sibby went to mass. It was so late that she could only listen in vain at the top of the stairs before she went into the room, where she found Sibby very indignant at having missed all the excitement of the night past. 'As if she could not have been trusted not to have wakened the mistress. She believed they would have let her alone till they all were burnt in their beds!'

It was not till breakfast, which took place unusually late, that Wilmet heard much. Felix and Lance had just come downstairs, rather ashamed of having overslept themselves, and Mr. Audley came in and begged for a cup of tea.

He told them that the father and uncle of the boy had arrived. They were American merchants or speculators of some kind, he thought, named Travis, and they had gone on business to Dearport the day before, meaning to dine there, and return by the mail train in the night, and leaving the boy with the black servant in the unfortunate hotel.

On arriving, at about three o'clock, not long after Felix had brought

Lance home, they had telegraphed to Dearport for a doctor and nurse, who were momentarily expected to arrive. The patient was only half conscious, and though he knew his father, continued to murmur for Diego. Martha was sitting with him whenever she could, for his father did not seem to understand nursing, and it would be a great relief when a properly-trained person arrived.

She came, and so did the doctor, but not till close upon church-time, and little but stray reports from the sick-room reached the population upstairs all that day, as Mr. Audley, whenever he was not at church, was obliged to be in attendance on his strange guests. All that reached the anxious and excited young people was the tidings of the patient being not unlikely to do well, though he was in great pain and high fever, and continually calling for the poor negro who had saved his life at the expense of his own.

This was the last bulletin when the household parted to go their several ways on Monday morning, not to be all collected again and free to speak till seven o'clock in the evening, when they met round the table for tea.

'Mamma looks cheery,' said Felix, coming into the little back room where Wilmet was spreading bread and butter.

'Yes,' said Wilmet, 'I think she has cared to hear about the fire. So many people have come in and talked, that it has enlivened her.'

'And how is the boy?'

'A little better, Martha heard; but he keeps on talking of Diego, and seems not to care about any one else.'

'No wonder. His father must be an unmitigated brute,' said Felix. 'He came to the inquest, and talked just as if it had been an old Newfoundland dog; I really think he cared rather less than if it had been.'

Tell us about the inquest, Felix,' said Lance. 'I wish they'd have wanted me there.'

'I don't see why, Lance,' said Felix gravely; 'it was a terrible thing to see poor Mr. Jones hardly able to speak for grief, and the mother of that poor young nurse went on sobbing as if her heart was breaking.'

'Nobody knows the cause of the fire, do they?' asked Cherry.

'Lady Price said it was the gas.'

'No; no one knows. Way, the waiter, saw a glare under the door of the great assembly-room as he was going up very late to bed, and the instant he opened the door the flame seemed to rush out at him. I suppose a draught was all it wanted. He saw this poor Diego safe

downstairs once, but he must have gone back to save his young master, and got cut off in coming back. Poor fellow! he is a Mexican negro, belonging to an estate that came to Mr. Travis's wife, and he has always clung to her and her son just like a faithful dog.'

'But he could not be a slave in England,' said Cherry eagerly.

'No; but as this Travis said, his one instinct was the boy: he did not know how to get rid of him, he said, and I do believe he thinks it a lucky chance.'

'I wish it had been he!' said Lance.

'Sibby has asked leave to go to the burial,' added Wilmet.

'I hope you gave it,' said Felix. 'Mr. Macnamara came and asked if he were not a Roman Catholic, and those two Travises laughed a little offensively, and said they guessed he was so, as much as a nigger was anything; and the Papists were welcome to his black carcase, only they would not be charged for any flummery. "I won't be made a fool of about a nigger," one said. And then, I was so glad, Mr. Audley begged to know when the funeral would be, and said he would go anywhere to do honour to faithfulness unto death.'

'Well done, Mr. Audley!' cried Lance. 'Won't we go too, Fee!'

'It will be at nine to-morrow,' said Felix; at which Lance made a face, since of course he would be in school at the time.

'Maybe I shall have to go,' added Felix; 'for only think, as my good luck would have it, Redstone went on Saturday night to see his mother or somebody, and only came back this morning; and Mr. Froggatt himself was "out at his box," as he calls it, so he told me this morning to write the account of the fire for the paper, and he would pay me for it extra, as he does Redstone.'

'Well, and have you done it?'

'I was pretty much at sea at first, till I recollected the letter I began to Edgar yesterday night, and by following that, I made what I thought was a decent piece of business of it.'

'Oh, did you put in the way they threw the things out at window at Jessop's without looking what they were!' cried Lance; 'and the jolly smash the jugs and basins made, and when their house was never on fire at all: and how the coal-heaver said "Hold hard, frail trade there!"'

'Well,' said Felix quaintly, 'I put it in a different form, you see. I said the inhabitants of the adjacent houses hurled their furniture from the windows with more precipitation than attention to the fragility of the articles. And, after all, that intolerable ass, Redstone, has corrected fire every time into "the devouring element,"

and made "the faithful black" into "the African of sable integument, but heart of precious ore."

'Now, Felix!'

'Bald, sir, bald,' he said, with such a face. "'Yes, Mr. Underwood," even good old Froggy said, when he saw me looking rather blue, "you and I may know what good taste and simplicity is; but if we sent out the Pursuivant with no mouth-filling words in it, we should be cut out with some low paper in no time among the farmers and mechanics.'"

'Is he so led by Mr. Redstone?' asked Wilmet.

'Not exactly; but I believe there's nothing he dreads more than Redstone's getting offended and saying that I am no use, as he would any day if he could. O, Mr. Audley, are you coming to stay?'

'Will you have a cup of tea?' said Wilmet.

'Thank you, yes; I've got to dine with these fellows at the Railway Hotel at eight, but I wanted to speak to you first, Wilmet,' said Mr. Audley, sitting down as if he were weary of his day.

'How is the boy?'

'Better. He has been quite sensible ever since he woke at twelve o'clock to-day, only he was dreadfully upset about poor Diego--about whom his father told him very abruptly--without the least notion he would feel it so much.'

'I wish I had the kicking of that father,' observed Felix, driving the knife hard into the loaf.

'He is not altogether such a bad fellow,' said Mr. Audley thoughtfully.

'Not for an American, perhaps.'

'He is not an American at all. He was born and bred in my own country, and took me by surprise by calculating that I was one of the Audleys of Wrightstone Court, and wanting to know whether my father were Sir Robert or Sir Robert's son. Then he guessed that I might have heard of his father, if I was not too young, and by-and-by it dawned on me that whenever there is any complication about business matters, or any one is in bad circumstances, my father always vituperates one Travis, who, it seems, was a solicitor greatly trusted by all the country round, till he died, some twenty years ago, and it appeared that he had ruined everybody, himself included. These men are his sons. They went out to America, and got up in the world. They told me the whole story of how they had knocked about everywhere, last evening, but I was too sleepy to enter into it much, though I daresay it was curious enough; successful speculations and hair's-breadth escapes seemed to come very thick one upon another,

but all I am clear about is that this poor boy, Fernando's mother was a Mexican heiress, they--one of them, I mean--managed to marry, her father English, but her mother old Spanish blood allied to the old Caciques, he says; whether it is a boast I don't know, but the boy looks like it--such a handsome fellow; delicate straight profile, slender limbs, beautifully made, inky-black hair and brows, pure olive skin--the two doctors were both in raptures. Well, they thought affairs in Mexico insecure, so they sold the poor woman's estate and carried her off to Texas. No; was it? I really can't remember where; but, at any rate, Diego stuck to her wherever she went, and when she died, to her child; nursed him like an old woman, and-- In short, it was that touching negro love that one sometimes hears of. Now they seem to have grown very rich--the American Vice-Consul, who came over this morning from Dearport, knew all about them--and they came home partly on business, and partly to leave Fernando to be made into an English gentleman, who, Mr. Travis says, if he has money to spend, does whip creation. He's English enough for that still. Well, they have got a telegram that makes them both want to sail by the next steamer.'

'That's a blessing. But the boy?

'He cannot be moved for weeks. It is not only the fractures, but the jar of the fall. He may get quite over it, but must lie quite still on his back. So here he is, a fixture, by your leave, my lady housekeeper.'

'It is your room, Mr. Audley,' said Wilmet. 'But can his father really mean to leave him alone so very ill, poor boy?'

'Well, as his father truly says, he is no good to him, but rather the reverse; and as the Travis mind seems rather impressed by finding an Audley here, I am to be left in charge of him now, and to find a tutor for him when he gets better. So we are in for that!'

'But what is to become of you?' asked Wilmet. 'The nurse has got the little back study.'

'I have got a room at Bolland's to sleep in, thank you,' he answered; 'and I have been representing the inconvenience to the house of this long illness, so that the Travises, who are liberal enough--'

'I thought them horrid misers,' said Felix.

'That was only the American conscience as to negroes. In other matters they are ready to throw money about with both hands; so I hope I have made a good bargain for you, Wilmet. You are to have five guineas a week, and provide for boy and nurse, all but wine and beer, ice and fruit.'

'Five guineas!' murmured Wilmet, quite overpowered at the munificent sum.

'I am afraid you will not find it go as far as you expect, for he will want a good deal of dainty catering.'

'And your room should be deducted,' said Wilmet.

'Not at all. Mrs. Bolland said she did not take lodgers, but should esteem it a favour if I would sleep there while her son is away. It is all safe, I think. He has given me orders on his London banker, and they say here at the bank that they are all right. It is a strange charge,' he added thoughtfully; 'we little thought what we were taking on ourselves when we picked up that poor fellow, Felix; and I cannot help thinking it will turn out well, there was something so noble about the poor lad's face as he lay insensible.'

It was about three weeks later, that one Sunday evening, when Mr. Audley came in from church, Felix followed him to his sitting-room, and began with unusual formality. 'I think I ought to speak to you, sir.'

'What's the matter?'

'About Lance, and him in there. I have had such a queer talk with _him_!'

'As how?'

'Why he wanted us to stop from church, asked me to let off the poor little coon; and when I said we couldn't, because we were in the choir, wanted to know what we were paid, then why we did it at all; and so it turned out that he thinks churches only meant for women and psalm-singing niggers and Methodists, and has never been inside one in his life, never saw the sense of it, wanted to know why I went.'

'What did you tell him?'

'I don't know; I was so taken aback. I said something about our duty to God, and it's being all we had to get us through life; but I know I made a dreadful mess of it, and the bell rang, and I got away. But he seems a sheer heathen, and there's Lance in and out all day.'

'Yes, Felix, I am afraid it is true that the poor lad has been brought up with no religion at all--a blank sheet, as his father called him.'

'Wasn't his father English?'

'Yes; but he had lived a roving, godless life. I began, when I found the boy must stay here, by asking whether he were of his father's or his mother's communion, and in return heard a burst of exultation that he had never let a priest into his house. His father-in-law had warned him against it, and he had carried his wife out of their reach long before the child's birth; he has not even been baptized, but you see, Felix, I could not act like Abraham to the idolater in the

Talmud.'

Felix did not speak, but knocked one foot against the other in vexation, feeling that it was his house after all, and that Mr. Audley should not have turned this young heathen loose into it to corrupt his brother, without consulting him.

'I told Travis,' continued the Curate, 'that if I undertook the charge as he wished, it must be as a priest myself, and I must try to put some religion into him. And, to my surprise, he said he left it to me. Fernando was old enough to judge, and if he were to be an English squire, he must conform to old-country ways; besides, I was another sort of parson from Yankee Methodists and Shakers or Popish priests--he knew the English clergy well enough, of the right sort.'

'So he is to learn religion to make him a squire?'

'I was thankful enough to find no obstruction.'

'And have you begun?' asked Felix moodily.

'Why--no. He has been too ill and too reserved. I have attempted nothing but daily saying a short prayer for him in his hearing, hoping he would remark on it. But you know the pain is still very absorbing at times, and it leaves him exhausted; and besides, I fancy he has a good deal of tropical languor about him, and does not notice much. Nothing but Lance has roused him at all.'

'I would never have let Lance in there by himself, if I had known,' said Felix. 'He is quite bewitched.'

'It would have been difficult to prevent it. Nor do I think that much harm can be done. I believe I ought to have told you, Felix; but I did not like denouncing my poor sick guest among the children, or its getting round all the town and to my Lady. After all, Lance is a very little fellow; it is not as if Edgar or Clem were at home.'

'I suppose it cannot be helped,' sighed Felix; 'but my father--' and as he recollected the desire to take his brothers away from Mr. Ryder, he felt as if his chosen guardian had been false to his trust, out of pity and enthusiasm.

'Your father would have known how to treat him,' sighed Mr. Audley. 'At any rate, Felix, we must not forget the duties of hospitality and kindness; and I hope you will not roughly forbid Lance to go near him, without seeing whether the poor fellow is not really inoffensive.'

'I'll see about it,' was all that Felix could get himself to say; for much as he loved Mr. Audley, he could not easily brook interference with his brothers, and little Lance, so loyal to himself, and so droll without a grain of malice, was very near to his heart. 'A young pagan,' as he thought to himself, 'teaching him all the blackguard

tricks and words he has learnt at all the low schools in north or south!' and all the most objectionable scenes he had met with in American stories, from Uncle Tom onwards, began to rise before his eyes. 'A pretty thing to do in a fit of beneficence! I'll order Lance to keep away, and if he dares disobey, I'll lick him well to show him who is master.'

So he felt, as he swung himself upstairs, and halted with some intention of pouring out his vexed spirit to Wilmet, because Mr. Audley had no business to make it a secret; but Wilmet was putting her mother to bed, and he went on upstairs. There he found all the doors open, and heard a murmuring sound of voices in Geraldine's room. In a mood to be glad of any excuse for finding fault, he strode across the nursery, where Angela and Bernard slept, and saw that Lance, who ought to have gone at once to bed on coming in, was standing in his sister's window, trying to read in the ray of gas-light that came up from a lamp at the brew-house door.

'Go to bed, Lance,' he said; 'if you have not learnt your lessons in proper time, you must wake early, or take the consequences. I won't have it done on Sunday night.'

Lance started round angrily, and Cherry cried, 'O Felix, it is no such thing! Only would you tell us where to find about the king and his priests that defeated the enemy by singing the "mercy endureth for ever" psalm?'

'In the Bible!' said Felix, as if sure it was a blunder. 'There's no such story.'

'Indeed there is,' cried Lance, 'for Papa (the word low and reverently) took out his blue poly-something Bible and read it out in the sermon. Don't you remember, Fee, a hot day in the summer, when he preached all about those wild robbers--horrid fellows with long spears--coming up in the desert to make a regular smash of the Jews?'

'Lance!' cried Cherry.

'Well, he did not say that, of course, but they wanted to; and how the king sent out the priests without a fighting man, only all in white, praising God in the beauty of holiness, and singing, "His mercy endureth for ever." I saw him read that, though he told us all the rest without book; how all the enemy began to quarrel, and all killed one another, and the Jews had nothing to do but to pick up the spoil, and sing another psalm coming back.'

'I remember now,' said Felix, in a very different tone. 'It was Jehoshaphat, Lancey boy. I'll find it for you in the book of Chronicles. Did you want it for anything?'

Lance made an uneasy movement.

'It was to show poor Fernando Travis, wasn't it?' said Cherry; and as

Lance wriggled again, she added, 'He seems to have been taught nothing good.'

'Now, Cherry,' broke out Lance, 'I told you to say not a word.'

'I know a little about it, Lance,' said Felix, sitting down on the window-seat and lifting Lance on his knee, as he said, in a tone very unlike his intended expostulation, 'You must not let him do you harm, Lance.'

'He wouldn't; but he does not know anything about anything,' said the little boy. 'They never taught him to say his prayers, nor sing hymns, nor chant, and he thinks it is only good for niggers. So I told him that singing psalms once beat an army, and he laughed; and I thought Cherry was sure to know where it was--but girls will always tell.'

'Indeed you never told me not,' said Cherry, humbly.

'She has done no harm,' said Felix. 'Mr. Audley has just been talking to me about that poor boy. He really is as untaught as that little scamp at the potteries that we tried to teach.'

'He's a stunning good fellow,' broke in Lance; 'he has seen an alligator, and ridden mustangs.'

'Never mind that now, Lance; I dare say he is very amusing, but--'

'Don't hinder me from going to him,' broke in the younger boy vehemently.

'If,' said Felix gravely, 'you can be quite sure my Father would not mind it.'

Lance was nestling close up to him in the dark, and he was surprised to find that round face wet with tears. 'Papa would not let him lie dull and moped all day long,' he said. 'O Fee, I can't keep away; I am so sorry for him. When that terrible cramp comes, it is of no use to say those sort of things to him.'

'What sort of things?'

'Oh, you know; verses such as Papa used to have said to him. They weren't a bit of good. No, not though I did get the book Papa marked for Cherry.'

'You did!' gasped Cherry, who little thought that sacred possession of hers was even known to Master Lance.

'You'd have done it yourself, Cherry,' said the little boy, 'if you had only seen how bad he was; he got quite white, and had great drops on his forehead, and panted so, and would not let out a bit of a cry, only now and then a groan; and so I ran to get the verse Papa used to

say over and over to you when your foot was bad. And I'm sure it was the right one, but--but--it did him no good, for, oh! he didn't know who our Saviour is;' and the little fellow clung to his brother in a passion of tears, while Felix felt a pang at the contrast.

'Have you been telling him, Lancey?' he asked.

'I wanted him to ask Mr. Audley, but he said he was a parson, and his father said that there would be no parsons if men were not fools. Now, Fee, I've told you, but don't keep me away.'

'It would be hard on a poor sick fellow,' said Felix, thoroughly softened. 'Only, Lance, you know I can't be with you; will you promise to go away if ever you think Papa would wish it?'

'Oh yes, one has to do that, you know, when our own fellows get blackguardly,' said little Lance, freely; whereat Cherry shuddered somewhat. 'And, Fee,' he added, 'if you would only come and make him understand about things.'

'Mr. Audley must do that,' said Felix; 'I can't.'

'You teach the boys in the Sunday-school,' said Lance. 'And he'd mind you, Blunderbore. He says you are the grandest and most splendiferous fellow he ever did set eyes on, and that he feels something like, when you've just looked in and spoken to him.'

'You little ass, he was chaffing you.'

'No, no, _indeed_ he wasn't. I told him all about it, because he liked your face so much. And he does care so very much when you look in. Oh! _do, do_, Fee; he is so jolly, and it is so lonely and horrid for him, and I do so want Papa for him;' and the child cried silently, but Felix felt the long deep sobs, and as Geraldine, much moved, said, 'Dear little Lancey,' he carried him over to her as she sat up in bed, and she kissed and fondled him, and murmured in his ear, 'Dear Lance, I'm sure he'll get good. We will get Mr. Audley to talk to him, you know, and we will say a prayer every day for him.'

Lance, beginning to recover, put his arms round Cherry's neck, gave her a tremendous hug, released himself from his brother's arms, and ran off to bed. Felix remained a few moments, while Cherry exclaimed, 'Oh! the dear good little fellow!'

'Better than any of us,' said Felix. 'I was quite savage with Mr. Audley when I found out about it. I must go down and tell him. I never thought all that was in the little chap! I'm glad he came to you, Cherry. Good-night.'

'And you will try to teach this poor boy, Felix?'

'I don't say that. I don't in the least know how; but I shall not dare to hinder Lance, now I see how he goes on.'

On his way down he heard voices in the sitting-room, where, in fact, Mr. Audley had joined Wilmet, to explain to her how vexed he was to have so much annoyed Felix, and perhaps also something of his own annoyance at the manner in which Felix took it. Wilmet, partly from her 'growing on the sunny side of the wall,' partly from her early authority, was in some ways older than her brother, and could see that there was in him a shade of boyish jealousy of his prerogative; and as she sat, in her pretty modest gravity, with her fair hair and her Sunday frock, she was softly but earnestly telling Mr. Audley that she was sure Felix would not mind long, and that he was very sorry for the poor boy really, only he was so anxious about Lance, and he did like to be consulted. Both looked up, startled, as Felix opened the door, and they saw that his eyes were full of tears. He came up to Mr. Audley, and said, 'I beg your pardon, sir; I'd no business to grumble, and that little fellow has been--'

'Beforehand with us?' asked Mr. Audley, as Felix broke down. 'The nurse has been just telling me how he sat on his bed saying bits of psalms and verses to him when he had that bad fit of cramp, "so pretty," she said; but I was afraid it must have been rather like a spell.'

Felix told his story, feeling it too much not to make it lame, and with the tearfulness trembling in his voice and eyes all the time.

'Our little gamin has the most of the good Samaritan in him,' said Mr. Audley. 'Tis not quite the end I should have begun at, but perhaps it may work the better.'

'Dear little boy, that he should have remembered that sermon!' exclaimed Wilmet.

'I am afraid it is more than I do,' said Felix; 'all last summer the more I tried to listen, the more I saw how he was changing. Do you remember it, Wilmet?'

'Yes; the text was, "The joy of the Lord is your strength," and he said how praising God, and going on thinking about His goodness and thankfulness, was the way to make our adversaries dissolve before us, and never trouble us at all, just like the bands of the Moabites and Ammonites before Jehoshaphat.'

'I recollect it well, and how I thought it such a likeness of himself,' said Mr. Audley; 'he was walking over his troubles, scarcely seeing them, as if they could not dim the shine of his armour while he went on looking up and being thankful. I fancy little Lance has a good deal of that kind of bright fearless way.'

'He has,' said Felix in a grave thoughtful tone that made the Curate look at him and sigh to think how early care and grief had come to make that joyous buoyancy scarce possible to the elder boy, little more than seventeen though he was.

'He is very idle, though,' added Wilmet; 'such caricatures as there are all over his books! Edgar's were bad enough, but Lance puts pig-tails and cocked hats to all Edgar's.'

So Lance's visits to the sick stranger remained unobstructed. He had no notion of teaching him; but the foreign boy in his languor and helplessness curiously fascinated him, perhaps from the very contrast of the passive, indolent, tropical nature with his own mercurial temperament. The Spaniard, or perhaps the old Mexican, seemed to predominate in Fernando, as far as could be guessed in one so weak and helpless. He seemed very quiet and inanimate, seldom wanting or seeking diversion, but content to lie still, with half-closed eyes; his manner was reserved, and with something of courteous dignity, especially when Lady Price came to visit him; and the Yankeeisms that sometimes dropped from his tongue did not agree with the polish of the tone, and still less with the imperious manner in which he sometimes addressed the nurse. He seemed, though not clever, to be tolerably well cultivated; he had been at the schools of whatever cities his father had resided in, and his knowledge of languages was of course extensive.

However, he never talked freely to Mr. Audley. He had bitterly resented that gentleman's interference, one day when he was peremptorily commanding the nurse to place him in a position that had been forbidden, and the endeavour to control him had made him fearfully angry. There was a stormy outbreak of violent language, only checked by a severe rebuke, for which he did not forgive the Curate; he was coldly civil, and accepted the attentions he could not dispense with in a grave formal manner that would have been sulky in an English lad, but had something of the dreary grandeur of the Spanish Don from that dark lordly visage, and made Mr. Audley half provoked, half pitying, speak of him always as his Cacique. He only expanded a little even to Lance, though the little boy waited on him assiduously, chattering about school doings, illustrating them on a slate, singing to him, acting Blondin, exhibiting whatever he could lay his hands on, including the twins, whom he bore down one after the other, to the great wrath of Sibby, not to say of little Stella herself, while Theodore took the exhibition with perfect serenity.

As to Felix, he was, as Lance said, the subject of the sick lad's fervent admiration. Perhaps the open, fair, cheerful, though grave countenance, fresh complexion, and strong, steadfast, upright bearing had something to do with the strange adoration that in his silent way Fernando paid to the youth, who looked in from time to time, bringing a sort of air of refreshment with his good-natured shy smile, even when he least knew what to say. Or else it was little Lance's fervent affection for Felix which had conduced to the erection of the elder brother into the idol of Fernando's fancy; and his briefest visit was the event of the long autumnal days spent in the uncurtained iron bed in the corner of the low room. The worship, silent though it was, was manifest enough to become embarrassing and ridiculous to the subject of it, whose sense of duty and compassion was always at war with his

reluctance to expose himself to it. Not another word passed on any religious subject. Mr. Audley was not forgiven enough to venture on the attempt; the Rector was shy and frightened about it, and could make no beginning; and Mr. Mowbray Smith, who found great fault with them for their neglect, had been fairly stared down by the great black eyes, which, when the heavy lids were uplifted, proved to be of an immense size and force; and Felix was so sure that it could not be his business while three clergymen were going in and out that he had never done more than describe the weather, or retail any fresh bit of London news that had come down to the office.

At last, however, one November day, he found Fernando sitting up in bed, and Lance, perched on the table, talking so earnestly as not to perceive his entrance, until Fernando broke upon his words: 'There! it's no use!'

'Yes, it is,' cried Lance, jumping down. 'O Fee, I am glad you are come; I want you to tell him the rights of it.'

'The rights of what, Lance?'

'Tell him that it is all the devil's doing, and the men he has got on his side; and that it was the very thing our Saviour came for to set us free, only everybody won't,' said Lance clinging to his brother's hand and looking up in his face.

'That's about right, Lance,' said Felix, 'but I don't quite know what you are talking about.'

'Just this,' said Fernando. 'Lance goes on about God being merciful and good and powerful--Almighty, as he says; but whatever women may tell a little chap like that, nobody can think so that has seen the things I have, down in the West, with my own eyes.'

'Felix!' cried Lance, 'say it. You know and believe just as I do, as everybody good does, men and all.'

'Yes, indeed!' said Felix with all his heart.

'Then tell me how it can be,' said Fernando.

Felix stood startled and perplexed, feeling the awful magnitude and importance of the question, but also feeling his own incompetence to deal with it; and likewise that Wilmet was keeping the tea waiting for him. He much wished to say, 'Keep it for Mr. Audley,' but he feared to choke the dawning of faith, and he likewise feared the appearance of hesitation.

'Nobody can really explain it,' he said, 'but that's no wonder. One cannot explain a thunderstorm, but one knows that it is.'

'That's electricity,' said Fernando.

'And what's electricity?'

'A fluid that--'

'Yes; that's another word. But you can't get any farther. God made electricity, or whatever it is, and when you talk about explaining it, you only get to something that is. You know it is, and you can't get any farther,' he repeated.

'Well, that's true; though science goes beyond you in America.'

'But no searching finds out all about God!' said Felix reverently. 'All we know is that He is so infinitely great and wise, that of course we cannot understand why all He does is right, any more than a private soldier understands his general's orders.'

'And you--you,' said Fernando, 'are content to say you don't understand.'

'Why not?' said Felix.

There was a silence. Fernando seemed to be thinking; Lance gazed from one to the other, as if disappointed that his brother was not more explicit.

'And how do you know it is true?' added Fernando. 'I mean, what Lance has been telling me! What makes you sure of it, if you are?'

'If I am!' cried Felix, startled into indignation. 'To be sure I am!'

'But how?'

'I know it!' said Felix.

'How?'

'The Bible!' gasped Lance impatiently.

'Ay; so you have said for ever,' broke in Fernando; 'but what authenticates that?'

'The whole course of history,' said Felix. 'There is a great chain of evidence, I know, but I never got it up. I can't tell it you, Fernando, I never wanted it, never even tried to think about the proofs. It is all too sure.'

'But wouldn't a Mahometan say that?' said Fernando.

'If he did, look at the Life of our Lord and of Mahomet together, and see which must be the true prophet--the Way, the Life, the Truth.'

'That one could do,' said Fernando thoughtfully. 'I say' as Felix

made a movement as if he thought the subject concluded, 'I want to know one thing more. Lance says it is believing all this that makes you--any one I mean--good.'

'I don't know what else should,' said Felix, smiling a little; the question seemed to him so absurd.

'Is it really what makes you go and slave away at that old boss's of yours?'

'Why, that's necessity and my duty,' said Felix.

'And is it what makes this little coon come and spend all his play-hours on a poor fellow with a broken leg? I've been at many schools, and never saw the fellow who would do that.'

'Oh! you are such fun!' cried Lance.

'All that is right comes from God first and last,' said Felix gravely.

'And you--you that are no child--you believe all that Lance tells me you do, and think it makes you what you are!'

'I believe it; yes, of course. And believing it should make me much better than I am! I hope it will in time.'

'Ah!' sighed Fernando. 'I never heard anything like it since my father said he'd take the cow-hide to poor old Diego, if he caught him teaching me nigger-cant.'

They left him.

'Poor fellow!' sighed Felix; 'what have you been telling him, Lance?'

'Oh, I don't know; only why things were good and bad,' was Lance's lucid answer; and he was then intent on detailing the stories he had heard from Fernando. He had been in the worst days of Southern slavery ere its extinction, on the skirts of the deadly warfare with the Red Indians; and the poor lad had really known of horrors that curdled the blood of Wilmet and Geraldine, and made the latter lie awake or dream dreadful dreams all night.

But the next day Mr. Audley was startled to hear the two friends in the midst of an altercation. When Lance had come in for his mid-day recreation, Fernando had produced five shillings, desiring him to go and purchase a Bible for him; but Lance, who had conceived the idea that the Scriptures ought not to be touched by an unchristened hand, flatly refused, offering, however, to read from his own. Now Lance's reading was at that peculiar school-boy stage which seems calculated to combine the utmost possible noise with the least possible distinctness; and though he had good gifts of ear and voice, and his reciting and singing were both above the average, the moment a book

was before him, he roared his sentences between his teeth in horrible monotony. And as he began with the first chapter of St. Matthew, and was not perfectly able to cope with all the names, Fernando could bear it no longer, and insisted on having the book itself. Lance shook his head and refused; and matters were in this stage when Mr. Audley, not liking the echoes of the voices, opened the door. 'What is it?' he asked anxiously.

'Nothing,' replied Fernando, proudly trying to swallow his vexation.

'Lance!' said Mr. Audley rather severely; but just then, seeing what book the child was holding tight under his arm, he decided to follow him out of the room and interrogate.

'What was it, Lance?'

'He ought not to touch a Bible--he sha'n't have mine,' said Lance resentfully.

'Was he doing anything wrong with it?'

'Oh no! But he ought not to have it before he is christened, and I would have read to him.'

Mr. Audley knew what Lance's reading was, and smiled.

'Was that all, Lance? I like your guardianship of the Bible, my boy; but it was not given only to those who are Christians already, or how could any one learn?'

'He sha'n't touch mine, though,' said Lance, with an odd sturdiness; stumping upstairs with his treasure, a little brown sixpenny S. P. C. K. book, but in which his father had written his name on his last birthday but one.

Mr. Audley only waited to take down a New Testament, and present himself at Fernando's bedside, observing gladly that there was much more wistfulness than offence about his expression.

'It was a scruple on the young man's part,' said Mr. Audley, smiling, though full of anxiety; 'he meant no unkindness.'

'I know he did not,' said Fernando quietly, but gazing at the purple book in the clergyman's hands.

'Did you want this?' said Mr. Audley; 'or can I find anything in it for you?'

'Thank you;' and there was a pause. The offended manner towards Mr. Audley had been subsiding of late into friendliness under his constant attentions, and Fernando's desire for an answer prevailed at last. 'Felix told me to read the Life of Christ,' he said, not irreverently, 'and that it would show me He must be True.'

'I hope and trust that so it may be,' said Mr. Audley, more moved than he could bear to show, but with fervour in his voice far beyond his words.

'Felix,' said Fernando, resting on the name, 'Felix does seem as if he must be right, Mr. Audley; can it be really as he says--and Lance--that their belief makes them like what they are?'

'Most assuredly.'

'And you don't say so only because you are a minister?' asked the boy distrustfully.

'I say so because I know it. I knew that it is the Christian faith that makes all goodness, long before I was a minister.'

'But I have seen plenty of Christians that were not in the least like Felix Underwood.'

'So have I; but in proportion as they live up to their faith, they have what is best in him.'

'I should like to be like him,' mused Fernando; 'I never saw such a fellow. He, and little Lance too, seem to belong to something bright and strong, that seems inside and outside, and I can't lay hold of what it is.'

'One day you will, my dear boy,' said Mr. Audley. 'Let me try to help you.'

Fernando scarcely answered, save by half a smile, and a long sigh of relief: but when Mr. Audley put his hand over the long brown fingers, they closed upon it.

CHAPTER VII

THE CHESS-PLAYER'S BATTLE

'Dost thou believe, he said, that Grace
Itself can reach this grief?
With a feeble voice and a woeful eye--
"Lord, I believe," was the sinner's reply,
"Help Thou mine unbelief."

SOUTHEY.

By the beginning of the Christmas holidays, Fernando Travis was able

to lie on a couch in Mr. Audley's sitting-room. His recovery was even tardier than had been expected, partly from the shock, and partly from the want of vigour of the tropical constitution: and he still seemed to be a great way from walking, though there was no reason to fear that the power would not return. His father wrote, preparing for a journey to Oregon, and seemed perfectly satisfied, and he was becoming very much at home with his host.

He was much interested in that which he was learning from Mr. Audley, and imbibing from the young Underwoods. The wandering life he had hitherto led, without any tenderness save from the poor old negro, without time to make friends, and often exposed to the perception of some of the darkest sides of human life, in the terrible lawlessness of the Mexican frontier, had hitherto made him dull, dreary, and indifferent, with little perception that there could be anything better; but first the kindness and then the faith he saw at Bexley, had awakened new perceptions and sensations. His whole soul was opening to perceive what the love of God and man might be; and the sense of a great void, and longing to have it satisfied, seemed to fill him with a constant craving for the revelation of that inner world, whose existence had just dawned upon him.

After a little hesitation, Mr. Audley decided on reading with Geraldine in his presence after he had come into the sitting-room, explaining to her how he thought it might be helpful. She did not much like it, but acquiesced: she used to hop in with her sweet smile, shy greeting, and hand extended to the invalid, who used to lie looking at her through his long eyelashes, and listening to her low voice reading or answering, as if she were no earthly creature; but the two were far too much in awe of one another to go any farther; and he got on much better with Wilmet, when she looked in on him now and then with cheery voice and good-natured care.

Then Fulbert and Robina came home; and the former was half suspicious, half jealous, of Lance's preoccupation with what he chose to denominate 'a black Yankee nigger.' He avoided the room himself, and kept Lance from it as much as was in his power; and one day Lance appeared with a black eye, of which he concealed the cause so entirely, that Felix, always afraid of his gamin tendencies, entreated Fulbert, as a friend, to ease his mind by telling him it was not given in a street row.

'I did it,' said Fulbert; 'he was so cocky about his Yankee that I could not stand it.'

'Why shouldn't he be kind to a poor sick fellow?'

'He has no business to be always bothering about Fernando here-- Fernando there--Fernando for ever. I shall have him coming up to school a regular spoon, and just not know what to do with him.'

'Well, Fulbert, I think if you had a broken leg you'd wish some one to speak to you. At any rate, I can't have Lance bullied for his good

nature; I was very near doing it myself once, but I was shamed out of it.'

'Were you--were you, indeed?' cried Fulbert, delighted at this confession of human nature; and Felix could not help laughing. And that laugh did much to bring him down from the don to the brother. At any rate, Fulbert ceased his persecution in aught but word.

Robina, always Lance's companion, followed him devotedly, and only hung about the stairs forlorn when he went to Fernando without her; or if admitted, she was quite content to sit serenely happy in her beloved Lance's presence, expecting neither notice nor amusement, only watching their occupation of playing at draughts. Sometimes, however, Lance would fall to playing with her, and they would roll on the floor, a tumbling mass of legs, arms, and laughter, to the intense diversion of Fernando, to whom little girls were beings of an unknown order.

So came on Christmas, with the anniversaries so sweet and so sad, and the eve of holly-dressing, when a bundle of bright sprays was left by some kind friend at No. 8, and Lance and Bobbie were vehement to introduce Fernando to English holly and English decking.

Geraldine suggested that they had better wait for either Mr. Audley or Wilmet to come in, but for this they had no patience, and ran down with their arms full of the branches, and their tongues going with the description of the night's carols, singing them with their sweet young voices as they moved about the room. Fernando knew now what Christmas meant, but the joy and exhilaration of the two children, seemed to him strange for such a bygone event. He asked them if they would have any treat.

'Oh no! except, perhaps, Mr. Audley said he should drink tea one day,' said Robina. And then she broke out again, 'Hark! the herald angels,' like a little silver bell.

Suddenly there was a cry of dismay. She had been standing on a chair over the mantelpiece, sticking holly into the ornaments, behind and under which, in true man's fashion, a good many papers and letters had accumulated. One of these papers--by some unlucky movement--fell, and by a sudden waft of air floated irrevocably into the hottest place in the fire.

'O dear! oh dear!' wailed Robina.

'That's a pretty go,' cried Lancelot.

'That comes of your open fires,' observed Fernando.

'What was it?' asked Lance.

'I don't know. I think it was a list of names! Oh! how vexed he'll be, and Wilmet; for she told me never to get on a chair over the

fender, and I forgot.' Bobbie's round face was puckering for a cry.

'No, no, don't cry, Bob; I told you to get up, and I'll say so,' said Lance, smothering her in his arms after the wont of consoling brothers.

'I dare say he'll not miss it,' said Fernando good-naturedly; 'he very seldom meddles with those things.'

Bobbie's great round gray eyes came out over Lance's shoulder, and flashed amazement and wrath at him. 'I'm not going to tell stories,' she said stoutly.

'No,' said Lance, equally scandalised; 'I thought you had learnt better, Fernando.'

Robina, be it observed, was ignorant of Fernando's untaught state.

'I only said you could hold your tongue,' was of course Fernando's rejoinder.

'That's just as bad,' was the little girl's response.

'But, Lance, you held your tongue about your black eye.'

'That's my affair, and _nobody else's_, ' said Lance, flushing up and looking cross at the allusion.

'And Fulbert told!' added Robina.

'Will they punish you?' asked Fernando.

'I think Wilmet will, because it was disobedience! I don't think she'll let me have any butter at tea,' Bobbie nearly sobbed. 'Mr. Audley won't punish! But he'll look--' and she quite cried now.

'And do you like that better than not telling?' said Fernando, still curious.

She looked up, amazed again. 'I must! I don't like it! But I couldn't ever have a happy Christmas if I didn't tell! I wish they would come that I might have it over.'

The street door opened at the moment, and Mr. Audley and Wilmet came in together from Lady Price's convocation of the parish staff.

Fernando heard the sobbing confession in the passage, and Lance's assurance that he had been art and part in the disobedience, and Wilmet gravely blaming the child, and Mr. Audley telling her not to think so much about the loss as the transgression; and then the door was shut, and he heard no more, till Mr. Audley came in, examined the chimney-piece, and performed the elegy of the list in a long low whistle.

'Is much harm done?' Fernando asked.

'Not much; only I must go and get another list made out, and I am afraid I shall not be able to come in again before church.'

'I hope they have not punished her?'

'Wilmet recommended not taking the prize prayer-book to church, and she acquiesced with tears in her eyes. A good child's repentance is a beautiful thing--

"O happy in repentance' school
So early taught and tried."

These last words were said to himself as he picked up his various goods, and added, 'I must get some tea at the Rectory. I am sorry to leave you, but I hope one of them will come down.'

They did not, except that they peeped in for a moment to wish him good-night, and regretted that they had not known him to be alone.

As Felix was going out to begin the Christmas Feast in the darkness of morning, he looked in as he usually did, since Mr. Audley, sleeping out of the house, never came in till after early church. The nurse, who still slept in the room, was gone to dress; there was only a flickering night-light, and the room looked very desolate and forlorn, still more so the voice that called out to him, 'Felix! oh, Felix! is that you?'

'Yes. A happy Christmas to you,' said Felix.

'Happy--! there was a sort of groan.

'Why, what's the matter? have you had a bad night? Aren't you so well?'

'I don't know. Come here, I must speak to you.'

Felix was, as usual, in a great haste, but the tone startled him.

'Felix, I can't stand this any longer. I must let you know what a frightful, intolerable wretch I've been. I tried to teach Lance to bet.'

'Fernando!' He was so choked with indignation, he could not say more.

'He wouldn't do it. Not after he understood it. It seems he tried it with another little boy at school, and one of the bigger ones boxed his ears and rowed him.'

'Ay; Bruce promised me to look after him.'

'So he refused. He told me he was on his honour to you not to stay if I did anything your father would have disapproved. He did leave me once, when I would not leave off.'

'But how could you?'

'I was so bored--so intolerably dull--and it is the only thing on earth that one cares to do.'

'But Lance had nothing to stake.'

'I could lend him! Ah! you don't know what betting is; why, we all do it--women, boys and all!' His voice became excited, and Felix in consternation broke in--'When did you do this?'

'Oh! weeks ago. Before I was out of bed. When I found my dice in my purse; but I have not tried it since, with him!'

'With whom, then?'

'Why--don't fall on him--with Fulbert. He knew what it meant. Now, Felix, don't come on him for it. Come on me as much as you please. I've been a traitor to you. I see it now.'

'Anything but that!' sighed Felix, too much appalled for immediate forgiving, dejected as was the voice that spoke to him.

'Yes, yes, I know! I see. The worst thing I could do,' said Fernando, turning his face in on the pillow, in so broken-hearted a manner that Felix's kindness and generosity were roused.

'Stay, don't be so downcast,' he said. 'There's no harm done with Lance, and you being so sorry will undo it with Fulbert! I do thank you for telling me, _really_, only it upset me at first.'

'Upset! Yes, you'll be more so when you hear the rest,' said Fernando, raising his head again. 'Do you know who set that inn on fire?'

'Nobody does.'

'Well, I did.'

'Nonsense! You've had a bad night! You don't know what you are talking about,' said Felix, anxiously laying hold of one of the hot hands--perceiving that his own Christmas Day must begin with mercy, not sacrifice, and beginning to hope the first self-accusation was also delirious.

'Tell me. Didn't the fire begin in the ball-room? Somebody told me so.'

'Yes, the waiter saw it there.'

'Then I did it; I threw the end of a cigar among the flummery in the grate,' cried Fernando, falling back from the attitude into which he had raised himself, with a gesture of despair.

'Nobody can blame you.'

'Stay. It was after father and uncle had gone! I was smoking at the window of our room, and the landlord came in and ordered me not, because some ladies in the next room objected. He told me I might come down to the coffee-room; but I had never heard of such meddling, and I jawed him well; but he made me give in somehow. Only when I saw that big ball-room all along the side of the building, I just took a turn in it with my cigar to spite him. Poor Diego came up and begged me not, but you know the way one does with a nigger. Oh!'

Felix did not know; but the voice broke down in such misery and horror, that his soul seemed to sink within him. 'Have you had this on your mind all this time?' he asked kindly.

'No, no. It didn't come to me. I think I've been a block or a stone. The dear faithful fellow, that loved me as no one ever did. I've been feeling the kiss he gave me at the window all to-night. And then I've been falling--falling--falling in his black arms--down--down to hell itself. Not that he is there; but I murdered him, you know--and some one else besides, wasn't there?'

'This is like delirium, really, Fernando,' said Felix, putting his arms round him to lay him down, as he raised himself on his elbow. 'I must call some one if you seem so ill.'

'I wish it was illness,' said Fernando with a shudder. 'Oh! don't go--don't let me go--if you can bear to touch me--when you know all!'

'There can't be any worse to know. You had better not talk.'

'I must! I must tell you all I really am, though you will never let your brothers come near me, or the little angels--your sisters. I'd not have dared look at them myself if I had known it, but things never seemed so to me before.'

Felix shivered at the thought of what he was to hear, but he gave himself up to listen kindly, and to his relief he gathered from the incoherent words that there was no great stain of crime, as he had feared; but that the boy had come to open his eyes to the evils of the life in which he had shared according to his age, and saw them in their foulness, and with an agonised sense of shame and pollution. Felix could not help asking whether this had long dwelt on his thoughts.

'No,' he said, 'that's the wonder! I thought myself a nice, gentlemanly, honourable fellow. Oh!' with a groan. 'Fancy that! I

never thought of recollecting these things, or what they have made me. Only, somehow, when those children seemed so shocked at my advising them to hold their tongues about their bit of mischief--I thought first what fools you all were to be so scrupulous, and then I recollected the lots of things I have concealed, till I began to think, Is this honour--would it seem so to Lance--or Felix? And then came down on me the thought of what you believe, of God seeing it all, and laying it up against one for judgment; and I know--I know it is true!' and there came another heavy groan, and the great eyes shone in the twilight in terror.

'If you know that is true,' said Felix, steadfastly and tenderly, 'you know something else too. You know Whom He sent into the world for our pardon for these things.'

There was a tightening of the grasp as if in acquiescence and comfort; but the nurse came back to tidy the room, and still Fernando clung to Felix, and would not let him go. She opened the shutters, and then both she and Felix were dismayed to see how ill and spent her patient looked; for she had slept soundly through his night of silent anguish and remorse--misery that, as Felix saw by his face, was pressing on him still with intolerable weight.

By the time the woman had finished Mr. Audley came in, and seeing at once that Felix's absence was accounted for by Fernando's appearance, he stepped up at once to the bed, full of solicitude. Felix hardly knew whether to reply or escape; but Fernando's heart was too full for his words not to come at once.

'No, I am not worse, but I see it all now.--Tell him, Felix; I cannot say it again.'

'Fernando thinks--' Felix found he could hardly speak the words either--'Fernando is afraid that it was an accident of his own--'

'Don't say an accident. It was passion and spite,' broke in Fernando.

'That caused the fire at the Fortinbras Arms,' Felix was obliged to finish.

'Not on purpose!' exclaimed Mr. Audley.

'Almost as much as if it had been,' said Fernando. 'I smoked to spite the landlord for interfering, and threw away the end too angry to heed where. There!' he added grimly; 'Felix won't tell me how many I murdered besides my poor old black. How many?'

'Do not speak in that way, my poor boy,' said Mr. Audley. At least, this is better than the weight you have had on your mind so long.'

'How many?' repeated Fernando.

'Two more lives were lost,' said Mr. Audley gently, 'Mr. Jones's baby

and its nurse. But you must not use harder words than are just, Fernando. It was a terrible result, but consequences do not make the evil.'

He made a kind of murmur, then turning round, uneasily said, 'That is not all; I have seen myself, Mr. Audley.'

Mr. Audley looked at Felix, who spoke with some difficulty and perplexity. 'He has been very unhappy all night. He thinks things wrong that he never thought about before.'

Mr. Audley felt exceedingly hopeful at those words; but he was alarmed at the physical effect on his patient, and felt that the present excitement was mischievous. 'I understand in part,' he said. 'But it seems to me that he is too restless and uncomfortable to think or understand now. It may be that he may yet see the joy of to-day; but no more talk now. Have you had your breakfast?'

He shook his head, but Felix had to go away, and breakfast and dressing restored Fernando to a more tranquil state. He slept, too, wearied out, when he was placed on his couch, while Felix was at Christmas service, singing, as he had never sung before,--

'Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.'

Oh! was the poor young stranger seeing the way to that reconciliation? and when Lancelot's sweet clear young notes rose up in all their purity, and the rosy honest face looked upwards with an expression elevated by the music, Felix could not help thinking that the boy had verily sung those words of truth and hope into the poor dark lonely heart. Kindness, steadfastness, truth, in that merry-hearted child had been doing their work, and when Lance marched away with the other lesser choristers, the elder brother felt as if the younger had been the more worthy to 'draw near in faith.'

Fernando was more like himself when Felix came in, but he was a good deal shaken, and listened to the conventional Christmas greeting like mockery, shrinking from the sisters, when they looked in on him, with what they thought a fresh access of shyness, but which was a feeling of terrible shame beside the innocence he ascribed to them.

'I wish I could help that poor boy,' sighed Wilmet. 'He does look so very miserable!'

And Geraldine's eyes swam in tears as she thought of the loneliness of his Christmas, and without that Christmas joy that even her mother's dulled spirit could feel--the joy that bore them through the recollections of this time last year.

Lance's desire to cheer took the more material form of acting as

Fernando's special waiter at the consumption of the turkey, which Mr. Audley had insisted on having from home, and eating in company with the rest, to whom it was a 'new experience,' being only a faint remembrance even to Felix and Wilmet; but Fernando had no appetite, and even the sight of his little friend gave him a pang.

'Do you want any one to stay with you!' asked Lance. 'If Cherry _would_ do--for Felix said he would take Fulbert and me out for a jolly long walk, to see the icicles at Bold's Hatch.'

'No, I want no one. You are better without me.'

'I'll stay if you do want it,' said Lance, very reluctantly. 'I don't like your not having one bit of Christmas. Shall I sing you one Christmas hymn before I go?' And Lance broke into the 'Herald Angels' again.

'Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die;
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.'

Fernando's face was bathed in tears; he held out his arms, and to little Lance's great amazement, somewhat to his vexation, he held him fast and kissed him.

'What did you do that for?' he asked in a gruff astonished voice.

'Never mind!' said Fernando. 'Only I think I see what this day can be! Now go.'

Presently Mr. Audley came softly in. The lad's face was turned in to his cushion, his handkerchief over it; and as the young priest stood watching him, what could be done but pray for the poor struggling soul? At last he turned round, and looked up.

'I saw it again,' he said with a sigh.

'Saw what!'

'What you all mean. It touched me, and seemed true and real when Lance was singing. What was it--"Born to save the sons of earth"? Oh! but such as I am, and at my age, too!'

And with a few words from Mr. Audley, there came such a disburthening of self-accusation as before to Felix. It seemed as if the terrible effects of his wilfulness at the inn--horrified as he was at them--were less oppressive to his conscience than his treachery to his host in his endeavour to gamble with the little boys. He had found a pair of dice in his purse when looking for the price of a Bible, and the sight had awakened the vehement hereditary Mexican passion for

betting, the bane of his mother's race. His father, as a clever man of the world, hated and prohibited the practice; but Fernando had what could easily become a frenzy for that excitement of the lazy south, and even while he had seen it in its consequences, the intense craving for the amusement had mastered him more than once, when loathing the dulness and weariness of his confinement, and shrinking from the doctrines he feared to accept. He knew it was dishonourable--yet he had given way; and he felt like one utterly stained, unpardonable, hopeless: but there was less exaggeration in his state of mind than in the early morning, and when Mr. Audley dwelt on the Hope of sinners, his eyes glistened and brightened; and at the further words that held out to him the assurance that all these sins might be washed away, and he himself enabled to begin a new life, his looks shone responsively; but he shook his head soon--'It went away from him,' he said; poor boy! 'it was too great and good to be true.'

Then Mr. Audley put prayer before him as a means of clinging even blindly to the Cross that he was barely beginning to grasp, and the boy promised. He would do anything they would, could he but hope to be freed from the horrible weight of sense of hopeless pollution that had come upon him.

For some days he did not seem able to read anything but the Gospels and the Baptismal Service; and at length, after a long silence, he said, 'Mr. Audley, if your sermon is finished, can you listen to me? May I be baptized?'

Then indeed the Curate's heart bounded, but he had to keep himself restrained. The father's consent he had secured beforehand, but he thought Fernando ought to write to him; and it was also needful to consult the Rector as to the length of actual preparation and probation.

Then, when the question came, 'Can I indeed be like Felix and Lancelot' the reply had to be cautious. 'You will be as entirely pardoned, as entirely belonging to the holiness within and without, as they; but how far you will have the consciousness, I cannot tell; and it is very probable that your temptations may be harder. Guilt may be forgiven, while habits retain their power; and they have been guarded, taught self-restraint, and had an example before them in their father, such as very few have been blessed with.'

Fernando sighed long and sadly, and said, 'Then you do not think it will make much difference.'

'The difference between life and death! But you must expect to have to believe rather than feel. But go on, and it will all be clear.'

The Rector was at first anxious to wait for definite sanction from the father; but as Mr. Audley was sure of the permission he had received, and no letter could be had for several months, he agreed to examine the lad, and write to the Bishop--a new Bishop--a new Bishop, who had been appointed within the last year, and who was coming in the spring for

a Confirmation.

Mr. Bevan was really delighted with the catechumen, and wrote warmly of him. The reply was, that if the Baptism could take place the day before the Confirmation, which was to be in a month's time, the Bishop himself would like to be present, and the youth could be confirmed the next day. There was much that was convenient in this, for it gave time for Fernando to make progress in moving about. He had made a start within the last week or two, was trying to use crutches, and had been out on fine days in a chair; and once or twice Lady Price had taken him for a drive, though she had never thought of doing so by Geraldine. The doctor said that change of air would probably quite restore his health; and he had only to wait to be a little less dependent before he was to go to a tutor, an old friend of the Audley family.

Everything promised well; but one wet afternoon, in the interim between the end of Lance's and that of Fulbert's holidays, Mr. Audley, while coming down from a visit to Mrs. Underwood, fancied he heard an ominous rattle, and opening the door suddenly, found Fernando and Fulbert eagerly throwing the dice and with several shillings before them.

Both started violently as he entered, and Fulbert put his arm and hand round as if to hide the whole affair; while Fernando tried to look composed.

All that the Curate said in his surprise was one sharp sentence. 'Fernando Travis, if you are to renounce the devil, you will have to begin by throwing those dice into the fire.'

Fernando's eyes looked furious, and he swept the dice and the money into his pocket--all but three shillings. Fulbert stole out of the room quietly. No doubt these were his winnings, which he did not dare to touch.

Mr. Audley took up a book and waited, fully expecting that sorrow would follow; but Fernando did not speak; and when at length he did on some indifferent matter, it was in his ordinary tone. Well, there must be patience. No doubt repentance would come at night! No; the evening passed on, and Fernando was ready for all their usual occupations. Perhaps it would come with Felix, or in the dawn after a troubled night. Alas! no. And moreover, Felix, to whom it was necessary to speak, was exceedingly angry and vexed, and utterly incredulous of there being any good in the character that could be so fickle, if not deceitful and hypocritical. His own resolute temper had no power of comprehending the unmanliness of erring against the better will; he was absolutely incapable of understanding the horrible lassitude and craving for excitement that must have tempted Fernando, and he was hard and even ashamed of himself for having ever believed in the lad's sincerity.

This anger, too, made him speak with such a threatening tone to

Fulbert as to rouse the doggedness of the boy's nature. All that could be got out of Fulbert was that 'his going there was all Felix's doing,' and he would not manifest any sign of regret, such as would be any security against his introducing the practice among the clergy orphans, or continuing it all his life. He was not a boy given to confidences, and neither Wilmet nor Cherry could get him beyond his glum declaration that it was Felix's fault, he only wanted to keep out of the fellow's way. They could only take comfort in believing that he was really ashamed, and that he suffered enough within to be a warning against the vice itself.

As to Fernando, he made no sign, he went on as if nothing had happened; and nothing was observable about him, but that he showed himself intensely weary of his present mode of life, put on at times the manners that were either those of the Spanish Don or of the Indian Cacique, and seemed to shrink from the prospect of the English tutor. Yet he continued his preparation for baptism, and Mr. Bevan was satisfied with him; but Mr. Audley was perplexed and unhappy over the reserve that had sprung up between them, and could not decide whether to make another attempt or leave the lad to himself.

One afternoon, only ten days from the time fixed for the Bishop's visit, Mr. Audley returned from a clerical meeting to find an unexpected visitor in the room--namely, Alfred Travis, Fernando's uncle, a more Americanised and rougher person than his brother. He rose as he entered. 'Good morning, Mr. Audley; you have taken good care of your charge. He is fit to start with me to-morrow. See a surgeon in town--then to Liverpool--'

'Indeed!' Mr. Audley caught a deprecating look from Fernando. 'Do you come from his father?'

'Well--yes and no. His father is still in the Oregon; but he and I have always been one--and opening the boy's letters, and finding him ready to move, I thought, as I had business in England, I'd come and fetch him, and just settle any claim the fellow at yonder hotel may have cheek enough to set up, since Fernan was green enough to let it out.'

'May I ask if you have any authority from his father?'

'Authority! Bless you! William will be glad to see his boy; we don't go by authority between brothers.'

'Because,' continued Mr. Audley, 'I heard from your brother that he wished Fernando to remain with me to receive an English education.'

'All sentiment and stuff! He knew better before we had sailed! An English squire in this wretched old country, forsooth! when the new republic is before him! No, no, Mr. Audley, I'll be open with you. I saw what you were up to when I got your letter, and Fernan--Got his lesson very well, he had. And when I came down, a friend in London gave me another hint. It won't do, I can assure you. That style of

thing is all very well for you spruce parsons of good family, as you call it in the old country; but we are not going to have a rising young fellow like this, with a prospect of what would buy out all your squires and baronets in the old country, beslobbered and befooled with a lot of Puseyite cant. You've had your turn of him; it is time he should come and be a man again.'

Mr. Audley was dizzy with consternation. Fernando was no child. He was full sixteen, and he was so far recovered that his health formed no reason for detaining him. If he chose to go with his uncle, he _must_. If not--what then? He looked at Fernando, who sat uneasily.

'You hear what your uncle says?' he asked.

'I told him,' said Fernando, 'I must wait for a fortnight.' He spoke with eyes cast down, but not irresolutely.

His uncle broke out--He knew what that meant; it was only that he might be flattered by the Bishop and all the ladies, and made a greater fool of than ever. No, no, he must be out again by May, and he should just have time to take Fernan to one of the gay boarding-houses at Saratoga, and leave him there to enjoy himself.

'I have letters from my father,' said Fernando, looking up to Mr. Audley, 'before he went to Oregon. He said nothing.'

'Do you wish to stay?' said Mr. Audley, feeling that all depended on that, and trying to hide the whirl of anxiety and disappointment he felt.

The answer was not what he expected. Fernando sat upright in his chair, looked up to him and then at his uncle, and said low but resolutely, 'I will stay.'

'Then you shall stay,' said Mr. Audley.

'You have worked upon him, I see, sir, with your old-world prejudiced superstition,' said Alfred Travis, evidently under the delusion that he was keeping his temper. 'A proper fool my brother was to leave him to you. But you do it at your peril. I shall see if there's power even in this old country to keep a boy from his own relations. You'll see me again, Fernan. You had better make ready.'

The words were not unaccompanied with expletives such as had never been personally uttered to Charles Audley before, and that brought the hot colour to his cheek. When he looked round, Fernando's face was covered with his hands. 'Oh! Mr. Audley,' he cried, as his uncle hastily shut the door, 'is he going to send for the police?'

'I do not believe he can do any such thing,' said Mr. Audley, seeing that Fernando was in great nervous agitation. 'I have authority from your father, he has none; and you are old enough to make your own decision. You really mean and wish to stay?' he added.

'I told him so from the first,' said Fernando.

'Then he has no power to force you away.'

Fernando was silent. Then he said, 'If I could have gone after my Baptism.'

'Would you have wished that?' said Mr. Audley, somewhat disappointed.

The tears were now on the long black lashes.

'Oh, don't think me ungrateful, or-- But this English life does come over me as intolerably dull and slow. No life nor go in it. Sometimes I feel sick of it; and going back to books and all, after what I have been used to. If my uncle could wait for my Baptism, or,' more hesitating, 'if I could be baptized at once. Men do lead Christian lives out there. I would try to keep from evil, Mr. Audley. I see your face! Is this another temptation of the devil?'

'I think it is an attempt of his,' said Mr. Audley, sadly. 'Even here you have not been able to abstain entirely from giving way to your old passion, when you had little temptation, and felt your honour bound. What will it be when you have comparatively no restraint?'

'I am resolved not to go unbaptized,' said Fernando. 'I said so from the first, but he will not wait! Yet if my father sends for me, I must go.'

'Then it will be your duty, and you will have more right to look for help. Besides, a summons from your father could not come for three or four months, and in that time you would have had time to gain something in Christian practice and training.'

'Oh, there is the bell! Must you go, Mr. Audley? He will come back!'

'I wish I could stay, but Smith is gone to Dearport, and I do not know whether the Rector is in. Besides, this must be your own doing, Fernan, not mine. I shall pray for you, that you well know. Pray for yourself, for this is a real crisis of life. God bless you, my dear boy.' He laid his hand on the head, and Fernando looked up gratefully, then said, 'You never did that before. May Lance come to me, if he has not gone?'

'I will call him,' said Mr. Audley, seeing that he really dreaded being alone. The little boy was on the stairs with something in his hand. 'Go in to Fernan,' he was told, 'he wants you. What have you got there?'

'This queer drawing. Cherry found it in an old portfolio, and has been copying it.'

It was Ketzsch's outline of the chess-player, and it almost startled

Mr. Audley by its appropriateness. He went out to Evensong, and never was more glad to get back to reinforce the feeble garrison.

Lance opened the front door to him. 'I'm so glad you are come!' he said. 'Mr. Bruce is there.'

'Not the uncle?'

'No, only Mr. Bruce.'

Mr. Bruce was a lawyer, and a very respectable man, in whom Mr. Audley felt confidence. He rose at the clergyman's entrance, and asked to speak to him in another room, so he was taken into the little back dining-room, and began--'This is a very unpleasant business, Mr. Audley; this gentleman is very much annoyed, and persuaded that he has a right to carry off his nephew; but as I told him, it all turns upon the father's expressions. Have you any written authority from him?'

Mr. Audley had more than one letter, thanking him, and expressing full satisfaction in the proposed arrangements for Fernando; and this Mr. Bruce thought was full justification, together with the youth's own decided wishes. The words were likewise clear, by which William Travis had given consent to his son's Baptism, but there was no witness of them. Mr. Bruce explained that Alfred Travis, who seemed to regard Fernando as the common property of the brothers, had come to him in what he gently termed 'a great state of excitement,' complaining of a Puseyite plot. He had evidently taken umbrage at the tone of the letters he had opened for his brother, and had been further prejudiced by some Dearport timber merchant he had met at Liverpool, who had told him how the parson had got hold of his nephew, and related a farrago of gossip about St. Oswald's. He was furious at the opposition, and could not understand that law in the old country was powerless in this case, because he was neither father nor guardian. In fact he seemed to be master of his brother; and Mr. Bruce told Mr. Audley that it was quite to be considered whether though law was on his side now, the father might not be brought over to the brother's side, be very angry at the detention of the boy, and refuse the payment, which, while he was in America, could not be forced from him. Of that Mr. Audley could happily afford to run the risk; and Mr. Bruce said he had also set before the young gentleman that he might have to suffer much displeasure from his father for his present refusal, although his right to make it was incontestable. To this Fernando had likewise made up his mind; and Mr. Bruce, who had never seen him before, thought he looked utterly unfit for a long journey and sea voyage, so that the uncle had taken nothing by his application to the law.

Fernando was flushed and panting, but more resolute, for resentment at the attempt at force had come to back him up, and rouse the spirit of resistance. Not half an hour had elapsed before there was another ring at the door. The uncle and lawyer were come together now. It was to make a last offer to Fernando; Mr. Alfred Travis offered to take

him up to London the next day, and there to have advice as to the safety of the voyage, in the meantime letting him be baptized, if nothing else would satisfy him, but by some London clergyman--not one of the Bexley set whom the uncle regarded with such aversion.

Fernando drew himself up, and stood, leaning on the end of the sofa. 'Thank you, uncle,' he said, 'I cannot. I am obeying my father now, and I will not leave those to whom he trusted me.'

There followed a volley of abuse of his English obstinacy and Spanish pride and canting conceit, which made Mr. Bruce stand aghast, and Fernando look up with burning cheeks and eyes glowing like hot coals; but with the Indian impassibility he did not speak till Alfred Travis had threatened him not only with his father's displeasure, but with being cast off by both, and left to his English friends' charity.

'My father will not!' said Fernando. 'If he sends for me I will come.' But there his strength suddenly collapsed, and he was forced to sit down and lean back.

'Well, Fernan,' said his uncle, suddenly withdrawing his attempt when he found it vain, 'you seem hardly in marching order, so I'm off by the night train; but if you change your mind in the next week, write to me at Peter Brown's--you know--and I'll run down. I will save you the coming out by yourself. Good-bye.'

Mr. Bruce tarried one moment to aver that he was unprepared for his client's violence, and that he thought the nephew had done quite right.

The door was shut, and Mr. Audley came back holding out his hand, but Fernando did not take it. He was occupied in supporting himself by the furniture from the sofa to the fireplace, where, holding by the mantelpiece with one hand, he took his dice from his pocket with the other, and threw them into the reddest depth. Then he held the hand to Mr. Audley, who wrung it, and said, 'It has been a hard fight, my boy.'

Fernando laid his weary head on his shoulder, and said, 'If my father is not poisoned against me!'

'Do not fear that, Fernando. You are where he left you. You have given up something for the sake of your new Lord and Master; you will have his armour another time.'

Fernando let himself be helped to sit down, and sighed. He was thoroughly worn out, and his victory was not such as to enliven his spirits. He took up the drawing that lay on the table, and gazed on it in a sort of dreamy fascination.

'You have checked him this time,' said Mr. Audley.

'Here or there, I will never bet again,' said Fernan solemnly.

'God help me to keep the resolution! It is the one thing that I care for, and I know I should have begun the first day I was away from you.'

'I think that with those tastes you cannot make too strong a resolution against it,' said Mr. Audley.

Their dinner was brought in, but Fernando had no appetite. He soon returned to his chess player, and seemed to be playing over the game, but he was too much tired for talk, and soon went to bed; where after a short sleep feverishness set in, bringing something approaching to delirium. The nurse had gone a fortnight previously; but as he was still too helpless to have no one within call, Felix slept on the bed in the corner of the room.

When he came down the opening of the door was greeted by 'Don't let him come! Is Mr. Audley there!'

'Yes, he is not gone.'

Then he knew Felix, but soon began again to talk of the game at chess, evidently mixing up his uncle with the personage with the long feather.

'He has been checked once. I've taken one piece of his. He is gone now. Will he come back after my Baptism? No; I shall go to him.'

This lasted till past midnight, when, as they were deliberating whether to send for Mr. Rugg, he fell soundly asleep, and awoke in the morning depressed, but composed and peaceful; and this state of things continued. The encounter with his uncle, and the deliberate choice, had apparently given some shock to his nerves; and whenever night recurred, there came two or three hours of misery, and apparently of temptation and terror. It took different forms. Sometimes it was half in sleep--the acting over again of one or two horrible scenes that he had partly witnessed in the Southern States, when an emancipator had been hunted down, and the slaves who had listened to him savagely punished. In spite of his Spanish blood, the horror had been ineffaceable; and his imagination connected it with the crowd of terrors that had revealed themselves to his awakened conscience. He seemed to think that if he lost in the awful game of life, he should be handed over to that terrible slave-master; and there were times when Diego's fate, and his own lapses, so fastened on his mind, as to make him despair of ever being allowed to quit that slave-master's dominions; and that again joined with alarm lest his uncle should return and claim him.

Sometimes, likewise, the old wandering life, with the flashes of rollicking mirth and excitement, rather glimpsed at and looked forward to than really tasted, would become so alluring a contrast to the flat and tasteless--nay, as it seemed to him, tedious and toilsome--future sketched out for him, and the restraints and

constant watchfulness of a Christians life appeared so distressing a bondage, that his soul seemed to revolt against it, and he would talk of following his uncle at once to London while yet it was time, and writing to him the next morning. This state was sure to be followed by a passion of remorse, and sheer delirious terror lest he should be given up to the enemy, who seemed now to assume to his fancy the form of his uncle. A great deal was no doubt delirious, and this betrayed the struggles which he had been for weeks fighting out in silence and apparent impassiveness; but it was impossible not to feel that therewith was manifested the wrestling with the Prince of Darkness, ere his subject should escape from his territory, and claim the ransom of his manumission. Mr. Audley--after the second night--would not let Felix remain, but took the watch entirely on himself, and fought the battle with the foe by prayer and psalm. Sleep used to come before morning; and by day Fernando was himself again, very subdued and quiet, and, in fact, having lost a good deal of ground as to health.

Strange to say, the greatest pleasure he had at this time was sitting in the upstairs parlour. The custom had begun in consequence of his nervous shuddering at being left alone lest his uncle should return, and Felix and Geraldine had then proposed taking him to their mother, who was rather interested than annoyed by his presence, and indeed all her gentle motherly instinct was drawn out by his feebleness and lameness; she talked to him kindly and quite rationally, and he was wonderfully impressed and soothed by her tenderness. It was so utterly unlike anything he had ever even seen, that he watched her with a sort of awe; while Cherry worked, read aloud, or drew, and felt proud of being able to fetch what was beyond the capacity of her little errand boy, Bernard.

The children, too, entertained him; he was a little afraid of Bernard's roughness, but delighted in watching him, and he and little Stella were intensely admiring friends. She always knew him, cooed at him, and preferred the gold of his watch-chain to all things in nature or art. Then when Wilmet, Angela, and Lance came home, and family chatter began, the weary anxious brain rested; and even in that room, so sad to most eyes, Fernando began to realise what Christian peace and cheerfulness could be.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HOME

'Within those walls each fluttering guest
Is gently lured to one safe nest;
Without, 'tis moaning and unrest.'

KEBLE.

A great delight came to Wilmet and Geraldine the day of the Bishop's visit, no other than Alda's being able to spend a week with them. Miss Pearson spared Wilmet that whole afternoon, that she might go up to meet her at the station, whither she was escorted by a maid going down to Centry.

There she was, in her pretty black silk, with violet trimmings, looking thoroughly the grown young lady, but clinging tight to her twin in an overflow of confused happiness, even while they stood together to get their first glance of the Bishop, who came down by the same train, and was met by Mr. Bevan with the carriage.

'I'm glad it is so nice and warm; it is better for Fernan, and Cherry can go!' said Wilmet, ready for joy about everything.

'Nice and warm! 'Tis much colder than in London,' said Alda, with a shiver. 'Has Cherry kept well this winter?'

'Quite well. She walks much better. And Marilda?'

'Oh, Marilda is always well. Rude health, her mother calls it. What do you think she has sent you, Wilmet? A darling little watch! just like this one of mine!'

'O Alda, you should not have let her. It is too much. Fernan wanted to give Lance a watch, but Felix would not let him.'

'Yes, but he is not like Uncle Thomas, and it makes you like me.'

'That we shall never be quite again,' sighed Wilmet.

'Oh! a little setting off, and trimming up! I've brought down lots of things. Aunt Mary said I might. What is this youth like, Wilmet--is he a boy or a young man?'

'I don't know,' said Wilmet; 'he is younger than Felix, if that helps you.'

'Well, Americans are old of their age. I have met some at Mr. Roper's. Oh, and do you know, Mrs. Roper told Aunt Mary that these Traveses are quite millionaires, and that this youth's mother was a prodigious Mexican heiress. Aunt Mary wants to ask him to Kensington Palace Gardens, when he comes up to town! I'm glad I am in time for the christening. Doesn't he have godfathers and godmothers?'

'Yes; he would have nobody but Felix and Mr. Audley, and Lady Price chose to be his godmother; indeed, there was nobody else.'

'You could not well be, certainly,' laughed Alda. 'Oh! and I've brought a dress down. I thought some of us might be asked to the Rectory in the evening.'

'My dear Alda, as if such a thing ever happened!'

'Ah! you see I have been so long away as to forget my Lady's manners.'

'Mr. Audley is going, and Fernan was asked, but he is not anything like well enough. So when Mamma and the little ones go to bed, we are to come down and spend the evening with him.'

'Fancy, Wilmet, I have quite been preparing Marilda for her Confirmation. She had hardly been taught anything, and never could have answered the questions if she had not come to me. She is always asking me what Papa said about this and that; and it is quite awkward, she will carry out everything so literally, poor dear girl.'

'She must be very good.'

'Oh! to be sure she is! But just fancy, she keeps a tithe of her pocket-money to give to the Offertory so scrupulously; she would really not buy something she wanted because it would have been just a shilling into her tenth. I'm so glad she is confirmed. I never knew what to do at church before. I couldn't go home by myself, and now a servant always waits for us. Oh! how fast the poor hotel is building again! It will brighten our street a little! Dear me, I did not know how dingy it was!'

Nothing could look dingy where two such fair bright faces were; but Alda's became awe-struck and anxious as she went up to her mother's room. Indeed Mrs. Underwood looked up at her rather confused, and scarcely knowing the fashionable young lady, and it was only when the plumed hat was laid aside, and the two heads laid together, their fair locks mingling, that she knew she had her elder twins again, and stroked their faces with quiet delight.

There was scarcely more than time to kiss the little ones, and contend with Stella's shyness, before first Lance hurried in and then Felix, excused from his work two hours earlier. He could only just run up and dress before he convoyed Geraldine to church, she having the first turn of the chair, helped her to her seat near the Font, and then came back for Fernando, who was under his special charge.

Fernando sat looking very pale, and with the set expression of the mouth that always made Cherry think of Indians at the stake His little new prayer-book was in his hand, and he was grasping it nervously, but he said nothing, as Felix helped him up and Lance held his crutch for him. It was his first entrance into a place of worship. They had intended to have accustomed him a little to the sights and sounds, but the weather and his ailment had prevented them. He was drawn to the porch, and there Felix partly lifted him out and up the step, while Lance took his hat for him, and as they were both wanted for the choir procession that was to usher the Bishop into church, they had to leave him in his place under

Geraldine's protection.

He had not in the least realised the effect of the interior of a church. St. Oswald's was a very grand old building, with a deep chancel a good deal raised, seen along a vista of heavy columns and arched vaults, lighted from the clerestory, and with a magnificent chancel-arch. The season was Lent, and the colouring of the decorations was therefore grave, but all the richer, and the light coming strongly in from the west window immediately over the children's heads, made the contrast of the bright sunlight and of the soft depths of mystery more striking, and, to an eye to which everything ecclesiastical was absolutely new, the effect was almost overwhelming. That solemnity and sanctity of long centuries, the peaceful hush, the grave beauty and grandeur, almost made him afraid to breathe, and Cherry sat by his side with her expressive face composed into the serious but happy look that accorded with the whole scene.

He durst not move or speak. His was a silent passive nature, except when under strong stimulus, and Cherry respected his silence a great deal too much to break upon it by any information. She was half sorry when the noise of steps showed that the congregation were beginning to drop in, chiefly of the other young Confirmation candidates. Then presently Alda came, and whispered to her that Wilmet could not leave Mamma; and presently after, Lady Price bustled in with her daughter, looked severely at Alda under the impression that she was Wilmet very improperly tricked out, and pressed Fernando's hand before going on to her own place. Then came the low swell of the organ, another new sensation to one who had only heard opera music; then the approaching sound of the voices. Geraldine gave him the book open at the processional psalm, and the white-clad choir passed by, one of the first pair of choristers being Lance, singing with all his might, and that merry monkey-face full of a child's beautiful happy reverence. And again could be recognised Felix, Mr. Audley, Mr. Bevan, all whom the poor sick stranger had come to love best, all to his present perception glorified and beautiful. They had told him it would be all faith and no sight, but he seemed to find himself absolutely within that brighter better sphere to which they belonged, to see them walking in it in their white robes, to hear their songs of praise, and to know whence came that atmosphere that they carried about with them, and that he had felt when it was a riddle to him.

And so the early parts of the service passed by him, not so much attended to or understood as filling him with a kind of dreamy rapturous trance, as the echoes of the new home, to which he, with all his heavy sense of past stain and present evil propensity, was gaining admission and adoption. For the first time he was really sensible of the _happiness_ of his choice, and felt the compensation for what he gave up.

When the Second Lesson was ended, and the clergy and the choir, in their surplices, moved down to encircle the Font, it was as if they came to gather him in among them. Felix came and helped him up. He

could stand now with one support, and this was his young godfather's right arm, to which he held tightly, but without any nervous convulsiveness--he was too happy for that now--during the prayers that entreated for his being safely gathered into the Ark, and the Gospel of admission into the Kingdom. He had an impulse to loose his clasp and stand alone at the beginning of the vows, but he could not; he had not withdrawn his hand before he was forced again to lean his weight upon the steady arm beside him.

Nothing had been able to persuade Lady Price that she was not to make all the vows as for an infant, but luckily nobody heard her except her husband and the other sponsors, for it was a full, clear, steadfast voice that made reply, 'I renounce them all!' and as the dark deep eyes gazed far away into the west window, and Felix felt the shudder through the whole frame, he knew the force of that renunciation; and how it gave up that one excitement that the lad really cared for. And when that final and carefully-guarded vow of obedience was uttered, the pressure on his arm seemed to show that the moral was felt of that moment's endeavour to stand alone.

The sound of prayer, save in his own chamber, was so entirely new, that no doubt the force of the petitions was infinitely enhanced, and the entreaty for the death of the old Adam had a definite application to those old habits and tastes that at times exerted their force. The right hand was ready and untrembling when the Rector took it; the stream of water glittered as it fell on the awe-struck brow and jetty hair, and the eyes shone out with a deep resolute lustre as 'Ferdinand Audley' was baptized into the Holy Name, and sworn a faithful soldier and servant.

He had begged to be baptized by the English version of his name; the Spanish one had grown up by a sort of accident, and had always been regretted by his father. He had wished much to take the name of Felix, but they were so certain that this would not be approved, that they had persuaded him out of it. He was soon set down again by Geraldine's side, and she put out her hand and squeezed his hand, looking up into his face with tearful eyes of welcome.

When the last sounds of the voluntary had died away, and the congregation had gone, she ventured again to look up at him and say, 'I am so glad!'

'Why did you never tell me it was like this?' he said. 'I should never have hung back one moment. Now nothing can touch me, since I belong to _this_.'

'Nothing can _really_,' said Geraldine softly. 'Above all, when it is sealed to us to-morrow.'

Then there came a movement from the vestry, and the Rector and Mr. Audley were seen following the Bishop, who came down to where the two lame children still sat together, and putting his hand upon Ferdinand's head with the hair still wet, gave him his blessing

before he spoke further. It was only a word or two of congratulation, but such as to go very deep; and then, seeing that the boy looked not excited, but worn and wearied, he added, 'You are going home to rest. I shall see you to-morrow after the Confirmation;' and then he shook hands with him and with Geraldine, asking if she were the little girl of whom he had been told.

'She is very young,' said Mr. Bevan, strongly impressed with the littleness of the figure;' but she has been a Communicant for more than a year, and she is--a very good child.'

'I can believe so,' said the Bishop, smiling to her. 'I have heard of your father, my dear, and of your brother.'

Cherry coloured rosy red, but was much too shy to speak; and the Rector and Bishop went away, leaving only Mr. Audley.

'Are you very much tired, Fernan?'

'I don't know,' he half smiled.

'I think he is; he is too happy to know it,' said Geraldine.

'Please let him go home first.'

So Mr. Audley helped him out to the chair, where Felix, Alda, and Lance were waiting; and he said, 'Thank you,' and held out his hand, while Lance eagerly shook it, saying, 'Now it is right at last; and here's Alda--isn't she a stunner?'

'I thought it was Wilmet,' said Fernan; and Alda went into church to keep Cherry company, thinking how curiously blind the male sex were not to distinguish between her dress and poor dear Wilmet's.

Mr. Audley was more than satisfied, he was surprised and comforted. He had prepared to meet either disappointment or excitement in his charge; he found neither--only a perfect placid content, as of one who had found his home and was at rest. The boy was too much tired, after his many bad nights and the day's exertion, to say or think much; all he did say was, 'I shall mind nothing now that I know what it is to be one of you.'

Mr. Audley tried to remember that there must be a reaction, but he could not bring himself to fear or to warn, or do anything but enjoy the happiest day of his three years' ministry.

He had to go to the Rectory dinner-party, and leave his neophyte to the tendance of the Underwoods. Felix sat with his friend in a great calm silence, while the rest were taken up by the counter-attraction upstairs, where Alda was unpacking an unrivalled store of presents from herself and Marilda, useful and ornamental, such as seemed a perfect embarras de richesses to the homely, scantily-endowed children. That little gold watch was the prize and wonder of all. It

was the first in the family, except that Felix wore his father's, and Alda knew how an elder girl was scorned at school if she had none; but Wilmet, though very happy with hers, smiled, and would not agree to having met with disrespect for want of it. Then there were drawing-books for Cherry, and a knife of endless blades for Lance, and toys for the little ones; and dresses--a suit for Wilmet like Alda's plainest Sunday one, and Alda's last year's silk for Geraldine, and some charming little cashmere pelisses--Aunt Mary's special present to the two babies--things that would lengthen Wilmet's purse for many a day to come; and a writing-case for Felix; and all the absent remembered, too. Uncle Thomas had given Alda a five-pound note to buy presents, and Marilda had sent every one something besides, mostly of such a matter-of-fact useful type that Alda stood and laughed at them. And Mrs. Underwood was pleased with the exhibition, and smiled and admired, only her attention was tired out at last, and she was taken early to her own room.

The elder ones went down to sit round the fire in Mr. Audley's room, where Ferdinand insisted on leaving his sofa to Geraldine, and betaking himself to the easy-chair, where he leant back, content and happy to watch the others through his eye-lashes. Alda was a little on her company manners at the first, but all the others were at perfect ease, as they sat in the dim light. Felix on the floor by Cherry, who delighted in a chance of playing fondling tricks with his hair and fingers; the twins in Mr. Audley's big chair, where they could lean against each other; and Lance cross-legged on the hearth-rug roasting chestnuts, of which a fellow chorister had given him a pocketful, and feeding every one in turn.

Geraldine gave a sigh to the wish that poor dear Edgar were there.

'He is very happy!' said Alda.

'Oh yes, but I wish he had not missed being here to-morrow. I wonder when he will come home.'

'I cannot guess; Aunt Mary wants to go down the Rhine next summer (only she is not quite sure it is not the Rhone), and if so, I suppose he would join us there.'

'It is a whole year since we have set eyes on him,' said Felix.

'But I believe he writes more to Cherry than anybody, does not he?'

'Oh yes, and sends me lovely photographs to copy. Such a beauty of himself! Have you seen it?'

'I should think I had! They have set it up in a little gold frame on the drawing-room table, and everybody stands and says how handsome it is; and Aunt Mary explains all about him till I am tired of hearing it.'

'And Clem?'

'Oh, Clem came to luncheon yesterday. He is very much grown, and looks uncommonly demure, and as much disposed to set everybody to rights as ever.'

But Alda did not enter much more into particulars; she led away the conversation to the sights she had seen in their summer tour; and as she had a good deal of descriptive power, she made her narratives so interesting that time slipped quickly past, and the young company was as much surprised as Mr. Audley was when he came home and found them all there, not yet gone to bed. They were greatly ashamed, and afraid they had done Ferdinand harm, and all were secretly very anxious about the night; but, though the wakeful habit and night feverishness were not at once to be broken through, yet the last impression was the strongest, and the long-drawn aisle, the 'dim religious light,' and the white procession, were now the recurring images, all joyful, all restful, truly as if the bird had escaped out of the snare of the fowler. Real sleep came sooner than usual, and Fernan rose quite equal to the fatigue of the coming day, the Confirmation day, when again Geraldine had to sit beside him--this newly admitted to the universal brotherhood, instead of being beside that dear Edgar of her own, for whom her whole heart craved, as she thought how their preparation had begun together beside her father's chair.

Their place was now as near the choir as possible, and they were brought in as before, very early, so that Fernan gazed with the same eager, unsated eyes into the chancel and at the altar, admitted as he was farther into his true home.

The church was filled with candidates from the villages round as well as from the town, and the Litany preceded the rite which was to seal the young champions ere the strife. The Bishop came down to the two lame children, and laid his hands on the two bent heads, ere he gave his final brief address, exhorting the young people to guard preciously, and preserve by many a faithful Eucharist, that mark which had sealed them to the Day of Redemption, through all this world's long hot trial and conflict.

There was holiday at both schools, and Felix had been spared to take his place in the choir, but Mr. Froggatt could not do without him afterwards, as the presence of so many of the country clergy in the town was sure to fill the reading-room and shop; and he was obliged to hurry off as soon as he came out of church. Now, the Bishop had the evening before asked Lady Price 'whether that son of poor Mr. Underwood's' were present among the numerous smart folk who thronged her drawing-room, to which my lady had replied, 'No; he was a nice, gentlemanly youth certainly, but, considering all things, and how sadly he had lowered himself, she thought it better not. In fact, some might not be so well pleased to meet him.'

The Bishop took the opportunity of trying to learn from the next person he fell in with, namely, Mr. Ryder, how Felix had lowered himself; and received an answer that showed a good deal of the

schoolmaster's disappointment, but certainly did not show any sense of Felix's degradation. And what he said was afterwards amplified by Mr. Audley, whom the Bishop took apart, and questioned him with much interest upon both Ferdinand Travis and the Underwood family, of whom he had only heard, when, immediately after his appointment, his vote for the orphan school had been solicited for the two boys, and he had been asked to subscribe to the Comment on the Philippians. Mr Audley felt that he had a sympathising listener, and was not slow to tell the whole story of the family--what the father had been, what Felix now was, and how his influence and that of little Lancelot had told upon their young inmate. The Bishop listened with emotion, and said, 'I must see that boy! Is the mother in a state in which she would like a call from me?' but there an interruption had come; and when the country clergy came in the morning, Mr. Audley had thought it fittest not to swell the numbers unnecessarily, and had kept himself out of the way, and tried to keep his fellow-curate.

So he had seen no more of the Bishop, until, some little time after he and Fernan had lunched, and were, it must be confessed, making up for their unrestful nights by having both dropped asleep, one on his chair, the other on the sofa, there came a ring to the door, and Lance, who had a strong turn for opening it, found himself face to face with the same tall gray-haired gentleman at whom he had gazed in the rochet and lawn-sleeves. He stood gazing up open-mouthed.

'I think I have seen you in the choir, and heard you too,' said the Bishop, kindly taking Lance's paw, which might have been cleaner, had he known what awaited it. 'Mr. Audley lives here, I think.'

Lance was for once without a word to say for himself, though his mouth remained open. All he did was unceremoniously to throw wide Mr. Audley's door, and bolt upstairs, leaving his Lordship to usher himself in, while Mr. Audley started up, and Ferdinand would have done the same, had he been able, before he was forbidden.

There was a kindly talk upon his health and plans, how he was to remain at Bexley till after Easter and his first Communion, and then Mr. Audley would take him up to London to be inspected by a first-rate surgeon before going down to the tutor's. The tutor proved to be an old school-fellow and great friend of the Bishop; and what Fernan heard of him from both the friend and pupil would have much diminished his dread, even if he had not been in full force of the feeling that whatever served to bind him more closely to the new world of blessing within the Church must be good and comfortable.

This visit over the Bishop asked whether Mrs. Underwood would like to be visited, and Mr. Audley went up to ascertain. She was a woman who never was happy or at rest in an untidy room, or in disordered garments, and all was in as fair order as it could be with the old furniture, that all Wilmet's mending could not preserve from the verge of rags. Her widow's cap and soft shawl were as neat as possible, and so were the little ones in their brown-holland, Theodore sitting at her feet, and Stella on Wilmet's lap, where she

was being kept out of the way of the more advanced amusement of a feast of wooden tea-things, carried on in a corner between Angela and Bernard, under Lance's somewhat embarrassing patronage.

Alda sprang up, stared about in consternation at the utter unlikeness to the drawing-room in Kensington Palace Gardens, and exclaimed, 'Oh! if Sibby had only come to take the children out! Take them away, Lance.'

'Sibby will come presently, or I will take them to her,' whispered Wilmet. 'I should like them just to have his blessing.'

'So many,' sighed Alda, but meantime Mr. Audley had seen that all was right at the first coup d'oeil, had bent over Mrs. Underwood, told her that the Bishop wished to call upon her, and asked her leave to bring him up; and she smiled, looked pleased, and said, 'He is very kind. That is for your Papa, my dears. You must talk to him, you know.'

The Bishop came up almost immediately, and the perfect tranquillity and absence of flutter fully showed poor Mrs. Underwood's old high-bred instinct. She was really gratified when he sat down by her, after greeting the three girls, and held out his hands to make friends with the lesser ones, whom their sisters led up, Angela submissive and pretty behaved, Bernard trying to hide his face, and Stella in Wilmet's arms staring to the widest extent of eyes. The sisters had their wish--the fatherless babes received the pastoral blessing; and the Bishop said a few kind words of real sympathy that made Mrs. Underwood look up at him affectionately and say, 'Indeed I have much to be thankful for. My children are very good to me.'

'I am sure they are,' said the Bishop. 'I cannot tell you how much I respect your eldest son.'

The colour rose in the pale face. 'He is a very dear boy,' she said.

'I should like to see him before I go. Is he at home?'

'Lance shall run and call him,' said Alda; but the Bishop had asked where he was, and Wilmet had, not unblushingly, for she was red with pleasure, but shamelessly, answered that he was at Mr. Froggatt's, offering to send Lance in search of him.

'I had rather he would show me the way,' said the Bishop. 'Will you, my boy?'

The way to Mr. Froggatt's was not very long, but it was long enough to overcome Lance's never very large amount of bashfulness; and he had made reply that he went to the Grammar School, and was in the second form, that he liked singing in the choir better than--no, not than _anything_--anything except--except what? Oh a jolly good snow-balling, or a game at hockey. Did he like the school? Pretty well, on the whole; but he did not suppose he should stay there long, his

brother at the Clergy Orphan said there was such a lot of cads, and that he was always grubbing his nose among them; but now, 'do you really think now that cads are always such bad fellows?'

His Lordship was too much diverted to be easily able to speak, but he observed that it depended on what was meant by a cad.

'That's just it!' exclaimed Lance. 'I'm sure some that he calls cads are as good fellows as any going.'

'And what does your eldest brother say?'

'Felix! Oh! he does not mind, as long as one does not get into a real scrape.'

'And then?'

'Oh, then he minds so much that one can't do it, you know.'

'What, does he punish you?'

'N--no--he never licks any of us now--but he is so horridly sorry--and it bothers him so,' said Lance. 'Here's old Froggatt's,' he concluded, stopping at the glass door. 'My eyes! what a sight of parsons!' (Lance had pretty well forgotten whom he was talking to.)

'There, that's Felix--no, no, not that one serving Mr. Burrowes, that's Redstone; Felix is out there, getting out the sermon paper for that fat one, and that's old Froggy himself, bowing away. Shall I go and call Felix? I suppose he will not mind this time.'

'No, thank you, I will go in myself. Good-bye, my little guide, and thank you.'

And Lance, when his hand came out of the Bishop's, found something in it, which proved to be a tiny Prayer-book, and moreover a half-sovereign. He would have looked up and thanked, but the Bishop and that 'fat one' were absorbed in conversation on the step; and when he turned over the leaves of the little blue morocco book, with its inlaid red cross, he found full in his face, in the first page, the words, 'Lancelot Underwood, March 15th, 1855,' and then followed an initial, and a name that utterly defeated Lance's powers, so that perceiving the shop to be far too densely full of parsons for him to have a chance there, he galloped off at full speed to Cherry, who happily could interpret the contracted Latin by the name of the See, and was not quite so much astonished as Lance, though even more gratified.

Meantime, the Bishop had made his way to the bowing Mr. Froggatt and asked to speak with him in his private room, where he mentioned his kindness to young Underwood, and was answered by a gratified disclaimer of having done anything that was not of great advantage to himself. The good man seemed divided between desire to do justice to Felix and not to stand in his light, and alarm lest he should have to

lose an assistant whom he had always known to be above his mark, and who was growing more valuable every month; and he was greatly relieved and delighted when the Bishop only rejoiced at his character of Felix, and complimented the Pursuivant by being glad that a paper of such good principles should be likely to have such a youth on its staff; it had been well for the lad to meet with so good a friend. Mr. Froggatt could not be denied an eulogium on the father, for whose sake he had first noticed the son; and when the Bishop had expressed his sorrow at never having known so bright a light as all described the late Curate to have been, he courteously regretted the interruption on a busy day, but he begged just to see the young man. He had little time himself, but if he could be spared to walk up to the station--'

Mr. Froggatt bustled out with great alacrity, and taking the charge of the customer on himself, announced, for the benefit of all who might be within earshot, 'Mr. Underwood, his Lordship wishes to speak with you. He wishes you to walk up to the station with him. You had better go out by the private door.'

Felix was red up to the ears. His eight years' seniority to Lance were eight times eight more shyness and embarrassment, but he could only obey; and at his first greeting his hand was taken--'hoped to have seen you sooner,' the Bishop said; 'but you had always escaped me in the vestry.'

'I had to go to help my sister, my Lord,' said Felix.

'And your friend, said the Bishop. 'That is a good work that has been done in your house.'

Felix coloured more, not knowing what to say.

'I wish to see you,' continued the Bishop, 'partly to tell you how much I honour you for the step you have taken. I wish there were more who would understand the true uprightness and dutifulness of thinking no shame of an honest employment. I am afraid you do sometimes meet with what may be trying,' he added, no doubt remembering Lady Price's tone.

'I do not care now, not much. I did at first,' said Felix.

'No one whose approval is worth having can consider yours really a loss of position. You are in a profession every one respects, and you seem to have great means of influence likely to be open to you.'

'So my father said, when he consented,' said Felix.

'I shall always regret having just missed knowing your father. Some passages in that book of his struck me greatly. But what I wished to say was to ask whether there is any way in which I can be useful to you in the education of any of the younger ones, or--'

'Thank you, my Lord,' said Felix. 'I think you kindly voted for my brothers last year for the Clergy Orphan school. Only one got in, and if you would vote again for little Lancelot--'

'My droll little companion, who Mr. Audley tells me did so much for that poor young American.'

'Indeed he did,' said Felix. 'I doubt if any of us would have got at him but for Lance, who did not mean anything but good-nature all the time.'

'He is just the boy I want for our Cathedral school.' And then he went on to explain that a great reformation was going on. There was a foundation-school attached to the Cathedral, with exhibitions at the University, to which the Cathedral choristers had the first claim. There had been, of course, a period of decay, but an excellent Precentor had been just appointed, who would act as head master; and the singing-boys would be kept on free of expense after their voices became unavailable, provided that by such time they had passed a certain examination. Such a voice as Lance's was sure to recommend him; and besides, the Bishop said with a smile, he wanted to raise the character of the school, and he thought there was the stuff here that would do so.

Felix could only be thankful and rejoiced; but it was a pang to think of Lance being as entirely separated from home as was Clement; with no regular holidays, and always most needed at his post at the great festivals. There was something in his tone that made the Bishop say, 'You do not like to part with him?'

'No, my Lord; but I am glad it should be so. My father was not happy about--things here, and charged me to get my brothers away when I could.'

'And as to holidays, you are near at hand, and most of the choir are of our own town. I think he may generally be spared for a good term at each holiday time. The organist is very considerate in giving leave of absence, even if he should turn out to have a dangerously good voice for solos. I will let you know when to send him up for examination, which he will pass easily. Good-bye. You must write to me if there is anything for me to do for you. One month more, and your father would have been one of my clergy, remember.'

Felix went back, flushed with gratification, and yet, to a certain degree, with confusion, and not exactly liking the prospect of being interrogated as to what the Bishop had said to him: indeed, he never told the whole of it to any one but Cherry. Somehow, though Wilmet was his counsellor and mainstay, Geraldine was the sharer of all those confidences that came spontaneously out of the full but reserved heart.

Besides, Wilmet was at present in such a trance of enjoyment of her twin sister, that she seemed scarcely able to enter into anything

else. She went through her duties as usual, but with an effort to shake off her absorption in the thought of having Alda at home; and every moment she was not in sight of her darling seemed a cruel diminution of her one poor fortnight. Indeed it was tete-a-tetes that her exclusive tenderness craved above all; and she was often disappointed that Alda should be willing to go and visit Fernan Travis when they might have had a quarter of an hour together alone. How much more selfish she must have grown than Alda in this last half year!

Alda's talk was indeed full of interest, and gave a much better notion of her way of life than her letters did. She seemed to have been fully adopted as a daughter of the house, and to enjoy all the same privileges as Marilda; indeed, she had a good deal more credit with all varieties of teachers, since she learnt rapidly and eagerly; and Marilda, while encouraging her successes, without a shade of jealousy, made no attempt to conquer her own clumsiness and tardiness. Even 'Aunt Mary,' as Alda called Mrs. Thomas Underwood, often had recourse to Alda for sympathy in her endeavours to be tasteful, and continually held her up as an example to Marilda.

'And poor dear good woman,' said Alda, 'she has such a respect for Underwood breeding and our education, that I believe I could persuade her into anything by telling her it was what she calls "comifo." Even when she was going to get the boudoir done with apple-green picked out with mauve, enough to set one's teeth on edge, and Marilda would do nothing but laugh, she let me persuade her into a lovely pale sea-green.'

'Is not sea-green too delicate for her?' asked Cherry.

'Why, it was very wicked of Edgar, to be sure, but he said that it was to suit the nymph reining in the porpoises. He made a sketch, and Marilda was delighted with it; she really is the most good-natured creature in the world.'

'She must be!' ejaculated Wilmet; 'but surely she ought not to like laughing at her mother.'

'Oh, everybody laughs at Aunt Mary, and she hardly ever finds it out, and when she does, she does not mind! Even old Mrs. Kedge, her mother, does nothing but laugh at her for trying to be fine. Old Granny is not a bit by way of being a lady, you know; she lives in a little house in the city with one maid, and I believe she rubs her own tables. I am sure she goes about in omnibuses, though she has lots of money; and Marilda is so fond of her, and so like her, only not so clever and shrewd.'

'But why does she live in such a small way?'

'Because she never was used to anything else, and does not like it. She hates grand servants, and never will come to Kensington Palace Gardens; but she really is good-natured. She told Clement to drop in

on her whenever he likes, and bring any of his friends; and she always gives them a superb piece of plum-cake, and once she took them to the Tower, and once to the Zoological Gardens, for she thinks that she cannot do enough to make up to them for being bred up to be little monks, with cords and sandals, and everything popish.'

'You don't let her think so?'

'Well, really when she has got a thing into her head nothing will uproot it; and, after all, they do carry things very far there, and Clement goes on so that I don't wonder.'

'Goes on how?'

'Why, just fancy, the other day when Uncle Thomas fetched him in his brougham because I was coming home, there he sat at luncheon and would not eat a scrap of meat.'

'Ah! it was a Wednesday in Lent,' said Cherry.

'Only a Wednesday, you know; and there, with four or five strange people, too. One of them asked if he was a Catholic, and of course Clement looked very wise, and greatly pleased, and said, "Yes, he was;" and that brought down Aunt Mary with her heavy artillery. "Bless me, Clement, you don't say so. Is Mr. Fulmort really gone over?" "Yes," said Clem. (I know he did it on purpose.) "He is gone over to preach at St. Peter's." And then one of the gentlemen asked if Clem meant Mr. Fulmort of St. Matthew's, Whittingtonia, and when he said "Yes, he lived in the clergy house," he began regularly to play him off, asking the most absurd questions about fasts and feasts and vigils and decorations, and Clem answered them all in his prim little self-sufficient way, just as if he thought he was on the high-road to be St. Clement the Martyr, till I was ready to run away.'

'Couldn't you have given him a hint?' asked Wilmet.

'My dear, have you lived twelve years with Clem without knowing that hints are lost on him?'

'Dear Clem, he is a very good steady-hearted little fellow,' said Cherry. 'It was very nice of him.'

'Well, I only hope he'll never come to luncheon again in Lent. There are times and seasons for everything, and certainly not for display! And to make it worse, Marilda is the most literal-minded girl. Fasting was quite a new mind to her, for she never realises what she does not see; and she got Clem into a corner, where I heard him going on, nothing loth, about days of abstinence, out of Mr. Fulmort's last catechising, I should think; and ended by asking what Cousin Edward did, so that I fully expected that I should find her eating nothing, and that I should be called to account.'

'And what did you tell her then?'

'Oh, you know I could say quite truly that he did not.'

'I don't think that was quite fair,' said Wilmet gravely. 'You know it was only because he really could not.'

'You don't know how glad I was to have an answer that would hinder the horrid commotion we should have had if Marilda had taken to fasting. And, after all, you know, Papa would have said minding her mother was her first duty.'

'Why did not you tell her that?'

'I have, dozens of times; but you know there are mothers and mothers, and nobody can always mind Aunt Mary, good soul! Marilda has just made herself, with her own good rough plain sense. I wish she was a man; she would be a capital merchant like her father; but it is hard to be a great heiress, with nothing she really likes to do. She is always longing to come down to Centry, and tramp about the lanes among the cottages.'

'Oh! I wish they would!'

'I don't think Aunt Mary will ever let them, she hates the country; and though she likes to have a place for the name of the thing, she does not want to live there, especially where there are so many of us; and then, Felix's situation!'

'For shame, Alda!'

'Well, I did not say anything myself. It is only Aunt Mary--it is very foolish of people, but, you see, they will. As to Marilda, I believe she would like to stand behind the counter with him this minute.'

'Marilda is the oddest and best girl I ever heard of!'

'You may say that. And so ignorant she was! She had a great velvet-and-gold Church Service, and hardly guessed there was any Bible or Prayer-Book besides. I am sure Felix cannot have had more work to teach that youth than I have had with Marilda. Such a jumble as she had picked up! She really had only little baby prayers to say, till she saw my book.'

'What a blessing you must be to her!' said Wilmet, fondly looking at her sister.

'Well, I do hope so. You must know she was regularly struck with dear Papa. I am sure he is the first saint in her calendar, and everything is--"What did Cousin Edward say?" And when once she has made up her mind that a thing is right, she will blunder on through fire and water, but she will do it.'

'Then,' said Cherry, 'she ought to try and learn, and not to be awkward because of obedience.'

Alda burst out laughing. 'People can only do what they can. Marilda trying to be graceful would be worse than Marilda floundering her own way. But she really is the best and kindest girl living, and she gets on much better for having me to keep her out of scrapes.'

Wilmet went to bed that night thankful to have Alda's head on the pillow beside her, and most thankful for the tokens that she watched among her brothers and sisters, which showed how much her father's influence was extending beyond his short life.

CHAPTER IX

THE THIRTEEN

'They closed around the fire,
And all in turn essayed to paint
The rival merits of their saint;
A theme that ne'er can tire
A holy maid, for be it known
That their saint's honour is their own.'

SCOTT.

The thirteen Underwoods did not meet again in the same house for many a long day, and when they did, it was on a grey misty morning in the Christmas week of the year following; and the blinds were down, and the notes of the knell clashing out overhead, as the door was opened to Edgar, Alda, and Clement, as they arrived together, having been summoned late on the previous night by a telegram with tidings that their mother had been struck by a paralysis. They knew what to expect when Felix, with one of the little ones on his arm, came quietly down the stairs and admitted them. All they had to ask, was 'when,' and 'how,' and to hear, that the long living death had ended in peaceful insensibility at last. Then they followed him upstairs to the room where the others sat, hushed, over their pen or their books, where Wilmet, her eyes gushing with quiet tears, held Alda in her embrace, and Geraldine, after her first eager kiss, gazed wistfully at Edgar as though there must be comfort in the very sight of him, if she could only feel it; while the very little ones opened their puzzled eyes on the newcomers as strangers.

And so they were: Clement had indeed been at home in September, but Alda not for a year and three-quarters, nor Edgar since he first left it three years before. The absence of the two latter was not by their own choice, a doctor who had ordered Mrs. Thomas Underwood to spend

the summer months, year after year, at Spa was partly the cause, and moreover, during the autumn and winter of 1856 Bexley had been a perfect field of epidemics. Measles and hooping-cough had run riot in the schools, and lingered in the streets and alleys of the potteries, fastening on many who thought themselves secured by former attacks, and there had been a good many deaths, in especial Clement's chief friend, Harry Lamb. Nobody, excepting the invalid mother, throughout the Underwood household, had escaped one or other disorder, and both fell to the lot of the four little ones, and likewise of Mr. Audley, who was infinitely disgusted at himself, and at the guarded childhood for which he thus paid the penalty pretty severely. When matters were at the worst, and Felix was laid up, and Wilmet found herself succumbing, she had written in desperation to Sister Constance, whose presence in the house had made the next three weeks a time of very pleasant recollections. Finally she had carried off Geraldine, Angela, and Bernard, to the convalescent rooms at St. Faith's, where their happiness had been such that the favourite sport of the little ones had ever since been the acting of Sisters of Mercy nursing sick dolls. The quarantine had been indefinitely prolonged for the proteges of Kensington Palace Gardens; for the three at school, though kept away till all infection was thought to be over, had perversely caught the maladies as soon as they came home for the summer holidays; and indeed the whole town and neighbouring villages were so full of contagion, that Mrs. Thomas Underwood had not far to seek for a plea for avoiding Centry.

All this time, from day to day, the poor mother had been growing more feeble, and it had been fully purposed that on Edgar's return at Christmas, on the completion of his studies at Louvaine, he and Alda should make some stay at home; but the brother and sister were both so useful and ornamental that their adopted home could not spare them until after a series of Christmas entertainments; and Clement had been in like manner detained until the festival services at St. Matthew's no longer required him. Indeed, when he had been at home in the autumn, he had been scarcely recognised.

For the last week, however, Mrs. Underwood had been much clearer in mind, had enjoyed the presence of her holiday children, and had for a short time even given hopes that her constitution might yet rally, and her dormant faculties revive. She had even talked to Mr. Audley and Geraldine at different times as though she had some such presentiment herself, and had made some exertions which proved much increased activity of brain. Alas! though their coming had thus been rendered very happy, the brightening had been but the symptom and precursor of a sudden attack of paralysis, whence there was no symptom of recovery, and which in a few hours ended in death.

For the present, the hopes that had been entertained gave poignancy to the sudden disappointment and grief, and the home children could not acquiesce in the dispensation with the same quiet reasonableness as those who had been so long separated from them as not to miss the gentle countenance, or the 'sweet toils, sweet cares, for ever gone.' Indeed Wilmet was physically much exhausted by her long hours of

anxiety, and went about pale-cheeked and tear-stained, quietly attending to all that was needful, but with the tears continually dropping, while Geraldine was fit for nothing but to lie still, unable to think, but feeling soothed as long as she could lay her hand upon Edgar and feel that he was near.

So the whole thirteen were together again; and in the hush of the orphaned house there was a certain wonder and curiosity in their mutual examination and comparison with one another and with the beings with whom they had parted three years ago, at the period of their first separation. All were at a time of life when such an interval could not fail to make a vast alteration in externals. Even Geraldine had gained in strength, and though still white, and with features too large for her face, startlingly searching grey eyes, and brows that looked strangely thick, dark, and straight, in contrast with the pencilled arches belonging to all the rest, she was less weird and elfin-like than when she had been three inches shorter, and dressed more childishly. As Edgar said, she was less Riquet with a tuft than the good fairy godmother, and her twin sisters might have been her princess-wards, so far did they tower above her--straight as fir-trees, oval faced, regular featured, fair skinned, blue eyed, and bright haired. During those long dreary hours, Edgar often beguiled the time with sketches of them, and the outlines--whether of chiselled profiles, shapely heads, or Cupid's-bow lips--were still almost exactly similar; yet it had become impossible to mistake one twin for the other, even when Alda had dressed the tresses on Wilmet's passive head in perfect conformity with her own. Looking at their figures, Alda's air of fashion made her appear the eldest, and Wilmet might have been a girl in the schoolroom; but comparing their faces, Wilmet's placid recollected countenance, and the soberness that sat so well on her white smooth forehead and steady blue eyes, might have befitted many more years than eighteen. There were not nearly so many lights and shades in her looks as in those of Alda and Geraldine. The one had both more smiles and more frowns, the other more gleams of joy and of pain; each was more animated and sensitive, but neither gave the same sense of confidence and repose.

As usually happens when the parents are of the same family, the inventory of the features of one of the progeny served for almost all the rest. The differences were only in degree, and the prime specimens were without doubt the two elder twins and Edgar, with like promise of little Bernard and Stella.

Edgar had grown very tall, and had inherited his father's advantages of grace and elegance of figure, to which was added a certain distinguished ease of carriage, and ready graciousness, too simple to be called either conceit or presumption, but which looked as if he were used to be admired and to confer favours. Athletics had been the fashion with him and his English companions, and his complexion was embrowned by sun and wind, his form upright and vigorous: and by force of contrast it was now perceived that Felix seemed to have almost ceased growing for the last three years, and that his indoor occupations had given his broad square shoulders a kind of slouch,

and kept his colouring as pink and white as that of his sisters. Like Wilmet, he had something staid and responsible about him, that, even more than his fringe of light brown whiskers, gave the appearance of full-grown manhood; so that the first impression of all the newcomers was how completely he had left the boy behind him, making it an effort of memory to believe him only nineteen and a half. But they all knew him for their head, and leant themselves against him. And in the meantime, Edgar's appearance was a perfect feast of enjoyment, not only to little loving Geraldine, but to sage Felix. They recreated themselves with gazing at him, and when left alone together would discuss his charms in low confidential murmurs, quite aware that Wilmet would think them very silly; but Edgar was the great romance of both.

Edgar observed that Clement had done all the growth for both himself and Felix, and was doing his best to be a light of the Church by resembling nothing but an altar-taper. When they all repaired to the back of the cupboard door in Mr. Audley's room to be measured, his head was found far above Edgar's mark at fourteen, and therewith he was lank and thin, not yet accustomed to the length of his own legs and arms, and seeming as if he was not meant to be seen undraped by his surplice. His features and face were of the family type, but a little smaller, and with much less of the bright rosy tinting; indeed, when not excited he was decidedly pale, and his eyes and hair were a little lighter than those of the rest. It was a refined, delicate, thoughtful face, pretty rather than handsome, and its only fault was a certain melancholy superciliousness or benignant pity for every one who did not belong to the flock of St. Matthew's.

Regular features are always what most easily lose individuality, and become those of the owner's class; and if Clement was all chorister, Fulbert and Lancelot were all schoolboy. The two little fellows were a long way apart in height, though there were only two years between them, for Lance was on a much smaller scale, but equally full of ruddy health and superabundant vigour; and while Fulbert was the more rough and independent, his countenance had not the fun and sweetness that rendered Lance's so winning. Their looks were repeated in Robina, who was much too square and sturdy for any attempt at beauty, and was comically like a boy and like her brothers, but with much frank honesty and determination in her big grey darkly-lashed eyes. Angela was one of the most altered of all; for her plump cherub cheeks had melted away under the glow of measles, and the hooping process had lengthened and narrowed her small person into a demure little thread-paper of six years old, omnivorous of books, a pet and pickle at school, and a romp at home--the sworn ally, offensive and defensive, of stout, rough-pated, unruly Bernard. Stella was the loveliest little bit of painted porcelain imaginable, quite capable of being his companion, and a perfect little fairy, for beauty, gracefulness, and quickness of all kinds. Alda was delighted with her pretty caressing ways and admiration of the wonderful new sister. She was of quieter, more docile mood than these two, though aspiring to their companionship; for it was startling to see how far she had left Theodore behind. He was still in arms, and speechless, a little pale

inanimate creature, taking very little notice, and making no sound except a sort of low musical cooing of pleasure, and a sad whining moan of unhappiness, which always recurred when he was not in the arms of Sibby, Wilmet, or Felix. It was only when Felix held out his arms to take him that the sound of pleasure was heard; and once on that firm knee, with his shining head against that kind heart, he was satisfied, and Felix had accustomed himself to all sorts of occupations with his little brother in his left arm. Even at night, there was no rest for Theodore, unless Felix took him into his room. So often did the little fretting moan summon him, that soon the crib took up his regular abode beside his bed. But Felix, though of course spared from the shop, could not be dispensed with from the printing-house, where he was sub-editor; and in his absence Theodore was always less contented; and his tearless moan went to his sister's heart, for the poor little fellow had been wont to lie day and night in his mother's bosom, and she had been as uneasy without him as he now was without her. All her other babes had grown past her helpless instinctive tenderness, and Theodore's continued passiveness had been hitherto an advantage, which had always been called his 'goodness and affection.'

Alda was the first to comment on the wonderful interval between the twins, when Wilmet accounted for it by Theodore's having been quite kept back for his mother's sake, and likewise by his having been more reduced by measles and hooping-cough than Stella had been; but to fresh observers it was impossible to think that all was thus explained, and Edgar and Alda discussed it in a low voice when they found themselves alone.

'The fact is plain,' said Edgar; 'but I suppose nothing can be done, and I see no use in forcing it on poor Wilmet.'

'I don't understand such blindness.'

'Not real blindness--certainly not on Felix's part. He knows that load is on his back for life. Heigh-ho! a stout old Atlas we have in Blunderbore; I wonder how long I shall be in plucking the golden apples, and taking a share.'

'I thought it was Atlas that gathered the apples.'

'Don't spoil a good simile with superfluous exactness, Alda! It is base enough to compare the gardens of the Hesperides to a merchant's office! I wonder how many years it will take to get out of the drudgery, and have some power of enjoying life and relieving Felix. One could tear one's hair to see him tied down by this large family till all his best days are gone.'

'Some of the others may get off his hands, and help.'

'Not they! Clem is too highly spiritualised to care for anything so material as his own flesh and blood; and it is not their fault if little Lance does not follow in his wake. Then if Ful has any brains,

he is not come to the use of them; he is only less obnoxious than Tina in that he is a boy and not a church candle, but boys are certainly a mistake.'

If ever the mature age of seventeen could be excused for so regarding boyhood, it was under such circumstances. All were too old for any outbreaks, such as brought Angela and Bernard to disgrace, and disturbed the hush of those four sad days; but the actual loss had been so long previous, that the pressure of present grief was not so crushing as to prevent want of employment and confinement in that small silent house from being other than most irksome and tedious.

Clement would have done very well alone; he went to church, read, told Angela stories, and discoursed to Cherry on the ways of St. Matthew's; but, unfortunately, there was something about him that always incited the other boys to sparring, nor was he always guiltless of being the aggressor, for there was no keeping him in mind that comparisons are odious.

Church music might seem a suitable subject, but the London chorister could not abstain from criticising St. Oswald's and contemning the old-fashioned practices of the Cathedral, which of course Lance considered himself bound to defend, till the very names of Gregorians and Anglicans became terrible to Cherry as the watchwords of a wrangling match. Fulbert, meantime, made no secret of his contempt for both brothers as mere choristers instead of schoolboys, and exalted himself whenever he detected their ignorance of any choice morceau of slang; while their superior knowledge on any other point was viewed as showing the new-fangled girlish nonsense of their education.

This Lance did not mind; but he was very sensitive as to the dignity of his Cathedral, and the perfections of his chosen friend, one Bill Harewood; and Fulbert was not slow to use the latter engine for 'getting a rise' out of him, while Clement as often, though with less design, offended by disparagement of his choir; nor could Edgar refuse himself the diversion of tormenting Clement by ironical questions and remarks on his standard of perfection, which mode of torture enchanted Fulbert, whenever he understood it. Thus these four brothers contrived to inflict a good amount of teasing on one another, all the more wearing and worrying because deprived of its only tolerable seasoning, mirth.

Clement had indeed a refuge in Mr. Audley's room, where he could find books, and willing ears for Mr. Fulmott's doings; but he availed himself of it less than might have been expected. Whether from inclination to his brothers' society, desire to do them good, or innate pugnacity, he was generally in the thick of the conflict; and before long he confided to Felix that he was seriously uneasy about Edgar's opinions.

'He is only chaffing you,' said Felix.

'Chaff, _now_!' said Clement.

'Well, Clem, you know you are enough to provoke a saint, you bore so intolerably about St. Matthew's.'

The much disgusted Clement retired into himself, but Felix was not satisfied at heart.

One was lacking on the cold misty New Year's morning, when even Geraldine could not be withheld from the Communion Feast of the living and departed. Each felt the disappointment when they found themselves only six instead of seven, but it was Clement who, as the boys were waiting for breakfast afterwards, began--

'Have not you been confirmed, Edgar?'

'How should I?'

'I am sure there are plenty of foreign Confirmations. I see them in the British Catholic.'

'Foreign parts isn't all one,' said Edgar; and the younger boys sniggled.

'If one took any trouble,' persisted Clement.

'Yes, but _one_, ' dwelling with emphasis on the awkward impersonal, 'one may have scruples about committing an act of schism by encouraging an intruding bishop performing episcopal functions in another man's diocese. Has not your spiritual father taught you that much, Tina?'

'I--I must find out about that,' said Clement thoughtfully; 'but, at any rate, the Lent Confirmations are coming on in London, and if I were to speak to the Vicar, I have no doubt he would gladly prepare you.'

'Nor I,' answered Edgar.

'Then shall I?' eagerly asked Clement.

'Not at present, thank you.'

Clement stood blank and open mouthed, and Fulbert laughed, secure that the joke, whatever it might be, was against him.

'Of course,' burst out Lance, 'Edgar does not want you to speak for him, Clem; he has got a tongue of his own, and a clergyman too, I suppose.'

Clement proceeded to a disquisition, topographical and censorial, upon the parish and district to which Edgar might be relegated, and finally exclaimed, 'Yes, he is not much amiss. He has some notions.'

He dines with us sometimes. You can go to him, Edgar, and I'll get the Vicar to speak to him.'

'Thank you, I had rather be excused.'

'You cannot miss another Confirmation.'

'I can't say I am fond of pledges, especially when no one can tell how much or how little they mean.

Whether this were in earnest, or a mere thrust in return for Clement's pertinacity, was undecided, for Wilmet came in, looking so sad and depressed that the brothers felt rebuked for the tone in which they had been speaking.

Mr. Thomas Underwood soon arrived, having come to Centry the night before; and after a few words had passed between him and Edgar, the latter announced his intention of returning with him to London that evening.

'Very well,' said Felix, much disappointed at this repetition of Edgar's willingness to hurry from the house of mourning, 'but we have had very little of you; Clement must go on the day after Twelfth Day, and we shall have more room. It will be a great blow to Cherry.'

'Poor little Cherry! I'll come when I can see her in greater peace, but I must buckle to with the beginning of the year, Fee.'

There was no further disputing the point, but Edgar was always a great loss. To every one except Clement he was so gentle and considerate that it was impossible not to think that the strange things reported of him were not first evoked and then exaggerated by the zeal of the model chorister: and indeed he led Geraldine to that inference when he went to her in the sitting-room, where, as before, she had to remain at home.

'My Cherry, I find I must go back with old Tom. Don't be vexed, my Whiteheart, I am not going back to Belgium, you know: I can often run down, but my work ought to begin with the year.'

'You cannot even stay over the Epiphany!'

'Well, I would have made an effort, but I am really wanted; and then if I am long with that light of the church, Tina, he will get me into everybody's black books. Never mind, old girl. I'll be for ever running down. Is any one going to stay with you?'

'Bernard is coming presently; I must try to make him recollect something about it.'

'You don't mean that child Angel is going.'

'She wishes it, and it seems right.'

'Right to leave a black spot in her memory! If children could but believe people were sublimated away!'

'Children can believe in the Resurrection of the body as well as we,' said Cherry reverently.

'Better, too, by a long chalk,' he muttered; then perceiving her dismayed expression, he added, 'No, no--I'm not talking to Tina, only he has put me in the humour in which there is nothing he could not make me dispute--even my Cherry being the sweetest morsel in the world. There, good-bye for the present, only don't afflict that poor little Bernard and yourself into too great wretchedness, out of a sense of duty.'

'No, I do not really grieve,' said Cherry. 'Tears come for thankfulness. The real sorrow came long ago; we grew up in it, and it is over now.'

'Right, little one. The mortal coil was very heavy and painful these last years, and no one can help being relieved that the end has come. It is the conventionalities that are needlessly distressing. What earthly purpose can it serve save the amusement of the maids and children of Bexley, that nine of us should present ourselves a pitiful spectacle all the way up to the cemetery in veils and hatbands?'

'Don't talk so, Edgar; you do not know how it jars, though I know you mean no disrespect.'

'Well, it must be a blessed thing to end by drowning or blowing up, to save one's friends trouble.'

'Edgar, indeed I cannot bear this! Recollect what a treasure that dear shattered earthen vessel has held. What a wonderful life of patient silent resignation it was!'

'Indeed it was,' said Edgar, suddenly softened. 'No lips could tell what the resolution must have been that carried her through those years, never murmuring. What must she not have spared my father! Such devotion is the true woman's heritage.'

Cherry was soothed as she saw the dew on his eye-lashes, but just then Felix came in to fetch him, and, stooping down, kissed her, and said in his low and tender but strong voice, 'We leave her with him, dear child. Recollect--

"The heart may ache, but may not burst:
Heaven will not leave thee, nor forsake."

Much as Geraldine had longed for Edgar, his words brought vague

yearning and distress, while Felix's very tone gave support. How could Edgar say patient, silent, self-devotion was not to be found except in woman?

So the worn-out body that once had been bright smiling Mary Underwood was borne to the church she had not entered since she had knelt there with her husband; and then she was laid beside him in the hillside cemetery, the graves marked by the simple cross, for which there had been long anxious saving, the last contribution having been a quarter of the Bishop's gift to Lancelot. The inscription was on the edges of the steps, from which the cross rose--

UNDER WODE, UNDER RODE.

EDWARD FULBERT UNDERWOOD,

NINE YEARS CURATE of THIS PARISH,

EPIPHANY, 1855,

AGED 40.

'Thy Rod and Thy Staff comfort me.'

There was room enough for the name of Mary Wilmet, his wife, to be added at the base of the Rood, that Cross which they had borne, the one so valiantly, the other so meekly, during their 'forty years in the wilderness.'

Many persons were present out of respect not only to the former Curate, but to his hard-working son and daughter, and not only the daughter's holly-wreath, but one of camellias sent by Sister Constance, lay upon the pall. When the mourners had turned away, Mr. Audley saw a slender lad standing by, waiting till the grave was smoothed to lay on it a wreath of delicate white roses and ferns. There was no mistaking the clear olive face; and indeed Mr. Audley had kept up a regular correspondence with Ferdinand Travis, and knew that the vows made two years ago had been so far persevered in, and without molestation from father or uncle. He had written an account of Mrs. Underwood's death, but had received no answer.

'This is kind, Ferdinand,' he said, 'it will gratify them.'

'May I see any of them?' the youth asked.

'Felix and Lance will be most glad.'

'I only received your letter yesterday evening. Dr. White forwarded it to me in London, and I persuaded my father to let me come down.'

'You are with your father?'

'Yes; he came home about a fortnight ago. I was going to write to you. O Mr. Audley, if you are not in haste, can you tell me whether I can see my dear Diego's grave?'

'The Roman Catholic burial-ground is on the other side of the town. I think you will have to go to Mr. Macnamara for admittance. Come home with me first, Fernan.'

'Home!' he said warmly. 'Yes, it has always seemed so to me! I have dreamt so often of her gentle loving face and tender weak voice. She was very kind to me;' and he raised his hat reverently, as he placed the flowers upon the now completed grave. 'I saw that all were here except the little ones and Geraldine,' he added. 'How is she?'

'As well as usual. Wilmet is a good deal worn and downcast, but all are calm and cheerful. The loss cannot be like what that of their father was.'

'Will they go on as they are doing now?'

'I trust so. I am going down to the family consultation. The London cousin is there.'

'Then perhaps I had better not come in,' said Ferdinand, looking rather blank. 'Shall I go down to Mr. Macnamara first?'

'Had you rather go alone, or shall I send Lance to show you the way?'

'Dear little Lance, pray let me have him!'

'It is a longish walk. Is your lameness quite gone?'

'Oh yes, I can walk a couple of miles very well, and when I give out it is not my leg, but my back. They say it is the old jar to the spine, and that it will wear off when I have done growing, if I get plenty of air and riding. This will not be too much for me, but I must be in time for the 3.30 train, I promised my father.'

'Is he here alone?'

'Yes, my uncle is in Brazil. My father is here for a month, and is very kind; he seems very fairly satisfied with me; and he wants me to get prepared for the commission in the Life Guards.'

'The Life Guards!'

'You see he is bent on my being an English gentleman, but he has some dislike to the University, fancies it too old-world or something; and, honestly, I cannot wish it myself. I can't take much to books, and Dr. White says I have begun too late, and shall never make much of them.'

'If you went into the Guards, my brother might be a friend to you.'

'My back is not fit for the infantry,' said Ferdinand, 'but I can ride anything; I always could. I care for nothing so much as horses.'

'Then why not some other cavalry regiment?'

'Well, my father knows a man with a son in the Life Guards, who has persuaded him that it is the thing, and I don't greatly care.'

'Is he prepared for the expensiveness?'

'I fancy it is the recommendation,' said Ferdinand, smiling with a little shame; 'but if you really see reason for some other choice perhaps you would represent it to him. I think he would attend to you in person.'

'Have you positively no choice, Fernan?'

'I never like the bother of consideration,' said Ferdinand, 'and in London I might have more chance of seeing you and other friends sometimes. I do know that it is not all my father supposes, but he thinks it is all my ignorance, and I have not much right to be particular.'

'Only take care that horses do not become your temptation,' said Mr. Audley.

'I know,' gravely replied Ferdinand. 'The fact is,' he added, as they turned down the street, 'that I do not want to go counter to my father if I can help it. I have not been able to avoid vexing him, and this is of no great consequence. I can exchange, if it should not suit me.'

'I believe you are right,' said the Curate; 'but I will inquire and write to you before the application is made. Wait, and I will send out Lance. But ought you not to call at the Rectory?'

'I will do so as I return,' said Ferdinand; and as Mr. Audley entered the house, he thought that the making the Cacique into an English gentleman seemed to have been attained as far as accent, mind, and manner went, and the air and gesture had always been natural in him. His tone rather than his words were conclusive to the Curate that his heart had never swerved from the purpose with which he had stood at the Font; but the languor and indolence of the voice indicated that the tropical indifference was far from conquered, and it was an anxious question whether the life destined for him might not be exceptionally perilous to his peculiar temperament of nonchalance and excitability.

Consideration was not possible just then, for when Mr. Audley opened the door, he found that he had been impatiently waited for, and barely time was allowed to him to send Lance to Ferdinand Travis,

before he was summoned to immediate conference with Thomas Underwood, who, on coming in, had assumed the management of affairs, and on calling for the will, was rather displeased with Felix's protest against doing anything without Mr. Audley, whom he knew to have been named guardian by his father. The cousin seemed unable to credit the statement; and Wilmet had just found the long envelope with the black seal, exactly as it had lain in the desk, which had never been disturbed since the business on their father's death had been finished.

There was the old will made long before, leaving whatever there was to leave unconditionally to the wife, with the sole guardianship of the children; and there was the codicil dated the 16th of October 1854, appointing Charles Somerville Audley, clerk, to the guardianship in case of the death of the mother, while they should all, or any of them, be under twenty-one, and directing that in that contingency the property should be placed in his hands as trustee, the interest to be employed for their maintenance, and the capital to be divided equally among them, each receiving his or her share on coming of age. All this was in Edward Underwood's own handwriting, and his signature was attested by the Rector and the doctor.

Thomas Underwood was more 'put out,' than the management of such an insignificant sum seemed to warrant. He was no doubt disappointed of his cousin's confidence, as well as of some liberal (if domineering) intentions; and he was only half appeased when Edgar pointed to the date, and showed that the arrangement had been made before the renewal of intercourse. 'It was hardly fair to thrust a charge upon a stranger when there was a relation to act. Poor Edward, he ought to have trusted,' he said. There was genuine kindness of heart in the desire to confer benefits, though perhaps in rather an overbearing spirit, as well as disappointment and hurt feeling that his cousin had acquiesced in his neglect without an appeal. However, after asking whether Mr. Audley meant to act, and hearing of his decided intention of doing so, he proceeded to state his own plans for them. The present state of things could not continue, and he proposed that Wilmet and Geraldine should go as half boarders to some school, to be prepared for governesses. Felix--could he write shorthand? 'Oh yes; but--' Then he knew of a capital opening for him, a few years, and he would be on the way to prosperity: the little ones might be boarded with their old nurse till fit for some clergy orphan schools; if the means would not provide for all, there need be no difficulty made on that score.

Mr. Audley saw Felix's start of dismay and glance at him, but knowing as he did that the lad was always more himself when not interfered with, and allowed to act for himself, he only said, 'It is very kind in you, sir, but I think Felix should be consulted.'

'It is impossible!' began Felix hastily.

'Impossible! It is quite impossible, I would have you to understand, that a lot of children like you should keep house together, and on

such an income as that. Quite preposterous.'

'As for that,' said Felix, still unsubmissively, 'it is only what we have been doing, except for the name of the thing, for the last three years on the same means.'

'You don't mean to tell me that you have kept things going on such means without a debt?'

'Of course we have! We never let a bill run,' said Felix, slightly indignant.

'Now mind, I'm not insulting you, Felix, but I know what the women are and what they tell us. Are you sure of that? No debts--honour bright?'

'None at all!' said Felix, with an endeavour at calmness, but glowing hotly. 'I help my sister make up her books every Saturday night. We always pay ready money.'

'Humph,' said Mr. Underwood, still only half convinced. 'Living must be cheap at Bexley.'

'You had better explain a little, Felix,' said Mr. Audley.

Felix did bring himself to say, 'I am sub-editor now, and get 100 pounds a year, besides being paid for any article I write. Wilmet has 25 pounds a year and her dinner, and Angela's at school, so there are only five of us constantly dining at home, and with Mr. Audley's two guineas a week we can do very well.'

'What, you lodge here?'

'Did not you know that?' said Felix surprised.

Mr. Underwood gave a whistle, and the Curate felt his cheeks growing redder and redder, as he perceived that seven-and-twenty was not considered as so very much older than eighteen. Edgar understood and smiled, but Felix only thought he was suspected of making a good thing of his lodger, and was beginning something awkward about, 'It is all kindness,' when Mr. Audley broke in--

'Of course nothing is settled yet, but--but I believe I shall change my quarters. A smaller house would be better for them; but I think the children should keep together. Indeed, my dear friend said he chiefly appointed me that Felix might be kept at their head.'

Thereupon Mr. Underwood began to expostulate against the sacrifice of position and talent that Felix was making for the sake of bearing the burthen of a family that would have pressed heavily on a man double his age. It was what Felix already knew, much better than when at sixteen he had made his first venture. He had experienced the effects of change of station, as well as of exertion, drudgery, and of the

home hardship that no one except Mr. Audley had tried to sweeten. He saw how Edgar had acquired the nameless air and style that he was losing, how even Clement viewed him as left behind; and, on the other hand, he knew that with his own trained and tested ability and application, and his kinsman's patronage, there was every reasonable chance of his regaining a gentleman's position, away from that half-jealous, half-conceited foreman, who made every day a trial to him, and looked at him with an evil eye as a supplanter in the post of confidence. But therewith he thought of his father's words, that to him he left this heavy burthen, and he thought what it would be to have no central home, no place of holiday-meeting, no rallying-point for the boys and girls, and to cast off the little ones to hired service, this alternative never seriously occurred to him, for were they not all bound to him by the cords of love, and most closely the weakest and most helpless? Yet his first reply did not convey the weight of his determination. It was only 'Geraldine is too delicate.'

'Well, well, good advice and treatment might make a change. Or, if she be fit for nothing else, would not that Sisterhood at Dearport take her on reasonable terms? Not that I can away with such nonsense, but your father had his fancies.'

'My father wished us not to break up the home.'

'That was all very well when your poor mother was alive. You have been a good son to her, but it is impossible that you and your sister, mere children as you are, should set up housekeeping by yourselves. Mr. Audley must see it cannot be suffered; it is the bounden duty of your friends to interfere.'

Mr. Audley did not speak. He knew that Felix could reckon on his support; and, moreover, that the youth would show himself to greater advantage when not interfered with. So after pausing to see whether his guardian would speak, Felix said, 'Of course we are in Mr. Audley's power, but he knows that we have made some trial, and except in name we have really stood alone for these three years. Wilmet can quite manage the house, and it would be misery for ever to us all to have no home. In short--' and Felix's face burnt, his voice choked, and his eyes brimmed over with hot indignant tears, as he concluded, 'it shall never be done with my good will.'

'And under the circumstances,' said Mr. Audley, 'I think Felix is right.'

'Very well,' said Thomas Underwood, much displeased. 'I have no power here, and if you and that lad think he can take charge of a house and a dozen children, you must have it your own way. Only, when they have all gone to rack and ruin, and he is sick of being a little tradesman in a country town, he will remember what I said.'

Felix forced back his resentful feelings, and contrived to say, 'Yes, sir, I know it is a great disadvantage, and that you only wish for our good; but I do not think anything would be so bad for the

children as to be all cast about the world, with no place to go to, and becoming strangers to one another; and since there is this way of keeping them together, it seems right.'

The steadiness of his manner struck Mr. Underwood, and the reply was not unkind.

'You are a good boy at bottom, Felix, and mean well, and I am only sorry not to be able to hinder you from throwing yourself away for life by trying to do what is morally impossible, in a foolish spirit of independence. Do not interrupt. I warn you that I am not to be appealed to for getting you out of the difficulties you are plunging into; but of course your brother and sister will be mine as before; and as I promised myself to do the same by your mother as by your father--my near cousins both--here is to cover necessary expenses.'

It was a cheque for 150, pounds the same as he had given on the former occasion; and though Felix had rather not have taken it, he had little choice, and he brought himself to return cold but respectful thanks; and Mr. Underwood did not manifest any more displeasure, but showed himself very kind at the meal that was spread in Mr. Audley's sitting-room, and even invited Wilmet to accompany Alda, when she joined the family in a week's time at Brighton, so as to have sea air for the remainder of her holidays.

Nothing could be more reluctant than was Wilmet at first, but there was a chorus of persuasions and promises; and the thought of being a little longer in Alda's presence made her waver and almost consent.

Ferdinand Travis came in, but had only time for a greeting and a hasty meal, before Mr. Underwood's carriage came round; and, nothing loth, he gave a lift to the Mexican millionaire to the station with him and Edgar. So, for the last time, had all the thirteen been at home together.

CHAPTER X

THE FAMILY COBWEB ON THE MOVE

'Oh! the auld house, the auld house,
What though the rooms were wee;
Oh! kind hearts were dwelling there,
And bairnies full of glee.'

Lady Nairn.

Every one except Edgar would, it was hoped, stay at home till after the Epiphany, that most marked anniversary of birth and death.

Clement at first declared it impossible, for St. Matthew's could not dispense with him on the great day; and Fulbert grinned, and nudged Lance at his crest-fallen looks, when he received full leave of absence for the next three weeks.

But Lance was bursting with reverse troubles. The same post had brought him a note from his organist; and that 'stupid old Dean' as he irreverently called him, had maliciously demanded 'How beautiful are the feet,' with the chorus following, and nobody in the choir was available to execute the solo but Lance. He had sung it once or twice before; and if he had the music, and would practise at home, he need only come up by the earliest train on the Epiphany morning; if not, he must arrive in time for a practice on the 5th; he would be wanted at both the festival and Sunday services, but might return as early as he pleased on Monday the 9th.

Lance did not receive the summons in an exemplary spirit. It is not certain that he did not bite it. He rolled on the floor, and contorted himself in convulsions of vexation; he 'bothered' the Dean, he 'bothered' the Precentor, he 'bothered' the Organist, he 'bothered' Shapcote's sore throat, he 'bothered' Harewood's wool-gathering wits, he 'bothered' his own voice, and thereby caused Clement to rebuke him for foolish murmurs instead of joy in his gift.

'A fine gift to rejoice in, to make one be whipped off by an old fogey, when one most wants to be at home! I thank my stars I can't sing!' said Fulbert.

'I should thank mine if Bill Harewood had any sense,' said Lance, sitting up in a heap on the floor. 'He can go quite high enough when he pleases; only, unluckily, a goose of a jackdaw must needs get into the cathedral just as Bill had got to sing the solo in "As pants the hart;" and there he stood staring with his mouth wide open--and no wonder, for it was sitting on the old stone-king's head! Wasn't Miles in a rage; and didn't he vow he'd never trust a solo to Harewood again if he knew it! Oh, I say, Wilmet--Fee, I know! Do let me bring Bill back with me on Monday morning; and he could go by the six o'clock train. Oh, jolly!'

'But is he really a nice boy, Lance?' asked Wilmet, doubtfully.

'Oh, isn't he just? You'll see! His father is a Vicar-choral, you know, lives in our precincts; his private door just opposite ours, and 'tis the most delicious house you ever saw! You may make as much row as you please, and nobody minds!'

'I know who Mr. Harewood is. Librarian too, is he not?' said Felix.

'I have heard people laughing about his good-natured wife.'

'Aren't they the people who were so kind to you last year, Lance,' asked Cherry, 'when you could not come home because of the measles?'

'Of course. Do let me bring him, Fee,' entreated Lance; 'he is no end of a chap--captain of our form almost always--and such a brick at cricket! I told him I'd show him the potteries, and your press, and our organ, and everything--and it is such a chance when we are all at home! I shall get the fellows to believe now that my sisters beat all theirs to shivers.'

'Can you withstand that flattering compliment, Wilmet?' said Felix, laughing. 'I can't!'

'He is very welcome,' said Wilmet; 'only, Lance, he must not stay the night, for there really is not room for another mouse.'

The little girls had heard so much about Bill Harewood, that they were much excited; but their sympathy kindly compensated for the lack of that of the elder brothers. Fulbert pronounced that a cathedral chorister could never be any great shakes; and Clement could not forgive one who had been frivolous enough to be distracted by a jackdaw; but Lance, trusting to his friend's personal attractions to overcome all prejudice, trotted blithely off to the organist-schoolmaster, to beg the loan of the music, and received a promise of a practice in church in the evening. Meantime, he begged Clement to play the accompaniment for him on the old piano. Neither boy knew that it had been scarcely opened since their father's hand had last lingered fondly upon it. Music had been found to excite their mother to tears; Geraldine resembled Fulbert in unmusicalness, and Wilmet had depended on school, the brothers on their choir-practice, so that the sound was like a new thing in the house; nor was any one prepared either for the superiority of Clement's playing, or for the exceeding beauty and sweetness of Lance's singing. No one who appreciated the rare quality of his high notes wondered that he was indispensable; Geraldine could hardly believe that the clear exquisite proclamation, that came floating as from an angel voice, could really come from the little, slight, grubby, dusty urchin, who stood with clasped hands and uplifted face; and Clement himself--though deferring the communication till Lance was absent, lest it should make him vain--confided to Wilmet that they had no such voice at St Matthew's, and it was a shame to waste him on Anglicans.

Wilmet hardly entered into this enormity. She had made a discovery which interested her infinitely more. Little Theodore, hitherto so inanimate, had sat up, listened, looked with a dawning of expression in the eyes that had hitherto been clear and meaningless as blue porcelain, and as the music ceased, his inarticulate hummings continued the same tune. Could it be that the key to the dormant senses was found? His eyes turned to the piano, and his finger pointed to it as soon as he found himself in the room with it, and the airs he heard were continually reproduced in his murmuring sounds; that 'How beautiful!' which had first awakened the gleam--his own birthday anthem--being sure to recur at sight of Lance; while a doleful Irish croon, Sibby's regular lullaby, always served for her, and the 'Hardy Norseman' for Felix, who had sometimes whistled it to him. Wilmet spent every available moment in awaking the smile on the

little waxen face that had never responded before; it seemed to be just the cheering hope she needed to revive her spirits, only she was almost ready to renounce her journey with Alda for the sake of cultivating the new-found faculty.

No one would permit this; and indeed, so far from waiting to be exhibited to Lance's friend, the two sisters received their billet de route on the very day he was expected; and there was no appeal, since a housekeeper was to travel from Centry, who would take charge of them to London, whence they would go down with Mr. Underwood. Poor Wilmet was much dismayed at leaving Geraldine to what they both regarded as the unprecedented invasion of a strange boy; indeed, the whole charge made Cherry's heart quail, though she said little of her fears, knowing the importance of Wilmet's having and enjoying her holiday; and Mr. Audley promised extra aid in keeping order among the boys.

But as they came in that evening from the practice at the church, to which Clement had insisted on their coming to hear Lance, Mr. Audley beckoned Felix to his room with the words, 'There's a thing I want to talk over with you.'

Felix recollected those ominous words to Mr. Underwood, and stood warming his hands in dread of what might be coming. It was all he feared.

'I wanted to say--I wanted to tell you--' began Mr. Audley. 'I would not have chosen this time, but that I think it may save Wilmet something to be able to tell her friends that the present arrangement is to cease.'

'Wilmet!' exclaimed Felix; then bethinking himself. 'Was that what Tom Underwood meant? But you will not trouble yourself about such rubbish.'

'Well, you see,' began the Curate, with heightening colour, 'it can't be denied that your sister has grown up, and that things are changed.'

'Mrs. Froggatt did ask me if you were going on here,' said Felix, still unconvinced; 'but can't we leave people to be stupid without interfering with us?'

'Felix, you ought to be a better protector to your sisters. You would not like to have my Lady remonstrating--nay, maybe writing to my mother: she is quite capable of it.'

Felix's cheeks were in a flame. 'If people would mind their own business,' he said; 'but if they will have it so--'

'They are right, Felix,' said the Curate quietly; 'appearances must be carefully heeded, and by you almost more than by any one. Your slowness to understand me makes me almost doubtful about my further

design.'

'Not going away altogether!'

'Not immediately; but things stand thus--Dr. White, my old tutor, you know, and Fernan's, is nearly sure of the new Bishopric in Australia, and he wants me.'

Felix hardly repressed a groan.

'Any way I should not go immediately; but when your father spoke to me about the guardianship, he made me promise not to let it stand in the way of any other call. I fancied he had mission work in his mind, and it disposes me the more to think I ought not to hold back; but while your dear mother lived, I would not have gone.'

'Yes, you have been very good to us,' was all Felix could say. 'But when?'

'Not for some time; but I am not going this moment. Three months' notice Mr. Bevan must have, and if he requires it, six; I must spend some time at home, and very like shall not be off till you are of age--certainly not if I find there is any difficulty in handing the management of things over to you. How long I remain with you must depend on circumstances. How much notice must you give before leaving this house?'

'I do not know--half a year, I fancy. You think we ought to give it up? I suppose it is too large for us now.'

'And you could take no lodger but one of the old-lady type.'

'Horrid!' said Felix. 'Well, we will see; but it will be a great stroke on poor Cherry--she can remember nothing before this house.'

'It will be very good for her to have no old associations to sit brooding over.'

'My poor little Cherry! If I saw how to cheer up her life; but without your lessons it will be more dreary for her than ever!'

'Give her all you can to do, and do not be over-careful to keep your anxieties from her knowledge. She is very much of a woman, and if you leave her too much to herself, she will grow more introspective.'

'Wilmet and I have always wanted to shelter her; she never seems fit for trouble, and she is so young!'

'Compared with you two venerable people!' said Mr. Audley, smiling. 'But her mind is not young, and to treat her as a child is the way to make her prey upon herself. I wish her talent could be more cultivated; but meantime nothing is better for her than the care of Bernard and Stella. I hope you will not be in a hurry to promote them

out of her hands.'

'Very well; but she will miss you sorely.'

'I hope to see her brightened before I am really gone, and I am not going to decamp from this house till some natural break comes. To do that would be absurd!'

There was a silence; and then Felix said with a sigh, 'Yes, a smaller house, and one servant. I will speak to Wilmet.'

'Perhaps you had better, so that she may have an answer in case she is attacked.'

Wilmet was aghast at first, but a hint from Alda made her acquiesce, not with blushing consciousness, but with the perception that the way of the world was against the retention of the lodger; and sorry as she was to lose Mr. Audley, her housewifely mind was not consoled, but distracted, by calculations on the difference of expenditure. Again she tried to beg herself off from her visit, in the dread that Felix would go and take some impracticable house in her absence--some place with thin walls, no cupboards, and no coal-hole; and she was only pacified by his solemn promise to decide on no house without her. She went away in an avalanche of kisses and tears, leaving Geraldine with a basketful of written instructions for every possible contingency, at which the anxious maiden sat gazing anxiously, trying to store her mind with its onerous directions.

'Shall I give you a piece of advice, Cherry?' said the Curate, as he saw the dark eyebrows drawn together.

'Oh, do!' she earnestly said.

'Put all that in the fire!'

'Mr. Audley!'

'And go by the light of nature! You have just as many senses as Wilmet, and almost as much experience; and as to oppressing yourself with the determination to do the very, thing she would have done under all circumstances, it is a delusion. People must act according to their own nature, not some one else's.'

'Certainly,' said Geraldine, smiling. 'I could never walk stately in and say, "Now, boys!"--and much they would care for it if I did.'

'It seems to be a case for "Now, boys!" at this moment,' said Mr. Audley; 'what can all that row be?'

'Oh, it must be that dreadful strange boy, Lance's friend,' sighed Geraldine, almost turning pale. Then, trying to cheer up, 'But it is only for the day, and Lance wished it so much.'

As she spoke, the shout of 'Cherry, here's Bill!' came nearer, and the whole of the younger half of the family tumbled promiscuously into the room, introducing the visitor in the midst of them. To the elders, 'no end of a chap' appeared, as Mr. Audley said, to mean all ends of shock hair, and freckles up to the eyes; but when Fulbert and Lance had whirled him out again to see the lions of Bexley, Robina and Angela were overheard respectfully pronouncing that he was nice and spotty like the dear little frogs in the strawberry-beds at Catsacre, and that his hair was just the colour Cherry painted that of all the very best people in her 'holy pictures.'

The object of their admiration was seen no more till the middle of dinner, when all three appeared, immoderately dusty; and no wonder, for the organist had employed them to climb, sweep fashion, into the biggest organ-pipe to investigate the cause of a bronchial affection of long standing,--which turned out to be a dead bat caught in a tenacious cobweb.

Shortly after, the guest was found assisting Angela in a tableau, where a pen-wiper doll in nun's costume was enacting the exorcism of the said bat, in a cave built of wooden bricks.

Clement was undecided whether to condemn or admire; and Geraldine, to whom Edgar had lent some volumes of Ruskin, meditated on the grotesque.

Before there had been time for the fanciful sport to become rough comedy, Lance had called off his friend to see the potteries; and to poor Cherry's horror, she found that Robina had been swept off in the torrent of boyhood. Clement, pitying her despair and self-reproach, magnanimously offered to follow, and either bring the little maid back, or keep her out of harm's way; and for some time Cherry reposed in the conviction that 'Tina was as good as a girl any day.'

But at about a quarter to six, a little tap came to Mr. Audley's door, and Angela stood there, saying, with a most serious face, 'Please, Mr. Audley, Cherry wants to know whether you don't think something must have happened.' And going upstairs, he found the poor young deputy in a nervous agony of despair at the non-return of any of the party, quite certain that some catastrophe had befallen them, and divided between self-reproach and dread of the consequences.

'The very first day Wilmet had gone!' as she said.

It was almost time for Harewood's train, which made it all the more strange. Mr. Audley tried to reassure her by the probability that the whole party were convoying him to the station, and would appear when he was gone; but time confuted this pleasing hypothesis, and Cherry's misery was renewed. She even almost hinted a wish that Mr. Audley would go out and look for them.

'And then,' he said, smiling, 'in an hour's time you would be sending Felix to look for me. No, no, Cherry, these waiting times are often

hard, no doubt; but, as I fear you are one of those destined to "abide by the tents" instead of going out to battle, you had better learn to do your watching composedly.'

'O Mr. Audley! how can I? I know it must be very wrong, but how can I not care?' And verily the nervous sensitive girl was quivering with suspense.

"He will not be afraid of any evil tidings, for his heart standeth fast and believeth in the Lord," answered Mr. Audley. 'I see that does not tell you how not to be afraid; but I imagine that a few trusting ejaculations in the heart, and then resolute attention to something else, may be found a help.'

Cherry would have sighed that attention was the most impossible thing in the world; but before she had time to do so, Mr. Audley had begun to expound to her his Australian scheme. It excited her extremely; and as a year and a half seemed an immense period of time to her imagination, the dread of losing him was not so immediate as to damp her enthusiasm. They had discussed his plans for nearly an hour before Cherry started at the sound of the door, and then it was only Felix who entered. He was irate, but not at all alarmed; and presently the welcome clatter of steps approached, and in dashed the whole crew, mired up to the eyes, but in as towering spirits as ever.

Their delay had, it appeared, been caused by a long walk that ensued upon the visit to the potteries, and a wild venture of Will Harewood upon impracticable ice, which had made him acquainted with the depths of a horse-pond. There was none of the dignity of danger, for the depths were shallows and the water only rose to his waist; but the mud was above his ankles, and he had floundered out with some difficulty. He wanted to walk back with no more ceremony than a water-dog; but the Underwoods had made common cause against him, and had dragged him to a cottage, where he had the pleasing alternative of an old woman's blankets and petticoats while his garments were drying. He was as nearly angry as a Harewood could be, Lance observed, declaring that they should never have got him into the cottage without fighting him, if Tina had not been so tall, and if Robin had not nearly cried; while he, throwing off all responsibility, ascribed all his lateness to his friend's 'maggots.' No more trains stopped at Bexley till after midnight, but as to his absence causing any uneasiness at home, he laughed at the notion, and was corroborated by Lance in averring that they had too much sense; listening with undisguised amazement to the elaborate explanations and apologies about Robina, which Clement was scrupulously pouring forth to his brother and sister, saying that he would have brought her home at once, but that he really did not like to trust those boys alone.

Whereat Lance held up his hands with a dumb show of amazement that convulsed Fulbert, Bill Harewood, and Robina herself, with agonies of half-suppressed merriment. The boy had come in, prepared to be grave and quiet, as knowing how lately affliction had come to the family, and having been warned by Lance, that 'as to going on as we do in the

precincts, why it would make Cherry jump out of her skin.'

But by some extraordinary influence--whether it were the oddity of William Harewood's face, or the novelty of his perfect insouciance in the household whither care had come only too early--some infection seized on the young Underwoods, and before the end of the evening meal, if the 'goings on' were not equal to those in the precincts, they were, at any rate, not far short of it.

Lance presently incited his friend to show 'how he had mesmerised Lucy.' Clement made a horrified protest; and Geraldine looked alarmed at her eldest brother, who began, 'Indeed, Lance, we can have nothing of that sort here.'

'But, Felix, I do assure you there is no harm.'

'Upon my word and honour, there's not a spice of anything the Archbishop of Canterbury could stick at,' added Will Harewood.

'It is impossible there should not be harm,' interposed Clement; but the boys, including Fulbert, were in such fits of laughter, that Felix began to suspect the seriousness of the performance; and when Lance sprang at him, exclaiming, 'I'll go to Mr. Audley! Fee--Cherry--will you be satisfied if Mr. Audley says we may?' Felix and Cherry both consented; and Lance rushed off to make the appeal, and returned not only with full sanction, but with Mr. Audley himself, come to see the operation. This perfectly satisfied Felix, who even consented, on the entreaty of his brothers, to become the first subject; and Cherry knew that where the Curate and Felix had no scruples, she need have none; but, for all that, she was more than half frightened and uncomfortable--above all, when Clement, amid shouts of mirth from the three schoolboys, indignantly marched away to shut himself up in his cold bedroom.

By and by, after some unseen preparation--all the more mystifying because carried on in the kitchen, where Sibby always used to keep Theodore in a cradle till Felix was ready for him--Will Harewood caused Felix to stand exactly opposite to him and to the spectators, with a dinner-plate in his hand, and under injunctions to imitate the operator exactly. Armed with another plate, William rubbed his own finger first on the under side of the plate, and then, after some passes and flourishes, on his own forehead, entirely without effect so far as he himself was concerned; but his victim, standing meekly good-natured and unconscious, was seen by the ecstatic audience to be, at each pass, painting his own face with the soot from a flame over which his plate had been previously held. The shrieks of amusement redoubled at the perplexity they occasioned him, till they penetrated the upper rooms: and suddenly a cry of horror made all turn to the door and see a little white bare-footed figure standing there, transfixed with fright, which increased tenfold when Felix hurried towards it, not yet aware of the condition of his visage, until a universal shout warned him of it; while Lance, darting in pursuit, picked up Bernard, and by his wonderful caressing arts, and

partly by his special gift of coaxing, partly as the object of the little fellow's most fervent adoration, made the scattered senses take in that it was 'all play,' and even carried back the little white bundle, heart throbbing and eyes staring, but still secure in his arms, to admire Felix all black, and then to be further relieved by beholding the restoration of the natural hue at the pump below stairs.

Then amid Sibby's scoldings and assurances that the child would catch his death of cold, Bernard was borne upstairs again by Felix, who found Clement in the nursery comforting the little girls, and preventing them from following the example of their valiant pioneer. Felix, now thoroughly entering into the spirit of the joke, entertained for a moment the hope of entrapping Clement; but of course Bernard could not be silenced from his bold and rather doubtful proclamation, that 'The funny boy made Felix black his own face, and I wasn't afraid.'

'Naughty boy!' commented Stella. 'Poor Fee!'--and she reared up to kiss him, and stroke the cheeks that had suffered such an indignity.

'What! It was only a trick?' said Clement slowly, as if half mystified.

'Of course,' said Felix; 'could not you trust to that?'

'I don't know. Cathedrals are very lax, and it had a questionable name.'

'O Clem! if it had not been in you before, I should wish you had never gone to St. Matthew's. Come down now, don't let us disturb the little ones any longer. --Good-night, Angel; good-night, little star; we'll not make a row to wake you again.'

Clement, in a severe mood, followed Felix downstairs; but some wonderful spirit of frolic was on all the young people that night--a reaction, perhaps, from the melancholy that had so long necessarily reigned in that house, for though the fun was less loud, it was quite as merry: a course of riddles was going on; and Clement, who really was used to a great deal of mirth among the staff of St. Matthew's, absolutely unbent, and gloried in showing that even more conundrums were known there than by the house of Harewood. He was not strong in guessing them; but then Will Harewood made such undaunted and extraordinary shots at everything proposed, that the spirit of repartee was fairly awakened, and Cherry's bright delicate wit began to play, so that no one knew how to believe in the lateness of the hour, and still less that this was the same house that grave Wilmet had left that morning.

'Poor dear little Cherry!' said Felix to Mr. Audley, after helping her upstairs, 'she is quite spent with laughing; indeed my jaws ache, and she is ready to cry, as if it had been unfeeling.'

'Don't let her fancy that. We certainly were surprised into it to-night; but I only wish for her sake--for all your sakes--that you could keep the house merrier.'

Felix sighed. He too felt as if he had been betrayed into unbecoming levity; and though he would not dispute, his heart had only become the heavier. However, he did not forget, and when Cherry again breathed a little sigh as to what Wilmet would think of their first day, he stoutly averred that there was no use in drooping, and no harm in liveliness, and that no one had ever been so full of joyousness as their father.

She owned it. 'But--'

And that but meant the effects of the three years that she had spent as the companion of her mother's mournful widowhood, and of the cares of life on her elder brother and sister.

It was true, as Mr. Audley said, that the associations of the rooms were not good for her spirits in her many lonely hours and confined life; and this reconciled Felix more than anything else to the proposed change. He was keeping his promise to Wilmet of not seeking a house till her return, when Mr. and Mrs. Froggatt, whose minds had been much relieved by hearing that the lodger would consult the proprieties, communicated to him their own scheme of taking up their residence at a village named Marshlands, about two miles from Bexley, where they already spent great part of the summer in a pleasant cottage and garden which they had bought and adorned. Mr. Froggatt would drive in to attend to the business every day, but the charge of the house was the difficulty, as they did not wish to let the rooms; and they now proposed that the young Underwoods should inhabit them rent-free, merely keeping a bedroom and little parlour behind the shop for Mr. Froggatt, and providing firing in them. With much more diffidence, at his wife's earnest suggestion, the kindly modest old man asked whether Miss Underwood would object to his coming in to take a piece of bread and cheese when he was there in the middle of the day.

It was an excellent offer, and Felix had no hesitation in gratefully closing with it, even without consulting Wilmet. Her reply showed that a great weight was taken off her mind; and she was only longing to be at home again, contriving for the move, which was to take place at Lady Day. She was burning to study the new rooms; nevertheless, as by kind Marilda's contrivance, she was taking lessons in German every day from a superior Fraulein who had once been her cousin's governess, and was further allowed to inspect the working of a good school, her stay was extended, by Miss Pearson's entreaty, a full fortnight beyond what had been intended. Nor had anything gone wrong in her absence. Even the overlooking of the boys' linen, which she had believed impossible without her, was safely carried on by Cherry, and all were sent off in sound condition. No catastrophe occurred; and the continual occupation and responsibility drove away all the low spirits that so often had tried the home-keeping girl. She did

enjoy those tete-a-tete evenings, when Felix opened to her more than he had ever done before; and yet it was an immense relief to have the day fixed for Wilmet's return, and how much more to have her walking into the room with all the children clinging about her in incoherent ecstasy, which had not subsided enough for much comprehension when Felix came joyously in. 'Hurrah, Wilmet! Mr. Froggatt sent me home a couple of hours before time!'

'How very good! I met him in the street, just now. Really, he is the kindest old gentleman in the world!'

'I believe you dazzled him, Mettie; he says he did not know you till you spoke to him, and if he had realised what a beautiful and majestic young lady you were, he should hardly have ventured to propose your taking up your abode under his humble roof.'

'That must be the effect of living with Alda,' said Wilmet merrily; 'but, oh! I am glad to be at home again!'

'And I never was so glad of anything in my life,' said Geraldine eagerly.

'I am longing to go over the house, and know what to do about furniture,' continued Wilmet.

'There! now W. W. is herself again!' said Felix.

'Mrs. Froggatt came and called on me,' said Geraldine. 'She talked of leaving us the larger things that will not go into the cottage.'

'Which is well,' said Felix; 'for how much of ours will survive the shock of removing is doubtful.'

'All the things that came from Vale Leston are quite solid,' said Wilmet, bristling up.

'That carpet is solid darn,' said Felix. 'We tried one evening, and found that though the pattern of rose-leaves is a tradition, no one younger than Clem could remember having seen either design or colour.'

'You should not laugh at it, Felix,' said Wilmet, a little hurt: for indeed her mother's needle and her own were too well acquainted with the carpet for her to like to hear it contemned.

Felix and Cherry both felt somewhat called to order, as if their mistress had come home again; and Cherry was the first to break silence by inquiring after Wilmet's studies at Brighton.

'Oh yes,' said Wilmet, 'I do hope I am improved. That was all Marilda's kindness. She quite understood how I missed everybody and everything; and at last, one day, when I was wishing I could pronounce German like Alda, and that Alda had time to give me some

lessons--'

'Alda hasn't time!'

'Oh, you don't know how useful she is! She writes all the notes. Marilda devised getting this Fraulein--such a good-natured woman! and when she heard what I wanted, she got leave for me to come every day to study the working of the school. I do believe I shall teach much better now, if only I were not so ignorant. I never had any notion before how little I knew!'

However, Wilmet's value had really risen so much in consequence of these instructions, that Miss Pearson arranged that she should lay the French and German foundations, and prepare the scholars, and should receive half a sovereign a half year from each girl whom she thus instructed, being the moiety of 'extra.' Moreover, the head teacher talked of retiring, and her succession was promised to Wilmet--a brilliant prospect, that the sight of Alda's grandeur did not make her contemn.

Wilmet's anxious mind was well satisfied by her inspection of the new quarters, which, among other conveniences, had that of shortening by ten minutes her walk to school. The family apartments were all upstairs, the space below being entirely taken up by the business, and the kitchens were under ground. The chief sitting-room upstairs was unfortunately towards the street, and had a northern aspect; it was a spacious room, with three large windows filled with boxes of flowers, and contained a big table and two sofas, which, with the carpet and curtains, would remain well covered up. Folding-doors led into a smaller room, with a south window towards the little garden, where Mrs. Froggatt generally sat, and which had been used for the dining-room. There were two bedrooms besides on the same floor, one of which would remain untouched for Mr. Froggatt; and above these, there was a large nursery, and more rooms than had been ever furnished. Rent, rates, taxes, and repairs, all off her mind! Wilmet felt as if prosperity were setting in; and she was the first to make the audacious statement that they need not part with Martha, and indeed, that the house could not be kept in order, nor dinners cooked fit for Mr. Froggatt, by Sibby single-handed. And Cherry made up her mind that they were like a family of caterpillars moving their cobweb tent; Angela, seeing such an establishment of young tortoise-shells, in their polished black, under their family web, had asked, 'Which was their brother Felix?' and the name was adopted.

So a time of much business and excitement set in, and the lengthening spring evenings were no sinecure to Wilmet, as the flitting day approached, being rather hurried on by the old bookseller, who wanted to be at Marshlands in time to admire his hyacinths and sow his annuals. Mr. Audley would take rooms at the Fortinbras Arms for the remainder of his stay at Bexley; and indeed, there was a good deal to break the old habit of constantly depending on him, for his brother's young wife was slowly dying in London, and the whole family seemed instinctively to turn to him for comfort and advice, so that he was

obliged to be continually going backwards and forwards.

On the 24th of March, when he came down by an afternoon train, he found the house door open, the steps scattered with straw, and after looking in and seeing his own parlour intact, and with a cheerful fire, he pursued his way upstairs, and there found the sitting-room bare except for a sort of island consisting of the sofa, on which Geraldine lay rolled in cloaks and shawls, trying to amuse the twins by a feeble attempt to sing

'Weel may the boatie row,'

while making paper boats for Stella to drag by strings upon the smooth boards.

'Eh, Cherry, are you the Last Man, or the Last Rose of Summer?'

'The last of the caterpillars,' said Cherry, smiling, but with effort. 'Do you see Stella's fleet--just thirteen?'

'Making omens, foolish child!' but though Stella was eagerly pointing and explaining, 'Tat Tella's boat--tat Tedo's--tat brothers--tat Angel,' and so on, the word foolish was not directed to the little one, but to the gray eyes heavy with unshed tears, that rested wistfully upon a wreck that had caught upon a nail and lay rent and ragged.

'Pray don't look which it is,' said she.

'Certainly not; I hate auguries.'

'Do you think there is nothing in them?'

'I think there is nothing in this room but what ought to be in mine. Do you expect me to stand discussing superstition in this horrible raw emptiness? Here,' picking up Theodore, 'I'll come back for you.'

'Oh no, thank you, let me get down by myself; he cannot be left alone in a room.'

'Come, Stella, and take care of him.'

'That's worse, she leads him into mischief. We are fox, goose, and cabbage. Please give me my crutch; Wilmet put it out of reach because she said I was destroying myself.'

'You are tired to death.'

'Oh no; but one can't sit still when so much is going on. Oh, how delicious!' as after an interval she arrived, and found Mr. Audley winding up a musical box, which Theodore was greeting with its own

tunes, and Stella with a dance and chant of 'Sing box--sing box;' and then the two sat listening to the long cycle of tunes which would hold Theodore entranced for any length of time.

After a short inquiry and a reply as to the sister-in-law's state, and a few words on the progress of the flitting, there was a silence while Mr. Audley read the letters that had come for him in his absence, and Cherry's face became more and more pensive. At last, when Mr. Audley laid down his letters, and leant against the chimneypiece, she ventured to say, 'Is it wrong?'

'Is what wrong?' said the Curate, who had quite forgotten the subject.

'To care about omens.'

'That depends. To accept them is sometimes necessary; to look out for them is generally foolish and often wrong.'

'Sometimes necessary?' said Cherry eagerly.

'Sometimes experience seems to show that in good Providence a merciful preparation is sent not so much to lead to anticipations, as to bring the mind into keeping with what is coming, and, as it were, attune it.'

'So that little things may be constantly types of great future ones?'

'My dear Cherry, I said not constantly.'

'Just let me tell you. Sibby says that the very day we all came into this poor old house, just as the omnibus stopped, there was the knell ringing overhead, and a funeral coming up the street. She knew it was a token, and burst out crying; and dear Mamma, who you know never shed tears, turned as white as a corpse, as if she was struck to the heart.'

'And your father?'

'Oh! Sibby said he just stood in the doorway, lifted his hat as the funeral passed and then well-nigh carried Mamma, with the baby (that was Fulbert) in her arms, over the threshold, and smiled at her, saying, "Well, mother, what better than to have found our home till death!" So you see he did believe in it.'

'I see he wanted to cheer her spirits, not by saying "stuff and nonsense," but reminding her that there are worse things than death. Have you an omen on your mind, Cherry? Have it out; don't let it sink in.'

'Only please don't laugh at me. Indeed, it was not my own doing, but Stella's fancy to have a boat for each of us, when she was launching them; and I could not help recollecting how we are all starting out

and away from our first home.'

'Stella's was not a very perilous ocean.'

'That was a comfort at first; and Stella tried to draw all the thirteen lines together, but they tangled, and one thread broke, and that boat was left behind; and one poor crooked ill-made thing fell over, and was left at home because hindering all the rest, and even Stella knew that was me, and--'her voice quivered, 'one was caught on a nail, and torn into a wreck! Now, can I help thinking, though you'll just call them newspaper-boats, dragged by a baby on a dry dusty floor?'

'Watched by a weary fanciful damsel,' said Mr. Audley, sitting down by her, 'who does not know a bit more than she did before, that all are launching on a sea, and if it is a rougher one, there's a better Guiding Star than Stella Eudora to lead them, and they have compasses of their own--ay, and a Pilot. And if there are times when He seems to be asleep in the ship--why, even the owner of the unseaworthy boat left at home can show the Light, and pray on till the others are roused to awaken Him.

'I wish there had not been that wreck,' she sighed.

'What seems a wreck need not be really one,' said Mr. Audley. 'It may be the very way of returning to the right course. And by and by we shall see our Master standing on the shore in the morning light.'

At that moment there was a sound at the door--Felix had accompanied Cherry's chair, to bring her and Theodore to the new home. There was too much haste for the wistful last looks she intended: she was deposited in the chair with Theodore on her knee, Stella trotting after, with Felix and Mr. Audley who was coming to see the inauguration. St. Oswald's Buildings were left behind, and she was drawn up to the green private door, beside the shop window; Wilmet hurried down and took Theodore from her; Felix helped her out, and up the narrow steep staircase, which certainly was not a gain, but when landed in the drawing-room, the space seemed to her magnificent. And their own furniture, the two or three cherished portraits brought from Vale Leston, their father's chair, their mother's sofa, the silk patchwork table-cover that had been the girl's birthday present to Mamma, the bookcase with Papa's precious books, made it seem home-like.

'The mantelpiece is just the same!' cried Cherry, delighted, as she recognised all the old ornaments.

The next moment her delight was great at the flower-stands, which Mr. Froggatt had kindly left full of primulas, squills, and crocuses; and when she looked out from the back room into the little garden, where Mr. Froggatt's horticultural tastes had long found their sole occupation, and saw turf, green laurels, and bunches of snowdrops and crocuses, she forgot all Stella's launch!

CHAPTER XI

THE CHORAL FESTIVAL

'And with ornaments and banners,
As becomes gintale good manners,
We made the loveliest tay-room upon Shannon shore.'

THACKERAY.

'Of course, after _this_, ' said Lady Price, 'Miss Underwood did not expect to be visited.'

Otherwise the gain was great. The amusement of looking out of window into the High Street was alone a perpetual feast to the little ones, and saved Geraldine worlds of anxiety; and the garden, where they could be turned out to play, was prized as it only could be by those who had never had any outlet before. It was a pleasant little long narrow nook, between the printing-house on the west, and such another garden on the east, a like slip, with a wall masked by ivy and lilacs, and overshadowed by a horse-chestnut meeting it on the south. It was not smoky, and was quite quiet, save for the drone and stamp of the steam-press; there was grass, a gum-cistus and some flower-beds in the centre, and a gravel-walk all round, bordered by narrow edgings of flowers, and with fruit trees against the printing-house wall, and a Banksia and Wisteria against that of the house. Mr. Froggatt was quite touched at the reverence with which Angela and Stella regarded even the daisies that had eluded his perpetual spud; and when he found out the delight it was to Cherry to live with flowers for the first time in her life, he seldom failed to send her a bunch of violets or some other spring beauty as soon as he arrived in the morning, and kept the windows constantly supplied with plants.

The old bookseller was at first very much afraid of his new inmates. To Felix he was used, but he looked on the sisters as ladies, and to ladies, except on business-terms, he was much less accustomed than to gentlemen. Besides, being a thorough gentleman himself at heart, he had so much delicacy as to be afraid of hurting their feelings by seeming at home in his own house, and he avoided being there at luncheon for a whole week, until one afternoon Felix ran up to say that he was sure Mr. Froggatt had a cold, and would be glad if a cup of tea appeared in his parlour. Gratitude brought him in to face the enemy; and after he had been kept at home for a day or two by the cold, his wife's injunctions and Felix's entreaties brought him to the dinner.

It happened to be one of Wilmet's favourite economical stews; but

these were always popular in the family, though chiefly composed of scraps, pot-liquor, rice, and vegetables, and both for its excellence and prudence it commanded Mr. Froggatt's unqualified approbation. All that distressed his kind heart was to see no liquor but water, except Cherry's thimbleful of port; he could not enjoy his glass of porter, and shook his head--perhaps not without reason--when he found that his young assistant's diet was on no more generous scale, and was not satisfied by Felix's laughing argument that it was impossible to be more than perfectly healthy and strong. 'False economy,' said the old man in private; but Felix was not to be persuaded into what he believed to be an unnecessary drain on the family-finances, and was still more stout against the hint that if Redstone discovered this prudential abstinence, it might make him 'disagreeable.' Felix had gone his way regardless of far too many sneers for poverty and so-called meanness to make any concession on their account, though the veiled jealousy and guarded insolence of that smart 'gent' the foreman had been for the last three years the greatest thorn in his side. And at least he made this advance, that the errand-boy cleaned the shoes!

Geraldine, though shy at first from the utter seclusion in which she had lived, put forth a pretty bashful graciousness that perfectly enchanted Mr. Froggatt, who was besides much touched by her patient helplessness. He became something between her grandfather and her knight, loading her with flowers, giving her the run of the circulating library, and whenever it was fine enough, taking her for a mile or two in his low basket-carriage either before or after his day's business in the shop. It was not exactly like being with her only other friend, Mr. Audley; but he was a thoroughly kind, polite, and by no means unlettered old man; and Geraldine enjoyed and was grateful, while the children were his darlings, and were encouraged to take all manner of liberties with him.

Among the advantages of the change was the having Felix always at hand; and though she really did not see him oftener in the course of the day than at St. Oswald's Buildings, still the knowing him to be within reach gave great contentment to Cherry. The only disadvantage was that he lost his four daily walks to and fro, and hardly ever had sufficient fresh air and exercise. He was indeed on his feet for the most of the day, but not exerting his muscles; and all taste for the active sports in which his kind old master begged him to join seemed to have passed away from him when care fell upon him. He tried not to hold his head above the young men of his adopted rank, many of whom had been his school-fellows; but, except with the members of the choir and choral society, he had no common ground, and there were none with whom he could form a friendship. Thus he never had any real relaxation, except music, and his Sunday walks, besides his evenings with his sisters and of play with the children. It was not a natural life for a youth, but it seemed to suit with his disposition; for though not given to outbursts of animal spirits, he was always full of a certain strong and supporting cheerfulness.

Indeed, though they did not like to own it to themselves, the young

people had left behind them much of the mournfulness of the widowed household, which had borne down their youthful spirits; and though the three elders could never be as those who had grown up without care or grief, yet their sunshine could beam forth once more, and helped them through the parting with their best friend. For Mr. Audley's sister-in-law died in the beginning of June, and his father entreated him to go abroad with his brother, so that he was hurried away directly after midsummer, after having left his books in Felix's charge, and provided for the reception of the dividends in his absence.

His successor was a quiet amiable young Mr. Bisset, not at all disinclined to cultivate Felix as a link with the tradesfolk; only he had brought with him a mother, a very nice, prim, gentle-mannered, black-eyed lady, who viewed all damsels of small means as perilous to her son. Had she been aware that Bexley contained anything so white and carnation, so blue-eyed and straight-featured, so stately, and so penniless as Wilmet Underwood, he would never have taken the Curacy. She was a kind woman, who would have taken infinite pains to serve the orphan girls; and she often called on them; but when the Rector's wife had told her that such a set had been made at Mr. Audley that he could bear it no longer, it was but a natural instinct to cherish her son's bashfulness.

That autumn Wilmet came home elevated by the news that the head teacher was going to retire at Christmas, and that she was to be promoted to her place of forty pounds a year. Her successor was coming immediately to be trained, being in fact the daughter of Miss Pearson's sister, who had married an officer in the army. She had been dead about three years, and the girl had been living in London with her father, now on half pay, and had attended a day-school until he married again, and finding his means inadequate to his expenses, and his wife and daughter by no means comfortable together, he suddenly flitted to Jersey to retrench, and made over his daughter of seventeen to her aunts to be prepared for governess-ship.

This was the account Miss Pearson and Miss Maria gave to Wilmet, and Wilmet repeated to Geraldine, who watched with some interest for the first report of the newcomer.

'She is rather a nice-looking little thing,' was the first report, 'but I don't know whether we shall get on together.'

The next was, 'Miss Maria has been begging me to try to draw her out. They are quite distressed about her, she is so stiff and cold in her ways with them, and they think she cries in her own room.'

'Poor thing, how forlorn she must be! Cannot you comfort her, Mettie?'

'She will have nothing to say to me! She is civil and dry, just as she is to them.'

'I think she can talk,' said Angela.

'How do you know anything about it, little one?' said Wilmet.

'I heard her talking away to Lizzie Bruce in the arbour at dinner-time. Her face looked quite different then from what it does in school.'

'Then I hope she is settling down to be happier,' said Wilmet thoughtfully; but, having watched Angela out of hearing, she added, 'Not that I think Lizzie Bruce a good friend; she is rather a weak girl, and is flattered by Carry Price making a distinction between her and some of the others.'

'When is Carry Price ever going to leave school?'

'When she can play Mendelssohn well enough to satisfy Mr. Bevan. I wonder Lady Price does keep her on here, but in the meantime we can only make the best of her.'

A day or two later, Wilmet and Angela came in from school eager, indignant, and victorious.

'You did manage it well! the younger was saying. 'I was so glad you saw for yourself.--Just fancy, Cherry, there were Carry Price and Lizzie Bruce turning out all the most secret corners of Miss Knevett's work-box, laughing at them, and asking horrid impertinent questions, and she was almost crying.'

'And you fetched Wilmet?'

'She was sitting out in the garden, showing some of the little ones how to do their crochet--it was the play-time after dinner--and I just went to her and whispered in her ear, and so she strolled quietly by the window.'

'Yes,' added Wilmet, 'and before I came to it Edith was saying to Jane Martin, on purpose for me to hear, that she thought it would be a good thing if Miss Underwood would look into the school-room. So Angel was not getting into a scrape.'

'I should not have minded if I had,' said Angel; 'it was such a shame, and she looks such a dear--'

'There she was,' said Wilmet, 'her fingers shaking, and her eyes full of tears, trying to do some work, while Carry Price went on in her scoffing voice, laughing over all the little treasures and jewels, and asking who gave them to her, and what they cost. All I could do was to put my hand on her shoulder and say I saw she did not like it; and then Lizzie Bruce looked ashamed, but Miss Price bristled up, and declared that Miss Knevett had unlocked the box herself. Then the poor child burst out that she had only said she would show her Maltese cross; she had never asked them to turn everything out, and

meddle with it; and Carry tossed her head, just like my Lady, and said, "Oh, very well, they did not want to see her trumpery, since she was so cross about it. I suppose you mean to show the things one by one to the little girls! A fine exhibition!" She cried out, "Exhibit! I don't mean to exhibit at all; I only showed it to you as my friend!" Whereupon Carry Price flounced off with, "As if I were going to make a friend of an underteacher!" and she went into a tremendous fit of crying, like what you used to have, Cherry, except that it was more passionate!

'I'm sure I never had anything like that to cry for. What did you do with her? How lucky she had you!'

'Why, when she went on sobbing, "I'll not stay here," "I won't be insulted." "I'll tell my aunts," my great object was to get her upstairs, and to silence her, for I was sure Miss Pearson would dislike nothing so much as having a regular complaint from her about Carry; and, besides that, all the girls, who pity her now, would be turned against her, and think her a mischief-maker. I did get her up at last, and, oh dear! what a scene we had! Poor thing, I suppose she has been a spoilt child, going to a lady's fashionable institute, as she calls it, where she was a great girl, and rather looked up to, for the indulgences she got from her father--very proud, too, of being a major's daughter. Then came the step-mother; what things she said about her, to be sure! No end of misery, and disputes--whose fault, I am sure I don't know; then a crisis of debts. She says it was all Mrs. Knevett's extravagance; but Miss Pearson told me before that she thought it had been going on a long time; and at last, when the father and his wife and her child go off to Jersey, this poor girl is turned over to the aunts she never saw since her mother died, twelve years ago.'

'I dare say it is the best thing for her.'

'If she can only think so; but she fancies the being a teacher the most horrid thing in the world.'

'Oh, Wilmet!' interrupted Angela; 'why, you like teaching: and Robin means to be a real governess, and so do I, if I am not a Sister!'

'Me too,' called out Stella.

'But you see this unlucky girl can't understand that teaching may be a real way of doing good; she fancies it a degradation. She says she and her friends at her institute hated and despised the teachers, and played all manner of tricks upon them.'

'How foolish the teachers must have been!'

'She did say something about their being low and mean. She did me the favour to say not like me, and that she was quite shocked to find I was one of this dreadful race. It was quite amazing to her when I told her how Robina's dear Miss Lyveson keeps school without

necessity, only to be useful. You may imagine what it is to her to be plunged all on a sudden into this unhappy class. She began by trying to take her old place as an officer's daughter, and to consort with the girls; but I think if she and Carry Price were left to one another, she would very soon sink as low as any of the poor hounded teachers she describes.'

'She must be very silly and conceited.'

'No, I think she is sensible, and loving too, at the bottom,' said Wilmet, 'only every one is strange here. I think she will understand better soon; and in the meantime she has quite forgiven me for being a teacher. She clung about me, and called me all sorts of pretty names--her only friend, and so forth.'

'Perhaps she can forgive you for being a teacher, in consideration of your being a twin,' said Cherry.

'There, Cherry, you understand her better already than I do! I'll bring her to you, I have not time for such a friendship.'

'Poor thing! I should like to try to comfort her, if she is strange and dreary; but I think she must be rather a goose. What's her name?'

'Alice; but in school Miss Pearson is very particular about having her called Miss Knevett. We have exchanged Christian names in private, of course.'

'You horrid old prosy thing of four U's,' said Geraldine. 'You are sitting up there, you great fair creature, you, for the poor child to worship and adore, and not reciprocating a bit!'

'Of course,' said Wilmet, 'if she can't be happy without being petted, I must pet her, and let her be nonsensical about me; but I think it is all great stuff, and that you will suit her much better than I ever shall.'

'Do you never mean to have a friend, Mettie?'

'Oh no, I haven't time; besides, I've got Alda.'

Geraldine had, however, many dreams about the charms of friendship. She read of it in the books that Felix selected for her; and Robina had a vehement affection for a schoolfellow whose hair and whose carte she treasured, and to whom she would have written daily during the holidays but for the cost of stamps. The equality and freedom of the letters she received always made Cherry long for the like. Since Edgar had left her, she had never been on those equal terms with any one; Wilmet was more like mother or aunt than sister; and though Felix had a certain air of confidence and ease when with her, and made her his chief playfellow, he could not meet all her tastes or all her needs; and there was a sort of craving within her for intimacy with a creature of her own species.

And though Wilmet's description of Alice Knevett did not sound particularly wise, Cherry, in her humility, deemed her the more secure of being on her own level, not so sensible and intolerant of little dreams, fancies, and delusions as those two sensible people, the twin sisters. So she watched impatiently for the introduction; and at last Wilmet said, 'Well, she is coming to tea to-morrow evening. Little ridiculous chit, she bridled and doubted, but as you were an invalid, she supposed she might, only it was not what she had been used to, and Papa "might object."' "

'What? To the shop? Well, I really think she had better not come! I'll have nobody here that thinks it a favour, and looks down on Felix.'

'My dear, if she contrives to look down on Felix after she has seen him, she will deserve anything you please. Just now, I believe the foolishness is in her school, and not in herself.'

Nevertheless, Geraldine's eagerness underwent a great revulsion. Instead of looking forward to the visit, she expected it with dread, and dislike to the pert, conceited, flippant Londoner, who despised her noble brother, and aspired to the notice of Carry Price. Her nervous shrinking from strangers--the effect of her secluded life--increased on her every moment of that dull wet afternoon; her feet grew cold, her cheeks hot, and she could hardly find temper or patience for the many appeals of Bernard and Stella for her attention.

Her foolish little heart was palpitating as if a housebreaker were entering instead of Wilmet, conducting a dainty cloud of fresh lilac muslin, out of which appeared a shining black head, and a smiling sparkling face, with so much life and play about the mouth and eyes that there was no studying their form or colour, and it was only after a certain effort that it could be realised that Alice Knevett was a glowing brunette, with a saucy little nose, retrousse, though very pretty, a tiny mouth full of small pearls, and eyes of black diamond.

In spite of her gracious manner, and evident consciousness of her own condescension, the winsomeness of the dancing eyes fascinated Cherry at once. Indeed, the simplicity and transparency of her little dignities disarmed all displeasure, they were so childish; and they vanished in a moment in a game at play with Bernard and Stella. When Wilmet brought out Geraldine's portfolio, her admiration was enthusiastic if not critical.

A sketch of Wilmet and Alda enchanted her; she had never seen anything so lovely or so well done.

'No, no,' said Cherry, rather shocked, 'you must have seen the Royal Academy.'

'Oh, but I am sure this ought to be in the Royal Academy; I never saw anything there that I liked half so much. How clever you must be!'

Cherry could not but laugh at the extravagant compliment. 'My brother Edgar draws much better than that,' she said, producing a capital water-colour of a group of Flemish market-women.

'I shall always like yours best. Oh! and what is this?'

'I did not know it was there,' said Cherry, colouring, and trying to take it away.

'Oh, let me look. What! Is it a storm, or a regatta, or fishing boats? What is that odd light? What is written under? "The waves of this troublesome world." Why, that is in the Bible, is not it?'

'Thirteen boats, Cherry,' said Wilmet; 'is that a device of your own?'

'What, not copied? Oh dear! I wish I was so clever!'

'It is the sea of this life, isn't it?' said Angela, coming up. 'Is it ourselves, Cherry, all making for the golden light of Heaven, and the star of faith guiding them?'

'She reads it like a book,' exclaimed Alice. 'And those two close together--that means love, I suppose!'

'Love and help, the weak and the strong,' said Geraldine, in her earnest dreamy voice.

'Do pray make a picture of my boat on a nice smooth sea of light; I don't like rocks and breakers, such as you have done there.'

'There always must be a last long wave,' said Cherry.

'Oh, but don't let us think about horrid things. I like the summer sea. Aren't there some verses--'

"Youth at the prow, and pleasure at the helm?"

'That would not be a pleasant augury,' said Cherry. 'Do you know what this is meant for, bad as it is? Longfellow's verses--'

'The phantom host that beleaguered the walls of Prague? How can you draw such things?'

'So I say,' observed Wilmet.

'They come and haunt me, and I feel as if I must.'

'Who is this kneeling on the wall? He looks like a knight watching his armour.'

'So he is,' said Cherry.

'But there is nothing about him in the poem. Did you make him for yourself?'

'Why, he is Ferdinand Travis!' exclaimed Wilmet.

'What, is it a real man? I thought it was somebody in a story.'

'I see!' said Angela quietly. 'He is watching his armour the night before he was baptized.'

For the child had never forgotten the adult baptism, though she had been little more than four years old at the time; but she was one of those little ones to whom allegory seems a natural element, with which they have more affinity than with the material world.

However, the mention of Ferdinand Travis led to the history of the fire at the hotel, and of his recovery, Alice declared that 'everything nice' seemed to happen at Bexley, and was laughed at for her peculiar ideas of niceness; but there was something in the feminine prattle that was wonderfully new and charming to Geraldine, while, on the other hand, the visitor was conscious of a stimulus and charm that she had never previously experienced; and the eager tongues never flagged till Felix came in. He had evidently taken pains with his toilette, in honour of the unusual event; and the measured grave politeness of his manners renewed Alice's scared punctilious dignity of demeanour, and entire consciousness that she was a major's daughter and he a bookseller.

But Felix had brought in some exciting Eastern news; and Alice put on an air capable, as one connected with India and the army, but she soon found out the deficiency of her geography, and was grateful for the full clear explanations, while her amour propre was gratified by finding that her familiarity with a few Indian terms was valuable. Before the end of the evening all were at ease, and she was singing with Felix and Wilmet at the old piano.

No sooner had the door shut on her when the maid came to fetch her, than a storm fell on Wilmet.

'So that's what you call rather nice-looking?'

'Well, she is under-sized and very brown, but I did think you would have allowed that she was rather pretty.'

'Rather!' exclaimed Cherry indignantly.

'That's what it is to be a handsome woman!' said Felix.

'Do you mean to say that you think her anything remarkable?' said Wilmet.

'Say no more, my dear W. W.,' laughed Felix. 'I never understood before why negroes don't admire white people.'

'I am sure I don't know what you are talking about,' said Wilmet, betaking herself to her darning with great good-humour. 'Alice Knevett is prettier than I thought she was when she was all tears and airs; but I can't see any remarkable beauty to rave about.'

'No, you can't,' said Geraldine merrily. 'You look much too high over her head, but you see I don't; and such a little sparkling diamond beetle is a real treat to me.'

And Geraldine often enjoyed the treat.

In a very short time the green door and steep stairs were as familiar to Alice as to the Underwoods themselves, for her aunts were thankful to have her happy and safe, and she was rapturously fond of Geraldine, reflecting and responding to most of her sentiments. Most of the Underwoods had the faculty of imprinting themselves upon the characters of their friends, by taking it for granted that they felt alike; and Alice Knevett had not spent six weeks at Bexley before she had come to think it incredible that she had thought either teaching or the Underwoods beneath her. She was taking pains to do her work well, and enjoying it, and was being moulded into a capital subordinate to Wilmet; while with Geraldine she read and talked over her books, obtained illustrations for the poetry she wrote out in her album, and brought in a wholesome air of chatter, which made Cherry much more girl-like than she had ever been before. It was an importation of something external, something lively and interesting, which was very refreshing to all; and even Felix, in his grave politeness and attention to his sister's friend, manifested that so far from being in his way, as they had feared, he found her a very agreeable element when she joined the home party or the Sunday walk.

Indeed, there was a certain tendency to expansion about the life of the young people; the pinch of poverty was less griping than previously, and their natural spirits rose. In January Lance was allowed to bring his friend Harewood to a concert of the choral society; and on the following evening Alice Knevett came to tea, and there was a series of wonderful charades, chiefly got up by Clement and Robina, and of comic songs by Lance and Bill Harewood--all with such success, that Alice declared that she had never seen anything so delightful in all her experience of London Christmases!

The young people really seemed to have recovered elasticity enough that year to think of modest treats and holidays as they had never ventured to do since that memorable sixteenth birthday of Felix's. Here was his twenty-first not very far off; and when it was announced that this identical 3rd of July had been fixed on for a grand choral meeting at the Cathedral, at which the choir of Bexley was to assist,

there was such a spirit of enterprise abroad in the family, that Geraldine suggested that Wilmet might take Robina to see the Cathedral and hear Lance.

'Lance will be just what will not be heard,' said Felix. 'They will not show off their solos; but the Robin ought to have the pleasure, if possible; and as I go in two capacities, press and choir, I hope we can manage it for her.'

He came in full early for the evening. 'All right,' he said. 'Two tickets are come for the Pursuivant, and Mr. Froggatt says he would not go at any price; and besides, each of the choir may take a friend--so that's three.'

'Am I to be reporter or friend?' asked Wilmet.

'Reporter, I think, for you will have to do audience.'

'Nay, Cherry ought to be the gentleman connected with the press,' said Wilmet, for in fact Geraldine did sometimes do copying and correcting work for her brother; 'and, indeed, I do not see why she should not. We could go home directly after morning service, and leave you there.'

'Oh no, impossible,' said Geraldine, 'it would never do; it would only spoil everybody's pleasure, and be too much for me.'

'I think you are wise,' said Felix; and somehow it struck her with a prick that he had rather the proposal had not been made. 'There is sure to be a great crush, and I may be obliged to be with the choir.'

'I am quite able to take care of her, I can always lift her,' said Wilmet, surprised.

'I would not go on any account,' protested Cherry. 'I should be like the old woman in that Servian proverb, who paid five dollars to go to the fair, and would have paid ten to be safe at home again.'

'There might be no getting a bench fit for you to sit upon,' added Felix, who, as a gentleman of the press, was not devoid of experience. 'I could not be easy about you, my dear; it is much safer not.'

'Perhaps so,' owned Wilmet, disappointed; 'but Angel is too little for such a long day, and Cherry is so much stronger, that I thought--'

'Oh, but could not Alice Knevett go?' put in Cherry.

'A very good suggestion,' said Felix. 'She hardly ever has any amusements. Well thought of, Whiteheart!'

I believe he thought of it from the first, felt Geraldine, angry with

herself that this conviction gave a prick like the point of a needle. She threw her energies into the scheme, and was begging Wilmet to go and make the proposal, when there was a sudden peal of the bell, a headlong trampling rush, a dash open of the door--Theodore began to hum the anthem 'How beautiful,' the other three small ones hailed 'Lance' at the top of their voices, and his arms were round the neck of the first sister who came in his way.

'What, Lance! how came you here?'

'Our organ is tuning up its pipes--man comes to-morrow--Prayers in the Lady Chapel and not choral, and it's a holiday at school, so I got off by the 5.20, and need not go back till the 6.10 to-morrow. We are practising our throats out to lead you all on the 3rd. You know you are coming, the whole kit of you.'

'Do we?' said Wilmet. 'It is only for the last ten minutes that we have known that any of us were coming.'

'All right; that's what I'm come about. Robina must be got home.'

'She will be come. She comes on the 1st.'

'That's right; then there's to be a great spread in Bishop's Meads between services. Everybody sends provisions, and asks their friends; but Cherry is to go and rest at the Harewoods'. The governor will get her in through the library into the north transept as quiet as a lamb, no squash at all. It is only along the cloister--a hop, step, and lump; and Miles has promised me the snuggest little seat for her. Then the Harewood sofa--'

'It is too much, Lance,' began Cherry. 'Mrs. Harewood--'

'Don't be absurd; she wishes it with all her heart. She won't want a ticket if Mr. Harewood smuggles her in, but I can get as many as you want. How many--Wilmet, Cherry, Robin, Angel, and Miss Knevett. She'll come, won't she?'

'We were thinking of going to ask her.'

'I'll do it; I've brought my own ticket for a friend for her; here it is, with L. O. U. in the corner. I'll run down with it before any one else cuts in.'

'Hold hard,' said Felix; 'we shall not get her if you set about it in that wild way!'

'Oh, but I'll promise Wilmet shall take her in tow, and if anything will pacify the old girls, that will.'

'You had better let me come with you,' said Wilmet.

'Look sharp then. Is it a practising night? Yes, that's well; Miles

is in a state of mind at the short notice, and has crammed me choke-full of messages; he says it will save his coming down; come along, then, W. W., and soft-sawder the venerable aunts.'

No more of this operation was necessary than the assurance that Miss Underwood was going, and that Mrs. Harewood would be a sort of chaperon. Alice Knevett was happy and grateful; and if anything were wanting to the universal enthusiasm of anticipation, it was supplied by Lance. The boy, with his musical talent, thorough trustworthiness and frank joyous manners, was a favourite with the organist, and was well versed in the programme; and his eagerness, and fulness of detail, were enough to infect every one. Geraldine thought it was great proof of his unspoilableness, that he took quite as much pleasure in bringing them to these services, where he would be but a unit in the hundreds, as if it had been one of the anthems, of which every one said, 'Have you heard little Underwood?' In the charm of the general welcome and the congratulation on Lance's arrangement, Geraldine had quite forgotten both her alarms and her tiny pang of surprise at not having been Felix's prime thought. Lance, by dint of a judicious mixture of hectoring and coaxing, obtained leave for Angela to be of the party, though against Wilmet's judgment; and Bernard and Stella were to spend the day with Mrs. Froggatt, which they regarded as an expedition quite as magnificent as that to St. Mary's Minster.

Mr. Froggatt was almost as eager about this pleasure for 'his young people,' as he called them, as they could be. He came in early to drive Geraldine to the station, and looked with grandfatherly complacency at the four sisters, who had ventured on the extravagance of white pique and black ribbons, and in their freshness looked as well-dressed as any lady in the land.

He entertained Cherry all the way with his admiration of Wilmet's beauty and industry, and when arrived at the station, waited there with her till first the three girls came up with Alice Knevett, white with pink ribbons, and then the choir arrived, marching with the banner with the rood of St. Oswald before them, each with a blue satin bow in his button-hole, and the bag with his surplice under his arm, the organist, the schoolmaster, and the two curates, bringing up the rear. Mr. Bevan, my Lady, and Miss Price, whirled up in the carriage, the omnibus discharged the friends of the choir, and two waggon loads of musical talent from the villages came lumbering and cheering in! The very train roared and shrieked in with a sound of cheering from its vertebrae, and banners were projecting from the windows, amid nodding heads and waving handkerchiefs of all colours; the porters ran about distracted, and Geraldine began to be alarmed, and to think of the old woman of Servia, but behold, Felix had her on one side, Mr. Froggatt on the other, a solid guard held open the door, and protected her from the rush, and before she well knew what they were doing with her, she was lying on the seat of the carriage, with her sisters and Alice all in a row in front of her; the recently crowded platform was empty of all but a stray porter, the stationmaster, and Mr. Froggatt kissing his hand, and promising to

come and fetch her on her return.

The train seemed hardly to have attained its full speed before it slackened again, and another merry load was disposed of within its joints. Another start, another arrival; and before the motion was over, a flash of sunny looks had glanced before the sisters' eyes. There was Lance, perfectly radiant, under his square trencher cap--hair, eyes, cheeks, blue bow, boots, and all, seeming to sparkle with delight as he snatched open the door.

'Hurrah! there they are. Give her out to me, Wilmet!' (as if she had been a parcel).

'Stay, wait for Felix. You can't---'

Felix rushed up from his colleagues of the choir, and Geraldine was set on her foot and crutch. 'Come along! I've got Ball's chair for you, and Bill Harewood is sitting in it for fear any one should bone it. Where's your ticket?'

'Lance, take care! Don't take her faster than she can go!' as he whisked her over the platform; and Wilmet was impeded by the seeking for Alice's parasol and Angela's cloak. They were quite out of sight when Lance had dragged Cherry through the crowd at the door, and brought her to the wheeled chair just in time to find Bill Harewood glaring out of it like the red planet Mars, and asseverating that he was the lame young lady it was hired for.

In went Geraldine, imploring to wait for Wilmet, but all in vain; off went the chair, owner and escort alike in haste, and she was swept along, with Lance and Will with a hand holding either side of the chair, imparting breathless scraps of information, and exchanging remarks: 'There goes the Archdeacon.' 'The Thorpe choir is not come, and Miles is mad about it.' 'That's the Town Hall.' 'There's where Jack licked a cad for bullying.' 'There's a cannon-ball of Oliver Cromwell's sticking out of that wall.' 'That's the only shop fit to get gingerbeer at!' 'That old horse in that cab was in the Crimea.' 'We come last in the procession, and if you see a fellow like a sheep in spectacles, that's Shapcote.' 'Hurrah! what a stunning lot! where is it from?' 'Bembury? My eyes, if that big fellow doesn't mean to bawl us all down. Down that way--that's the palace. Whose carriage is it stopping there! Now, here's the Close.'

'Is that the Cathedral? Oh!'

'You may well say so! No, not that way.' And on rattled poor amazed Geraldine through an archway, under some lime trees, round a corner, round another corner, to another arched doorway, with big doors studded with nails, with a little door for use cut out of one of the big ones.

'You must get out here,' said Lance, 'we are close by,' and he helped her out, and paid and thanked the man with the chair. 'Here's our

domain,' he continued, as he introduced Cherry through the open doorway into a small flagged court, with two houses, gray and old-fashioned, forming one side, and on the other an equally old long low building with narrow latticed arched windows. Opposite to the entrance was a handsome buttressed Gothic-looking edifice, behind which rose the gable of the north transept of the Cathedral, beautiful with a rose window, and farther back, far, far above, the noble tower.

Already everything was very wonderful to Geraldine. 'That's our kennel,' said Lance, pointing to the low buildings to the right. 'School's behind; but we boarders are put up in one of the old monks' dormitories, between court and cloister.'

'Is it really!' exclaimed Geraldine.

'So my father says,' said Will. 'Here's our door.' Another stone-arched passage, almost dark, with doors opening on either side, seemed common to both houses; and Will was inviting them to enter, but Lance held back. 'No time,' he said; 'better call your father.'

'The others,' sighed Geraldine.

'Bother the others! That's right: here he is!'

'Halloo, Father!' cried Will; 'we've got Cherry.'

'By which unceremonious designation I imagine you to mean to introduce Miss Underwood,' said a figure, appearing from beneath the archway, in trencher cap, surplice, and hood, with white hair, and a sort of precision and blandness that did not at all agree with Cherry's preconceived notions of the Harewood household. 'I am very glad to see you. My ladies, as usual, are unready. Will you have a glass of wine? No?--What do you say, Lancelot?--Very well, we will take you in at once. You will not object to waiting there, and this is the quiet time. --Boys, you ought to be with the choir.'

'Oceans of time, Dad,' coolly answered Will; 'none of the fellows up there are under weigh.'

Mr. Harewood offered his arm, but perceived that Cherry preferred Lance and her crutch; advancing to the door opposite that by which they had entered, he unlocked it, and Geraldine found herself passing through a beautiful old lofty chamber, with a groined Tudor roof, all fans, and pendants, and shields; tall windows stained with armorial bearings, parchment charters and blazoned genealogies against the walls, and screens upon screens loaded with tomes of all ages, writing-tables and chairs here and there, and glass-topped tables containing illuminations and seals. 'Here is my paradise,' said the librarian, smiling.

'I think it must be,' said Geraldine, with a long breath of wonder and admiration.

'Ah! would you not like to have a good look, Cherry?' said Lance.
'That's Richard Coeur de Lion's seal in there.'

'Don't begin about it--don't set him on,' whispered Willie, with a sign of his head towards his father, who was fitting the key into the opposite door, 'or we shall all stay here for the rest of the day.'

This low door open, Mr. Harewood and the boys bared their heads as they entered, and Geraldine felt the strange solemn sensation of finding herself in a building of vast height and majesty, full of a wonderful stillness, as though the confusion of sounds she had been in so recently were far, far off.

'Where now, Lancelot?' asked Mr. Harewood, in a hushed voice; 'do you want me any further?'

'No, thank you, sir, I'll just take her across the choir to Mr. Miles, and then join the rest of us at the vestry.'

'Good-bye for the present, then,' said Mr. Harewood kindly. 'You are in safe hands. Your brother comes round every one. _I_ could not do this.'

Through the side-screen, into the grandly beautiful choir, arching high above, with stall-work and graceful canopies below, and rich glass casting down beams of coloured light--all for 'glory and for beauty,' thought Geraldine.

'You must not stop; you must look when you are settled. That's my side,' pointing to one of the choristers' desks. 'It will be only we that sing in here; the congregation is in the nave--a perfect sea of chairs. I'll come for you when it is over. Here is Mr. Miles. My sister, sir.'

A pale gentleman in spectacles, with a surplice and beautiful blue hood, was here addressed. He too greeted Geraldine, very shyly but kindly, and she found herself expected to ascend some alarming-looking stone steps. The organ was on the choir screen, and to the organist's little private gallery was she to ascend. It was a difficult matter, and she had in her trepidation despairingly recognised the difference between Lance's good will and Felix's practised strength; but at last she was landed in an admirable little cushioned nook, hidden by two tall painted carved canopies--exactly over the Dean's head, her brother told her--and where, as she sat sideways, she could see through the quatrefoils into the choir on the right hand, and the nave on the left. 'Delightful! Oh, thank you, how kind! If I am only not keeping any one out.'

'No,' said Lance, smiling, and whispering lower than ever, 'he has no one belonging to him. He hates women. Never a petticoat was here before in his reign. Have you a book?'

'They are robing, Underwood,' said the misogynist in the organ-loft; and Lance hurried away, leaving Geraldine alone, palpitating a good deal, but almost enjoying the solitude, in the vast structure, where the sanctity of a thousand years of worship seemed to fill the very air, as she gazed at the white vaultings and bosses carved with emblems above, at the vista of clustered columns terminating in the great jewelled west window, or at the crown-like loveliness that encompassed the sanctuary. All was still, except a deep low tone of the organ now and then. Mr. Miles looked in after the first, to hope she did not feel it uncomfortably, and to assure her that though she was too near his organ, she need not fear its putting forth its full powers; it was to be kept in subordination, and only guide the voices. This was great attention from a woman-hater, and Geraldine ventured to reiterate her thanks; at which he smiled, and said, 'When one has such a boy as your brother, there is pleasure in doing anything he wishes. You are musical?'

'I never was able to learn to play.'

'But you can read music?'

'Oh yes,' for she had often copied it.

So he brought her whole sheets of music, and put her in the way of following and understanding, perceiving, as he went, that she was full of intelligence and perception.

When he went back to his post, a few groups, looking very small, were creeping in by transept doors--by favour, like herself: then a little white figure flitted across to the desks, opened and marked the books, took up something, and disappeared; and in another moment Lance, in his broad white folds, was at her side. 'Here's the music. Oh, you have it! I've seen Fee,' he whispered; 'they are at Mrs. Harewood's, all right!' and he was gone.

Here she sat, her attention divided between the sacred impressions of the place, its exceeding beauty, and the advance of the multitude into the nave, as the doors were open, and they surged up the space left in the central aisle, and occupied the ranks of chairs prepared for them. Then came a long pause; she scanned each row in search of her sisters, and only was confused by the host of heads; felt lost and lonely, and turned her eyes and mind to the silent grandeur to the east, rather than the throng to the west.

At last there came the sweet floating sound of the chant, growing in power like the ocean swell as it approached, and the first bright banner appeared beneath the lofty pointed archway; and the double white file came flowing on like a snowy glacier, the chant becoming clear and high as the singers of each parish marched along to their places, each ranked under a bright banner with the symbol of their church's dedication. St. Oswald's rood helped Geraldine to make out that of Bexley better than their faces, though she did make out her eldest brother's fair face, and trace him to his seat. The cathedral

singers came at last, and that kenspeckle red head of Will Harewood's directed her to the less conspicuous locks belonging to Lance, whose own clear thrush-like note she could catch as he passed beneath the screen. Then came the long train of parish clergy, the canons, the Dean, and lastly the Bishop, the sight of whom recalled so much.

The unsurpriced contribution had meantime been ushered in by the side doors, and filled seats in the rear of the others, so as to add their voices without marring the general effect--the perfection of which Geraldine enjoyed--of the white-robed multitude that seemed to fill the whole chancel.

The sight seemed to inspire her whole soul with a strange yearning joy, as though she were beholding a faint earthly reflex of the great vision of the Beloved Disciple; and far more was it so at the sound, which realised in a measure the words, 'As the voice of mighty waters, and as the voice of thunder.'

These were the very words that had been selected for the Second Lesson, and the First consisted of those verses in which we hear of David's commencement of the continual chant of psalms at the sanctuary; and both, unwonted as they were, gave a wonderful thrill to the audience, as though opening to them a new comprehension of their office as singers of the sanctuary.

There is no need to dwell on the wonderful and touching exhilaration derived from the harmony of vast numbers with one voice attuned to praise. It is a sensation which is so nearly a foretaste of eternity, that participation alone can give the most distant perception thereof. To the entirely unprepared and highly sensitive Geraldine it was most overpowering, all the more because she was entirely out of sight, and without power of taking part by either gesture or posture--she was passive and had no vent for her emotion.

Lance, who made his way to her round through the transept the moment he had disrobed, found her pale, panting, tearful, and trembling, with burning cheeks, so that his exaltation turned to alarm. 'Are you done up, Cherry? It is too hot up here? Ill try to find Felix or Wilmet, which?'

'Neither! I am quite well, only--O Lance, I did not know anything could be so heavenly. There seemed to be the sweeping of angels' wings all round and over me, and Papa's voice quite clear.'

'I know,' said Lance; 'it always does come in that Te Deum.'

The sister and brother were silent, not yet able for the critical discussion of single points; only, as he put his arm round her to help her to rise, she said, with a sigh, 'O Lance, it is a great thing to be one of them! Thank you. I think this is the greatest day of all my life.'

The getting her down, what with Lance's inexperience and want of

height and strength, was anxious work; and just as it had been safely accomplished, the rest of their party were seen roaming the aisle in distress and perplexity. Geraldine was very glad of Felix's substantial arm, but she had rather he had omitted that rebuke for venturesomeness in dealing with her, which would have affronted Fulbert, but never seemed to trouble Lance, who was only triumphant in his success; and her perfect contentment charmed away the vexation which really arose from a slight sense of having neglected her.

The others had been perfectly happy in their several ways, and made eager comments on their way to the house of Harewood, whither Lance piloted them--this time by the front way, through the garden, which lay behind the close--entering, in spite of the mannerly demurs of the elder ones, through the open door, into a hall whence a voice of hearty greeting at once ensued. 'Here you are at last; and how's the poor darling your sister! not over-tired?'

And Cherry, before she was aware, found herself kissed, and almost snatched away from Felix, to be deposited on a sofa; and while the like kisses were bestowed on the two little girls, and hospitable offers showered on all, she was amused by perceiving that good Mrs. Harewood was endowed with exactly the same grotesque order of ugliness as her son William; but she was even more engaging, from an indescribably droll mixture of heedlessness, blundering, and tender motherliness.

'There, now, you'll just leave her to me, the poor dear; and Lance will take you down to the Mead, and find Papa and the girls for you.'

'Oh, thank you, I could not think of your staying. Now pray--'

'Now prays' were to no purpose; Mrs. Harewood professed only to want an excuse for staying at home--she did not want to be done up with running after her girls to the four ends of the Mead, when it was a long step for her to begin with. Off with them.

So when Wilmet was satisfied that Geraldine was comfortable, the five moved off--Felix and Alice, Angel in Wilmet's hand, and Lance's and Robina's tongues wagging so fast that the wonder was how either caught a word of what the other was saying.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Harewood, tossing her bonnet and gloves aside, in perfect indifference to the exposure of the curious structure of red and gray hair she thus revealed, lavished meats and drinks upon her guest, waiting on her with such kindness, that in spite of all weariness and craving for quiet after these deep and wonderful impressions, it was impossible not to enjoy that warmth of heart. There was exactly the tender motherliness that even Wilmet and Sister Constance could not give.

It was charming to hear how fond Mrs. Harewood was of Lance, and how the having such a companion had made it possible to keep her Willie at the cathedral school, where the mixture of lads was great, but the

master first-rate. He thought highly of the promise of both; 'but to tell the truth,' said Mrs. Harewood, as she sat and fanned herself with her husband's trencher cap, looking more than ever like a frog in a strawberry bed, 'though my Willie is the cleverest boy in the school, little good his cleverness would have done him, and he would have been harum-scarum Bill more than ever, if it were not for Lance. So say his father and brother Jack; so that they will not be for his going to a public school unless Lance were sure of it too.'

'Will not they be able to stay on here?'

Mrs. Harewood explained that the year that the barristers--choristers she meant--were sixteen, when their voices were usually unserviceable, they, together with those of like age in the school, were subjected to an examination, and the foremost scholar obtained an exhibition, in virtue of which he could remain free of expense for another two years, and then could try for one of the Minsterham scholarships at one of the colleges at Cambridge. Those who failed, either had to pay like the ordinary schoolboys, or left the school.

Dear Mrs. Harewood was a perfect Malaprop, and puzzled Geraldine by continually calling the present occasion the rural meeting, and other like slips, uncommonly comical in a well-educated woman with the words she knew best.

All this, and a great deal more--about the shy woman-hating organist, and the unluckiness of the dissenter--no, precentor--having a sick wife, and the legal difficulties that prevented building a better house for the boarders than the queer long room where they lodged, between the cloister and the Bailey--the proper name of the little court by which Geraldine had come--was poured out; and kind as it was, there was a certain sense of having been talked to death.

A whole flood of Harewoods, Underwoods, and untold numbers besides, swept into the room as the bell began to ring for Evensong. Most sincere were Cherry's entreaties that she might be left alone. She could not go back to her coign of vantage, 'it had been too beautiful for her to bear more,' she said; and she severally declined offers of companionship from three female Harewoods and two sisters, telling Wilmet at last that all she wanted was to be still and alone.

Alone she was, but not still, for there was nothing to hinder the magnificent volume of sound that surged around the Cathedral from coming to her; and she could trace the service all along--in chant, pealing mighty Amens, with the hush between, in anthem, and in jubilant hymn. She was more calmly happy than in the oppressive grandeur of the morning, as she lay there, in the cool drawing-room, with the open window veiled by loose sprays of untrimmed roses, and sacred prints looking down from the walls.

The solitude lasted rather too long, when she had heard the hum and buzz of the host pouring out of the Cathedral, and still no one came. They were to go home by the 5.10 train, and every time she counted

the chimes she became more alarmed lest they should be too late. Minutes dragged on. Five! It was five! Was she forgotten? Should she be only missed and remembered at the station, too late? Tired, nervous, unused to oblivion, she found tears in her eyes, and was too sorrowful and angry with her own impatience even to think of the old woman of Servia. Hark! a trampling? Had they remembered her? But oh, it would be late for the train!

In burst Lance, in his cap and little short quaint black gown.

'O Lance, I shall be too late!'

'You don't go by this train.'

'Oh dear! oh dear! Mr. Froggatt was to meet me;' and the tears started from her eyes. 'How could Felix forget?'

'Never mind, there's sure to be a fly or something.'

'Yes, but Mr. Froggatt waiting!'

'Never mind,' repeated Lance, "'tis a fine evening to air the old boss.'

'Don't, Lance; you none of you have any proper regard for Mr. Froggatt;' which, as far as Lance was concerned, was unjust, and it was well for Cherry that it was not addressed to either of the brothers who better deserved it.

What Lance did was to execute one of his peculiar summersaults, and then, making up a dismal face, to say, 'Alas! I commiserate the venerable citizen disappointed of the pleasure of driving my Lady Geraldine home from the wash as well as hisself.'

She was past even appreciating the bathos. 'It is no laughing matter, she said; 'it is so uncivil, when he is so kind. I can't imagine what Felix is thinking of?'

'Croquet,' said Lance briefly, then seeing the flushed, quivering, mortified face, he added, 'Wilmet has not forgotten you one bit, Cherry; but Alice Knevett and Robin did so want to see the fun in the mead--there's running in sacks, and all sorts of games--that there's no getting any one away; and the W's are in charge, and can't leave them to their own devices, so she said perhaps you would be more rested by lying still than rattling home.'

'Oh, I dare say Wilmet is as sorry as anybody,' said Cherry rather querulously, for the needle point was pricking her again.

'And as to your dear old Froggy,' continued Lance, 'she says he told her he did not in the least expect you back by this train, and if you did not come by it, he'll stay in town for the 8.50.'

'How very good of him!' said Cherry, beginning to be consoled. 'And Felix at croquet!'

'Alice is teaching him. You never did see such a joke as old Blunderbore screwing up his eyes at the balls, and making at them with his mallet like a sledge-hammer. He and Alice and Robin and that Bisset curate are playing against Bill, two of the girls, and Shapcote--Bexley against Minsterham, and little Bobbie's a real out-and-outer. She'll make her side win by sheer cool generalship.'

'And poor little Angel?' The needle point was a pang now.

'Oh, Angel is happier than ever she was in her life. The Bishop's daughter has a turn for little kids, and has got all the small ones together in the pleached alley, playing at all manner of things.'

'Run back, Lance, to the fun. I shall do very well,' said poor Geraldine.

'I should think so, when I get you so often!' scornfully ejaculated Lancelot, drawing a dilapidated brioche from under the sofa, and squatting on it, with his dancing eyes close to her sad ones.

An effusion of spirits prompted her to lay her hands on his shoulders, kiss him on each cheek, and cry, 'O Lance, you are the very sweetest boy!'

'Sweetest treble, you mean,' said Lance quaintly; 'if you had only heard me! You should see how the old ladies in the stalls peep and whisper, and how Bill Harewood opens his mouth rather wider than it will go, and they think it is he.'

'Not for fun, Lance?'

'Well, I believe all their jaws are hung on looser than other people's. But I say, ain't you dying of thirst?'

'Perhaps Mrs. Harewood will give us some tea when she comes in.'

'If you trust to that--'

'O Lance!' she cried, alarmed at seeing him coolly ring the bell.

'Bless you, she's forgotten all about you and tea and everything! They are drinking it by the gallon in the tents; and by and by she'll roll in, ready to cry that you've had none, and mad with herself and me for giving you none; and the fire will be out, and the kettle will boil about ten minutes after you are off by the train. We'll have some this minute.'

'But, Lance--'

'But, Cherry, ain't I a walking Sahara with roaring at the tiptop of

my voice to lead the clod-hoppers? How they did bellow! I owe it as a duty to the Chapter to wet my whistle.'

'One comfort is, nobody knows your coolness. Nobody comes for all your ringing.'

'Reason good! Every living soul in the house is in the Bishop's meadow, barring the old cat; I seen 'em with their cap-strings flying. But that's nothing. I know where Mother Harewood keeps her tea and sugar;' and he pounced on a tea-caddy of Indian aspect.

'Lance, if you did that to Mettie--'

'Exactly so. I don't;' and he ran out of the room, while Cherry sat up on her sofa, her petulance quite banished between amusement and desperation at such proceedings in a strange house. He came back presently with two cups, saucers, and plates, apparently picked up at hap-hazard, as no two were alike. 'My dear Lance, where have you been?'

'In the kitchen. Such a jolly arched old hole. Bill and I have done no end of Welsh rabbits there. Once when we were melting some lead, Bill let it drop into the pudding, and the Pater got it at dinner, and said it was the heaviest morsel he ever had to digest.'

'But wasn't it poison?'

'I suppose not, for you see he isn't dead. Another time, when we were melting glue, we upset a whole lot of fat, and the chimney caught fire; and wasn't that a go? Bill got a pistol out of Jack's room, and fired it up the chimney to bring the soot down; and down it came with a vengeance! He was regularly singed, and I do think the place would have been burned if it had not been too old! All the Shapcotes ran out into the court, hallooing Fire! and the engine came, but there was nothing for it to do. Oh, the face Wilmet would make to see that kitchen. Kettle's biling--I must run.'

He came back with an enormous metal tea-pot in one hand, and a boiling kettle in the other, a cloud of vapour about his head.

'You appear in a cloud, like a Greek divinity,' said Cherry, beginning to enter into the humour of the thing.

'Bringing nectar and ambrosia,' said Lance, depositing the kettle amid the furbelows of paper in the grate, and proceeding to brew the tea. 'Excuse the small trifles of milk and cream, and as to bread, I can't find it, but here are the cakes you had for luncheon, shunted off into the passage window. Sugar, Cherry! Fingers were made before tongs. Now I call this jolly.'

'I only hope this isn't a great liberty.'

'If you fired off a cannon under Mrs. Harewood's nose, she would not

call it a liberty.'

'So it appears. But Mr. Harewood does not look--like that.'

'Oh, he's well broken in. He is the pink of orderliness in his own study and the library, but as long as no one meddles there, he minds nothing. It just keeps him alive; but I believe the Shapcotes think this house a mild lunatic asylum.'

'Who are the Shapcotes?'

'He's registrar. They live in the other half of this place--the old infirmary, Mr. Harewood calls it. Such a contrast! He is a tremendous old Turk in his house, and she is a little mincing woman; and they've made Gus--he's one of us, you know--a horrid sneak, and think it's all my bad company and Bill's. By-the-by, Cherry, Gus Shapcote asked me if my senior wasn't spoony about--'

'I nope you told him to mind his own business!' cried Geraldine, with a great start of indignation.

'I told him he was a sheep,' said Lance. 'But, I say, Cherry, I want to know what you think of it.'

'Think? I'm not so ready to think nonsense!'

'Well, when the old giant was getting some tea for _her_, I saw two ladies look at one another and wink.'

'Abominably ill-mannered,' she cried, growing ruddier than the cherry.

'But had you any notion of it?'

'Impossible!' she said breathlessly. 'He is only kind and civil to her, as he is to everybody. Think how young he is!'

'I'm sure I never thought old Blunderbore much younger than Methuselah. Twenty-one! Isn't it about the age one does such things?'

'Not when one has twelve brothers and sisters on one's back,' sighed Geraldine. 'Poor Felix! No, there can't be anything in it. Don't let us think of foolish nonsense this wonderful day. What a glorious hymn that was!'

Lance laid his head lovingly on the sofa-cushion, and discussed the enjoyment of the day with his skilled appreciation of music. Geraldine's receptive power was not inferior to his own, though she had none of that of expression, nor of the science in which he was trained. He was like another being from the merry rattle he was at other times; and she had more glimpses than she ever had before of the high nature and deep enthusiasm that were growing in him.

'Hark! there's somebody coming,' she cried, starting.

'Let him come. Oh, it is the Pater.--Here is some capital tea, Mr. Harewood. Have some? I'll get a cup.'

'You are taking care of your sister. That is right. A good colonist you would make.--Come in, Lee,' said Mr. Harewood, who, to Cherry's increased consternation, was followed by another clergyman. 'We are better off than I dared to expect, thanks to this young gentleman. Miss Geraldine Underwood--Mr. Lee.--You knew her father, I think.'

'Not poor Underwood of Bexley? Indeed! I knew him. I always wished I could have seen more of him,' said Mr. Lee, coming up and heartily shaking hands with Cherry, and asking whether she was staying there, etc.

Meantime Lance had fetched a blue china soup-plate, a white cup and pink spotted saucer; another plate labelled 'Nursery,' a coffee-cup and saucer, one brown and the other blue, and as tidily as if he had been lady of the house or parlour-maid, presented his provisions, Mr. Harewood accepting with a certain quiet amusement. His remarkable trim neatness of appearance, and old-school precision of manner, made his quiet humorous acquiescence in the wild ways of his household all the more droll. After a little clerical talk, that reminded Cherry of the old times when she used to lie on her couch, supposed not to understand, but dreamily taking in much more than any one knew--it appeared that Mr. Lee wanted to see something in the Library, and Mr. Harewood asked her whether she would like to come and see Coeur de Lion's seal.

She was fully rested, and greatly pleased. Lance's arm was quite sufficient now, and she studied the Cathedral and its precincts in a superexcellent manner. Mr. Harewood, who had spent almost his whole life under its shadow, and knew the history of almost every stone or quarry of glass, was the best of lionisers, and gave her much attention when he perceived how intelligent and appreciative she was. He showed her the plan of the old conventual buildings, and she began to unravel the labyrinth through which she had been hurried. The Close and Deanery were modernised, but he valued the quaint old corner where he lived for its genuine age. The old house now divided between him and Mr. Shapcote had been the infirmary; and the long narrow building opposite, between the Bailey and the cloister, had been the lodgings either of lay-brothers or servants. There being few boarders at the Cathedral school, they had always been lodged in the long narrow room, with the second master in a little closet shut off from them. Cherry was favoured with a glance at Lance's little corner, with the old-fashioned black oak bedstead, solid but unsteady table and stool, the equally old press, and the book-case he had made himself with boards begged from his friend the carpenter. A photograph and drawing or two, and a bat, completed the plenishing. She thought it very uncomfortable, but Lance called it his castle; and Mr. Harewood, pointing to the washing apparatus, related that in his day the cock in the Bailey was the only provision for such

purposes. The boys were safely locked in at eight every night when the curfew rang, and the Bailey door was shut, there being no other access to the rooms, except by the Cathedral, through the Library, and the private door that led into the passage common to the Harewoods and Shapcotes.

The loveliness of the Cloister, the noble vault of the Chapterhouse, the various beauties and wonders of the Cathedral, and lastly the curiosities of the Library--where Mr. Harewood enthroned her in his own chair, unlocked the cases, brought her the treasures, and turned over the illuminated manuscripts for her as if she had been a princess--made Geraldine forget time, weariness, and anxiety, until, as the summer sun was at last taking leave, a voice called at the window, 'Here she is! I thought Papa would have her here!' and the freckled face of a Miss Harewood was seen peering in.

There the truants were, eager, hurried, afraid for the train, full of compunction, for the long abandonment: Alice, most apologetic; Wilmet, most quiet; Felix, most attentive; Robina, still ecstatic; and Angela, tired out--there they all were. It was all one hasty scramble to the crowded station, and then one merry discussion and comparison of notes all the way home, Geraldine maintaining that she had enjoyed herself the best of all; and Alice incredulous of the pleasure of sitting in a musty old library with an old gentleman of at least sixty; while Felix was so much delighted to find that she had been so happy, that he almost believed that the delay had been solely out of consideration for her.

Mr. Froggatt was safe at the station in his basket, full of delight at the enjoyment of his young people, and of anecdotes of Bernard and Stella; and Geraldine found herself safely deposited at home, but with one last private apology from Wilmet as she was putting her to bed. 'I did not know how to help it,' she said; Alice was so wild with delight, that I could not get her away; and Felix was enjoying his holiday so thoroughly, I knew that you would be sorry it should be shortened.'

'Indeed I am very glad you stayed. It would be too bad to encumber you.'

'I wanted to come and see after you, but I had promised Miss Pearson not to lose sight of Alice. And then Lance offered to take care of you.'

'O Wilmet, I never half knew what a dear boy Lance is! What boy would have come, when all that was going on, to stay with a lame cross thing like me? And how nice for him to have such kind friends as the Harewoods!'

'They seem very fond of him,' said Wilmet; 'but I wish he had taken up with the Shapcotes. I never saw such a house. It is enough to ruin all sense of order! But they were very kind to us; and if you were well off, it was all right. I never saw Felix look so like his bright

old self as to-day; and it is his birthday, after all.'

So Wilmet was innocent of all suspicions--wise experienced Wilmet! That was enough to make Cherry forget that little thorn of jealousy, especially as things subsided into their usual course, and she had no more food for conjecture.

CHAPTER XII

GIANT DESPAIR'S CASTLE

'Who haplesse and eke hopelesse all in vaine,
Did to him pace sad battle to darrayne;
Disarmd, disgraste, and inwardly dismayde,
And eke so faint in every ioynt and vayne,
Through that fraile fountaine which him feeble made.'

SPENSER.

Felix's majority made no immediate difference. His thirteenth part of his father's small property remained with the rest, at any rate until his guardian should return from his travels in the East; but in the course of the winter his kind old godfather, Admiral Chester, died, and having no nearer relation, left him the result of his small savings out of his pay, which would, the lawyer wrote, amount to about a thousand pounds, but there was a good deal of business to be transacted, and it would be long before the sum was made over to him.

Wilmet and Geraldine thought it a perfect fortune, leading to the University, and release from trade; and they looked rather crestfallen when they heard that it only meant 30 pounds per annum in the funds, or 50 pounds in some risky investment. Mr. Froggatt's wish was that he should purchase such a share in the business as would really give him standing there; but Wilmet heard this with regret; she did not like his thus binding himself absolutely down to trade.

'You are thinking for Alda,' said Felix, smiling. 'You are considering how Froggatt and Underwood will sound in her ears.'

'In mine, too, Felix; I do not like it.'

'I would willingly endure it to become Redstone's master,' said Felix, quietly.

'Is he still so vexatious?' asked Geraldine: for not above once in six months did Felix speak of any trials from his companions in business.

'Not actively so; but things might be better done, and much ill blood saved. I cannot share W. W.'s peculiar pride in preferring to be an assistant instead of a partner.'

'Then this is what you mean to do with it?'

'Wait till it comes,' he said, oracularly. 'Seriously, though, I don't want to tie it all up. The boys may want a start in life.'

Neither sister thought of observing that the legacy was to one, not to all. Everybody regarded what belonged to Felix as common property; and the 'boys' were far enough into their teens to begin to make their future an anxious consideration. Clement was just seventeen, and though he had outgrown his voice, was lingering on as a sort of adopted child at St. Matthew's, helping in the parish school, and reading under one of the clergy in preparation for standing for a scholarship. He tried for one in the autumn, but failed, so much to his surprise and disgust, that he thought hostility to St. Matthew's must be at the bottom of his rejection; and came home with somewhat of his martyr-like complacency at Christmas, meaning to read so hard as to force his way in spite of prejudice. He was very tall, fair, and slight; and his features were the more infantine from a certain melancholy baby-like gravity, which music alone dispersed. He really played beautifully, and being entrusted with the organ during the schoolmaster's Christmas holidays, made practising his chief recreation. That Lance would often follow him into church for a study, and always made one of the group round the piano when Alice Knevett came to sing with them, was a great grievance to Fulbert, who never loved music, and hated it as a rival for Lance's attention.

These two were generally the closest companions, and were alike in having more boyishness, restlessness, and enterprise than their brothers. This winter their ambition was to be at all the meets within five miles, follow up the hunt, and be able to report the fox's death at the end of the day. Indeed, their appetite for whatever bore the name of sport was as ravenous as it was indiscriminate; and their rapturous communications could not be checked by Clement's manifest contempt, or the discouraging indifference of the rest--all but Robina, who loved whatever Lance loved, and was ready to go to a meet, if Wilmet had not interfered with a high hand.

Before long Felix wished that his authority over the male part of the family were as well established as that in her department.

One hunting day the two brothers came in splashed up to the eyes, recounting how they had found a boy of about their own age in a ditch, bruised and stunned, but not seriously hurt, how with consolation and schoolboy surgery they had cheered him, and found he was Harry Collis, whom they had known as a school-fellow at Bexley; how they had helped him home to Marshlands Hall, and had been amazed at the dreariness and want of all home comfort at the place, so that they did not like to leave him till his father came home; and how

Captain Collis had not only thanked them warmly, but had asked them over to come and shoot rabbits the next day.

There was nothing to blame them for, but Felix had much rather it had never happened. Captain Collis was one of a race of squires who had never been very reputable, and had not risen greatly above the farmer. He had been in the army, and had the bearing of a gentleman; but ever since his wife's death, he had lived an unsatisfactory sort of life at the Hall, always forward in sport, but not well thought of, and believed to be a good deal in debt. His only child, this Harry Collis, had been sent somewhat fitfully to the St. Oswald's Grammar School, and had been rather a favourite companion of Lance's; but separation had put an end to the intimacy, and this renewal was not at all to the taste of their eldest brother.

'It can't be helped this time,' he said, when he heard of the invitation; 'I suppose you must go to-morrow, but I don't fancy the concern.'

Fulbert's bristles began to rise, but Lance chatted gaily on. 'But, Fee, you never saw such a place! Stables for nine hunters. Only think! And a horse entered for the Derby! We are to see him to-morrow. It is the jolliest place.'

'Nine hunters!' moralised Clement; 'they cost as much as three times nine orphans.'

'And they are worth a dozen times as much as the nasty little beggars!' said Fulbert.

On which Angela put in the trite remark that the orphans had souls.

'Precious rum ones,' muttered Fulbert; and in the clamour thus raised the subject dropped; but when next morning, in the openness of his heart, Lance invited Clement to go with them to share the untold joys of rabbit-shooting, he met with a decisive reply. 'Certainly not! I should think your Dean would be surprised at you.'

'Oh, the Dean is a kind old chap,' answered Lance, off-hand; 'whenever he has us to sing at a party, he tips us all round, thanks us, and tells us to enjoy ourselves in the supper-room, like a gentleman, as he is.'

'Do you know what this Collis's character is?'

'Hang his character! I want his rabbits.'

And Lance was off with Fulbert; while Clement remained, to make Geraldine unhappy with his opinion of the temptations of Marshlands Hall, returning to the charge when Felix came in before dinner.

'Yes,' said Felix briefly, 'Mr. Froggatt has been telling me. It must be stopped.'

'Have you heard of the mischief that--'

'Don't be such a girl, Tina. I am going to do the thing, and there is no use in keeping on about it.'

Felix had not called Clement Tina since he had been head of the family, and irritability in him was a token of great perplexity; for indeed his hardest task always was the dealing with Fulbert; and he was besides very sorry to balk the poor boys of one of their few chances of manly amusement.

He would have waited to utter his prohibition till the excitement should have worked off, but he knew that Clement would never hold his peace through the narrative of their adventures; so, as they had not come in when his work was over, he took Theodore on his arm, and retreated to the little parlour behind the shop, where he lay in wait, reading, and mechanically whistling tunes to Theodore, till he heard the bell, and went to open the door.

The gas showed them rosy, merry, glorious, and bespattered, one waving a couple of rabbits, and the other of pheasants, and trying to tickle Theodore's cheeks with the long tails of the latter, of course frightening him into a fretful wail.

'Take Theodore upstairs, if you please, Lance,' said Felix, 'and then come down; I want you.'

'The Captain was going to dine at Bowstead's,' said Fulbert, 'so he drove us in his dog-cart. If the frost holds, we are to go out and skate on Monday.'

Felix employed himself in putting away his papers, without answering.

'I had very good luck,' continued Fulbert, 'four out of six; wonderful for so new a hand, the Captain said.'

'Such a lovely animal you never saw,' said Lance, swinging himself downstairs. 'You must walk out and see it, Fee, for you'll have it in the Pursuivant some Saturday.'

'Lance, I am very sorry,' said Felix, standing upright, with his back to the exhausted grate. 'Just attend to me, both of you.'

'Oh!' said Lance, hastily, 'I know there's a lot of old women's gossip about Collis; but nobody minds such stuff. Harry is as good a lad as ever stepped; and there was no harm to be seen about the place;--was there, Ful?'

'The old Frog has been croaking,' hoarsely muttered Fulbert.

Boys of sixteen and fourteen were incapable of coercion by a youth of one-and-twenty, and the only appeal must be to conscience and reason,

so Felix went on speaking, though he had seen from the first that Fulbert's antagonism rendered him stolid, deaf, and blind; and Lancelot's flushed cheeks, angry eyes, impatient attempts to interrupt, and scornful gestures told of scarcely repressed passion.

'You may have seen no harm, I find no fault' (Fulbert scowled); 'but if I had known what I do now I should not have let you go to-day. My father would rather have cut off his right hand than have allowed you to begin an acquaintance which has been ruinous to almost all the young men who have been in that set.'

'But we are not young men,' cried Lance, 'it is only for the holidays; and we only want a little fun with poor Harry, he is so lonely--and just to go out rabbiting and skating. It is very hard we can't be let alone the first time anything worth doing has turned up in this abominable, slow place.'

'It is very hard, Lance. No one is more concerned than I; but if this intimacy once begins, there is no guessing where it will lead; and I do not speak without grounds. Listen--'

'If it comes from old Frog, you may as well shut up,' said Lance.

'There's been no peace at Marshlands since he took that cottage--a regular old nuisance and mischief-maker, spiting the Captain because one of the dogs killed his old cock, and bothering Charlie to no end about him.'

'I have heard from others as well,' said Felix; and he briefly mentioned some facts as to the scandals of the dissipated household, some of the imputations under which Captain Collis lay, and named two or three of the young men whose unsatisfactory conduct was ascribed to his influence.

He saw that both lads were startled, and wound up with saying, 'Therefore it is not without reason that I desire that you do not go there again.'

With which words, he opened the door, turned off the gas, and walked upstairs, hearing on the way a growl of Fulbert's--'That's what comes of being cad to a stupid brute of an old tradesman;' and likewise a bouncing, rolling, and tumbling, and a very unchorister-like expletive from Lance, but he hurried up, like the conclave from the vault at Lindisfarn, only with a sinking heart, and looks that made his sisters say how tired he must be. The boys were seen no more, but sent word by Bernard that they were wet through, they should not dress, but should get some supper in the kitchen, and go to bed.

On Sunday Lance had recovered himself and his temper, but in the evening he made another attempt upon Felix in private. His heart was greatly set upon Marshlands, and he argued that there was no evil at all in what they had been doing, and entreated Felix to be content with the promise both were willing to make, to take no share in anything doubtful--not even to play at billiards, or cards--if that

would satisfy him, said Lance, 'but we will promise anything you please against playing, or betting, or--'

'I know, Lance, you once made such a promise, and kept it. I trust you entirely. But before, it would have been cruel to keep you from that sick boy; now this would be mere running into temptation for your own amusement.'

'Harry is not much better off than Fernan was,' said Lancelot, wistfully.

'Poor fellow! very likely not; but it would be more certain harm to yourself than good to him. Any way, no respectable person would choose to be intimate there, or to let their boys resort there; and it is my duty not to consent.'

'Ful is in such an awful way,' said Lance, disconsolately. 'Fee, you don't know how hard it is, you always were such a muff.'

'That is true,' said Felix, not at all offended, 'and I had my father and Edgar; but indeed, Lance, nothing ever was so hard to me to do as this. I cannot say how sorry I am.'

'You do really order me not?' said Lance, looking straight up at him.

'I do. I forbid you to go into Captain Collis's grounds, or to do more than exchange a greeting, if you meet him.'

'I will not. There's my word and honour for it, since--since you are so intolerably led by the nose by old Frog;' and Lance flung away, with the remains of his passion worked up afresh, and was as glum as his nature allowed the rest of the evening; but Felix, though much annoyed, saw that the boy had set up voluntarily two barriers between himself and his tempted will--in the command and the promise.

But the command that was a guard to the one, was a goad to the other; for Fulbert had never accepted his eldest brother's authority, and could not brook interference. Still his school character was good, and there was a certain worth about him, which made him sometimes withdraw his resistance, though never submit; and Felix had some hope that it would be so in the present case, when, while speeding to church in the dark winter Monday morning, he overheard Lance say to Clement, 'I say, Clem, 'tis a jolly stinging frost. If you'll take your skates and give us a lesson, we'll be off for the lake at Centry.'

One of the Whittingtonian curates had taken the boys to the ice in the parks, and taught them so effectively, that Clement was one of the best skaters in Bexley; but he was too much inclined to the nayward not to reply, 'I have to practise that anthem for Wednesday.'

'Oh, bother the practice!'

(Which Felix mentally echoed.)

'I can play that anthem, if that's all,' said Lance; 'and I believe you know it perfectly well. Now, Clem, don't be savage; I think, if you will come, we might put that other thing out of Ful's head.'

'Well, if you think it is to be of use----'

'That's right! Thank you,' cried Lance. 'And you won't jaw us all the way? He can't stand that, you know.'

Clement winced; but in compensation, apparently, for this forbidden lecture, he observed, 'I am glad you at least take it properly, Lance, though it would be worse in you than in him, considering your--'

'Bother it!' unceremoniously broke in Lance; and the words of wisdom were silenced.

Lance did his best to organise his party, but it was a failure; Fulbert said he had made an engagement, and would not break it; he was not bound to toady old Froggy, nor in bondage to any old fogeys of a dean and chapter; and he walked off the faster for Clement's protest, leaving Lance to roll on the floor and climb the balusters backwards to exhale his desire to follow. He was too much upset even to follow Clement to the organ, or to settle to the drawing which Cherry was teaching him, and was a great torment to himself and his sisters till dinner-time, when Clement had done his organ and his Greek, and was ready for a rush for the ice; and Robina went joyously with them. 'Between two young ladies one can't well run into harm's way,' said Lance.

So things went on for a fortnight. Fulbert never shuffled, he went openly to Marshlands Hall; and though not boasting of his expeditions, did not treat them as a secret. Wilmet and Geraldine each tried persuasion, but were silenced rudely; and Felix, unable to enforce his authority, held his tongue, but was very unhappy, both for the present and for the future. He did not believe much harm was doing now, but the temptation would increase with every vacation as the boys came nearer to manhood; and he seemed to have lost all influence and moral power over Fulbert.

Good old Mrs. Froggatt gave a small children's party, to which, with many apologies, she invited the lesser Underwoods, under charge of Wilmet. They were to sleep at the cottage, and Wilmet having offered to help in dressing the Christmas-tree, they set out early in the day to walk, escorted by the three brothers. That the trio did not return to tea did not alarm Felix and Geraldine, who suspected that the dislike the two elder expressed to the whole house of Froggatt had melted before the pleasure of working at the tree.

The evening was taken up in the discussion of a letter of Edgar's, more than usually discontented with his employment; and another of Alda's, who had been laid under orders to write to her eldest

brother, and desire him to remonstrate with Edgar on his inattention, laziness, and pleasure-seeking. The anxiety had long been growing up; Felix had come to write his difficult letter by the light of Geraldine's sympathy, and they were weighing what should be said, when the door-bell rang, some sounds puzzled them, and just as Felix was getting up to see what was the matter, Fulbert put his head in at the door, and said, low but earnestly, 'Step here, Felix, please.'

He thought there must have been some terrible accident; but when from the top of the stairs he beheld Clement's aspect under the gas in the passage, and heard the thick tones in which he was holding forth according to instinct, his consternation was almost greater than at any injury. Fulbert looked pale and astounded. 'I can't get him upstairs,' he said.

However, sense enough remained to Clement to give effect to his eldest brother's stern words, 'Be quiet, and come up;' and they dragged him stumbling upstairs without more words.

'Where's Lance?' then asked Felix.

'Stayed at the Froggatts'. I wish he hadn't. He will walk home by and by.'

'Now, Ful, run and tell Cherry that nobody is hurt. Do not let her get frightened.'

Felix spoke resolutely, but he felt so full of dismay and horror, that he hardly knew what he was doing till Fulbert had returned, and repressing all poor Clement's broken moralities, they had deposited him safely in bed, and shut the door on him. Then Fulbert gazed up at Felix with eyes full of regret and consternation, and he gathered breath to enter his own room, and say, 'What is the meaning of this?'

'His head must be ridiculously weak: or there was some beastly trick. Nobody else was the least queer!'

'Marshlands Hall?'

'Well, he had gone on at me so, that when Lance let himself be persuaded into staying to hang up the lamps, it struck me what a lark it would be to take Tina across the Hall lands, and then tell him he had been on the enemy's ground. So I told him of the old chantry that is turned into a barn, and of course he must go and see it, and take sketches of the windows for his clergy. While he was doing it, up comes young Jackman. You know young Jackman at the Potteries--a regular clever fellow that knows everything?'

'Yes, I know him.'

'Well, they got into early pointed, and late pointed, and billets and dog-tooths, and all the rest, and Clem went on like a house on fire; and by that time we had got to the big pond, where Collis and half a

dozen more were, and he had got his skates, and I believe he did surprise them; they called it first rate.'

'Did he know where he was?'

'Not at the beginning of the skating. I only wanted to get him down from his altitudes, and never thought it would come to this. You believe that, Felix?'

'Yes, I do. Go on.'

'It was fine moonlight, and we stayed on ever so long, while Jackman and Clem and two more danced a quadrille on the ice; and when it was over everybody was horribly cold, and Captain Collis said we must all come in and have something hot; and Jackman said he was going to drive home to dinner at eight, and would take us, but every one got talking, and it was half-past eight before we started. It was all in such a scramble, that I had no notion there was anything amiss till Clem began to talk on the way home.'

'What were they drinking?'

'Various things--brandy-and-water chiefly. I don't like it, and had some ale; but I was playing with Harry's puppies, and not much noticing Clem.'

'Do you think it was a trick?'

'I can't tell. He is so innocent, he would have no notion how stiff to make it. If any one meant mischief, it was Jackman; and I did think once or twice he had found out Tina, and was playing him off. On the way home, when I was trying to hinder poor Clem from falling off, he went on chaffing so, that I longed to jump off, and lay the whip about his ears.'

'Poor Clem!' said Felix, more grieved and shocked than angry, and not insensible to Fulbert's being even more appalled, and quite frightened out of his sulkiness.

'It is a bad business,' he sighed. 'It was all Lance's fault for letting himself be lugged into that baby party.'

Even this was a great admission, and Felix would not blight it by a word.

'It is well the girls are not at home,' was all he said.

'I only told Cherry that Clem wasn't well. I can't face her; I shall go to bed. I would not have had this happen for the world.'

'I shall say nothing to her,' said Felix, dejectedly, turning to leave the room, under a horrible sense of disgrace and stain on the whole family; but at the door he was caught hold of by Fulbert, who

looked up at him with a face quite unlike anything he had ever seen in the lad.

'Felix, I never was so sorry in my life. I wish you would give me a good rowing.'

Felix half smiled. 'I could not,' he said. 'You did not know what you were doing. Good-night.'

Fulbert gazed after him as he went downstairs, and went back, with a groan, to his own room.

Felix had never before felt so hopeful about Fulbert; but still he was too much overset to talk to Cherry, and hurried her off to bed, soon following her example, for he had not the heart to see Lance that night.

Of course, the first hours of the morning had to be spent in attending on the victim, whose misery, mental and bodily, was extreme, and was aggravated by his engagement to the organ. Lance could supply his place there, and was sent off to do so, but looking as subdued and guilty as if he had been making Fulbert's confession instead of hearing it, and stumbling uncomfortably over the explanation that Clement was not well, and that Felix could not leave him.

For there was a fragility about Clement's long lank frame that made any shock to it very severe, and he was ill enough to alarm his happily inexperienced brothers, and greatly increase Fulbert's penitence; but by the time Mr. Froggatt drove the sisters home, and Wilmet wondered that she could not go out for a night without some one being ill, he had arrived at a state which she could be left to attribute to Mrs. Froggatt's innocent mince-pies.

He burrowed under his blankets, and feigned sleep and discomfort beyond speech, whenever she came into the room, begging only that the light might be kept out, and that nobody would speak to him. He was too utterly miserable for anger with Fulbert, but only showed a sort of broken-hearted forgiveness, which made Fulbert say in desperation to Lance, 'I wish you would just fall upon me. I shall not be myself again till I've been blown up!'

'I suppose you are doing it for yourself, and that is worse,' said Lance.

'And you know it was all your doing, for going to that disgusting old Philistine's tea and cake.'

'What, you and Clem wanted me to lead you about, like two dogs in a string?' said Lance.

'No; Tina would have kept the baby-bunting out of harm's way.'

'More likely he would have bored me into going. Poor Tina! I should almost like to hear him jaw again! After all, you and he never promised, and I did.'

'I wish I had,' said Fulbert; 'I am awfully afraid they are getting hold of it in the town.'

'So am I. Mowbray Smith looked me all over, and asked me after Clement, when I met him just now in the street, as if he had some malice in his head.'

'What did you tell him?'

'I said he was in a state of collapse, and that serious fears were entertained for his life and reason; and then he warned me against the nineteenth-century manners, and I thanked him and made a bow, and now I suppose he is gone to tell my Lady.'

When Felix was free in the evening, he found Clement dressed, and sitting over the fire in his room--so well indeed, that he might have been downstairs, but that he shrank from every one; and that fire had been the fruit of such persevering battles of Wilmet and Sibby with the smoke and soot, that it would have been a waste of good labour to have deserted it.

'Well, Clem, you are better?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Headache gone?'

'Nearly,' with a heavy sigh.

Felix drew an ancient straw-bottomed chair in front of the fire backwards, placed himself astride on it, laid his arms on the top and his forehead on them, and in this imposing Mentorship attitude began, 'After all, Clem, I don't see that you need be so desperately broken-hearted. It was mere innocence and ignorance. Water-drinkers at home are really not on a level with other people. I always have to be very guarded when I have to dine with the other reporters.'

'No,' said Clement, sadly; 'I do not regard the disgrace as the sin so much as the punishment.'

It was more sensible than Felix had expected. He was conscious of not understanding Clement, who always seemed to him like a girl, but if treated like one, was sure to show himself in an unexpected light.

'You did not know where you were going?'

'Not at first. I found out long before I came off the ice; and then, like an absurd fool as I was, I thought myself showing how to deal courteously and hold one's own with such people.'

'You are getting to the bottom of it,' said Felix.

'I have been thinking it over all day,' said Clement, mournfully. 'I see that such a fall could only be the consequence of long continued error. Have I not been very conceited and uncharitable of late, Felix?'

'Not more than usual,' said Felix, intending to speak kindly.

'I see. I have been treating my advantages as if they were merits, condemning others, and lording it over them. Long ago I was warned that my danger was spiritual pride, but self-complacency blinded me.' And he hid his face and groaned.

Felix was surprised. He could not thus have discussed himself, even with his father; but he perceived that if Clement had no one else to preach to he would preach to himself, and that this anatomical examination was done in genuine sorrow.

'No humility!' continued Clement. 'That is what has brought me to this. If I had distrusted and watched myself, I should have perceived when I grew inflated by their flattery, and never--egregious fool that I was--have thought I was showing that one of our St. Matthew's choir could meet worldly men on their own ground.'

Felix was glad that his posture enabled him to conceal a smile; but perhaps Clement guessed at it, for he exclaimed, 'A fit consequence, to have made myself contemptible to everybody!'

'Come, Clem, that is too strong. Your censorious way was bad for yourself, and obnoxious to us all, and it was very silly to go to that place after what you had heard.'

'After telling Lance it was unworthy of a servant of the sanctuary,' moaned Clement.

'Very silly indeed,' continued the elder brother, 'very wrong; but as to what happened there, it is not reasonable to look at it as more than an accident. It will be forgotten in a week by all but Fulbert and yourself, and you will most likely be the wiser for it all your lives. I never got on so well with Ful before, or saw him really sorry.'

Clement only answered by a disconsolate noise; and Felix was becoming a little impatient, thinking the penitence overstrained, when he broke silence with, 'You must let me go up to St. Matthew's!'

'Really, Clement, it is hardly right to let you be always living upon Mr. Fulmott now your occupation is ended, and it would be braver not to run away.'

'I do not mean that!' cried Clement. 'I will not stay there. I would

not burthen them; but see the Vicar I _must_! I will go third class, and walk from the station.'

'The fare of an omnibus will not quite break our backs,' said Felix, smiling. 'If this is needful to settle your mind, you had better go.'

'You do not know what this is to me,' said Clement, earnestly; 'I wish you did.' Then perceiving the recurrence to his old propensity, he sighed pitifully and hung his head, adding, 'It is of no use till Saturday, the Vicar is gone to his sisters.'

'Very well, you can get a return ticket on Saturday--that is, if the organist is come back.'

'Lance must play; I am not worthy.'

'You have no right to break an engagement for fancies about your own worthiness,' said Felix. 'Rouse yourself up, and don't exaggerate the thing, to alarm all the girls, and make them suspicious.'

'They ought to know. I felt myself a wicked hypocrite when Wilmet would come and read me the Psalms, and yet I could not tell her. Tell them, Felix; I cannot bear it without.'

'No, I shall not. You have no right to grieve and disgust them just because you "cannot bear it without." Cannot you bear up, instead of drooping and bemoaning in this way? It is not manly.'

'Manliness is the great temptation of this world.'

'You idiot!' Felix, in his provocation, broke out; then getting himself in hand again, 'Don't you know the difference between true and false manliness?'

'I know men of the world make the distinction,' said Clement; 'I am not meaning any censure, Felix. Circumstances have given you a different standard.'

Felix interrupted rather hotly: 'Only my father's. I have heard him say, that if one is not a man before one is a parson, one brings the ministry into contempt. The things the boys call you Tina for are not what make a good clergyman.'

'I don't feel as if I could presume to seek the priesthood after that.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' cried Felix. 'If no one was ordained who had ever made a fool of himself and repented, we should be badly off for clergy. You were conceited and provoking, and have let yourself be led into a nasty scrape--that's the long and short of the matter; but it is only hugging your own self-importance to sit honing and moaning up here. Come down, and behave like a reasonable being.'

'Let me stay here to-night, Felix, I do need it,' said Clement, with tears in his eyes; 'if I am alone now, I think I can bring myself to bear up outwardly as you wish.'

The affected tone had vanished, and Felix rose, and kindly put his hand on his shoulder, and said, 'Do, Clem. You know it is not only my worldliness--mere man of business as I am--that bids us to hide grief within, and "anoint the head and wash the face."' "

Just then an exulting shout rang through the house, many feet scuttled upstairs, knocks hailed upon the door, and many voices shouted, 'Mr Audley! Felix, Clem, Mr. Audley!'

'Won't you come, Clem?'

'Not to-night; I could not.'

Clement shut the door, and Felix hastened down among the dancing exulting little ones. 'I thought you were at Rome!' he said, as the hands met in an eager grasp.

'I was there on Christmas Day; but Dr. White's appointment is settled, and he wants me to go out with him in June. My brother is gone on to London, and I must join him there on Saturday.'

'I am glad it is to-day instead of yesterday,' said Wilmet. 'We were all out but Felix and Cherry, and poor Clement was so ill.'

'Clement ill? Is he better?'

'He will be all right to-morrow,' said Felix.

Mr. Audley detected a desire to elude inquiry, as well as a meaning look between the two younger boys, and he thought care sat heavier on the brow of the young master of the house than when they had parted eighteen months before.

His travels were related, his photographs admired, his lodging arranged in Mr. Froggatt's room, and after the general goodnight, he drew his chair in to the fire, and prepared for a talk with his ex-ward.

'You look anxious, Felix. Have things gone on pretty well?'

'Pretty fairly, thank you, till just now, when there is rather an ugly scrape,'--and he proceeded to disburthen his mind of last night's misadventure; when it must be confessed that the narrative of Clement's overweening security having had a fall provoked a smile from his guardian, and an observation that it might do him a great deal of good.

'Yes,' said Felix, 'if his friends do not let him make much of his penitence, and think it very fine to have so important a thing to

repent of.'

'I don't think they will do that. You must not take Clement as exactly the fruit of their teaching.'

'There's no humbug about him, at least,' said Felix. 'He is really cut up exceedingly. Indeed all I have been doing was to get him to moderate his dolefulness. I believe he thinks me a sort of heathen.'

'Well,' said Mr. Audley, laughing, 'you don't seem to have taken the line of the model head of the family.'

'The poor boys were both so wretched, that one could not say a word to make it worse,' said Felix. 'This satisfies me that Fulbert is all right in that way. He would not have been so shocked if he had ever seen anything like it before; but though he is very sorry now, I am afraid it will not cut the connection with those Collises.'

'You do not find him easier to manage?'

'No; that is the worst. He is not half a bad boy--nay, what is called a well-principled boy--only it is his principle not to mind me. I do not know whether I am donnish with him, or if I bullied him too much when he was little; but he is always counter to me. Then he is one of those boys who want an out-of-door life, and on whom the being shut up in a town falls hard. The giving up sporting is real privation to him and to Lance, and much the hardest on him, for he does not care for music or drawing, or anything of that sort.'

'How old is he?'

'Just sixteen.'

'Suppose I were to take him out to Australia?'

'Fulbert!'

'Yes; I always intended to take one if I went, but I waited till my return to see about it, and I thought Clement was of a more inconvenient age, but you must judge.'

'Poor Tina!' said Felix, smiling, 'he would hardly do in a colony. He is heart and soul a clergyman, and whether he will ever be more of a man I don't know; but I don't think he could rough it as a missionary.'

'Is he going to get a scholarship?'

'He has tried at Corpus, and failed. He is full young, and I suppose he ought to go to a tutor. I am afraid he learnt more music than classics up at that place.'

'Can the tutoring be managed?'

'I suppose a hundred out of that thousand will do it.'

'Is that thousand to go like the famous birthday five?'

'Five hundred is to be put into the business; but the rest I meant to keep in reserve for such things as this.'

'If all are to be helped at this rate, your reserve will soon come to an end.'

'Perhaps so; but I have always looked on Clement as my own substitute. Indeed, I held that hope out to my father, when it distressed him that I should give it up. So Clem is pretty well settled, thank you. Besides I am not afraid of his not going on well here; but I do believe Fulbert will do the better for being more independent, only it seems to me too much to let you undertake for us.'

'They are all my charge,' said Mr. Audley; 'and as I am leaving you the whole burthen of the rest, and my poor little godson is not likely to want such care, you need have no scruple. One of the Somervilles is going out to a Government office at Albertstown, and perhaps may put me in the way of doing something for him.'

Felix mused a moment, then said, 'The only doubt in my mind would be whether, if it suited you equally, it might not be an opening for Edgar.'

'Edgar! Surely he is off your hands?'

'I am greatly afraid his present work will not last. He always hated it, and I believe he always had some fancy that he could persuade Tom Underwood into making a gentleman of him at once, sending him to the University or the like, and they petted and admired him enough to confirm the notion. Mrs. Underwood makes him escort her to all her parties; and you know what a brilliant fellow he is--sure to be wanted for all manner of diversions, concerts, private theatricals, and what not; and you can fancy how the counting-house looks to him after. Tom Underwood declares he requires nothing of him but what he would of his own son; and I believe it is true; but work is work with him, and he will not be trifled with. Here is a letter about it, one of many, I was trying to answer last night; only this affair of poor Clem's upset everything.'

'Six brothers are no sinecure, Felix.'

'They are wonderfully little trouble,' said Felix, standing on their defence. 'They are all good sound-hearted boys, and as to Lance, there's no saying the comfort that little fellow always is. He has that peculiar pleasantness about him--like my father and Edgar--that one feels the moment he is in the house; and he is so steady, with all his spirits. The other two both say all this could not have

happened with him.'

'High testimony.'

'Yes, as both are inclined to look down on him. But think of that boy's consideration. He has never once asked me for pocket-money since he went to the Cathedral. He gets something when the Dean and Canons have the boys to sing, and makes that cover all little expenses.'

'What do you mean to do with him?'

'If he gets the scholarship, a year and a half hence, he will stay on two years free of expense. Unluckily, he says that young Harewood is cleverer than he, and always just before him: but I have some hope in the hare-brains of Master Bill. If he do not get it--well, we must see, but it will go hard if Lance cannot be kept on to be educated properly.'

Mr. Audley took the letters, and presently broke into an indignant exclamation; to which Felix replied--

'The work is not good enough for him, that is the fact.'

'If you are weak about any one, Felix, it is Edgar. I have no patience with him. His work not good enough, forsooth, considering what yours is!'

'Mine has much more interest and variety; and he is capable of much more than I am.'

'Then let him show it, instead of living in the lap of luxury, and murmuring at a few hours at the desk.'

'I ascribe that to his temperament, which certainly has a good deal of the artist; that desk-work is peculiarly irksome.'

'Very likely; but it is his plain duty to conquer his dislike. No, Felix; I wish I could take him away with me, for I am afraid he will be a source of trouble.'

'Never! Edgar is too considerate.'

'But he is exactly what Australia is over-stocked with already--a discontented clerk. If he be spoiled by luxury here, do you think he would bear with a rude colony? No. Fulbert is a gruff, obstinate boy, but not idle and self-indulgent; and I am not afraid to undertake him, but I should be of Edgar.'

Felix had flushed up a good deal, for his love for Edgar was less paternal and more sensitively keen than that for any of the others; but he was more reasonable, and had more control of temper now, than when Mr. Audley had last crossed him; and he made answer, 'I believe

you are right, and that Edgar could not be happy in a colony. Any way, you are most kind to Fulbert. But I am afraid I must go now, or Theodore will wake.'

'Do you still have him at night?'

'He is not happy with any one else. You have not seen him yet? I am sure he is improving! There's his voice! Good-night.' And Felix hurried away, leaving Mr. Audley feeling that though here and there the young pillar of the house might be mistaken, the daily unselfishness of his life was a beautiful thing, and likewise impressed by his grave air of manly resolution and deliberation.

By the morning, Clement had recovered his tone, so as not to obtrude his penitence or to be much more subdued in manner than usual. Mr. Audley made him bring his books to the dining-room after breakfast, and the examination quite exonerated the authorities at Oxford from any prejudice except against inaccuracy, and showed that a thorough course of study was needful before he could even matriculate; and Clement in his present lowliness was not incredulous of any deficiency at St. Matthew's, but was only meek and mournful.

'What shall I do?' he asked. 'Perhaps some school would take me to teach and study at the same time. Or I might get an organist's place, and read so that I might be ordained as a literate at last. It would come when I was fit, I suppose.'

Mr. Audley only said he would inquire, and talk to Felix; and Clement pleased him by answering that he could not bear to be an expense to Felix. The good principle in the boys was quite to be traced, when presently after it was necessary to put Fulbert to a severe trial. On going to pay his respects at the Rectory, Mr. Audley found Mr. Mowbray Smith there, and after some preliminaries, he was asked whether he knew how the young Underwoods had been going on of late; of course, though, it would be concealed from him: but it was right, etc. Then Mr. Bevan feebly suggested that he did not believe there was any truth in it, and was sharply silenced; and Miss Caroline observed that she was always sure that Clement Underwood was a great humbug; whereupon, between the mother, daughter and curate, the popular version of the Marshlands Hall affair was narrated--or rather versions, for all were beautifully entangled and contradictory.

Some one had been in the street, and had seen poor Clement's exit from young Jackman's dog-cart, and reported indiscriminately that it was 'young Underwood.' Lance had not been able to put a sufficiently bold face on his morning's report of Clement's indisposition and Felix's absence; and this, together with the boys' hunting propensities, and Fulbert's visits to Marshlands, had all been concocted into a very serious accusation of the whole of the brothers, including Felix, of having entered into a dangerous friendship with Captain Collis, and underhand enjoying the dissipations of the Hall, which had been the bane of many a young man of Bexley.

There were different measures of indignation. Miss Price expected a grand series of denunciations--to Mr. Froggatt--to Miss Pearson, 'whose niece was always there--most imprudent;'--nay, perhaps to the Dean, and to the Vicar of St. Matthew's. The least excitement she expected, was Felix Underwood's expulsion from the choir.

Lady Price merely believed it all, and thought the friends ought to interfere, and save the poor young things while there was time for any of them. She would never mention it so as to injure them, but nothing else could be expected.

Mr. Mowbray Smith supposed there must be some exaggeration, but he had been surprised at Lancelot's manner, and he did not think Felix's absence accounted for; he did seem steady--but-- And there was something unnatural in the way of life at St. Matthew's, that would make him never trust a lad from thence.

Yes; and even Mr. Bevan did not like St. Matthew's (because it was not slack or easy), and he too could believe anything of Clement. No doubt poor Felix found those great brothers getting too much for him.

Mr. Audley was standing by the window. He saw Fulbert with Lance and little Bernard going down the street, and by one of the sudden dashes that had often puzzled the Rectory, he flew out at the door, and the next moment had his hand on Fulbert's shoulder.

'Fulbert, they have made a terrible scandal of this affair at Marshlands Hall. They fancy Felix had something to do with it.'

'Felix! I should like to punch their heads.'

'You can do better. You can contradict it.'

'But, Sir--'

However, Fulbert, while still following to plead with Mr. Audley, found himself where he never recollected to have been in his life before, among the cushions, arm-chairs, and tables covered with knick-knacks, of the Rectory drawing-room. Mr. Bevan in an easy-chair; Mr. Smith standing before the fire; Lady Price at work, looking supercilious; and her daughter writing notes at a davenport.

Mr. Bevan half rose and held out his hand, the others contented themselves with a nod, while the big, stout lad stood rather like a great dog under the same circumstances, very angry with everybody, and chiefly with Mr. Audley--to whom, nevertheless, he trusted for getting him safe out again.

'Fulbert,' said Mr. Audley, 'Mr. Bevan would be better satisfied if he could hear what intimacy there has been between your brothers and the Collises.'

'None at all,' said Fulbert, bluntly.

'My boy,' said the gentle Rector, deprecatingly, 'nobody ever suspected your eldest brother.'

'I should think not!' exclaimed Fulbert, with angry eyes. 'All he ever did was to warn us against going. More fools not to mind him!'

'Then,' said my Lady, 'it has been the insubordination and wilfulness of you younger boys that has nearly involved him in so grave an imputation.'

'Of nobody's but mine,' returned Fulbert. 'The others would have nothing to do with it.'

'That cannot be the literal fact,' said Mr. Smith, in a low voice, to Lady Price. 'There were certainly two of them.'

Fulbert heard, and turning to the Rector, as if he thought every one else beneath his notice, said, 'The long and short of it is this: Lance and I picked young Collis out of a ditch, and took him home. Then Captain Collis asked us rabbit-shooting. Lance never went again, because Felix did not choose it. I did; and, just by way of a joke, I took Clement there without his knowing what place it was. We fell in with them skating, and went into the house, the day before yesterday. That is,' said Fulbert, concluding as he had begun, 'the long and short of it. Whatever happened was my fault, and no one else's.'

'A very honest confession!' said kind Mr. Bevan, pleased to have something to praise.

'And I hope it will act as a warning,' said Lady Price.

'But,' said Mr. Smith, partly incited by Carry's looks, 'it was true that you--two of you were brought home by young Jackman.'

'Yes,' said Fulbert, growing crimson, 'he drove Clement and me home!'

'And,' said Mr. Audley, 'it was Clement's great distress that kept Felix at home the next morning.'

'Yes,' said Fulbert, 'there was nobody else but me, and Clem could hardly bear the sight of me, because I had led him into it. We thought no one in the house would know it--and I don't believe they do.'

'Ah!' said Lady Price, 'it is false kindness to attempt concealment.'

'From lawful authority it is,' said Mr. Audley; 'but in this case it was only from children and servants. However, Fulbert, I think you have fully satisfied Mr. Bevan as to the amount of intercourse between your brothers and Marshlands.'

'Entirely,' said Mr. Bevan, 'in fact, you may assure your brother that I never believed anything to his discredit.'

'I shall say nothing about it, said Fulbert, not choosing to see the hand held out to him. 'I should be ashamed!--May I go now, Sir?' to Mr. Audley; and with an odd sort of circular bow, he made his escape, and Mr. Audley, having remained long enough to ascertain that the worst that could be said of him was that he was a cub, and that it was a terrible thing to see so many great hulking lads growing up under no control, took his leave, and presently came on the three boys again, consulting at the ironmonger's window over the knife on which Bernard was to spend a half-crown that Mrs. Froggatt had given him.

'Can Lance and Bernard settle that? I want you a moment, Fulbert. Not to confront the Rectory again,' he added, smiling. 'It was a horrid bore for you, but there was no helping it.'

'I suppose not,' said Fulbert, gloomily, as if he did not forgive the unpleasant moments.

'It was not about that I wanted to speak to you, though,' said Mr. Audley. 'I wanted to know whether you have any plans or wishes for the future.'

'I?' said Fulbert, looking up blank.

'Yes, you. You are growing up, Fulbert.'

'I suppose I must take what I can get,' said Fulbert, in the same sulky, passive voice.

'That may be a wise determination, but have you really no choice?'

'Well, when I was a little chap, and knew no better, I used to think I would be a soldier or a farmer--but that's all nonsense; and I suppose I must have some abominable little clerkship,' said Fulbert, with a certain steadiness for all the growl of his tone.

'Well, Fulbert, have you a mind to try whether the other side of the world would suit you better?'

Fulbert looked up. 'You don't mean that you would take me out?'

'Yes, I do, if you are inclined to come and try for work at Albertstown.'

Fulbert, instead of answering, quickened his pace to a walking run, dashed on, nearly upsetting half a dozen people, and was only checked by a collision with a perambulator. Then he stood still till Mr. Audley came up to him, and then again muttered under his breath, 'Go out to Albertstown!'

They walked on a little way, and then the boy said, 'Say it again, please.'

Mr. Audley did say it again, in more detail; and Fulbert this time exclaimed, 'It is the very thing! Thank you, Mr. Audley;' and his face clearing into a frank, open look, he added, 'I'll try to do my best there. I wonder I never thought of it before. I would have worked my way out as a cabin boy if I had. Where is Lance? Does Felix know?'

There was no sentiment about Fulbert. He jumped at the offer as instinctively as a young swallow would prepare to migrate, seemed to brighten all over, and shake off his dull, defiant mood, and gave no sign of feeling about brother or sister--except that he said he believed Felix would get on better without him; and that he told Lance that they would have splendid fun together when he was big enough to come out and ride a buck-jumper.

CHAPTER XIII

PEGASUS IN HARNESS

'Fear not on that rugged highway
Life may want its lawful zest,
Sunny glens are on the mountain,
Where the weary heart may rest.'

CHARLES GAVAN DUFFY.

There was much relief and comfort in that visit of Mr. Audley's. For one thing, Geraldine was able to pour out all her troubles, as she had been used to do ever since her father had left her in his charge --her repentance for the stirrings of her naturally fretful, plaintive temper, for her fits of impatience and her hard judgments, and, what surprised him chiefly, for jealousy.

'Yes,' she repeated, at his word of surprise, 'I am jealous!'

'Indeed!'

'I never knew it till the choral festival. I used to be very fond of her, but-- I'm sure it is jealousy; I don't like to see her more eagerly attended to than myself. Not that there is anything to complain of. He never neglected me in his life.'

Mr. Audley smiled. 'People would tell you it is the natural lot of sisters.'

Then she saw that he knew all about it; for, in fact, Felix had, rather to the general surprise, observed that the Miss Pearsons would like to meet Mr. Audley, and the trio had spent a musical evening with the Underwood party.

'Oh,' she cried, 'is it all my own horridness? Or is it really--'

'My own horridness or my own discernment?' said he, taking the words out of her mouth. 'My dear, such an affair as this would be generally the family jest.'

'Oh!'

'It is just as well it should not be so here,' continued Mr. Audley, 'for nonsense is not always a cure, and the talk would be mischievous; besides, I think both are unconscious.'

'He is, I believe,' said Cherry.

'At any rate, he is more than ordinarily full of sense and self-control, and may safely be trusted to do nothing imprudent. She is pretty and attractive, and of course he likes to be with her; but I should think it very unlikely it would go farther. Has any one else observed it?'

'Not Wilmet, only Lance.'

'And has not made fun of it? That speaks well for Master Lance's discretion. Yet you all feel the weight of life too heavily. I had rather have found you amused by these little prepossessions, than weighing them seriously, and wearing yourself to fritters.'

'I _will_ try not to mind, but I can't help being afraid for him! It must be very wrong to be almost turned against her because he likes her; and yet, what is all very well as my friend does not seem enough for Felix.'

'Nor will it be. My dear Cherry, such things come on and go off twenty times in a man's life. You will treat the symptoms more lightly before you have done with your seven brothers. Meantime, don't fret your conscience over fancies, unless you have spoken or acted unkindly or fretfully.'

'O Mr. Audley, what shall I do when you are quite gone? All this time I have felt as if I were without my pilot.'

Mr. Audley, too, had been thinking this over, and wished to put her more formally under the spiritual charge of Mr. Willoughby of St. Faith's, feeling that the morbid and sensitive nature needed external support, and that it was not right to deprive it of what the Church sanctions.

Her only doubt was Felix's approval. His nature did not readily

accept progress beyond that to which he had been bred up; and in border lands like these, an unfavourable medium made much difference to the clearness of the sight. Clement's contempt for what had satisfied his father annoyed him: and his mind was self-reliant, his soul accustomed to find its requirements met by the system around him, and his character averse to intermeddling, so that it was against the grain with him that spiritual guidance should be sought outside the family, or, at any rate, outside the parish. He thought such direction weakened the nature, and Mr. Audley, after warning him against taking the disease for the effect of the remedy, had to laugh at him as a British householder. After all, he yielded, because he thought Mr. Audley had a certain right over Geraldine, and that it was proper to defer to his judgment; while his guardian trusted to a sight of St. Matthew's for the overthrow of the prejudices that Clement had managed to excite.

Before leaving England, Mr. Audley was resolved that little Theodore should be shown to some London physician. The child was five years old, but looked no more than three. He could totter in an uncertain run, and understood a few simple sentences, but came no nearer to language than the appropriation of a musical sound to every one whom he knew. There was nothing unpleasant about him, except his constant purring and humming; he was perfectly docile, loved music, and could be amused by simple recurring games. His affections seemed to have gone out chiefly to Felix and to Sibby; and as to his twin-sister, he seemed lost without her, and she seemed to view him as the complement of herself--like a sort of left hand, giving him things to hold in his feeble grasp, saying her lessons to him, and talking as if to a doll. There was something sad in the very resemblance; for their eyes were of the same shade of deep blue, their long soft hair of the same flaxen tint, their faces equally fair, but while hers was all colour, light, and life, his was pale and vacant, and scarcely ever stirred into expression.

Mr. Audley thought it right to ascertain whether treatment could be of any use; and finding that his father's London house was only occupied by his brother the Captain, he arranged that Felix should come up to town with the child and Sibby, when the law business could be arranged, and there would be an opportunity of his seeing something of the world.

He had never had a holiday before, and Mr. Froggatt rivalled his guardian in his desire that it should not be too short. The first call was by appointment on the doctor. He was not used to have patients like Theodore brought by youths of Felix's age, and was touched by the care and tenderness of the young man, as he tried to overcome the alarm that was rendering the little one impracticable, when it was desirable to exhibit his slender store of accomplishments. His nearest approach to his natural state was when perched on his brother's knee, with his back to the strange faces, listening as Felix whistled the tunes he loved best.

After all, little was gained by the consultation, except the

assurance that the poor little fellow was as well situated as was possible. A few directions for treatment and discipline were given, but very little hope was held out of any important change for the better.

The verdict disappointed Felix to an extent that surprised Mr. Audley, who had better understood the hopelessness of the case. Of all the family, Felix had the most of the parental instinct for the most helpless; and while he warmly thanked his friend, he looked so mournfully at the child who clung to him, that Mr. Audley said in a voice of sympathy, 'It is a burthen, but one that will never bring the sting of sin.'

'Not a burthen,' said Felix. 'No; as my father said when he gave him to me, he is the Gift of God, the son of my right hand. May it always be able to work for you!' he murmured, as he bent his head over the little one.

'And I think the gift will bring a blessing!' said Mr. Audley.

Theodore was sent home with Sibby, thus restoring Stella to herself, for she had been greatly lost without her speechless companion: but Felix remained in London for a week of business and pleasure. Captain Audley was very good-natured and friendly, and abetted his brother in all his arrangements for showing Felix as much of life as was possible in a week, assuring him that every new experience was a duty to the Pursuivant--a plea that Felix, with his lover-like devotion to every detail of his paper, admitted with a smile. Edgar was of almost all their expeditions, and dined with them nearly every day. That young gentleman's peculiar pleasantness had very nearly averted the remonstrances with which his brother and his guardian had come up armed. There he was, finding his work real, and not a royal road to immediate wealth, idling, lounging, and gratifying his taste for art and music; and when his employer stormed and threatened, listening with aggravating coolness, and even sweetness, merely hinting that his occupation was a mistake; and living all the time as a son of the house, with a handsome allowance, and free access to society and amusement. Thus, when Mr. Audley talked to him, he smiled with a certain resignation, and observed that he was concerned for poor old Tom, to have been unlucky enough to have drawn such a fellow as himself. Probably it was a judgment on him for not having come forward sooner, when he might have had Felix! And when Mr. Audley upheld Felix as an example of hearty sacrifice of taste and inclination, it was to obtain an enthusiastic response. Nobody breathed equal to dear old Fee, and it was the most ardent desire of Edgar's heart to take some of the burthen from his shoulders! When it was hinted that such an allowance as Tom Underwood gave afforded the opportunity, Edgar smiled between melancholy and scorn, saying, 'Times must have altered since your time, Mr. Audley.--No, I forgot. Expense is the rule in our line. Swells can do as they please.'

However, these things rested; Mr. Underwood treated him exactly like an idle son, storming at him sometimes, but really both fond and

proud of him, and very gracious to Felix, whom he invited once to a very dull and dazzling dinner, and once sent to the opera with his ladies.

Felix's Sunday was chiefly spent at St. Matthew's, which he was very glad to see without Tina's spectacles. He was amazed to find so much more good sense and reality than the effect on Clement had led him to expect; and Mr. Fulmort, who struck him as one of the most practical-looking men he had ever seen, spoke in high terms of Clement's steadiness and wish to do right; but added, 'I am afraid we have rather spoilt him. He came up to us so unlike the kind of boy we generally get, that we may have made rather too much of him at first.'

Felix smiled. 'Perhaps we had knocked him about, and made too little of him at home,' he said.

'Besides, esprit de corps in so small a place as this is apt to become so concentrated as not to be many removes from egotism. I daresay we have been a terrible bore to you.'

Felix laughed. 'We have always been very grateful to you, Sir.'

'I understand. I am glad he is going farther a-field. He will be much improved by seeing other places, and having his exclusiveness and conceit shaken out of him; but we shall always regard him as the child of the house, and I only hope he may end by working among us.'

'Poor fellow! Conceit has been pretty well shaken out for the present,' said Felix.

'I hope it may last. He was rather hurt at my not making his misfortune of more importance: but it seems to have been accident, all except the priggish self-confidence that led to it.'

Felix increased much in cordiality towards Mr. Fulmort, and at the same time mounted many stages in Clement's estimation on the discovery that, however behindhand his ecclesiastical advantages might be, the Vicar was exceedingly impressed by his excellence.

A day or two after Felix's arrival, Ferdinand Travis was first encountered riding a spirited horse in the park, looking remarkably handsome, though still of the small-limbed slender make that recalled his Indian blood. His delight in the meeting was extreme, and he seemed to be as simple and good as ever. He was in deep mourning, having newly heard of his father having been killed in an American railway accident, and though his uncle seemed proud of him, and continued his liberal allowance, the loss and blank were greatly felt--all the more that he had not found it easy to make friends among his brother officers in the Life Guards. His foreign air was somehow uncongenial; he had no vivacity or cleverness, and being little inclined to some of the amusements of his contemporaries, and on his guard against others, he seemed to find his life rather dull

and weary. He did not seem to have anything to love except his horses, especially the creature he was then riding, Brown Murad. He had obtained it after such competition, that he viewed the purchase as an achievement; while Felix heard the amount with an incredulous shudder, and marvelled at Mr. Audley's not regarding it as wildly preposterous. It was a dangerous position; and though Mr. Audley certified himself, through his soldier brother, that Travis was steadiness itself--neither betted, gamed, nor ran into debt--yet while he seemed personally acquainted with all the horses that ran, and apparently entered into no literature but the Racing Calendar, it was impossible not to be anxious about him, even though he seemed perfectly happy to be allowed to be with his two godfathers, and followed them everywhere, from the Houses of Parliament to St. Matthew's.

This was not the last expedition Felix had to make to London that spring. After many appointments of the time, and as many delays, a telegram suddenly summoned him in the beginning of May to bring Fulbert up to London, when the business would be wound up, and Captain Audley would take his brother and the boy in his yacht to Alexandria, there to join the overland passengers.

So Fulbert's farewells were made in the utmost haste, and mixed up with Wilmet's solicitous directions for his proper use of all her preparations for his comfort on the voyage; and Lance could only be seen for the brief moments of halt at the Minsterham Station, during which neither spoke three words, but Lance hung on the step till the train was in motion, and then was snatched back, and well shaken and reprimanded, by a guard; while Fulbert leant out after him at even greater peril of his life, long after the last wave of the trencher cap had ceased to be visible.

Felix believed that this parting was more felt than that with all the other eleven, and while Fulbert subsided into his corner, the elder brother felt much oppressed by the sense that it was his duty to give some good advice, together with great perplexity what it should be, how it should be expressed, and whether it would be endured. He would have been thankful for some of Clement's propensity for preaching when he found himself *tete-a-tete* with Fulbert in a cab; but while he was still considering of the right end by which to take this difficult subject, he was startled by his beginning, 'Felix, I say, I'm glad you are going to get shut of me.'

'I believe it is for your good,' said Felix.

'You'll get on better without me,' repeated Fulbert; then, with an effort, 'Look here. It isn't that I don't know you're a brick and all that, but somehow nothing riles me like your meddling with me.'

'I know it,' answered Felix. 'I wish I could have helped it; but what could be done, when there was nobody else?'

'Ay,' responded Fulbert, 'I know I have been a sulky, nasty brute to

you, and I should do it again; and yet I wish I hadn't.'

'I should be as bad myself if I were a junior,' was the moral reflection Felix produced for his brother's benefit. 'Only, Ful, if you try that on with Mr. Audley out there, you'll come to grief.'

'I don't mean to,' said Fulbert.

'And you'll keep in mind what my father meant us to be, Ful--that we have got to live so as to meet him again.'

Fulbert nodded his head emphatically.

'It is his name you have to keep unstained in the new country,' added Felix, the fresh thought rising to his lips; but it was met by a gush of feeling that quite astonished him.

'Ay, and yours, Felix! I do--I do want to be a help, and not a drag to you. I really don't think so much of any of them--not even Lance--as of you. I hope I shouldn't have been better to my father than I have been to you; and when--when I'm out there, I do hope to show--that I do care.'

The boy was fighting with very hard sobs, and for all the frightful faces he made the tears were running down his cheeks. Felix's eyes were overflowing too, but with much of sudden comfort and thankfulness.

'I always knew you were a good fellow, Ful,' he said, with his hand on his brother's knee, 'and I think you'll keep so, with Mr. Audley to keep you up to things, and show you how to be helped.'

All after this was bustle and hurry. Fulbert had to be sent alone to take leave of Alda, while his brother and Mr. Audley transacted their business. Edgar came back with him; and after some hurried rushings out in search of necessaries forgotten, the last farewells were spoken, and Fulbert, with the two Audley brothers, was out of sight; while Felix, after drawing a long, deep sigh, looked at his watch, and spoke of going to see Alda.

'Don't run your head into a hornet's nest,' said Edgar; 'it's all up with me there. Come this way, and I'll tell you all about it.'

'All up with you!'

'There are limits to human endurance, and Tom and I have overpassed each other's. I don't blame him, poor man; he wanted raw material to serve as an importer of hides and tallow, but you, the genuine article, were bespoken, and my father was not in a state for the pleading of personal predilections.'

'What is it now?'

'Only a set of etchings from Atalanta in Caledon. That was the straw that broke the camel's back,' said Edgar, so coolly as to make Felix exclaim--

'How much or how little do you mean?'

'Separated on account of irreconcilable incompatibility.'

'Impossible!'

'Possible, because true.'

'Why did you not tell before Mr. Audley was gone?'

'It would have been bad taste to obtrude one's own little affairs, and leave him with vexatious intelligence to ruminate on his voyage. Nay, who knows but that he might have thought it his duty to wait to compose matters, and so a bright light might have been lost to the Antipodes.'

'You actually mean me to understand that you have broken with Tom Underwood?'

'The etchings were the text of an awful row, in which the old gentleman exposed himself more than I am willing to repeat, and called on me to choose between his hides and tallow and what he was pleased to call my tomfoolery.'

Felix groaned.

'Exactly so. You are conscious that his demand was not only tyrannical but impracticable. One can't change the conditions of one's nature.'

'Are you absolutely dismissed?'

'Nothing can be more so.'

'And what do you mean to do?' demanded Felix, stung, though to a certain degree reassured, by his tranquillity.

'Study art.'

'And live--?'

'On my own two hundred. You will advance it? I only want sixteen months of years of discretion, and then I'll pay it back with more than interest.'

'I must know more first,' said Felix. 'I must understand what terms you are on with Tom Underwood, and whether you have any reasonable or definite plans.'

'Spoken like an acting partner! Well, come to Renville, he will satisfy you as to my plans. I am to be his pupil; he teaches at the South Kensington Museum, and is respectability itself. In fact, he requires my responsible brother to be presented to him. Come along.'

'Stay, Edgar. I do not think it right by Tom Underwood to see any one before him. I shall go to him before anything else is done.'

'Do not delude yourself with the hope of patching up matters like Audley last winter, losing me five months of time and old Tom of temper.'

'How long ago was this?'

'The crisis was yesterday. I was just packing to come home when Fulbert burst upon the scene.'

Nothing could be worse news, yet Edgar's perfect self-possession greatly disarmed Felix. Never having thought his brother and the work well suited, he was the less disposed to anger, especially as the yoke of patronage was trying to his character; but he persisted in seeing Thomas Underwood before taking any steps for Edgar's future career, feeling that this was only due to the cousin to whom his father had entrusted the lad. So Edgar, with a shrug, piloted him to the Metropolitan Railway, and then to the counting-house where, in the depths of the City, Kedge and Underwood dealt for the produce of the corrals of South America.

Edgar, as he entered the office full of clerks, nodded to their bald-headed middle-aged senior in a half-patronising manner. 'Don't be afraid, Mr. Spooner; I'm not coming back on your hands, whatever this good brother of mine may intend. Is the Governor in?'

'Mr. Underwood is in his room, Mr. Edgar,' was the very severe answer; 'but after this most serious annoyance, I would not answer for the consequences.'

'Wouldn't you indeed?' said Edgar quietly, in a nonchalant tone that made the younger lads bend down to sniggle behind their desks, while he moved on to the staircase.

Mr. Spooner and he were visibly old foes; but the senior devoured his wrath so far as to come forward and offer a chair to Felix, repeating, however, 'Mr. Underwood is very seriously annoyed.'

Before Felix could attempt an answer, Edgar had re-descended, newspaper in hand. 'Go up, Felix,' he said, threw himself into the chair, and proceeded to read the paper; while Felix obeyed, and found the principal standing at his door, ready to meet him.

'What, Felix Underwood! Glad to see you. This intolerable affair can't have brought you up already, though?'

'No, Sir; I was telegraphed for late last night, to bring up my brother Fulbert to start with Mr. Audley.'

'Oh, ay. Well, I hope he'll have a better bargain of him than I've had in Edgar. You've heard his impudence?'

'I am exceedingly sorry--'

Then Mr. Underwood broke out with his account of Edgar's folly and ingratitude, after all the care and expense of his education. He had taken up with a set of geniuses for friends, was always rehearsing for amateur performances with them, keeping untimely hours; and coming late to the office, to cast up accounts, or copy invoices in his sleep, make caricatures on his blotting-paper, or still worse, become 'besotted' with some design for a drawing or series of drawings, and in the frenzy of execution know no more what was said to him than a post. Finally, 'the ladies' being as mad as himself, as Mr. Underwood said, had asked him to draw for a bazaar, and in his frenzy of genius over the etchings he had entirely forgotten an important message, and then said he could not help it. On being told that if so he was not fit for his profession, he merely replied, 'Exactly so, the experiment had been unsuccessful;' and when his meekness had brought down a furious tempest of wrath, and threats of dismissal, he had responded, 'with his intolerable cool insolence,' that 'this would be best for all parties.'

'This is the offence?' anxiously asked Felix.

'Offence? What greater offence would you have?'

'Certainly nothing can be much worse as to business,' said Felix.

'But when he told me what had happened, I was afraid that he might be running into temptation.'

'Oh! as to that, there's no harm in the lad--Spooner allows that--nothing low about him.'

'And his friends?'

'How should I know! Ruffs those fellows always are, sure to bring him to the dogs!'

'Did you ever hear of an artist named Renville?'

'Ay?' meditatively. 'He was the master the girls had at one time, wasn't he?'

'Then he is respectable! I ask because Edgar wants to study under him.'

'Eh! what!' demanded Mr. Underwood, in manifest astonishment. 'Is the lad gone crazy?'

'I thought you had dismissed him, Sir.'

'Well, well, said Mr. Underwood, taken aback, 'I told him only what he deserved, and he chose to take it as final. I thought you were come to speak for him.'

'You are very kind, Sir, but I doubt whether he would resume his work here, or indeed if it would not be an abuse of your kindness to induce him.'

'Eh! what?' again exclaimed Thomas. 'You give in to his ungrateful folly! Felix Underwood, I thought you at least were reasonable!'

The imperious passionate manner, rather than the actual words, made Felix side the more with the wayward genius, and feel that having sacrificed himself for the good of the family, he might save his brother from the gloomy office and piles of ledgers and bills below-stairs. 'Sir,' he said, 'I am sorry Edgar has not been better fitted to return the timely help you have given us, but I am afraid that such unwilling work as his could never be of service to you.'

'Why on earth should it be unwilling? Better men than he have sat at a desk before now! I've no patience with young men's intolerable conceit. There have I done everything for this young fellow, and he is unwilling, _unwilling_ indeed, to give his mind to the simplest business for six hours a day.'

'It is wrong,' said Felix, 'but his powers lie in such a different line.'

'Fiddling and daubing! Pah! If anything could be more incomprehensible than his not being able to cast up an account or take a message; it is your backing him up!'

'I am afraid he is too old for coercion.'

'No coercion like having not a penny in the world. Pray, how is he to live?'

'His own means will help him through his studies.'

'His own--200 pounds! About as much as he has made ducks and drakes of in a year. Besides, he is not of age.'

'No; but I have something of my own to advance for him.'

Wherewith there began a fresh storm. Thomas Underwood was greatly mortified at the desertion of one brother, and still more at the acquiescence of the other. He would no doubt have been ready to retain the handsome engaging youth, grumbling and enduring, as a sort of expensive luxury; and in his wrath, disappointment, and sense of ingratitude at finding that his restive protegee was not to be driven back to him, he became so abusive, that Felix could hardly keep his

tongue or temper in check; but when he declared that if any support were given to Edgar's lunatic project, the whole family except Alda should be left to their own resources for the rest of their lives, it was with quiet determination that the reply was made, with studied, though difficult, respectfulness:--

'Sir, we are much obliged for what you have done for us, but we hope to be able to work for ourselves and for one another without becoming dependent. You cannot suppose that such a consideration would affect my opinion respecting Edgar.' (N.B.--If Mr. Underwood had supposed it, he felt as if it were impossible, as all his cousin Edward's high spirit glowed in that young man's eyes, and strengthened the studiously calm voice.) 'I think,' continued Felix, 'that no one can be doing right whose work is not thorough. If Edgar cannot or will not apply himself in earnest to your business, he will be doing better by studying art with a will than in pretending to work here, and abusing your forbearance. That would be so improper towards you, and so wrong in him, that it would be simply unjustifiable in me to try to persuade you into allowing it.'

Somehow, Mr. Underwood had not at all expected such a reply; and as luckily want of breath had forced him to wait and really hear it, a sensation came over him of old times when Edward Underwood had argued with him; and it was with much less heat that he returned, with an effort at irony, 'And so you take the bread out of the mouths of the others to support my fine gentleman in his absurd nonsense?'

'No, Sir; what I advance is entirely my own.'

'Oh, ay; didn't I hear something about a legacy?'

'Yes, from Admiral Chester. A thousand pounds. It has only just been paid to me.'

'That you may throw it away on this young scamp's fancies?'

'No, Sir, I hope not. Half of it goes into the business at Bexley. We sign the deed of partnership next week. It will make a great difference to me. The rest is ready for emergencies.'

'Tomfooleries,' muttered Mr. Underwood. 'Pray, what are the plans for this making a new Michael Angelo? Am I expected to give him the run of my house? I shall do no such thing!'

'No, Sir, it would not be proper to ask it. This Renville takes pupils for the Royal Academy, and Edgar would board and lodge there; but I hope you will still be good enough to allow him to call on Alda, and not let him be entirely left to himself. He is much to blame, but it is not as if he had run into bad dissipation.'

'That's true,' said Mr. Underwood. 'A terrible disappointment that young dog has been to me, Felix Underwood; but as you put it, there's an honesty in the thing! Where is my fine gentleman?'

'Downstairs, Sir.'

Mr. Underwood breathed through a mysterious tube, and Edgar appeared, with his usual easy grace, and with a sharp glance at Felix as if to inquire whether there were to be any attack on his newly-found liberty.

'Look here, Edgar,' was the address. 'Your brother--a much better one than you deserve--'

'Thru for you,' muttered Edgar between his teeth.

'--Says what has some sense in it, that "nothing is so ruinous as doing things by halves," and that you ought to be ashamed of hanging about here doing nothing--'

A quick glance passed between the brothers.

'--So he is for letting you have your way; and if he chooses to support you, and you choose to rob him--for I think it nothing less than robbery--why there--I can't help it. So I put it to you for the last time: will you buckle steadily to your work here like a rational being, or cast yourself loose to live as a beggarly artist on what your brother can give you by pinching the rest?'

'Thank you, Sir; I hope the sooner to help him to feed the rest, by taking the plunge you think so desperate,' said Edgar, with more gravity than usual.

'Oh, indeed!' sneered Mr. Underwood. 'Remember, not a farthing of mine goes to such folly! I don't understand it. I thought once you'd have been as good as a son to me,' he added in a very different tone, as he looked at the fine young man in whom he yearned to take pride.

'I wish I could, Sir,' said Edgar, with real feeling. 'I wish you had hit upon any one of us but my unlucky self. You've been very good to me, but what a man can't do, he can't; and if I gave in now, it would only be the same over again. But we don't part in anger, Uncle, he continued, with a trembling of voice.

'Anger! No, my boy. I'm only vexed at the whole thing; but I don't want to lose sight of you altogether. You'll stay with us till you've found decent lodgings, and you'll be welcome to look in on a Sunday.' Mr. Underwood spoke in a tone between asking and granting a favour.

'Thank you, Sir, with all my heart,' said Edgar.

'And you'll come to dine and sleep?' he added to Felix. 'You've not seen your sister.'

'No, thank you, Sir, I cannot to-day; I must be at home tonight.'

They shook hands cordially: but as Edgar crossed the counting-house, he paused to open his own desk and pocket some of the contents, saying lightly as he did so, 'There's promotion in store for some of you youngsters--I congratulate you, Mr. Spooner; you're free of a burthen to your spirit.'

'Indeed, Mr. Edgar, I'm very sorry if--'

'Don't throw away your sorrow, Mr. Spooner; I was foredoomed your soul to cross, and I bear no malice to you for having been crossed. Shake hands, and wish me success as a painter.'

'I wish you success, Mr. Edgar; but it will not be met with in any profession without application and regularity.'

Edgar forbore from any reply but a low and deferential bow, such as to provoke another smothered laugh from the other young clerks, to whom Felix suspected, as he looked round, the favoured kinsman was subject of jealousy, admiration, or imitation, according to character. However, Edgar shook hands with each, with some little word of infinite but gracious superiority, and on coming out exclaimed, 'Ban, ban, Caliban! You who are emancipated from a Redstone, congratulate me!'

Felix neither observed on the vast difference between the excellent confidential Spooner and pettily jealous Redstone, nor on the extremely dissimilar mode of emancipation. He was more occupied with the momentous responsibility of having assisted to cut his brother loose from the protection to which his father had confided him. Mr. Audley's warning that he was inclined to be weak where Edgar was concerned, came before him. Yet the life of luxury and unfulfilled duties was in his eyes such a wrongful course, that he felt justified in having put an end to it; and his heart warmed with hope and exultation as he recollected how Etty's success had been owing to his brother's aid, and felt himself putting Edgar's foot on the first round of the ladder, and freeing his ascent from all that had hitherto trammelled it. Such bright visions haunted him when talking was impossible on the omnibus, outside which Edgar had exalted him-- he did not well know why till on descending at Charing Cross, he found he was to have an interview with Mr. Renville, who was copying a picture in the National Gallery, and whom he found, to his great relief, to be no wild Bohemian, but a simple painstaking business-like man, who had married a German hausfrau, and lodged a few art students with unexceptionable references. Knowing Edgar already, he had measured his powers, and assured Felix that his talent was undoubted, though whether that talent amounted to genius could only be decided when the preliminary studies were accomplished; but even if it were not of the very highest order (a supposition that rather hurt Felix's feelings), the less aspiring walks of the profession would afford sufficient security of maintenance to justify the expense of the study. He talked with sense and coolness; and his charges, though falling severely on such funds as were at the disposal of the young pillar of the house, were, Edgar declared, and

Felix could well believe, very moderate. The time was to be further decided after reference to Mrs. Renville.

'Will you not come home first?' asked Felix, as they descended the steps.

'Not in the character of the discarded! Who knows the effect it might have on old Froggy? By the by, I hope this advance does not make any difference to the terms of your bondage.

'Nothing important.'

'Draw bills to any amount on the R.A. of the future!'

The light hopeful tone contrasted with Clement's grave thankfulness, and sorrow at being an expense; but Felix really preferred it, as far less embarrassing.

'Could you come down in a month's time?' he continued. 'Lance is to be confirmed at the Cathedral, and it might be an opportunity for you.'

'I cannot lose this month's work at the Academy, it is the most important in the year.'

'It might be arranged for you to come down for the day. You could see any one you pleased here.'

'Has Tina excited you to consign me to the Whittingtonian Fathers?'

'No.' Felix had almost rested there, but presently added, gravely, 'I constantly feel the impossibility of getting through this world and keeping straight without help--the help that is provided for us,' he added, lamely enough.

'Dear old Blunderbore,' said Edgar, affectionately; 'what comes naturally to you, No. 1, letter A, in a flock of girls and boys, can't be the same when one has got out into this wicked world. Go on in your own groove, and leave me to my aberrations. Don't vex yourself, old fellow. A popular journalist must have got far enough to know that men don't concern themselves about these little affairs in one another.'

'Brothers do.'

'Not unless they partake of the sister. Come! You have had no sustenance since breakfast at six o'clock, have you? Come in here, and learn what soup means.'

'There's no time. The train is at five.'

'Time! You don't mean to walk?'

'I do; and get something to eat at the station.'

'I declare, Fee, your unsophistication would be refreshing if it were not a disgrace to your profession. Why are you not reporter to the Teetotal Times? No wonder if the Pursuivant has a flavour of weak tea!'

Felix smiled rather sadly, aware that this was meant to lead him away from the last subject. He perceived that the door between his favourite brother's soul and his own was closed, and that knocking would only cause it to be bolted and barred. It might be true, as Mr. Audley had told him, that Edgar's was not so much real scepticism as the talk of the day, and the regarding the doubts of deeper thinkers as a dispensation from all irksome claims; but this was poor solace, while his brother rattled on: 'My dear Blunderbore, the hasty-pudding on which you characteristically breakfast is a delusion as to economy. Renville's little Frau will keep us better and at less expense than ever Wilmet conceived. You wrap yourself in your virtue, and refuse to spend a couple of shillings, as deeming it robbery of the fry at home. You wear out at least a shilling's worth of boot leather, pay twopence for a roll and fourpence for a more villainous compound called coffee; come home in a state of inanition, cram down a quartern loaf and a quarter of a pound of rancid butter, washed down with weak tea; and if self-satisfaction and exhaustion combined are soporific, it is only to leave you a prey to nightmare. Then, to say nothing of poorness of blood producing paucity of ideas, it is fearful to think of the doctor's bill you are laying up!'

'Nonsense, Edgar; I am in perfect health.'

Edgar went off into a learned dissertation on the qualities of food and liquor, and the expedience of enriching the blood, and giving substance to the constitution. He was, in fact, much more robust and athletic, as well as much taller than his brother, who looked like one who led an indoor life without cultivating his strength, but had no token of lack of health or activity. Always of small appetite, he did not care how long he fasted, and was so much used to be on his feet, that the long walk through the streets seemed to fatigue him less than Edgar, who nevertheless kept with him, as finding real pleasure in his company.

The only pauses were at the sight of an accordion in a shop window labelled at so low a price, that Felix ventured on it for Theodore; and again when Edgar insisted on stuffing his pockets with bon-bons for the babes, as antidotes, he said, to the Blunderbore diet.

'I beg to observe, it was not Blunderbore that lived on hasty-pudding. That was the Welsh giant,' said Felix.

'Ay! Blunderbore had three heads, and was buried up to the neck, completing the resemblance! Well, some day I'll give you all a hoist, old fellow, and then you'll be immortalised for having developed the President of the Royal Academy out of his slough of hides and

tallow.'

Felix went home through the summer twilight, tired and heavy-hearted, to find Wilmet sitting up over a supper not much less rigorously frugal than Edgar had foretold. Telling Wilmet was perhaps the worst of it to Felix. True, she forbore to reprove or lament when she understood that the deed was actually accomplished, and saw that he was fatigued and out of spirits; but her 'Indeed! Oh! Felix!' and her involuntary gesture and attitude of dismay, went as far as a volume of reproach and evil augury. He was weary beyond vindicating himself or Edgar; but the next morning, when Wilmet and Angela had started for school, there was a sense that the cat was away, and Geraldine looking up under her long black eyelashes, whispered, 'Oh! it is so nice in you to have let him loose, dear Fee! It was such cruel waste to pin him down there!'

'It was mockery for him to pretend to work there against the grain, and live in all that ease and luxury,' said Felix, greatly appreciating her sympathy. 'That must be so clearly wrong, that the more I think it over, the more I trust I did right in not trying to make it up again, as Mr. Audley did.'

'It was only a pity he did!' said Cherry; 'but of course it was for your sake, that you might not have him thrown back on your hands.'

'And for Edgar's own protection too,' said Felix; 'but I cannot think lazy insufficient work, and constant amusement, otherwise than so unworthy, that I am sure Mr. Audley would think it more honest and right to put an end to them, even at some risk.'

'Risk!' said the little sister, ruffling up her feathers; 'he is sure to succeed, and you know it.'

'I did only mean risk in that sense,' said Felix, gravely; 'but I hope he is safely and satisfactorily placed. Renville seems an excellent person, and more trustworthy perhaps because he only commits himself to Edgar's capability.'

'Capability!' contemptuously repeated Cherry. 'No one but you and I really understand what Edgar can do!'

'I could have shaken the fellow for his coldness,' said Felix, smiling; 'but no doubt it was right of him, and Edgar will soon show--'

'That he will! Only look at the beauty and freedom of this outline,' as she opened her portfolio.

'Don't beguile me, Cherry; I can't stay. I've all yesterday's work to make up.'

'Here are all the proofs, ready. Only just look at the sentence I marked for you. O Felix, how lucky Edgar has you for a brother, to

save him from being blighted and crushed!

'Is that head yours or his? Yours! I should say he was lucky to have such an unenvious sister. You would draw as well as he if you only had the teaching.'

'Oh no, don't say that! It spoils his! Though I do wish my drawing could be of some use.'

'Never mind about use. You are our pleasure,' as he saw her dissatisfied; 'besides, what would Pur (the household abbreviation of Pursuivant) do without the sub?'

This was much pleasanter! Cherry smiled at his kiss, and he ran downstairs, exulting--like herself--in their artist brother's future fame.

When he returned to the sitting-room in the evening twilight, the first voice he heard, through Theodore's humming, was Wilmet's, as in mitigation--'I daresay he is well educated, and not vulgar.'

'Oh! but the sound of it!' cried Alice Knevett's voice. 'A mere tradesman!'

'Who is the unfortunate?' asked Felix, coming forward.

'O Mr. Underwood, how you do steal upon one! Yes, I'm furious! Here's my old friend Florence Spelman--the dearest girl in the world, and so pretty--gone and engaged herself to young Schneider, of Schneider and Co', on the tailor's advertisements, you know! It is one of the first houses in London, and he's very rich and handsome and all that; but isn't it dreadful? All her friends will have to drop her! And I was so fond of her.'

'Is it trade itself, or the kind of trade, that outrages your feelings?' asked Felix, in a tone of raillery.

'Oh, a tailor is too horrible! As if all trade wasn't bad enough,' said Alice, laughing, then recollecting herself she turned, blushing and confused, to Cherry--'At least--I mean--your brother makes one forget. He isn't in the least like _that_!'

'I never wish to forget anything he is!' said Cherry, proudly looking up to him.

'Ah! you don't know what is in my pocket!' said Felix, leaning his back against the mantlesheff.

'Oh! what!' cried Alice and Geraldine both together; while Wilmet looked at him as if she wished to put him in mind of the presence of a stranger.

'Guess!' he said.

'Somebody has left you a fortune! Oh! delightful!' cried Alice, clasping her hands.

'Mr. Thomas Underwood will take Edgar's art study on himself,' exclaimed the more moderate Geraldine.

'You burn, Cherry. It comes from that quarter. Here's a letter by the evening's post to offer me, if I have not closed with Mr. Froggatt, to invest in Kedge and Underwood's concern, and begin with 300 pounds a year as clerk.'

'It can't be possible,' said Wilmet, the only one to speak, as the other two girls looked rather blank.

'Just so far that the deed of partnership here is not signed.'

'What is the business?' asked Alice.

'He is a South American merchant, and deals with Rio for hides and tallow, if you prefer that to books and stationery,' said Felix, in a would-be light tone.

'Oh, but a South American merchant! That sounds quite delightful!' cried Alice. 'And you'll have to live in dear, dear London! How I envy you!'

'That must be the effect you had upon him, Felix,' said Cherry, proudly.

'Well, I thought I had been a specimen of the obstinate,' observed Felix. 'Here is his letter.'

He gave it as of right to Wilmet, but other eyes remarked the address to F. C. Underwood, Esquire, an unusual thing, since, as Mr. Froggatt had never aspired to the squirehood, Felix made all his brothers and sisters write only the Mister, and thus entirely deprived himself of the pleasure of Alda's correspondence.

'Where will you live? Oh! you'll let me come and stay with you sometimes!' cried Alice.

Felix smiled as he answered, 'I'm afraid our house is not built yet.'

'Miss Pearson's maid for Miss Alice,' said Martha, at the door. 'Oh dear, how tiresome! but you'll tell me all about it tomorrow. How horrid it will be here when you are all gone!'

'We are not gone yet,' said Wilmet, repressively. 'And if you please, Alice, do not talk of this.'

'No,' said Felix, 'it must be entirely a family matter. I know we can trust to you.'

'Thank you. I'm so glad I was there. It is so nice to have a secret of yours--and this is a beauty! Why, you'll be a great man with a house in London, just like Mr. Underwood of Centry.'

'Pleasing ambition,' Cherry could not help muttering, with an ironical smile, as Alice laughed and nodded herself away.

'Ready sympathy is a pleasant thing,' returned Felix.

'You don't mean that you think this feasible?' said Wilmet, with a negative inflection in her voice.

'I think it ought to be considered before it is absolutely too late.'

Both were surprised, having always thought that he considered his destiny as fixed; and as Geraldine looked on while the other two discussed pounds, shillings, and pence, it was plain to her that he had an inclination to the change. The probability of rising, the benefit of lodging Edgar, the nearness to Alda, the probable openings for the younger lads, were advantages; but against these Wilmet set the heavy London house-rent, rates and taxes--from which they were free--the expense of living, the loss of her present situation, the dangers of deterioration of health. As to Edgar, his habits must be formed, he was already in a respectable family, and Lance and Bernard ought not to be risked for his sake. In fact Wilmet looked on London with a sage country girl's prudent horror of the great and wicked capital; and when that experienced man of the world, Felix, tried to prove that she did it injustice, he was met with a volley of alarming anecdotes. He hinted that ladies' schools might need teachers there, but was met by the difficulty of forming a new connection; and when he suggested that Cherry's talent might be cultivated, Wilmet hotly exclaimed, 'She could never go about to classes and schools of art!'

'Not alone, certainly, said Cherry,' wistfully.

'Edgar is as good as nobody, and I should be of no use in places like that,' added Wilmet.

'I'm afraid you don't look very chaperonish,' said Felix, contemplating the fair exquisitely-moulded face, the more Grecian for the youthful severity that curved the lip and fixed the eye. 'If we could only turn her inside out, Cherry, she would be a dozen duennas in one!'

'And then the Pursuivant. You would not like to desert poor Pur,' added Cherry.

'I could do that better in town in some ways.'

'Mr. Underwood would think that as bad as Edgar's drawing,' said Wilmet. 'No, no, Felix, you have learnt one business thoroughly, and it would be foolish to begin a fresh one now. Besides, how about Mr.

Froggatt?’

‘Of course I should do nothing in such haste as to inconvenience Mr. Froggatt,’ said Felix; ‘and no one is more anxious for our real benefit, if this were possible.’

‘But you see it won’t do,’ reiterated Wilmet.

‘Perhaps not,’ he answered, with more of a sigh than his sisters expected.

Rather nettled, Wilmet set to work with pencil and paper to calculate expenses, Geraldine looked up at Felix, who had taken up a book, and began to whistle, ‘For a’ that, an’ a’ that.’

Presently Wilmet, by way of making assurance sure, went off for her account-book; when he looked up and said, ‘How should you have liked this, Cherry?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve not thought. Did you?’

‘I hadn’t time before our Pallas Athene settled it; and I believe she is right, if she would not lay it in quite so hard. It only seemed a pity to lose our last chance of a lift in life without at least considering it.’

‘I thought you did not care about lifts in life.’

‘I ought not. But when it is brought home that we have slipped down two degrees in the social scale, it is tempting to step up one again! However, it plainly cannot be.’

Yet when Wilmet mustered her irrefragable figures to prove how much poorer they would be in London than on their present income at Bexley, he would not go into details, saying that he wanted to hear no more about it, in a tone that a little hurt her. He was so uniformly gentle and gracious, that what would have passed unnoticed in most brothers, was noticed anxiously in him; and as Wilmet darned his shirt sleeve, a glistening came between her eyes and her needle, as she felt the requital of her prudence rather hard. Must all men pant to be out in the world, and be angry with women for withholding them?

Nor was Geraldine devoid of the old prick, when she thought of the degrees in the social scale in connection with the words about tradesmen and merchants.

Wilmet was not quite happy without knowing that the letter of refusal was written, and was more vexed than she liked to show when Felix laughed at her for supposing he could have made time to write it on a busy Saturday, even if there had been any London post to send it by. Poor Alice Knevet got a considerable snubbing for bursting in to ask the decision, and lamenting over it when she had heard it; but she

stood her ground with a certain pertinacity of her own: and so late in the evening, that Wilmet had gone up to put Stella to bed, Felix came up with the letter in his hand. It was so carefully expressed, that Cherry could not help saying saucily that it was worthy of the editor of the Pursuivant; while Alice, much impressed by the long words, enthusiastically broke out, 'It is a most beautiful letter, only it ought to have said just the other thing!'

'Why, what would you have done without Cherry?' said Felix.

'I'd have come to stay with her! And it is such a pity! A merchant is a gentleman, and I am sure you could get to be anything--a member of Parliament, or a baronet, or--' as if her imagination could not go farther; but she looked up at him with a dew of eagerness glistening in her bright hazel eyes. 'I was telling Cherry it does seem such a dreadful horrible pity that you should be nailed down in this little hole of a place for life.'

Felix smiled--a man's superior, gratified, but half melancholy smile --as he answered, 'At any rate, you won't lose the pleasures of imagination or of pity.'

'But I want to see you have the spirit to try,' cried Alice, eagerly. 'I know you could.'

'It would not be right,' said Felix, sitting down by her, and in full earnest gentleness and gravity setting before her the reasons that Cherry had hardly thought it worth while really to explain--namely, the impossibility of their being able to pay their way and meet the needful expenses, and the evils of the young, inexperienced household residing in London, resigning security for dependence.

Alice, flattered by being treated as a sensible person, said, 'Yes,' and 'I see,' at all the proper places; then drew a sigh, saying, 'It is very good in you.'

'I knew you would see it in the right light,' replied Felix.

'Oh!' but the sigh recurred. 'I can't help being sorry, you know.'

'There is nothing to be sorry for,' he said gratefully. 'I was disappointed at first myself; but for sheer usefulness to one's neighbour, I believe that this present position, if I have sense to make use of it rightly, is as good as any; and the mere desire of station and promotion is--when one comes to look at it properly--nonsense after all.'

She opened her eyes in amazement, and made a little exclamation.

'They may be well when they come,' said Felix in answer: 'but I have thought it over well to-night, and I see that to do anything doubtfully right for their sake would be a risk for all that I have no right to run.'

Alice hung her head, overcome by the pure air of the region where he was lifting her; and in a sort of shyness at the serious tone in which he had spoken, he added, smiling,

'Then you'll forgive the "sound of it."'

'O Mr. Underwood,' she said, in the simplest and most earnest voice that Cherry had ever heard from her, 'I'm ashamed to recollect that nonsense!'

CHAPTER XIV

WHAT IT MAY LEAD TO

'I never was so berhymed since I was an Irish rat, which I can scarcely remember.'--As You Like It.

'Dim memories haunt the child,
Of lives in other beings led--
Other, and yet the same.'

KEBLE.

In the autumn Alda made a visit at home. She had, as usual, gone with Mr. and Mrs. Underwood to their German baths, and had there fallen in with a merry set of her intimates in London, who had persuaded her to join them in an expedition to the Tyrol, which lasted till the end of September. On her return, she was dropped at Bexley, where her sisters were greatly edified by her sketch-book, a perfect journal in clever scenes and groups, like the 'Voyage en zig-zag.' Two of the gentlemen seemed always in waiting on the graceful outline that did duty for Alda; and indeed, she gave Wilmet to understand that only the skill that played them off one against the other had averted an offer from each, hundreds of miles from home, when it would have been so very inconvenient! Every morning Wilmet considered how her dinner would appear if one or both should suddenly drop in to pursue his courtship.

Even Felix, though he had pooh-poohed the mysterious whisper from his sisters, was startled at the apparition of a picturesque figure; in Tyrolese hat, green knickerbockers, belt, knapsack, loose velvet coat, and fair moustache, marching full into the shop; and while the customers who were making it a rendezvous gazed in doubt between gamekeepers and stage banditti, holding out a hand too fair and dainty for either character, and exclaiming, 'How are you, Mr. Froggatt! Hollo, Felix!'

Mr. Froggatt was amazed beyond measure, and it was only on hearing the ring of the mirthful laugh that he exclaimed, 'Mr. Edgar This is an alteration. You will find the young ladies up-stairs.'

Felix was disengaged at the moment, and could take him through the parlour, too glad to have him there at all to utter the faintest wish that he would have rung at the private door; and he ushered him into the drawing-room with the words, 'Here's the artist who has begun with himself;' and then retreated.

'Edgar! oh, you wonderful boy!' cried happy Geraldine, as he threw his arms round her; while Alda asked: 'Is that the thing now, Edgar?'

'Quite comifo,' he answered. 'Ha, little ones, have you forgotten me?'

'Stella says you're the clarinet in the brass band,' said Bernard. 'What have you got in that pack?'

'Munitions of war!' he answered, unstrapping his bag, and producing packets of French bon-bons, bought on his way home, from the sketching tour Mr. Renville always made with sundry of his pupils in early autumn. 'Gobble them up, little mice, before the cat comes home.'

Stella paused with a dutiful 'May I?' and Cherry had to interfere between the little maiden's scruples, Bernard's omnivorous inclination, and Theodore's terror at any new article of food; while Alda and Edgar exchanged eager question and answer:

'You've been at home. You've seen them all?'

'I dined there on Sunday--might do so any day; they can't do without me, that's a fact.'

'Nor me, I imagine,' said Alda. 'I suppose I am to go back with you?'

'So Madam proposed; but the fact is, that Molly has done uncommonly well without you this time.'

'What do you mean ?' asked Alda, sharply.

'What think you of a friend of Cherry?'

'I haven't got any friends.'

'Think again! Not the great convert, the Cacique of all the Mexicos?'

'Ferdinand Travis! You don't mean it?'

'_I_ don't; but the elders mean it, and the youngers will do it.'

'Do tell me! I can't understand,' cried Alda, much excited. 'We have never met him.'

'The uncle or father--which?

'The uncle.'

'Well, the uncle has been in England, and fraternised with our governor at Peter Brown's; there was a banqueting all round, and his nephew was carried at his chariot wheels. If I am not much mistaken, gold and timber jingled to silver and bullock-hide, and concluded a prospective union in the persons of my nephew and my daughter. I'm sorry. I have long been persuaded that a very small effort on the part of our respected Blunderbore might have redeemed the family fortunes in the person of Polly.'

'How could you think of anything so absurd?' said Alda.

'As if my uncle would consent!'

'If Tom has any sentiment, it is for my father and the name of Underwood,' said Edgar. 'You remember he was sorely disappointed that Felix would not step into my shoes.'

'And very angry and hurt,' said Alda, 'as well he might be.'

'Yes; but that anger proved the vastness of his good intentions. Besides there's something about our old giant--steadiness and breeding, I believe--that uniformly makes Tom knock under to him; and there's a peculiar affinity of good sense between him and Marilda, that ought to have ripened under favourable circumstances.'

'And is he really cut out!' said Alda. 'I don't know how to believe this! How far has it gone?'

'Hanger on and oyster in love,' promptly answered Edgar.

'Honest Polly has the most comical look of anxious coyness on her jolly face, and holds her elbows squarer than ever; and a few paces off stands Montezuma, magnificent and melancholic; and Edgar assumed the posture.

'Melancholy, no wonder,' said the conscious beauty; 'Edgar he must be over head and ears in debt.'

'So it struck me; but he must have managed it uncommon quietly, for they call him the Mexican Muff, he's hand and glove with all their holinesses up at Clement's shop, and the wildest orgie he has been detected at was their magic-lantern.'

'Then it is real goodness that draws them together!' exclaimed Cherry, looking up from her presidency over the comfits.

'Goodness and a balance,' said Edgar.

'Did you know,' said Cherry, 'that as soon as he came of age, he paid the Insurance all the money for the Fortinbras Arms? The agents were quite overwhelmed, and wanted to put it in the Pursuivant.'

She was cut short by the return of Wilmet and Angela, accompanied by Miss Kneve. The effect of Edgar's appearance was startling. Alice gave a little scream of surprise, Angela crept behind her sisters, and Wilmet stood for a moment like a stag at gaze; then, as he said, 'Well, Mettie, are you going to send for the police?' exclaimed, 'You, Edgar! What a figure you have made of yourself!'

'See how our eldest crushes me!' said Edgar. 'Such a face as yours, Mettie, ought not to be wedded to the commonplace.'

'I suppose it is like German artists,' said Wilmet, trying to resign herself.

'It is such a beautiful becoming dress,' whispered Alice to Geraldine; while Edgar rattled on--'No wonder there is a deterioration in taste from living in the very tents of the Philistines. Why, Cherry, how do you bear existence surrounded by such colours as these?'

'The paper?' asked Wilmet, surprised. 'It is rather a large pattern, to be sure.'

'I call it cruelty to animals to shut Cherry up among the eternal abortive efforts of that gilded trellis to close upon those blue dahlias, crimson lilacs, and laburnums growing upwards, tied with huge ragged magenta ribbons. They would wear out my brain.'

'Well, I think when you remember our old paper, you might be thankful!' said Wilmet.

'Precisely what I do, and am not thankful. What our paper may have been in its earlier stages of existence, I am not prepared to say, but since I can remember, that hateful thing, the pattern, could only be traced by curious researches in dark corners, and the wall presented every nuance of purplish salmon or warm apricot.'

'Dear old paper!' cried Cherry. 'Yes, wasn't it soft, deepening off in clouds and bars, sunsets and storm-clouds, to make stories about?'

'Where it was most faded and grimy,' said Wilmet. 'It is all affectation not to be glad to have clean walls.'

'Clean!' cried Edgar, in horror. 'Defend me from the clean! Bare, bald, and frigid, with hard lines breaking up and frittering your background. If walls are ornamented at all, it should not be in a poor material like paper, but rich silk or woollen tapestry'

hangings.'

'We couldn't have tapestry now,' said Alice, in a puzzled voice.

'Then, '"Comrades, take warning by my fall,
 And have it strong or not at all.'"

'Not walls,' laughed Cherry.

'Let them be of natural, or, at any rate, uniform tint; and cover them with your own designs of some character and purpose, not patterns bought by the yard.'

'Oh! I see what you would be at,' said Wilmet quaintly.

'You are bewailing the loss of your great Man Friday.'

'Achilles, I beg your pardon.'

'He never would come out,' said Angela; 'he came through the whitewash after the measles.'

'I wonder what the present inhabitants think of him,' said Cherry. 'One comfort is, if he is a bogey now, they may show him some day as an early effort of Sir Edgar Underwood, President of the Royal Academy.'

'Oh dear! I must go!' cried Alice. 'I only came to fetch a pattern for Aunt Maria, and she is waiting for it; but you are all so delightful here.'

'What pretty little thing have you picked up there?' asked Edgar, as she went.

'Have we not told you of Miss Pearson's niece?'

'You should take her likeness, Cherry, as a relief from the classically severe.'

Cherry opened her portfolio, and showed two or three water-coloured drawings of the graceful little head and piquant features. Edgar criticised, and promised a lesson; and the sitter, nothing loth, though rather coy, was caught. She blushed and smiled, and took exception at little personalities, and laughed her forgiveness, going through a play of countenance very perplexing to the pupil, but much relished by the master, as he called up the pout and smile by turns, and played with her little airs.

He took Alda back on Monday, but promised to come home for Christmas, and kept his word. Perhaps the Renville wirthschaft afforded less contrast with home than did the Underwood menage; and, in spite of the Philistine furniture, the rooms in the High Street agreed better with his tastes than the old house in St. Oswald's Buildings. He was

above objecting to the shop; and whereas Clement carefully avoided the public precincts, he was often there, hunting up books, reading newspapers, gossiping with Mr. Froggatt or with Redstone, and always ensuring himself a welcome by the free bright sweetness of his manner and his amusing talk.

It was a prosperous winter; Felix, as partner and acknowledged editor, was in a more comfortable position both as to income and authority. Other matters were going well. Fulbert, to the general surprise, turned out a capital letter-writer, and sent home excellent accounts of himself, working heartily in a situation in the post-office, which Mr. Audley's Somerville interest had managed to secure for him. Moreover, all close scholarships had not been abolished, and Felix's opportunities in the newspaper line had enabled him to discover one at St. Cadoc's, a small college at Cambridge, to be competed for by the natives of the county where Clement had fortunately been born. A letter to the parish clerk of Vale Leston, to ask for the baptismal register of Edward Clement Underwood, produced a reply from a well-remembered old Abednego Tripp, who declared himself 'horned and rejoiced' at hearing from Master Felix, and at being able to do anything for one of the Reverend Mr. Edward's sons. The competition was not very severe; Clement obtained the scholarship, and therewith his maintenance for three years to come; and he was at the same time able to exercise a bit of patronage on his sisters' behalf, more gratifying to his own feelings than theirs. Mr. Fulmort's unmarried sisters had lived in the country with a former governess, until on the death of the elder, the survivor decided on employing her very considerable fortune in establishing a school where girls of small means might be prepared for becoming first-rate governesses, with special openings for the daughters of poor clergy and of missionaries.

One of the first families thought of was that of the favourite chorister; so Angela, now ten years old, was nominated at once, to the relief of Wilmet, who did not think her romping intimacies with the girls at Miss Pearson's very desirable. Moreover, after a correspondence between Miss Fulmort and Miss Lyveson, it was decided that Robina should be transferred to the new school at Brompton with her sister, partly by way of infusing a trustworthy element, and partly that her studies might be perfected by London masters. Robina, whose allegiance to Miss Lyveson was most devoted, was greatly grieved, but she was a reasonable, womanly little being, aware that governess-ship was her profession, and resolute to qualify herself; so though she came home with tell-tale spots under her eyes, she replied to all condolences with, 'I know it's right what must be must;' and her spirits rose when Lance came home, bound only to return during the holidays on two or three special days when his voice was indispensable at the cathedral.

Edgar and he together kept the house in continual merriment, so that the sober pillars of the house found themselves carried along, they knew not whither.

'I have had a serious application,' said Felix one evening. 'A solemn knock came to the office door, and an anxious voice came in--"Please, brother, I want to speak to you." There stood the little Star! I thought at least she had broken the chandelier, but no such thing. It was, "Please, brother, mayn't I have a birthday?"'

'Poor little darling!' cried some voices.

'What could have put it into her head?' said Wilmet.

'She said all little girls had birthdays, and Ellen Bruce had told Angel all about the dance in honour of hers.'

'Ah!' said Wilmet, 'we'll have Angel out of the way of that kind of chatter.'

'Poor little maid! of course I had to quench her,' said Felix, as far as her own day was concerned. I told her more about it than she had ever heard, but then she took me aback by saying Father was happy, and she thought he would like her to be happy.'

'You didn't consent!' exclaimed Wilmet.

'I represented that it was Theodore's birthday as well, and that strangers would make him miserable. She was really very good, and I want you just to consider whether we could not do something--of course on a different day--but in the course of the holidays, by way of treat. Surely you could invite some of Miss Pearson's pupils.'

'I don't like to begin, Felix,' said Wilmet; 'there would be reciprocity, and no one knows where it might lead to.'

'A few white muslin frocks--eh, W. W.? I think we could stand them.'

'That is not all I mean,' said Wilmet; 'it is the sort of style of thing. It would be all very well to have a few little girls here, but they would all ask us again, and I could not answer for what might happen at their homes.'

'It is out!' said Edgar. 'Now we know the sort of style of thing it might lead to. Minerva under a mistletoe bough.'

'Hurrah!' burst out Lance, in convulsions of mirth, which infected Felix and Cherry; while Wilmet, as simple as she was discreet, blushed up to the tips of her ears, and tried to defend herself.

'They tell me of doings at their parties that are what I should not like for our little girls, and I don't think you would, Felix.'

'Forfeits, to wit?' asked Edgar. 'Or cards, or waltzing. You may as well be explicit, Mettie.'

'No, no,' said Felix, 'Mettie shall not be teased: she is right in

the main.' But his tone was that he always used when her prudence was too much for him.

'And the family refinement is to be secured by sitting in ashes all Christmas,' said Edgar. 'Slightly unchristian, it strikes me.'

'But,' continued Felix, 'out of these domestic ashes, we must get up some sport for the children. I stand committed to Stella.'

'Shall I get Bill Harewood, and do Box and Cox?' suggested Lance.

'Might we not get up something they could take part in themselves?' said Cherry; 'Cinderella, or some such little play?--Edgar, you know how to manage such things.'

'Wilmet doesn't know where they would lead to,' gravely responded Edgar.

'To Lance's going off with a circus,' said Felix.

'I always had a great mind to do so,' responded Lance. 'To sing comic songs on one leg on a spotted horse's back, and go about day and night in a yellow van drawn by elephants--I call that life!'

'Secure a berth for me as scene-painter!' cried Edgar. 'See how I'd draw a house by the very outline of Mazeppa outside!'

'And Felix will print all our advertisements gratis!'

'Oh!' broke in Cherry, 'I have a notion. Couldn't we make a play of the conjuror in disguise? It is Dr. Knowall in German popular tales, Robin the Conjuror in English.'

'Nothing foolish, I hope?' seriously asked Wilmet.

'Oh no. Don't you recollect? The story is, that a set of thieves steal a jewel, a man comes shamming conjuror and offering to find it for the owner, intending to trust to chance, and feast at her expense as long as he is not found out.'

'I remember!' exclaimed Lance, you used to tell us the story. Somebody suspects him, and brings a creature shut up in a covered dish to ask him to tell what it was--and it happens to be a robin; so when he cries out, "Oh, poor Robin!" thinking himself done for, out hops the bird, and the enemy is sold.'

'Yes; and then he counts his dinners every day, and the thieves who have come to look on think he is counting them, and throw themselves on his mercy.'

'It has capabilities,' said Edgar.

'But the moral!' said Wilmet.

'What! Not the lesson against dealing with conjurors?' demanded Edgar.
'I'll undertake to arm your pupils against spirit-rapping for ever.'

'In that point of view--' said Wilmet doubtfully.

'In that point of view,' said Felix, laughing, 'it has my vote.'

'I don't like deception to succeed,' said Wilmet; 'but at least there's none of the worst sort of nonsense.'

Lance leapt up and performed a pas seul, insisting that Bill Harewood must come and be a robber; and Edgar and Cherry instantly had their heads together as playwrights and managers.

'Never mind, Wilmet,' said Felix at their bedroom doors that night.
'Remember, Father never was a man for all work and no play.'

'I don't mind play, but I don't know what this may lead to;' then, as Felix laughed merrily at the repetition, she followed him into his room, saying, 'I mean, I have no trust in Edgar's discretion, or Lance's either, and all sorts of things may be put into the children's heads.'

'You can't keep children's heads a blank,' said Felix, 'and Edgar's good taste ought to be trusted in his own home, for his own sisters. Even you might stretch a few points to keep him happy and occupied with Cherry. Besides, I believe we do live a duller life than can be really good for any one. It can't be right to shut up all these young things all their holidays without any pleasure.'

'I thought,' said Wilmet, her eyes growing moist, 'it was pleasure enough to be all at home together.'

'So it is, to staid old fogies like you and me,' said Felix, kissing her; 'but the young ones want a lark now and then, and I confess I should be immensely disappointed if this fun didn't come off. No, no, W. W., I can't have you an old cat; you are much too young and pretty.'

The levity of this conclusion shocked Wilmet beyond remonstrance. Was Felix falling from his height of superiority, or was her strictness wearisome?

Meantime, Geraldine's brain was ringing with doggerel rhymes, and whirling with stage contrivances, in the delight of doing something with Edgar, whether versifying or drawing; and as Felix said, to keep him happy at home for Christmas was no small gain, even though it brought a painful realisation that their feast was not his feast.

Geraldine suffered in silence, for a word from her was always put down by some tender jest, avowing as much inferiority in goodness as superiority in intellect. As to Clement, Edgar's sport was to startle

him with jokes, dilemmas, and irreverences, and then to decline discussion on the ground that he never argued with _sisters_, and that Clement would understand when he went to Cambridge. Otherwise, the subject was avoided at home, but Edgar consorted a good deal with Mr. Ryder, calling him the only person in the town, except Cherry, who knew the use of a tongue, and one day, when Felix was assisting his old master in a search through old newspapers in the reading-room, Mr. Ryder said, 'By-the-by, your brother Edgar has a good deal more of the talk of the day than you can be prepared for.'

'I am afraid so, sir,' said Felix; 'but he does not put it forth much at home.'

'So I hoped. It would have startled your father a good deal; but I believe myself acting in the spirit of his wishes in letting him talk out his crudities.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Felix, not quite knowing how to take this.

'It is a phase to be passed through,' said Mr. Ryder. 'Indeed, a good deal of it is fashion and vanity.'

'Mr. Audley thinks so,' replied Felix. 'He said he thought poor Edgar did not think enough to have real doubt, but that he considered other people's a dispensation from attending to the subject at all.'

'Exactly,' said Mr. Ryder, 'except so far as repeating what he has caught up seems to him knowing, and according to the spirit of the time, fit to dazzle us down here. Whatever may deepen him will probably change all that--I do not say into what you or your father would wish; but what is jargon now will pass away into something more real, for better or--'

'For worse?' asked Felix anxiously, as he paused.

'I do not say so,' returned Mr. Ryder. 'Perhaps what I chiefly wished at this moment was to clear myself in your eyes of treachery to your father.'

'No, sir, that I never could suspect.'

But the conversation might well leave heaviness behind it. Was it come to Edgar's views being such as to startle Mr. Ryder! who, for that matter, had of late shown much less laxity of opinion than in his younger and more argumentative days; and there was little comfort in supposing that these were not real honest doubts at all, only apologies for general carelessness and irreligion.

Yet with even this trouble in the recess of the heart, this was the merriest winter the Underwood household had known since their father's time.

Edgar chose to frame the play upon the Italian form of the story,

where the impostor is a starveling poet, nicknamed Signor Topo, or Master Ratton, because his poverty had brought him to live in a hay-loft. This character he assumed, and no doubt it fitted him better than either the English cobbler or the German doctor; besides, as he said, sham court costume is always the easiest to contrive: but Cherry was by no means prepared to find the Rat-like poet the secret admirer of a daughter of the Serene Highness who owned the jewel.

'Such a monstrous interpolation,' quoth Geraldine.

'Interpolations are the beauty of the thing. It would be as flat as a pancake without.'

'And Wilmet won't like it.'

'Wilmet must be brought to the level of ordinary human nature.'

'I don't feel as if this were using her well. You know she expressly consented to this "because there was no nonsense in it."'

'I.e. if it had been Cinderella, it would have been improper; if the Sleeping Beauty, highly scandalous. Eh, Cherie?'

'You know I think Mettie does carry her scruples pretty far,' said Geraldine, trying not to laugh, 'but I won't be a party to cheating her; and if this young princess is to come in, she must be told of it.'

'Or she will take out her Gorgon's head in the midst, and petrify her subjects! Maybe it will be safest to prepare her. You see, such discipline reigns here, that a poor Bohemian like me doesn't know where to be.'

Accordingly, Edgar said in his airy way, 'O Mettie, by-the-by, we have put in a part for little Miss Knevett.'

'Indeed! I thought it was to be all among ourselves. Have you spoken to her?'

'Of course; and she is in the ecstatic state of preparation of spangles and coronets.'

'I wish you had spoken before. It would be hard to disappoint her now. What is she to be?'

'Nothing less than heroine. There must be some sort of conventional catastrophe, or the whole concern falls flat.'

'I don't see why it should not fall flat,' said Wilmet, with a sober air that drove Cherry into an uncontrollable convulsion of laughter; 'it would amuse the children just as well.'

'The children of six, maybe,' said Edgar gravely, 'but hardly the

children of sixteen. Have you no mercy on them, my venerable sister?’

Wilmet had arrived at such a pass of resignation as to perceive that ‘a fuss’ on her part might be more mischievous than any ‘nonsense’ in which Edgar was likely to indulge in public, especially with Geraldine as his coadjutor. She tried to obtain some reassurance that there was ‘nothing more silly than needful in this play of yours.’

‘No, indeed. There is just a little mock courtship; but as that is the case with nine-tenths of the stories in the world, I don’t think you gain much by turning it out.’

‘I did hope for once in a way we ourselves might be quit of it.’

‘It is hard on you,’ said Cherry, smiling; ‘but it would make a great uproar to disturb all now.’

‘At any rate, I have found the old receipt for tea-cakes,’ responded Wilmet, whose mind was almost as much preoccupied with the entertainment of the body as her sister’s with that of the mind.

She had relented so far as to invite two little girls and their widowed mother, from whom there was no danger of reciprocities, Lance had prevailed to have Will Harewood as one of the robbers; and the Miss Pearsons were coming to behold their niece; besides which, Stella having imparted the great secret to Mr. Froggatt, Felix found the good old gentleman and his wife burning to have an invitation. Thus the party would be the largest Wilmet had ever contemplated; and the mysteries of tea and supper were so congenial to her housewifely soul, that she did not distress herself about the frequent rehearsals in Miss Pearson’s empty school-room, the transformations of garments under the needles of Cherry and Robina, nor even the wildness and ecstasy of all the children from Lance downwards, all bursting with secrets, and letting them out at every corner of their grinning mouths.

It must soon be over, and Felix seemed to be enjoying it thoroughly; and Wilmet could tolerate a great deal when either Felix or Alda enjoyed. He was much too busy with Christmas accounts to undertake any part that needed learning, but he was pressed into the service as a courtier, only with a dispensation from either speaking or rehearsing; while Wilmet utterly scouted any idea of taking any share in the drama, having enough to do in her own character.

And in that character she was left alone to entertain the guests, for even Cherry was in request as prompter and assistant dresser--nay, with the assistance of Theodore’s accordion, formed the whole band of musicians at the ball which opened the performance, and which required the entire corps dramatique. Robina, as the Elderly Princess, demonstratively dropped her bracelet, with a ruby about as big as a pigeon’s egg (being the stopper of a scent-bottle), and after the dancers had taken some trouble not to step on it, they retired, and it was stolen by the gang of robbers, cloaked up to

their corked eyebrows and moustaches.

Then appeared in his loft--supplied with straw culled from packages at the printing-house--the poet, well got up in his knickerbockers and velvet smoking-cap, scarf and guitar, soliloquising in burlesque rhyme on his fallen state and hopeless admiration, and looking very handsome and disconsolate, until startled by the cry behind the scenes--

'O yes! O yes! O yes!
By command of her Highness!
Lost, stolen, or strayed,
Gone to the dogs or mislaid,
Her Highness' splendid ruby.
Whoso finds it--wit or booby,
Tinker, tailor, soldier, lord--
Let him ask what he will, he shall have his reward.'

Thereupon the poet, communicating his designs in a stage soliloquy, disguised himself in a tow wig and beard, and a railway rug turned up with yellow calico; and the scene shifting to the palace, he introduced himself to the Elderly Princess as the greatest of spiritualists--so great, that--

'Detective police are an ignorant fable:
No detective can equal a walnut-wood table.'

But he required as a medium a maiden fair and lovely, but with a heart as yet untouched, otherwise the spirits might be offended. The only lady who was available was, of course, the youthful princess Fiordespina, whose alarm and reluctance had been contrived so as to be highly flattering to the disguised poet.

The dinner scenes, at which the robbers presented themselves in turn, and imagined that they heard themselves counted, went off in due order; also the test, when the courtiers tried to pose the spiritualist with making him divine what they brought him in a covered dish, and were disconcerted by his sighing out,

'Alas! alas! see envy batten
On the unhappy Master Ratton!'

while the rat leaped out from beneath the lid!

Then came the avowal by the robber: but the conclusion was so far varied, that the jewel having been judiciously hidden, the poet made use of his voice and his guitar to throw the Lady Fiordespina into a

mesmeric sleep before the court, and then to cause a table to rap out the letters, which she interpreted so as to lead to the spot.

It was the prettiest scene of all, his music and song were so graceful; and in spite of some suppressed giggling, the attitude and countenance of Fiordespina were so very pretty in her trance. Nothing more was left save the restoration of the ruby, the claiming of the reward, and the final tableau, in which Ratton and Fiordespina, in their native good mien, had their hands joined by the benignant Elderly Princess; while, to the equal amusement and confusion of all, good old Mrs. Froggatt fairly burst out crying with excitement and admiration!

Mrs. Vincent, the young widow, was likewise enchanted, and so was Miss Maria Pearson; but Wilmet could not quite fathom the tone of the elder and graver sister, or decide whether it were her own dissatisfaction that made her think Miss Pearson had not expected to see such a role bestowed upon her niece.

The doors between the drawing-room and the theatre were opened again; the boys handed round negus and lemonade; and Felix, standing over Cherry, said, 'Lance's circus speculation would not be a bad one. There's plenty of dramatic talent in the family.'

'Did you like it, Felix!'

'I could tell exactly which parts were yours and which Edgar's,' was the ambiguous answer, as he turned to secure the Princess Fiordespina for the dance that was to crown the performance.

'O Mr. Underwood! Oh yes, thank you! but--'

'Is it part of the programme that wizard and medium should dance together?'

'Oh no! Only it seems so funny to think of your dancing.'

'What, you thought a stationer must be stationary?'

'O Mr. Underwood, what a shocking pun!' and she was led off sparkling with pretty laughter; while the conjuror muttering,

'The gouty oak began to move
And flounder into hornpipes,'

turned graciously on little Susie Vincent, and scared as much as he elevated her, by claiming her as his partner.

Will Harewood, dashing across the room, and looking earnestly with his bold and now flushed face up to Wilmet, blurted out, 'Miss Underwood, now please, let me dance with you.'

'Thank you,' she said graciously; 'but I believe I must play for them.'

'I'll do that,' said Clement, over her head.

'The Dead March in Saul?' murmured Edgar.

'Nonsense!' broke out Mrs. Vincent, starting up; 'what am I good for but to play?'

So Clement, who thought he had found an escape, was reduced to the necessity of asking the other little Vincent; and Wilmet's smile of consent so elated Bill Harewood, that he could not help flying across to that very happy and well-matched pair, the Elderly Princess and First Robber, to tell them, 'I've got her.'

'Who?'

'Why, your sister.'

'You've never been and made up to Wilmet!' said Lance, as if this instance of valour crowned his merits.

'Yes, I have; and she will. You see there ain't another gentleman out of the family except the old Froggy, and the little one has got him. Well, I always wished beyond anything to dance with Miss Underwood!'

'Did you?' said Robina. 'I never should have thought of that.'

'Most likely not,' said Bill; 'but she is the most beautiful woman I ever did or shall see in all my life;' and he flew back to her side.

'Is she?' said Robina, altogether amazed.

'Well, perhaps,' said Lance; 'you know one might go a long way without finding any one so handsome.'

'Then I wish people wouldn't say so. It seems making our Wilmet common, like any other girl, to care for her being pretty.'

'So Froggy's dancing with Stella,' observed Lance. 'I declare I'll try if Mrs. Frog won't stand up with me. Some one ought. You'll not mind waiting, Bobbie. It is not often one has the chance to dance with a cap like that.'

Bobbie resigned herself amicably, and Lance, with his bright arch face, made his bow and half polite, half saucy addresses to Mrs. Froggatt in her magnificent head-gear, making her laugh herself almost to tears again as she declined. He held the Miss Pearsons in greater awe, and ventured on neither; so that Robina had him for Sir Roger de Coverley, where the sole contretemps arose from Angel and Bear being in such boisterous spirits that Wilmet decreed that they

must not be partners again. Of the rest, some had a good deal of dancing-master experience; Mrs. Harewood's impromptu merry-makings had afforded plenty of practice to the two choristers; even Clement had had a certain school-feast training; and Felix, with a good ear, ready eye, and natural ease of movement, acquitted himself to Miss Knevett's eagerly expressed admiration.

'Take care, Master Ratton will be jealous,' said Edgar, as he claimed her for the next dance, a quadrille.

'Jealous! oh no! Some people one never thinks of complimenting.'

Cherry caught the words, and wondered what they meant.

A few more dances, and then came Wilmet's anxiously contrived supper.

'I say,' observed Will Harewood to Lance, 'why can't we have things like this at home?'

'Tisn't their nature to,' judiciously responded Lance.

'This cream is quite up to the grub we get after a crack let-off in the Close,' added Will; for requisitions for their voices at private concerts had made the choir connoisseurs in the relics of feasts.

'Better, I should say,' returned Lance. 'Mettie doesn't make it of soap, or arsenic, or verdigris, like old Twopenny.'

'What! you don't mean that she made it herself!'

'Of course! who else should?'

'My eyes! And to see her looking like that!' Then, with a deep sigh, 'If I could only book her for my wife on the spot!'

Whence it may be inferred, that Stella's birthday party was not only a brilliant success, but might, in Wilmet's phrase, 'lead to something.' All it seemed to have led to at present was a discovery on the part of the good Miss Pearsons, that the household they had been wont to pity as small orphan children, now contained three fine young men.

At least Geraldine connected this with the desire they expressed that Alice might enjoy the same opportunities as Robina of giving her acquirements a final polish, up to diploma pitch. A correspondence commenced, resulting in Miss Knevett being engaged as teacher, being remunerated by lessons in languages and accomplishments. The arrangement gave universal satisfaction; Cherry could not detect any regret on the part of Felix; Alice would still spend her holidays with her aunts; and the sense that her departure was near made the intercourse between the two houses more frequent and familiar than it had ever yet been.

One evening Cherry, while looking up a quotation for Felix in Southey's Doctor, lit on his quaint theory of the human soul having previously migrated through successive stages of vegetable and animal life, and still retaining something characteristic from each transmigration. Her brothers were a good deal tickled with the idea; and Lance exclaimed, 'I know who must have been rhubarb, queen-wasp, and a hen-harrier.'

'Oh, that's too bad!' cried Robina.

'Why a hen-harrier?' asked Felix, recognising, like almost all the others.

'One of the birds of prey where the female is bigger than her mate,' drily observed Edgar.

'Besides,' said Cherry, 'recollect the hen-harrier's countenance in pictures, with beady eyes, and a puffed supercilious smile about the beak.'

'Why, that's Lady Price!' chimed in Alice, making the discovery at last.

Lengthily and gravely Edgar uttered the words, 'Puzzle-monkey, praying mantis, sacred stork, howler.'

Lance and Robin roared with merriment, and after one glance at Clement's half virtuous, half offended countenance, Felix and Cherry fell into like convulsions; while Alice exclaimed, 'But who is it?' and Angel shouted the sufficiently evident answer, 'Clement, oh! the howler, the black preaching monkey in a natural surplice!'

'I can't think how you do it!' exclaimed Alice.

'I object to the mantis,' Cherry struggled to say. 'Nasty hypocritical creature that eats things up.'

'Praying for its living, eh, Cherry?' said wicked Edgar. 'If you had ever seen the long thin animal, with head back, hands joined, and pious attitude, you couldn't doubt.'

And as he spoke he sketched his mischievous likeness, at which the mirth grew more furious; while Cherry, always the most easily excited, uttered in a strangled voice, 'A parsnip, a barn-door hen, a dilapidated Guernsey cow, an old mother whale.'

'O Cherry, Cherry, you've immortalised yourself!' shouted Lance. 'How did you hit off the parsnip? the very thing that had stumped me.'

'The colour, and the odd sort of sweetness,' said Cherry.

'Won't we have fun with it when I go back!' cried Lance.--'Not tell? Nonsense! Why, no one will enjoy it like Mother Harewood herself.'

'Only don't say I made it. There, Edgar has got one.'

'Touch-me-not balsam, blister-fly, bantam-cock (full strut), black terrier.'

He did not caricature this time except with the muscles of his face, and with these he contrived to put on four different aspects, each so exactly like Mr. Mowbray Smith that not even Alice required the proclamation of the name; and Wilmet gravely said, 'I do not think this is a proper sort of game. It must be ill-natured or irreverent.'

'That depends,' said Geraldine, now thoroughly in the swing.-- Here! Hawthornden apple-tree, stickleback, goldfinch, beaver.'

'The hardy Norseman's house of yore
Was on the foaming wave,'

sang out Lance, recalling Theodore's substitute for Felix's name.

'Exactly like--figures, tastes, and all,' said Edgar, scanning Felix's clear, bright, fresh face, glossy hair, and rather short figure, at once trim and sturdy. 'The goldfinch hit him off exactly, but I don't see the force of the apple-tree.'

'You would,' said Cherry, 'if you were properly acquainted with our three trees and their individualities. The Hawthornden is a resolute looking fellow, but it indulges in the loveliest pink and white blossoms, and waxen, delicate, peachy fruit.'

'Uncommonly sour! Thank you, Cherry,' said Felix.

'Not in a pie,' suggested Alice.

'Properly treated and sweetened, eh?' asked he, smiling on her.

'But why is Felix like a stickleback?' said Angela.

'Don't you know?' said Cherry; 'a beautiful bright little fish, and the good male one swims up and down taking care of the nest.'

'I do like the beaver,' allowed Wilmet. 'It always was my favourite beast.'

'It hits off the respectable householder element,' added Edgar.

'Three flaps of his broad tail rule beaverdom like Jupiter's nod.'

'I have one,' interposed Robina.--'Bella-donna lily, working bee, menura--'

'Hold hard!' called Lance; 'is a menura fish, flesh, or fowl?'

'Fowl: the lyre-tailed pheasant, that makes a shelter for its nest with its own tail.'

'Decided liar tale,' muttered Edgar.

'Go on, Bobbie,' Felix encouraged her. The pheasant suits both the twins as well as the bella-donna. Any more?'

'Perhaps the leading stag of the herd.'

'Don't make us like that proud, cowardly, tyrannical beast,' exclaimed Wilmet.

'I have seen you look exactly like one,' said Geraldine. 'That and the pheasant both give the notion of your neck.'

'Such a set of trumpery gaudy things!' grumbled Wilmet. 'Nothing but the bee is tolerable.'

'I did think of a speckled Hamburg hen, and a nice quiet she-goat,' said Robina; 'but they are all dowdy, and would not suit Alda.'

'There's something in the theory,' said Edgar. 'That belladonna approves itself perfectly--so delicate and stately, and yet so essentially unpoetical.'

'That Mettie takes as a compliment,' said Felix, 'only she would rather have been a potato, or a cabbage.'

'Now,' said Cherry, 'you will all know--bell-heather, the grasshopper, the lark, and the squirrel.'

'Is this the lark's crest, or the squirrel's tail!' said Felix, giving an elder brother's pull to the boy's highest wave of hair.

'Or the grasshopper's leap?' cried Lance, springing on him for a bout of buffeting and skirmishing; in the midst of which Alice was heard wondering how the riddles, as she thought them, were either made or guessed.

'They come,' said Geraldine. 'I am only afraid we shall fall into a trick of making them for everybody.'

'I wonder what you would make for me.'

Geraldine had it on her tongue's end that Alice would be difficult, for want of anything distinctive, but Felix and Edgar were both jotting something down, and Robina was before-hand with either--'Scarlet pimpernel, tortoiseshell butterfly, budgerigar, marmoset.'

No one answered, for Felix had pushed a slip of paper over to Alice, on which she read--"Forget-me-not, ladybird, linnnet, kitten." I

don't think I ever saw a linnet. Isn't it a little brown bird?'

'With a rich glow of red, and a beautiful song,' said Felix, smiling; and the red glowed redder on her cheek, as she said, laughing, 'Kitten for mischief, eh? For shame, Mr. Underwood!--What, another! Dear me, I shall not know myself!'

This had been slipped into her hand; and Cherry suspected that her exclamation had been a mistake of which she was conscious, as the colour deepened on her already blushing cheeks, and her eyes were cast down, while a demure smile played on her lips. The incautious exclamation had betrayed her, and the young ones clamoured to hear Edgar's view of her transmigration; but there was a little coy struggle of 'Oh no, she wouldn't, and she couldn't.'

'She smiled and blushed, and oft did say
Her pretty oath by yea or nay.'

And in the midst came the message that the maid was arrived to take her home; and this being a cross stiff personage, who might never be kept waiting, she had to hurry away; and had no sooner gone than Angela burst out with, 'Here it is! I've got it! Listen to it: "Say, Lady--"'

'Stay, Angela,' interrupted Felix. 'You have no business with that.'

'Not Edgar's fun!' she exclaimed. 'Why, where is he?'

'Surely he is not going home with her!' said Wilmet in some dismay.

'Oh, but it is such fun,' went on Angela, 'only I can't make it out. You read it, Lance.'

'Did she give it you?' said Felix.

'No, I whipped it up when she dropped it. There's something about Ratton in it.'

Felix quietly took the paper out of her hand, folded it, and put it into an envelope. 'You take it back to her the first thing to-morrow,' he said. 'Now go to bed.'

Angela durst not oppose that tone, so unusually serious and authoritative; but she contrived to prolong her good-nights, and the putting away of her goods, with a kind of half droll, half sullen resignation; and just as Wilmet was hurrying her off, Edgar returned. He always spoilt Angela a little, and she sprang to him with a kind of droll pout. 'You'll not be cross, Edgar. You'll let us hear Alice's transmigrations. Look! here's Felix bottled them up in an envelope, and won't let us peep at them! But you'll let me hear. You won't order me off to bed.'

Cherry fancied she saw a disconcerted look on his face when he saw the envelope held up to him; but if so, it instantly gave place to the mischievous entertainment of defeating a lesson on discretion.--
'The heads of the family must assert themselves sometimes, my dear, even about nothing,' he said consolingly.

'Indeed,' said Wilmet, bristling in defence of Felix, 'of course we knew it was nothing. It was only very ill-mannered and wrong of Angela to go prying into what was not meant to be shown.

'I'm sure,' said Edgar most ungratefully, 'it might be posted on the church door for what I care, except for its intrinsic vileness.'

'Oh, let's have it! let's have it!' burst out Lance and Robina, who had been burning with curiosity all the time.

'Don't let us have them murdered, whatever they are,' said Edgar, taking them into his own hand. 'Pity the sorrows of a poor wretch seduced into one of your horrid jeux d'esprit--a lady's excuse for fishing for compliments that sound more than they mean. Here goes, then:--

'Say, Lady, what existence past
Thine essence hath enfolded;
What humble antecedent cast
Thy present self hath moulded.

The hawthorn bush, with blossom white
Veiling her branches pricking;
The painted lady, fluttering light,
The rash pursuer tricking.

Grass paraquit, who loves to sit
In clustering rows and chat on;
Caressing, purring, traitor kit,
Fatal to Master Ratton.

There, ladies and gentlemen, I hope you are satisfied,' he concluded, letting his performance float into the fire; 'the metaphors, to say the least, are startling, but that is the fault of the game.'

'I don't enter into it all,' said Cherry.

'Not likely another of the grass paraquits would, my dear,' said Edgar.

'And it is exactly what Robin made her,' said Angela; 'both that and the butterfly; and Felix, the kitten. You didn't borrow of course. How funny!'

'But I didn't make her inconstant,' said Robin; 'that is not fair.'

'Not when you made her a butterfly, and the shepherd's weather-glass too!'

'I never thought of that, only their being both bright, dark, sparkling things; and Felix has the forget-me-not, by way of antidote.'

'I do not think such things are wise,' pronounced Wilmet.

'And, by the by, Edgar, it has always been the custom that nobody should walk home with Alice. Miss Pearson would not like it, and it would make a talk.'

Edgar laughed. 'Dear W. W., let it not trouble you! What it may lead to is a bugbear to you. You can't think how much younger and more agreeable you will be when you have learnt that there can be passages that lead to nothing.'

Geraldine went to bed uncomfortable and perplexed. Before she was dressed in the morning, Alice darted in. 'Cherry, I'm so vexed; I dropped that paper. Do you think it is here?'

'No; Angel picked it up, and Edgar read us the verses, and then threw them into the fire.'

'Burnt them!'

'Yes; he said the worst of such games was that they force one to pay compliments that may be taken to mean more than they do.'

Cherry spoke under a stern sense of virtue doing a service to Alice; and when the quick answer came, 'He didn't say that, I'm sure it was Wilmet,' she asseverated, 'Indeed he did. I don't confuse in that way. It is a very good warning not to dwell on what gentlemen may say in mere play.'

'Who told you I did?' said Alice sharply. 'You've no business to say such things!'

Happily there was an interruption. Cherry felt as if she had had a taste of the claws; but she feared she had been malicious, and she was penitent.

CHAPTER XV

WHAT IT LED TO

'Then out and spak the popinjay.'--Old Ballad.

Geraldine was hard at work on a drawing. Edgar's teaching had improved her so much that, under a sore longing to obtain some good studies, she had ventured to place in the shop one of her best imaginary groups, and to her surprise and delight, it had brought her in fifteen shillings, and an order for a companion.

Vistas of hope began to rise before her, only obscured by her consciousness of the want of knowledge and skill. It took some resolution not to attend exclusively to her art, and she was forced to make it a rule never to touch a pencil till the lessons of Bernard and Stella were both over for the day.

They were finished, the children in the garden, and Cherry was in that world of joy and something like inspiration known to spirits imbued with any of the constructive poetry of art, always endeavouring to fulfil an ideal, never indeed satisfying themselves, but never so at rest as in the effort.

Presently she was startled by a step on the stairs. Nothing short of the Fall of Delhi had ever been known to bring Felix upstairs in business hours; and he was especially bound to his work at present, since Mr. Froggatt was detained at home by a serious attack of rheumatism. She looked up amazed at the eager question, 'Is there a letter from Alda?'

'I believe there is, waiting for Wilmet. What is the matter?'

'The most astonishing thing. Here is Ferdinand Travis writing to tell me of his engagement to Alda.'

'To Alda?'

'To Alda! I looked twice to be sure that there was no confusion between the names, but it is my sister Alda beyond a doubt. He would not ask my consent if it were Marilda. Here's the letter, as good and nice as possible, dear good fellow.'

'Then what Edgar told us must have been pure imagination.'

'Not the old folks' wishes, most likely. For the rest, Edgar can make a good story. One can't wonder at the preference, and there's no denying that it is a brilliant chance for Alda.'

'And what a blessing that he should be so good!'

'Infinite! No one could be so welcome! How pleased Mr. Audley will be! But I must go, and try not to look too much disposed to stand on the counter and crow.'

Whatever Felix did below, upstairs Cherry found drawing impossible. Ferdinand a brother! The pleasure was enhanced by the affectionate simplicity of his letter, the outcome of so good a heart, greatly in love, but very conscientious, and utterly unpresuming on his wealth, but showing all his old affection and reverence for Felix. What a delightful wonder that Alda should bring in a connection so faithful to Felix!

Yet, what would not Cherry have given to be as unsuspecting as Felix or Wilmet? Why would misgivings come into her head such as never troubled theirs? Why must she be haunted by Alda's intimations about her travelling companions, and her manner, half scornful, half nettled, when Edgar described the terms on which Mr. Travis stood?

She read Ferdinand's letter a second time, and was convinced that he looked at the whole with such artless seriousness as to preclude all notion of his having been consciously playing fast and loose; but she was ready to torture herself for the involuntary doubt whether her own sister were equally to be trusted.

However, when Wilmet came home, her genuine wholesome overflow of undoubting rapture could not but sweep Cherry along in the tide. Ferdinand combined the apparently impossible advantages of being thoroughly one of themselves, and yet of being able to give Alda the luxuries to which she had become accustomed; and Wilmet's joy was beyond expression. The contrast between the twins--one admired, praised, followed, esteemed, as one of the brightest ornaments of London society; the other toiling in an obscure poverty-stricken home, a teacher in a small third-class school, her beauty unheeded or viewed as a real disadvantage--all this never occurred for one moment to Wilmet, she only felt elevated in her sister.

Two days passed before more letters were received, and these came by the first instead of the second post, before breakfast was over. Four--besides one unheeded, being only in Robina's childish handwriting--Alda to Wilmet, Thomas Underwood and Ferdinand both to Felix, Edgar to Geraldine. There was a simultaneous opening of the letters, then a general starting and looking into one another's eyes, and Geraldine faintly murmured,

'Then it was really so!'

'So? what do you mean?' broke forth Wilmet. 'These selfish people are treating my poor Alda most cruelly among them; and Felix must go and fetch her home to be married from her own brother's house as she ought to be.'

'I shall have to fetch her home,' said Felix thoughtfully; 'but I wish I were quite clear that she has been dealing kindly by Marilda.'

'You are not believing that man Thomas rather than your own sister!' cried Wilmet. 'If Alda does happen to be prettier than his daughter, she can't help it. I'm sure I should be glad enough not to be pretty,

but it is a trial, and one must do the best one can.'

'That is just what I fear Alda has been doing,' said Felix between his teeth, as he frowned over his letter.

'Read her letter, poor dear girl,' cried Wilmet, 'and see if you aren't ashamed of such a judgment! No. Some is only meant for me, but listen--"Your letter of sisterly joy has come on troubled waters. I always knew I was the poor relation upon sufferance, but I have been taught to feel it now." She does not know how she could bear it, but for the security of Ferdinand's strength; and they will not let her see him--say she must give him up or them--Mrs. Underwood's violence inconceivable, and all because of a chimerical fancy.'

'What does Ferdinand himself say?' asked Cherry, as Wilmet looked on for further selections.

'He says,' said Felix, reading, 'that our greeting was especially welcome, from the contrast to what he met with from Mr. Underwood. The angry opposition took him by surprise, having always thought they regarded Alda as a daughter; but of course nothing makes any difference to him, and he would much rather come to us for her than to a stranger. His uncle is at New Orleans, and he is writing to him; he is afraid they ought to wait for the answer, though there can be no doubt about it, and he owes him no obedience.--Now, Cherry, there is just time for Edgar's account before we go our several ways.'

'O Felix,' cried Wilmet, 'aren't you going to fetch her home, poor dear?'

'Not possible to-day, Mettie. I shall have much ado to get away to-morrow. Don't be so unhappy, you know she could come alone or with Edgar, if it were so very dreadful; or if you are so fierce, you had better go yourself and encounter "Man Thomas."'

Wilmet looked so much hurt, that Geraldine thought to defend Felix by reading aloud at once.

'MA CHERIE--Such a bear-garden never was seen! Madame furious, Tom abusive, Alda injured innocence, Montezuma heroism, and poor Polly magnanimous--though the least said about her, the soonest mended. I saw when I went back that the crisis could not be far off. The fact is, that our dear sister cannot see any one else treated as "an object," and has so persuaded herself that she is the proverbial maltreated poor relation, as to think everything fair.'

'Geraldine!' exclaimed Wilmet, 'how can you read? Felix, how can you listen to such things about your own sister?'

'It is only what she said herself,' said Felix drily. 'Go on, Cherry.'

'It must be owned that it was hard, when for once Polly had fallen in with something alike palatable to self and parents, and able to swallow her broad visage! If Madame had had any wit, she would have kept Alda away till the fish was hooked, when, it is my belief, he would have had no eyes for aught beyond; but the good creature is too sure of the charms of her own goose, to dread the admission of any swan whatsoever to her pond. While the Cacique being yet uncommitted, small blame to him if he saw the differ, especially as he attaches to Alda all the sanctity of Bexley, which is to him at the least what St. Matthew's is to Clem. To have been reared on the other--or indeed either side of the Atlantic, our intended brother-in-law is curiously simple. He accepted the intimation that Alda's face is her fortune with superb indifference; whether it will be the same with his uncle, remains to be seen; and I am afraid he is a good deal dependent on him, his mother's Mexican property having been speculated away. I don't like the look of the business; but if any one can do any good it is Marilda herself. Tom is in a towering rage, and his wife worse--neither perceiving that the noise they make is small mercy to their daughter. She looks all manner of colours, but stands out gallantly that she is glad, and that all is as it should be; and I believe that, left to herself, she will set things straight. Felix had better keep out of the fray except upon compulsion.'

'Here is compulsion,' said Felix. 'Tom Underwood summons me; I can't say I like the errand.'

'You ought not to let yourself be led by Edgar's unkind joking way!'

'We ought to be off now, at any rate,' said Felix, glad to close the discussion. 'I'll write to get Fernan to meet me at the station to-morrow.'

Accordingly, when he arrived, there was Ferdinand Travis driving a magnificent horse, the whole turn--out very far from looking like a connection of Froggatt and Underwood. He had certainly developed into a splendidly handsome fellow, though still lithe and slight rather than robust, and his dignified bearing giving the idea of greater height than his inches testified to. His greeting was warmly affectionate, with all his old wishful reverence towards his young godfather, and even with a sort of doubt of his thinking him worthy of his sister. As to the disturbance created by the avowal of the object of his attentions, he seemed amazed at it, and entirely unconscious of any supposed change on his part.

'I knew my uncle wished me to be an intimate with the family,' he said, 'and I was rejoiced to fall in with any one who bore your name, and knew how to appreciate you; but I had reason to think that--that there were other views--for--' and here the olive cheeks grew crimson, and he stammered himself into a hopeless entanglement, whence Felix recalled him charitably to an account of the explosion as it had affected himself.

It appeared that his proposal had not been mentioned to the family till Felix's answer had been received, Ferdinand feeling that no one ought to hear of it before the eldest brother. The lovers had met that night at a ball, and their consultation over the letters had taken place in the conservatory, where they had been surprised, and partly overheard, by Mrs. Underwood. When Ferdinand arrived the next morning, he was received with denunciations of underhand ways, and his explanation only made matters worse. A thunderstorm about ingratitude and treachery was launched forth, and he was told that the connection was so contrary to any intentions of his uncle, that Mr. Underwood could not hear of it, and that Alda must renounce it entirely, on peril of being cast off by the family. That Ferdinand regarded her brother as the true head of her house, was only additionally provoking; and Mr. Underwood had given him warning, which he only hinted at to Felix, that the engagement could not be carried on with impunity.

Therewith they reached Kensington Palace Gardens, and being in a measure forbidden the house, Ferdinand drove about waiting for Felix, who on giving his name, found himself ushered into the room where the whole party were finishing breakfast.

Alda, looking meek and pensive, but very lovely, exquisitely dressed in white and blue ribbons, flew into his arms as if her protector were come; Mr. Underwood, without getting up, acknowledged him by a grunt, and hand held out; Marilda came round, and put a cold hand into his, clasping it tight; and her mother greeted him with, 'So, Felix Underwood, you are come up about this unlucky business?'

'There is no reason it should be anything but a very happy one,' said Marilda stoutly. 'Come, Mamma, we had better leave Papa and Felix;' and she set the example, but Mrs. Underwood did not stir.

'You hear the dear girl!' she said. 'It ought to go to Alda's heart!'

'It is of no use talking before the ladies,' said Mr. Underwood, getting up. 'That is, unless you have the good sense to join with me in telling Alda that she must give up this wild affair. The fellow has next to nothing of his own, and his uncle would see him at Jericho before he consented to a match like this!'

'I am hardly prepared to do that, Sir,' said Felix, as Alda clung to his arm, and looked appealingly in his face, 'unless the objection were more personal.'

'Objection!' burst forth the lady of the house, 'when he has been making his way underhand--deceiving us all along.'

'Alda, my dear,' said Felix in her ear, 'don't you think you had better go upstairs?'

But Alda seemed as little disposed as Mrs. Underwood to quit the

scene of conflict. 'O Felix, I don't know what she means, nor what we have been doing, for them all to turn against me.'

'Don't tell me, Miss Innocence,' retorted Mrs. Underwood, the artificial polish giving way, and the native scolding Polly Kedge breaking out in a storm of words. 'Wasn't the young man doing just as his uncle meant him, and my poor dear girl fancying him as I never saw her do any one before, till you came home with your sly, artful ways--you that owed us the very clothes on your back?'

'Hush, Mary!' ejaculated her husband; but he might as well have tried to stop a torrent. 'Ay, I know. She comes round every man of you with her smooth tongue and pretty face, till you--you are ready to take her part against your own child, Underwood. When my poor girl's laid in her coffin, then you will know what a serpent you've been fostering.'

To Felix's surprise and annoyance, Alda must needs answer: 'I'm sure it's very hard! If people will look at me, I can't help it; and I've as much right to be spoken to as Marilda. She that has got everything, and poor me--'

Luckily her tears stopped her voice.

'Come along, Felix,' said the master of the house, opening the door; and he, perceiving that escape alone could put an end to this most humiliating scene, whispered again his recommendation to Alda to go to her room, and saw her hurrying up the stairs before his kinsman shut the door of his private room with a bounce, exclaiming, 'There! Now we are out of the way of the women's tongues, we can hear ourselves speak. I am afraid it is an awkward business, Felix Underwood.'

'I am afraid it is, Sir.'

'And the ladies make it worse by making such a din about it,' said Tom, who after all was an Underwood, and whose better breeding had come to the perception how these ravings compromised his daughter's dignity. 'How far any one is to blame, I can't tell. The truth is, that it would have been very satisfactory both to Alfred Travis and to me if the lad and my girl could have made it up together, and they seemed ready enough to like each other. My girl has got rather a turn for your new-fashioned sort of saints, and he seemed just her style. Everything does go contrary at times; and when your sister came home, with her pretty face and way, my wife declares now she saw a change from the first, but to tell the truth I never did, and I doubt her doing so; but you may guess how amazed we were when she came on them whispering together, and it came out that he had been writing to you to sanction his proposing for Alda, as if he were ashamed to come to me, who had always been a father to her.'

'He meant no slight to you, Sir,' said Felix, eagerly; 'but you know we were his first acquaintance, and he had a feeling that an elder

brother came nearest. I am sure he felt no shame; he was conscious of no change of intention.'

'Well, well, he is a little bit of an ass. Between ourselves, Felix, I don't blame him half as much as Alda. The girl is sharp enough; she has swarms of lovers; men come about her like wasps to a lump of sugar; and there's 5000 pounds ready for her the day she marries; but when there was one my poor Mary liked for once, we liked for her, and was in the way of liking her--Mary, who has shared everything with her like a sister--she might have let him alone. Indeed, her aunt gave her a hint, but it only served to make her carry it on on the sly.'

Felix wished he had not known of Alda's hearing Edgar's report. He could only say sadly, 'If so, she is quite indefensible.'

What would Wilmet have thought of his fight with 'Man Thomas?'

'Of course,' proceeded that gentleman, 'we know the less we say of that part of the story the better. Some day, Mary will know she's well rid of a coxcombical foreign-looking fellow. She can afford to look farther, but for your sister, this is the maddest thing in the world. William Travis made a regular mull with his wife's fortune, and depend on it, the young man has next to nothing, and would come to beggary if he offended his uncle. There is nothing for it but for them to give one another up!'

'I do not think there is much chance of their doing so,' replied Felix.

'Not as they are now, in the height and fury of the thing, but you are a sensible lad, Felix; you will do your best to show them the utter folly of the thing.'

'We do not know whether Ferdinand can afford it yet,' said Felix.

'Don't delude yourself with fancying Alfred Travis will swallow this! Not he! Why, he's set on that young Spanish don making a great match--hardly thought my Mary's hundred thousand good enough.'

'Very likely he will refuse consent,' returned Felix; 'but, in the meantime, I see nothing to be done but for Alda to go home with me and wait.'

'To very little purpose,' ejaculated Mr. Underwood, 'except that maybe a taste of your way of life may bring her to her senses, and serve her right. I must say,' he added, 'it is hard that both this boy and girl should be thrown back on your hands for no fault of yours. I wish I could help it, but you see there wouldn't be a moment's peace if Alda stayed here without giving him up.'

'It is not fit that she should,' said Felix.

'I like the girl, too, indeed, she's almost like my own,' continued

Mr. Underwood; 'the house will be dull without her, and I believe those pretty young women can't help flirting, and think one another's beaux fair game. Eh? Well, we'll send for her and put it to her--will she give up Travis and stay here, or hold him to it and go home with you?'

Felix could make no objection, though he had no question what the decision would be; so the bell was rung, Alda was summoned, and soon appeared with burning cheeks and moist eyes.

'Now, Alda,' said her adopted uncle, 'your brother and I have talked it over, and I am ready to overlook what has gone by--that is, if your aunt will--and to let all be as it was before, on this one condition, that you break off this foolish concern. Listen to me. You will find that he has little enough to call his own, and his uncle can cut off his allowance any day. It is mere insanity to think he will consent to such a match as you would be; and you would be doing the best thing for the young man and yourself to tell him it is all nonsense, and you've thought better of it.'

'O Uncle, I couldn't do that!'

'If not--you have the choice--I can't abet what Travis never intended, your aunt couldn't stand it either. There's nothing for it but that you should leave this house. Choose between us and him!'

'That can't help being done, Uncle,' said Alda, with streaming eyes and a choked voice. 'You have been very good to me, but he must come first;' and she moved towards Felix, who put his arm round her kindly, and kissed her, saying,

'Then, Alda, I will leave you to prepare; I must go and see the children and Edgar. I will come back for you in time for the half-past five train.'

Alda's tears flowed too fast again for words, and she turned to leave the room.

'I shall see you again,' said Mr. Underwood. 'Can I give you a lift anywhere, Felix?'

'No, thank you, Sir; Travis is waiting for me.'

'Ay, ay, very fine with his thorough-bred; but when his allowance is docked, how is he to live on his pay?'

The brougham had long been waiting for Tom Underwood, and he left them together. Alda hung on her brother. 'O Felix, is it not dreadful?'

'I thought him very kind and forgiving,' said Felix.

'Is that what you call forgiving? And oh! if you could hear Aunt

Mary! You little think what I have gone through!

'It will be over soon,' said Felix, kindly. 'You are going home, you know, and Wilmet is wild to have you.'

'But, Felix, you don't think they mean to do more than frighten me? Ferdinand must have a real right to his own father's money; and besides, he can't properly object to me; Uncle Tom promised me my 5000 pounds whatever happened!'

'I cannot stay to discuss that now, Alda,' said Felix. 'I have a great deal to do, and Fernan is waiting for me. I shall come back in time.'

'Oh, I wish I could come with you now! Dear Fernan! Tell him I have borne it all for his sake, but it is such an age since I saw him!'

'No doubt he will meet us at the station,' said Felix, escaping at last, and finding Ferdinand not many yards off in the road outside.

'Well, Fernan, to Brompton, if you please. Mr. Underwood is really much kinder than I expected; but as things stand, you can't carry it on in their house, so Alda comes home with me to-night.'

'Then the dear girl is really banished for my sake! I mean, no place is like Bexley to me. But it is very noble of her!' exclaimed Ferdinand, curiously divided between regard for Felix and sense of Alda's sacrifice.

'It is the proper place in which for her to wait for your uncle's answer,' said Felix; 'but indeed, Fernan, it is a question whether we ought to let you risk all your prospects.'

Ferdinand's vehement demand what Felix took him for, and equally eager protest that his uncle must know he had no right to withhold the means that were in all equity due to him, lasted through all the brief transit to the farther end of Brompton, where a great old house and grounds, once quite in the country, had been adapted and revived by Miss Fulmort.

'Might I not come in and see the little girls?' asked Ferdinand, wistfully.

'I should rather suppose not,' said Felix, smiling. 'Life-Guardsmen are not exactly the visitors expected in establishments for young ladies. You had better not wait for me; I cannot give the children less than an hour.'

'I would wait if it were ten hours.'

'But how about your horse? He isn't in love!'

Ferdinand would not, however, be denied; and when at length a

rendezvous was agreed on, Felix, free of the dashing equipage, of which he was, to tell the truth, slightly ashamed, rang at the gates, arrived at the house door, announced himself as Mr. Underwood, asked to see his sisters; and after a long labyrinth of matted passages, found himself in a pretty countrified room, where a wiry, elderly, sensible lady, with grey hair and a keen face, gave him a friendly reception, drew a favourable, but not enthusiastic, picture of Robina's steadiness and industry, and said that Angela was a more difficult character. By this time Robina came into the room with her hat on, eagerly, but with her face flushed and her eyes rather frightened, and as she received her brother's kiss, she said, 'The little ones are not come in yet.--May I take my brother into the garden, Miss Fennimore?'

Permission was given, and Robina held his hand with an unusually tight grasp as she led him to the wide, square, walled garden, with a broad gravel-walk around an old-fashioned bowling-green. He thought the round face looked anxious and perplexed, and was rather uneasy as he began by saying, 'I hope not to lose Angel. Do you always walk so early in the day?'

'On Herr Muller's days, because he only comes in the afternoon,' said Robina; 'but I am rather glad; I wanted to speak to you, Felix.'

'Is anything wrong?' said Felix, seeing that the child's face had become crimson, and hearing effort in her voice. 'You are happy here? Don't be afraid to tell me anything, my dear. Remember, there is no one so bound to watch over you.'

'I know,' said Robina, looking up into those kind eyes. 'I want to tell you--' but she panted, and he encouraged her by putting his other hand over hers caressingly. 'Edgar comes every Sunday,' came out at last.

'And what of that? Isn't it a pleasure?'

'It--it would be--but he and Alice ought not to send each other notes and messages.'

'What?' very low.

'Indeed they do; and I can't tell what to do.'

'What sort of notes and messages?' asked Felix, in a half reproving voice, as though he thought the solemnity of thirteen was taking alarm needlessly.

'O Felix, love notes,' half whispered the girl, hanging her burning head.

'Nonsense, child; you have misunderstood some joke.'

'No,' said Robina, looking full in his face with sturdy offended

dignity. 'They both were in earnest when they told me about it.'

'About what?' said he, still severely, as he sat down on a bench, unheeding February damp.

'About--' she was not far from tears, as she faltered out, 'their engagement.'

'Theirs! he wrung the hand that he still retained; 'Edgar and--'

'And Alice Knevett,' said Robin. 'I would not promise not to tell. I hope it is not treachery!'

'How long?' asked Felix, hoarsely.

'Ever since the holidays. They used to walk together when Miss Pearson thought she was with us, but none of us ever knew it then.'

'You are certain? Remember, this is a graver matter than perhaps you understand.'

'I think I do understand, and it is that which makes me so unhappy; but, indeed, it can't be fancy. I have seen her ring, emerald and amethyst, for Edgar and Alice, and the locket with their hairs twisted together. The very first Sunday we were here, he gave me a note for her, and when I told him it was not allowed, he tried quizzing me at first, and at last told me I was a silly child who did not know what was proper between engaged people. So I said,' continued Robina, with dignity, 'that I could allow much to be proper in that case, but I wanted to know whether this was only kept from me because I was a baby, and was known to you and the grown-up people.'

'Right, Robin,' muttered Felix, feeling that she needed encouragement.

'Then he laughed at me more than ever about expecting things to be proclaimed on the market-cross, and tried to puzzle me out of my senses, till I could only stick to one thing, that I couldn't take his notes unless somebody knew. And after all I found the thing in my jacket pocket. He must have put it in when I was not looking.'

'And what did you do with it!'

'Oh! the dreadful thing! I felt as if it would bite me all the week long, but I didn't think it would be honourable to tear it or burn it, and I kept it. Luckily Alice didn't ask if I had a note, only whether he had said anything; and when she found I knew, she told me all about it, and said all sorts of things about my being unkind and mean to stand out, but I never promised to keep the secret.'

'Are you still keeping this note!'

'No. I gave it back to Edgar on Sunday, and told him to play no such

tricks. I thought he would have been in a rage, but he was--oh! so provoking! just as if he didn't care for a little spite in a naughty child.'

'Then is this intercourse checked!'

'No, that's the worst of it. When I would not, they took to Angel. You know she got very fond of Edgar in the winter, and was always running after him and waiting on him. So she did what he told her quite innocently at first, till I found out what was going on, and tried to stop her; but she doesn't care for me as she does for Edgar, and thinks it grand to be in all their secrets, when I am too cross. And then there's a class that goes to the South Kensington Museum, and Alice is one of them, and Edgar is about there. I'm sure Miss Fulmort ought not to be deceived as they are doing; it's all nonsense about school-mistresses being designed by nature to be hoodwinked. It makes me so miserable, I don't know what to do; and when I heard you were come, it was as if you had been sent on purpose to help me.'

'Poor child!' said Felix, with a heavy sigh. 'You have kept this all to yourself.'

'I could not tell any one. I could have told Miss Lyveson, because she is one's friend; but it would only be being a tell-tale and informer here. And one's own brother, too! And I could not write, for they look over all the letters that are not to fathers and mothers.'

'They must make an exception for me!' said Felix, in an indignant tone.

'I knew you would say so. O Felix, tell them so! I do feel like having Papa now I have you.'

'If you only had!' sighed Felix. 'My poor Bob, it is a grievous business, but you have been very upright and considerate, as far as I can see.'

'I'm so glad you don't want me to have told!' she said, with a sigh of relief, as unlike his as that of one who throws off a burden is to that of him who takes it up.

'Not if it can be helped. It would be a mischievous and cruel exposure, and would be hard on one who has been led into it,' he said, with breaks and pauses, half for breath, half for considering. 'It is most reckless, most unjustifiable, in Edgar!' He knit his brows, so that she gazed at him in awe and wonder, as having something in his countenance that she did not comprehend. Then, after a silence, he said, 'Robin, I will speak to Edgar, and if you do not find that this is stopped after one communication, which of course there must be, write to me. These ladies must make an exception in favour of such as we are!'

'O Felix, it is so nice to hold you and feel you! Only I wish I had

not had to grieve you so much!

'Dishonourable conduct is not what I was prepared for!' he said, setting his teeth.

'And will you speak to Angel? I hear them coming in,' said Robina.

'Yes. Let me have her alone at first. Come back in ten minutes' time.'

He was still sitting on the bench, with his elbows on his knees, and his hands over his brow, when Angela came towards him. She was of the same long-limbed make as Clement, was nearly as tall as the square sturdy Robina nearly three years older, and had Clement's small, almost baby mould of features, relieved only by such arch deep blue eyes as shone in Edgar's face. She looked such a mere child, that when her step and exclamation caused Felix to raise his head, it seemed absurd to imagine her to be knowingly engaged as go-between in a clandestine correspondence, and with a sort of pity and compunction for the blame he had intended, he held out his arms to her.

'O Felix, how cold you are! Your face is like marble. Now if I was to sit there, in this weather, wouldn't they be at me like wild cats?'

Thus reminded, Felix rose, and certainly shivered after the exercise of his privilege. 'Are you happy here, Angel?' he asked in a constrained tone.

'Yes, it is jollier than Miss Pearson's. There are more girls, and we do have such fun!'

'I hope you are good and steady, and very careful of all the rules.'

Angela fidgeted, as if she didn't like the style of the conversation.

'You know,' he continued, 'there may be rules that you may not see the use of, but that must be obeyed for all that.'

'What a tiresome dry old Blunderbore you are!' broke out Angela, with ill-assured sauciness; 'this isn't the way Edgar goes on when he comes to see us.'

Felix could not check a sort of groan or grunt; and Angela, whose pertness was defensive, quailed a little. She had driven him out of the due sequence of his discourse, but he resumed it. 'Angel, I must tell you; if anybody asks you to break rules--by giving letters--you must not'

Angela kicked pebbles about.

'Have you ever been asked to do so?'

She hung her head, and a pout came over her face.

'Angel,' he said, in a voice from the sadness of his heart, 'I will not ask any questions, in case you have made promises not to betray secrets; but you must never make such promises again. Tell me you will never do--this thing again.'

She was silent.

'Angela!' he said, reprovingly.

'I don't know why I should promise you more than Edgar,' broke out Angela, petulantly. 'He is my brother too, and he isn't cross; and I love him, and _will_ keep his secret.'

Between this flat defiance of his authority, and his scruple about interfering with the child's sense of honour, Felix was in no slight perplexity even as to this interview with his little sister. His disclaimer came first. 'I ask about no one's secret,' he said, 'but, Angel, I must have you understand this. If you break the rules that forbid the giving of notes from any person outside the school, it will be doing more harm than you can understand. I shall put a stop to it at once, and most likely you will be sent away in disgrace.'

She was somewhat awed, but she did not speak.

'Whatever any one may say to you,' said Felix, 'recollect that it is dishonesty and treachery to do anything underhand, and the greatest possible mischief to those you wish to be kind to. Don't you see, it is no kindness to help any one to do wrong?'

She began to cry. 'They don't want to do wrong. It is very nasty and mean of Bobbie to have told.'

'You will know some day how good and trustworthy it is in Bobbie,' said her elder brother. 'You cannot understand the rights and wrongs in such a manner as this, at your age, Angel.' (To tell the child this was a mistake, if he had but known it.) 'You must be satisfied with knowing that whatever breaks rules and must be kept secret is necessarily disobedient and deceitful, and may have terrible consequences. Do you believe me? Then give me your word to have no more to do with it.'

She muttered something among her tears like 'I won't,' and Felix was satisfied, for the exaction of promises had necessarily been the chief mode of government with the two youthful pillars of the house, who spent so much time apart from their dominions; and it was almost unprecedented that such a promise was not observed.

Robina was lingering near, and as they joined her Felix found that his time was up. He was taken back to the drawing-room, where he found himself in presence of the lady he had seen, and of a much younger smaller person, with a slight cast in her eye, and a peculiar jerking manner such as he could well believe would frighten away a

young girl's confidence. When he made his request for free correspondence from his little sisters, there was no demur; only Miss Fulmort said, half vexed, 'It ought to have been mentioned before; she did not know why the children had not told her.' And then she made a point of ascertaining Felix's individual address; for she said, 'A great deal of undesirable stuff may be scribbled to brothers and sisters.'

Felix possessed no card, unless such might be reckoned the announcement of photographs and stationery, etc., which was wont to be put up with parcels for strangers; and when he tried to write 'Mr. F. C. Underwood,' the shivering chill so affected his fingers that he could hardly guide the pencil. He took leave, and soon found the assiduous Ferdinand, who presently asked, shyly, 'What the little ones thought of it?'

Felix bethought himself. 'Really, Fernan, it was put out of my head; and, moreover, perhaps it had better not be known more widely than needful.'

'You do not doubt--'

All the ground that had been gone over before was argued out once again by the eager Mexican before they reached the National Gallery, the appointed place of meeting with Edgar. He was not within, but without, and, throwing away his cigar, hailed them as Fernan drew up his horse.

'At last! The storm must have been pitiless, to judge by the effects! You are blue with cold, Felix.'

'Ferdinand, thank you,' said Felix, getting out. 'I am sorry, but I must have Edgar alone a little while.'

'Look here, Travis,' said Edgar, seeing his blank look, 'we'll give you the honour of giving us a spread. You go on and order it at --'s, and I'll walk this fellow there. Curry soup that will astonish him, and warm the cockles of his heart, mind.'

Ferdinand nodded, and drove off, perfectly satisfied with this compensation.

'Let's see if we can walk a little life into you,' said Edgar, taking his brother's arm. 'Bless thy five wits, Tom's a cold! Was it Madame! I always thought she could not be many generations from Billingsgate.'

'I have been to Brompton.'

'That tragical hoarseness would lead me to conclude something. Eh! has that Robin been chirping out her fancies? And do you mean to say that you are struck all of a heap by the awful discovery of a boarding-school mystery?'

'It is naturally distressing to find you acting such a part.'

'Then I am afraid you have a good deal to go through in the course of your life. If every little flirtation on the part of your Geschwister is to produce this effect, there won't be much left of you by the time it comes to Stella.'

'What meaning do you attach to the words "little flirtation?"'

'When the head of the family puts the question in that solemn tone, how is it to be answered? Bless me, Blunderbore, such a countenance can only proceed from being smitten yourself! To be sure, when there was only one girl you ever spoke to, it was no wonder. Poor old fellow! I'd never have poached on your manor, but how was I to imagine a pillar of the house giving way to such levities?'

'This is mere bravado, Edgar,' was the grave answer, in a tone not disconcerted, but full of repression, and with a pale but steady countenance. 'Gloss it over as you will, a correspondence such as you have begun is unjustifiable. It risks damaging for ever the prospects, at once not only of--of the object--but those of your little sisters.'

'O Felicissimo mio, how green a spot is Bexley! As though secrets and mysteries were not the elixir of life to the boarding-school.'

'Have you ever considered what a discovery must involve?'

'I need not, it seems, since you had not the sense to box that child's ears for a meddling tell-tale. Did the scene equal Madame's performance?'

'You do not imagine that I mentioned it.'

'Oh! The revered prop of the state soars so far above my head that I did not know what he might regard as his duty.'

'You shall know it now, Edgar. There are two choices. If you are really engaged to this young lady' (Edgar made a nod of impatient scornful acquiescence, but certainly of acquiescence), 'then ask her honourably from her friends, and let whatever you do be open! Otherwise, give it up as an impossible imprudence, but drop all attempt at what is clandestine. Unless you do one or other of these, I warn you that I shall speak to Miss Pearson.'

'If you were a reasonable and experienced paterfamilias, instead of only a poor conscientious over-harassed prig of a boy, with more brothers and sisters than he knows what to do with, I'll tell you, in candid unprejudice, what you would do. Just let it alone! There are as many of such little affairs going as there are midges in a sunbeam; and they never do any one any harm, unless the higher powers make an unadvised hubbub.'

'Am I to understand that as an avowal that you know yourself to be trifling?'

'I know nothing about it. I don't live in the heroics, like some of my friends. In the rural seclusion of Bexley I saw a pretty lively girl, who, not to put too fine a point upon it, made quite as much up to the romantic young artist as ever the young artist did to her. Of course, there was an exchange of prettinesses, and life on either side became a blank when she was immured at Brompton, and the only solace left was the notes that so outrage your and Bobbie's united sense of propriety.'

'And what is to follow?'

'Is it to lead to?' he corrected, with a mimicry of Wilmet's tone.

'That depends. If you make the explosion, I shall have to rise to the occasion--keep the slip-knot ready and patent, and as soon as I get my head above water, have a wife and family on my back to keep me down, and hinder me from coming to your rescue. If not--why, it will take its chance, and we shall have a reasonable chance of trying whether we get tired of one another--the best thing that could happen to us, by the by--though she is such a saucy little darling, that were that picture of mine painted, I should be fool enough to marry her to-morrow.'

'And why--may I ask--seeing these things so clearly, did you draw the poor child into an engagement!'

Edgar shrugged his shoulders. 'You had better ask why she drew me. If you didn't know it before, my dear Felix, "'Tis human natur to be fools."

'Allowing it to be folly, you do not mean to persist?'

'As if a poor fellow must always have a meaning! Life is not worth having if one is to be always so awfully in earnest.'

'I have the misfortune to be in earnest,' said Felix, with the formality of one past patience, but resolved to keep his temper in hand, 'when I warn you, that if I find that this intercourse is continued, unless you choose to ask her properly of her father, it will be my duty to let Miss Pearson know.'

'So be it,' was the answer, in a tone of half mocking, half compassionate submission, that was more provoking than all, except for the sudden change to the gay kindness that followed, as Edgar threw aside his own affairs, to laugh over Ferdinand Travis's honest simplicity of adoration of Alda and all her household, declaring that it had been as much for his delight, as to be rid of him, that he himself had devised that commission of the luncheon. 'What a spread it will be!' Edgar chuckled to himself; 'and how it will be thrown away on the present company! not that there ever was a man who wanted

it more!' he added, as he saw how white his brother's face was.
'You've been and got a chill!'

Felix did not deny it; and if his unsophisticated palate did not appreciate all that Ferdinand had ordered on the principle that nothing could be too good for him either in his individual capacity or as Alda's brother, he at least submitted to what his two companions required of him in the way of hot soup, and even of one glass of wine, before he grew restive, and insisted on carrying the head that their solicitude had succeeded in rendering heated and flushed to burning pitch, to do the business in the City that always sprang up whenever any one had to go to town.

Edgar bade him adieu; and the faithful Ferdinand drove him wherever he had to go, and finally to Kensington Palace Gardens, where he was ushered into the drawing-room, to find Marilda, resolved upon unconsciousness, but only succeeding in a kind of obstreperous cordiality and good will, which, together with the hot room, made him quite dizzy; and his answers were so much at random, that he sent Fulbert to an examination at Cambridge, and Clement prospecting in Australia. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Underwood made their appearance; but when Felix spoke of getting a cab, Marilda said the carriage was ordered. Then Alda was explicit about the boxes that were to follow, but on the whole she was behaving very prettily and unobtrusively. Marilda kissed her warmly, and detained Felix a moment to say, 'This will blow over, and then she will come back, unless things have settled themselves better. If I can do any good, write to me.'

So Alda quitted her adopted home; but the change might be lightened to her by being handed out of the carriage at the station by a military-looking figure, who announced that he wanted to see a fellow at Aldershot, and meant to dine there. It was not his fault that he got out at Farnborough.

CHAPTER XVI

THE WINTER OF DISCONTENT

'Peace, brother, be not exquisite,
To cast the fashion of uncertain evils;
For, grant they be so, while they rest unknown,
What need a man forestall his date of grief?'

MILTON.

Wilmet was so devoted to Alda and her hopes and fears, that she let Felix escape with less reproof than usual, for the cold that sat heavily upon him after the last day's chill. He did not give way to

it. There might have been some temptation to sit over the fire if Geraldine had been alone there; but Alda, when Wilmet was out of reach, engrossed Cherry's ears with descriptions of her feelings, and cravings for sympathy in her suspense, treating every other subject as futile, and the interruption of the children's lessons as an insult. No one might talk of anybody but Ferdinand; and Cherry did not wonder that Felix looked wearied and harassed, and always betrayed some anxiety to come first into possession of the morning post. One day, nearly a fortnight after his visit to London, he called Wilmet away from the breakfast table into the sitting-room: 'Wilmet,' he said, 'I must go and see Miss Pearson before school hours.'

'You! Is there anything the matter with Alice?' asked Wilmet, startled at his tone.

'Had they--had you--any notion of anything between her and Edgar?'

'No! Miss Pearson has taken to saying, "My dear, your brothers are quite grown into young men," and I thought she did not like the play.'

'Ah! that play! It threw them together!'

'Is it really so? I suppose nothing is too foolish and provoking for Edgar!'

'The fact of admiration is not wonderful,' said Felix, rather in a tone of defence; 'but the worst of it is, that he has been trying to communicate with her through those poor girls at school.'

Wilmet's horror was surpassing; and when she found that he had known it all this fortnight, she was so indignant, that to his reply that it was not fair to leave both parties the chance of acting honourably, she replied with scorn for his weakness in expecting anything from Edgar, and exposing the children to the chance of expulsion, which might be a lasting blight, such as merely in thought put her into a perfect agony. Nevertheless, angry and excited as she was, she flew at him when he gave her the letters, and was off to Miss Pearson's--'Go there without breakfast, in the sleet, sitting and still with that bad cold not half gone!' and she dragged him back reluctantly to the other room, where, ignominiously ordering off Bernard and Stella to finish their stir-about elsewhere, she insisted on his breakfasting while she told the story. She was far too loyal to blame him except *tete-a-tete*, but she burst on him now and then.

'You are not eating, Felix!'

'A cup of tea, then, please, Cherry. No one can swallow stir-about in hot haste but Wilmet herself.' He spoke good-humouredly, but with a force upon himself that Cherry detected, and she further saw that he took nothing but that one cup and a fragment of bread, and then hurried off, saying that he must catch Miss Pearson for the little

girls' sake.

The letters he had left were Robina's and another enfolding it containing these words:

Dear Sir--According to my promise, I have refrained from opening this letter, though I own that the discovery of the purpose for which free correspondence was asked, has been no small amazement to me. In the first shock, I will not trust myself to say more, until after consultation with my brother; but you shall hear from me again respecting your sisters.--I remain, your obedient servant,

R. M. FULMORT.

The letter within was--

MY DEAR FELIX--It has all come out. There is a dreadful uproar, and nobody will believe me. If only Miss Lyveson was here! This was the way. Edgar came yesterday and took us for a long walk in Kensington Gardens, and afterwards I saw Angela going towards Alice Knevett's room; and as we are not allowed to run into other people's bedrooms, I stopped her and put her in mind of what you said; but she began to cry and struggle with me, and Alice came out, and made a fuss to get the note Angel had for her, till I got into a passion, and spoke so loud that Miss Fennimore came out upon us. Angel did not know what she was about by that time, and cried, saying that I was unkind, and was hurting her; and Alice took her part, accusing me of tyrannising and being jealous, so that I faced round and told all on the spot. Miss Fennimore took us all straight down to Miss Fulmort, and it was a dreadful business. They are frightfully angry with us all, and me the most, for having told you instead of them. They cannot understand the difference between you and any common brother. They think I have not told the whole truth, and it is very hard. Nobody ever distrusted me before. We are just living on sufferance till Mr. Fulmort comes to see about it, and then I think we shall be sent away. I hope so, for I know my own dear Miss Lyveson will believe me and take me back to justice and confidence. Here the girls are as angry with me for telling as the ladies are for not telling; they have no idea of such loyalty and love as we had at Catsacre. There is a report that Miss Pearson has been sent for. If we are sent home with her, it will be a horrid shame and injustice; but I shall not be able to be sorry one bit, for I know you will stand by me.--Dear, dear brother Felix, your affectionate sister,

BOBBIE.

When the three sisters had made out all that could be understood, Geraldine owned herself less amazed than Wilmet; and Alda laughed at both for not being aware that Edgar was a universal flirt. All that surprised her was his having let it proceed to such dangerous extremities; but of course that was the girl's own fault--he would give it up when it came to the point.

'Why should you expect Edgar to be more inconstant than Ferdinand?' asked Cherry.

Both twins turned on her, and told her she was a child and knew nothing about it--their favourite way of annihilating her; and then Alda, in her excitement, walked with Wilmet to the school, leaving Cherry, as usual, to wash up the breakfast things. She felt a conviction that all this accounted for the weary oppressed look, broken by occasional starts of vivacity, which ever since Felix's day in London had been laid to the score of the cold he had brought home.

She was glad she was still alone, when Felix looked in for a moment to say, 'Miss Maria goes up by the 11.30 train. I am going to send a letter by her, and I think she will save Robin. Angel is so mere a child, that it matters less.'

'How can they all be so unjust?'

'They have not had time to know the child.'

'I did not mean Robina, but you.'

'I don't mind that,' he said, with a smile, 'though I am glad there is one lady who does not scold me;' and he bent down to kiss her.

'Did the Miss Pearsons?'

'They allowed that I meant to act for the best, and you know what that means. However,' he added, 'they are earnest to save the little girls, which is more to the purpose. Wilmet or I would have gone up, but Miss Maria thinks she can do better than either, and I believe they are more likely to trust an old schoolmistress, who is the injured party besides. I must write my letter. Shall I help you into the other room?'

'No, thank you; I have the lessons here, for they tease Alda. If you would only send Theodore to me as you go.'

'Does Alda never help you?'

'Only by criticising my French pronunciation. She is much too restless. O Felix, what a cough! You have made your throat worse.'

'It is only this black east wind.'

'You ought to stay upstairs and be taken care of. Can't you, and let Redstone call if you are wanted?'

'I _am_ wanted. It is quite as warm in the office as here, when the door is shut. What I want is, only to be twenty years older. Good-bye.'

Cherry's ponderings were divided between that sigh and the possible sighs of the wind if that door were not shut, until her own door was opened by Felix's hand, to admit a little figure still in petticoats, with the loose flaxen curls, tottering feet, limp white fingers, and vacant blue eyes, whom she daily put through a few exercises to train his almost useless fingers and tongue. The sight of this, Alda declared, made her ill; though the little boy was as docile as he was helpless; but it was quite true that to nerves and ears not inured from the first, Theodore's humming and his concertina were a trial from their perpetuity.

Late that evening came a message to beg Mr. and Miss Underwood would step up; and they stepped, though the east wind was blacker than ever. They found that in great tribulation Miss Maria had brought Alice Knevett home, and sent her to bed all tears and exhaustion, but that Robina and Angela were forgiven--a word so offensive to Felix as relating to the former, that he sorely lamented that prudence forbade their removal, but was somewhat consoled by a letter that Miss Maria brought him from the Vicar of St. Matthew's, who had had a private investigation of the whole subject. He wrote to Felix that his sister was new to the management of the girls, and was a good deal annoyed at the secrecy observed towards herself, not making full allowance for Robina's exceptional circumstances; but that, for his own part, he was convinced of the girl's genuine uprightness and unselfish forbearance; and though he feared her position must be unpleasant just now, he thought it would be for the good of all if she had the patience to live it down, and earn the good opinion he was sure she deserved. Miss Maria reported that Miss Fennimore had been brought round by his opinion, though Miss Fulmort remained persuaded that Robina had 'come over him' in some way; and while yielding to his stringent desire that, as he said, 'one of the worthiest of her girls should not be unjustly expelled,' only let the child herself know that she was tolerated in consideration of her youth, her orphanhood, and her relationship to Clement. Poor Robin! No one could help grieving for the tempest that had fallen on her guiltless head, and hope that all would result in her final good; but the sorrows of an absent school-girl could hardly occupy even her dearest friends, in the full and present crisis of two love affairs.

For Edgar and Major Knevett both arrived, the lover as dispassionate as the father was the reverse. Edgar did, however, as he had undertaken, rise to the position. He joked at it a little in private, to the annoyance and perplexity of Cherry, and, even of Felix; but he was perfectly steady in maintaining his perfect right to address Miss Knevett, in avowing his engagement, and in standing by it.

To Major Knevett, the affair appeared outrageous impudence on the part of a beggarly young painter out of a country bookseller's shop, encouraged by the egregious folly of the aunts. What was said of clergyman's sons and good old family went for absolutely nothing; and Edgar's quiet assurance of success in his profession was scoffed at with incredulity not altogether unpardonable. In the encounter that Felix had the misfortune to witness, since it took place in his own

office-parlour, he could not help thinking that Edgar, with his perfect temper, unfailing courtesy, calm self-respect, and steady sense of honour towards the young lady, showed himself the true gentleman in contrast with the swaggering little Major, who seemed to expect that he could bluster the young man out of his presumption, and was quite unprepared for Edgar's cool analysis of his threats. But instead of, like Tom Underwood, cooling down into moderation and kindness so soon as his bolt was shot, the finding it fall short only chafed him the more, and rendered him the more inveterate against all conciliation.

There was an appeal all round to Felix, but he was not so practicable as the universal compliments to his good sense showed to be expected. He had expressed his opinion that it was a rash engagement, hitherto improperly carried on; but he could not be brought to advise his brother to break it off on his side while the lady held to it on hers. It might be best to give it up by mutual consent; but as long as one party was bound, so was the other; and he thoroughly sided with Edgar in not being threatened out of it whilst Alice persisted. Still more flatly did he refuse Miss Pearson's entreaty that he would see the wilful girl, and persuade her how hopeless was her resistance, and how little prospect of the attachment being prosperous. Nothing but despair and perplexity could have prompted the good aunts to try such a resource, but they were at their wits' end. They really loved their niece, and they dreaded the tender mercies of her father, who had indeed petted Alice as a young child, but had made her mother suffer greatly from his temper. If she would yield, they hoped to procure for her a home at York, with their brother's widow, and to save her from a residence in Jersey with the step-mother; but Alice, upheld by a secret commerce of notes ingeniously conveyed, felt herself a heroine of constancy, and kept up her spirits by little irritations to whoever tried to deal with her. She could deftly insinuate, on the one hand, that her aunts had always preached up the Underwood perfections; and on the other, hint to her father that if her home had still remained what it was, she should never have looked out of it; and whenever he flew into a rage, or used violent language, she would look up under her eyelids and whisper something about 'real gentlemen.' Those thorns and claws that had figured in the scale of her transmigration were giving a good many little scratches, which did her feelings some good, but her cause none at all, by the vexation they produced. 'If she could only be made to understand,' said poor Miss Pearson, 'how little she gains by irritating her father, and that he is really a very dreadful person when he is thoroughly offended! Poor child! my heart aches for her.'

So Wilmet was turned in upon her, and before she could utter a word was hugged and kissed all over because she was the very image of darling Edgar, and his dear violet eyes were exactly the same colour.

Unsentimental Wilmet extricated herself, saying, 'Eyes can't be violet coloured. Don't let us go into that silly talk, Alice; things are too serious now.'

'You are come to help me and be a dear!' cried Alice, clasping her hands. 'How does he look? the dear boy!'

'The same as usual,' said Wilmet, coolly. 'But, Alice, if you think that I am come to--'

'Does he--really and truly? I saw him out of the little passage window, and I thought he looked quite thin! And Lizzie Bruce said Mrs. Hartley asked who that handsome young man was who looked so delicate.'

'He is particularly strong and healthy. Alice, I want to set it all before you as a reasonable being--'

'Only do tell me; has he got his appetite? For you know he is used to live where everything is recherche, and when one's out of spirits _things_ do make a difference--'

Was that the claw in the velvet paw?

'He eats three times as much as Felix any day,' said Wilmet, with a certain remembrance of the startling nudity of the bone of yesterday's leg of mutton. 'He is doing very well. You need not be afraid for him; but it seems to me that you should consider whether it can be right--'

'Come, Wilmet, you were my first friend; you can't help being kind to me.'

'I want to show you true kindness.'

'True kindness means something horridly cross! Now don't, Wilmet. I get ever so much kindness as it is! I know what you are going to say. It is very naughty of people to like each other when neither of them has got a sixpence; but if they can't help it, what then? Must they leave off liking, eh?'

'They ought to try to prevent their liking from leading to disobedience and concealment.'

'Ah! but if they can't?'

'People always can.'

'Were you ever tried?' asked Alice, slyly, for all the simplicity.

'I hope never to be, if deceiving my friends and making others deceive is to be the consequence.'

'Well, luckily there isn't much chance,' crept out of the demure lips. It was intended as the thorn beneath the mayflower, but it was no such thing. Wilmet was quite ready to accept the improbability as

very fortunate.

'That has nothing to do with it,' she said. 'The question is, what it is right to do now. It seems hard for me to say so, being your friend and his sister--'

'Oh, never mind that. People's sisters never do like the girls they are fond of.'

Decidedly Wilmet could not get on. Her mouth was stopped either by a little rapture about Edgar, or a little velvet-pawed scratch to herself, whenever she tried in earnest to set the matter before Alice; and when, being a determined person, she at last talked on through all that Alice tried to thrust in, and delivered her mind of the remonstrance she had carefully thought over, and balanced between kindness, prudence, and duty, and all the time with the conviction that not one word was heeded! If it was not English malice it was French malice that pointed the replies and sent Wilmet away as much provoked as pitying, and not at all inclined to be examined by Edgar on her interview, and let him gather that she had not had the best of it. Poor Alice! what were these little triumphs of a sharp tongue in comparison with the harm she did herself by exacerbating whoever tried to argue with her? There was one person she did profess to wish to see, namely, Geraldine; but the flying rheumatic pains, excited by the black east wind with sleet upon its blast, could not be trifled with; and Major Knevett's wrath put an effectual stop to Alice's entering the house during the Saturday and Sunday of his stay at Bexley. Perhaps Cherry was not sorry. She could not have pleaded against Edgar, in spite of her disapprobation of both; and moreover, the thought at the bottom of her heart was, 'How could any one who had been the object of such tones of the one brother's voice be won by the showy graces of the other? Edgar could easily have thrown off a disappointment; but Felix came first--and oh! can he shake it off in the same light way?'

She had not the comfort of talking it over. Felix made no sign, and Edgar's line was to treat the whole complication as a matter of pleasantry, pretending that he had only gone into it to please Felix! and yet, as came to their knowledge, privately exchanging billets and catch-words with Alice, while he openly declared his engagement and resolution to work his way up and lay his laurels at her feet.

He went away the very same morning as Major Knevett carried off his daughter to Jersey, audaciously following them to the station, where he exchanged a grasp of the hand with her in the very sight of the 'grey tyrant father,' who actually gnashed his teeth, in his inability either to knock him down or give him in charge.

There was no time to breathe between the departure of this pair of lovers and the arrival of Alda's splendid Life Guardsman, who, horses and all, took up his abode at the Fortinbras Arms, and spent his days in felicity with Alda. A very demonstrative pair they were. To Geraldine, often unwillingly en tiers, they seemed to spend their

time chiefly in sitting hand in hand, playing with one another's rings and dangles, of which each seemed to possess an inexhaustible variety. Ferdinand's dressing-case and its contents were exquisite in their way, and were something between an amusement and a horror to Wilmet, who could not understand Felix's regard for so extravagant and wasteful a person, who gave away sovereigns where half-crowns would have been more wholesome, half-crowns instead of shillings, shillings instead of pence, and who moreover was devoted to horse-flesh. His own favourite steed, Brown Murad, had been secured at a fabulous price; and the possession of him seemed to be the crowning triumph over a certain millionaire baronet in the same corps, evidently his rival. What was even more alarming was that every detail about races and horses in training was at his fingers' ends, so that he put Felix up to a good deal of knowledge useful to the racing articles in the Pursuivant; but he declared that he never betted. His was a perilous position, homeless and friendless as he stood; and this rendered him doubly grateful for the brotherly welcome he received. Yet the days would have been long to any but lovers, in spite of the rides and walks, one even to Minsterham to see Lance. Ferdinand liked to recur to the old remembrances of his convalescence; but in these Alda had no part, and they seemed to jar on her. She might sometimes seem half fretted by his impetuous southern love, but she could not bear a particle of his attention to be bestowed on aught save herself; and when Geraldine would have utilised his fine straight profile as an artistic study, the monopoly was so unpleasing that the portrait had to be dropped. The odd thing was that Alda should have a lover whose most congenial spirit was Clement. He was a great frequenter of St. Matthew's, and had no interest save in kindred subjects. Felix always found them alike difficult to converse with, from a want of any breadth of sympathy with subjects past or present, such as would have occupied him even without the exigencies of his profession. They seemed to talk, not church, but shop, as if they did not look beyond proximate ecclesiastical details, which they discussed in technical terms startling to the uninitiated; and yet Felix trusted that Clement's soul was a good deal deeper and wider than his tongue, and that Ferdinand's, if narrow, was thoroughly resolute, finding in his enthusiasm for these details a counterpoise for the temptations of his position.

His seemed to be a nature that would alternate between apathetic indolence and strong craving for excitement. He could go on for days with a patient, almost silent, round of mechanical occupations performed well, nigh in his sleep, and then, when once stirred up became possessed with a vehement restlessness, as if there were still a little about him of the panther of the wilderness.

At first he awaited his letter from his uncle much more philosophically than did Alda, but when it tarried still, he became so eager that he made two journeys to London to meet the mail, and pestered every one with calculations as to time and space.

The letter came, and was all that every one else had expected. Alfred

Travis had always detested the family into which his nephew had been thrown by his accident, and the tidings that the heiress had been rejected for the sake of one of these designing girls could not be welcome. So he gave notice that nothing more could be expected from him if his nephew stooped thus low. This, however, did not much concern Ferdinand. He curled his black moustache, and quietly said his uncle would not find that game answer. The affairs of the brothers had always been mixed together, and Ferdinand had been content to leave the whole in his uncle's hands, only drawing for his own handsome allowance; but the foundation had been his mother's fortune, and he had only to claim his own share of the capital, and disentangle it from the rest, either to bring his uncle to terms at once, or to be able to dispense with his consent. The delay was vexatious, but it could be but brief; and in the meantime Bexley was felicity. Yes, in spite of the warning he received at the Rectory, which my Lady followed up by a remonstrance to Felix--over the counter, for in vain he tried to get her into the office. He could only tell her that he much regretted Edgar's conduct, but as to Alda, there was no disobedience, and the young man's character was high. He was just as impracticably courteous as his father and Lady Price shrugged her shoulders and hoped. 'For, Felix Underwood,' she said, 'I am convinced that after all you are a very well-meaning young man.'

This was her farewell, for Mr. Bevan had been more ailing than usual, and had obtained permission to leave his parish for a year, to be spent partly in the south of France, partly at the German baths.

Well was it for those who could get away! Never had the spring been sourer; Easter came so early as itself to seem untimely, and the Wednesday of its week was bleakness itself, as Lance and Robina stood on the top of the viaduct over the railway, looking over the parapet at the long perspective of rails and electric wires their faces screwed up, and reddened in unnatural places by the bitter blast. Felix had asked at breakfast if any one would be the bearer of a note to Marshlands; Lance had not very willingly volunteered, because no one else would; then Robina joined him, and they had proceeded through the town without a syllable from either of the usually lively tongues, till as they stood from force of habit watching for a train, the following colloquy took place, Robina being the first speaker.

'What is it?'

'What is what?'

'What is the matter?'

'What is the matter with what?'

'With it all?'

There came a laugh, but Robina returned to the charge. 'Well, but what is it? Is it east wind?'

'Something detestable--whatever it is,' grunted Lance.

'You've found it so too,' said Robina; for Lance had only come home after evening cathedral the day before.

'Haven't I, though!'

He said no more, being a boy of much reserve as to his private troubles; and Robina presently said,--

'I say, Lance, did Alda use to be nice, or is it love?'

'Never nice, like Wilmet or Cherry.'

'I am sure,' proceeded the girl, 'I thought love was the most beautiful and romantic thing--too nice to be talked about, for fear it should turn one's head, but here it seems to be really nothing but plague and bother and crossness.'

'Poor Bob!' said Lance, 'you got the worst of it up at Brompton.'

'I got it every way,' said Robina. 'There was Edgar treating me like a little contemptible baby, and Alice sometimes coaxing me and sometimes spiting me, and Angel poisoned against me; and when I thought I must be acting for the best in telling Felix, somehow that turned out altogether horrid.'

'I suppose a girl must be telling some one,' said Lance; 'and if it was to be done, Felix was the right one.'

'So I made sure,' said poor Robin; 'but Miss Fulmort and Miss Fennimore seemed to think it no better than if I had told you. They say I am forgiven, but I hate their forgiveness. I've done nothing wrong, and yet they don't like or trust me; and they seem to grudge me all my marks and prizes. "For proficiency, not for conduct," they say, in that hard cold voice. And then the girls nod and whisper. Angel and all, think me a nasty spiteful marplot. Alice set half of them against me before she went!'

'Poor Bob. And you can't have a good set to, and punch their heads all round! That's the way to have it out, and get comfortable and friendly.'

'For choir boys? O Lance!'

'Choir boys ain't girls, I thank my stars.'

'Well,' continued Robina, glad to pour out her troubles, even for such counsel as this, 'when I came home last week, I did think it would be made up.'

'Well,' said Lance, as Robin grew rather choky, and drew the back of

a woolly glove across her eyes, not much to their benefit.

'Clem looks black, because he says his sisters were meant to raise the tone of the school.'

'Confound the tone of the school! I know what that is! But who cares for Tina?'

'Then Wilmet says I ought to have asked leave to write to her, and she could have managed it quietly, and kept everybody out of a scrape.'

'Whew--w--w--' whistled Lance; but at the melancholy tone, he absolutely took his red hand out of its comfortable nest in his pocket, to draw his sister's arm into his. It was well, for her voice was far more trembling now. 'I could bear it all if it were not for Felix himself. I know he is angry with me, but he won't talk, nor tell me how; he only said, "We both meant to act for the best; but it is a painful affair, and we had better not discuss it," and then he began to whistle to Theodore. If any one did know how I hate being told I meant to act for the best!'

'Something is come over Felix,' said Lance. 'I never knew him give such a jaw as he has to me. To be sure, he was set on to it.'

'Set on?'

'Yes, by Wilmet for one! You should have seen the way she was in--as if I hadn't a right to do what I please with my own money.'

'What?'

'My violin! Ferdinand Travis tipped me when he rode over to the Cathedral, and by good luck it was the day before the auction at old Spicer's. Bill and I went in to see the fun, and by all that is lucky, there was a violin routed out of an old cupboard. Nobody bid against me but Godwin, the broker, and it was knocked down to me for twenty-two and six. Bill lent me the half-crown; and Poulter, our lay vicar, who is at a music-shop, says 'tis a real bargain, he's mad to have missed it himself, but he showed me how to put my fingers on it, and I can play Mendelssohn's "Hirtenlied." You shall hear by and by, Robin. Well; Wilmet comes on it when she was unpacking my shirts. I'm sure I wish she'd let me unpack them myself, instead of poking her nose there; and if she wasn't in a way! Wasting my money, when I ought to be saving it up to buy a watch; and wasting my time and all the rest of it--till one would think 'twas old Scratch himself I'd brought home!'

'Oh don't, Lance. And did she set on Felix?'

'Ay; and then, you know, our new Precentor, Beccles, isn't one quarter the man Nixon was; and he has been and written a letter to Fee that any schoolmaster in creation should be licked for writing,

to go and pison a poor chap's home--all about those cards.'

'What cards?'

'The pack Jones found in the middle of the north transept ten days ago.'

'Of the Cathedral! How shocking! But why should he write to Felix?'

'Because the big-wigs make sure some one out of the Bailey must have dropped them, getting into the town through the Cathedral at night'

'But they don't suspect you?'

'No; but Beccles got into an awful way, and swears--'

'You don't mean really swears!'

'No, no--stuff--vows--that unless he gets to the bottom of it, not one of us shall have the good-conduct prize. Now I did think I might have had that--though I'm not a church candle like Tina--for I never was had up for anything; and it is precious hard lines! Such a beauty, Robin, the Bishop gives it--all the Cathedral music, bound in red morocco; and this beggar hinders us all this very last chance! And then, he is dirty enough to write and tell Felix to get out of me who has been getting out through the Cathedral, and dropping the cards.'

'Do you know?'

'Hold your tongue; I thought you had a little sense! Felix had that; he saw I could not tell him, and said it must be as I pleased about that; but then he rowed me, as he never did before, for wasting time, and not mugging for the exhibition--as if that was any use.'

'Why shouldn't t you get the exhibition?'

'Put that out of your head,' said Lance, angrily; 'Harewood is sure of that! A fellow that construes by nature--looks at a sentence, and spots the nominative in a moment--makes verses--rale, superior, iligant articles.'

'But I thought he wasn't always accurate. Can't you catch him out? O Lance, don't look so fierce! I only said so because he can't want the exhibition as much as you. He can go to some other school, or be paid for.'

'Not conveniently,' said Lance, 'they are not at all well off, and Jack helps them. Besides, I wouldn't get the thing in a sneaking way; and besides, Bill could no more make a mull in construing out of carelessness than I could a false note--it's against nature. I can't beat him, except in arithmetic. My birthday comes at such an unlucky time. I should get another year if I'd only been born in July instead

of June! I might be second, for Shapcote is only dogged by his father; but that's no good for the exhibition: and then there's an end of Cathedral and all!

'What should you do then, Lance?'

'Whatever costs least! I'd as lief work my way out to Fulbert, if this is to go on.'

'Oh, don't! don't do that, whatever you do!' cried Robina, clinging to his arm.

'I don't see why not, if everybody is to be as savage as a bear when one comes home. One always trusted to Felix to see sense, if nobody else did; but what with his jawing one about the exhibition, and Wilmet about the tin and every spot on one's clothes, and Alda growling at whatever one does in the parlour, I'm sure I wish I'd stayed at Bexley.'

The boy and girl had never before been tried by want of sympathy, and what seemed to them injustice, when they had thus descended into the perturbed atmosphere of what they were used to regard as a happy home. There was a long mutual communication of grievances--irritable speeches--inattention from their elders--fancies and complaints of Alda's enforced peremptorily by Wilmet--appeals to Felix either quashed or unheeded; the strange thing was, in how short a time so much had managed to go wrong with them, except that they added the vexations of the last quarter to the present discomfort, real or fancied; and though they were both good children, each had the strong feeling that there was not as much encouragement as usual to goodness, and that it could not have been much worse if they had been seriously to blame. One had expected to be caressed for her endurance in a good cause; the other had not expected to be severely rebuked for what he scarcely viewed as faults. It was the first time this younger half of the family had ever suffered anything approaching to neglect or injustice from their seniors, and the moment was perilous. The discussion was forming their discontents into a dangerously avowed state, if it had the beneficial effect of raising their spirits by force of sympathy. At any rate, they were in no gloomy mood when they reached the tidy little villa, with its beds of open-hearted crocuses defying the cold wind, and admitting the sun to the utmost depths of their purple and golden bosoms, as they laughed their cheery greeting.

No less cheerful was the welcome from kind old Mrs. Froggatt, who met them at the door. 'Master Lancelot, Miss Robina, this is an unlooked-for pleasure, to be sure! My dear Miss Robina!' as the girl gave her hearty embrace.

They were the prime favourites next to Felix, and were the more gladly hailed that Mr. Froggatt was anxious about the business on which they came, and had been trying to get leave from his wife to peril his rheumatics by coming in to Bexley about it. They must stay

to luncheon; and while Mr. Froggatt went off to answer his note, they were made much of over the fire, in the way that had of late become so abhorrent to Bernard, with difficulty avoiding a pre-luncheon or nooning of cake and wine within an hour of the meal of the day.

'And how is Mr. Underwood?' asked Mrs. Froggatt, when Robina had been divested of her wraps, placed close to the fire, screened and footstooled, and when Lance had transferred the big white cat from the arm-chair to his own knee.

'Oh, very well, thank you,' said Robina, rather surprised that the lengthy catechism on the family health did not as usual start from 'poor dear Miss Geraldine.'

'He was looking so thin, and had such a cough, I was quite concerned when he walked out here on Good Friday afternoon,' continued Mrs. Froggatt. 'I hope he is taking care.'

'Wilmet is always at him about it,' said Lance.

'That is right. And I hope he minds to keep the office-door shut. It is such a draughty place! Does he wear flannel, do you know, my dear?'

'I think so,' said Robina. 'Sister Constance told Wilmet he ought, when he had that long cough after the measles.'

'Ay. You know--you'll excuse me, my dears, a cough is not to be trifled with in your dear family.'

'You should write to the clerk of the weather-office, Mrs. Froggatt,' said Lance, rather gruffly.

And as Mrs. Froggatt was not good at understanding jokes, but was always ready to accept Mr. Lance's, she thought he meant Admiral Fitzroy; and much explanation and banter followed, which the children made the louder from dread of the subject. Mrs. Froggatt was by no means the cultivated person her husband was; but, being of a good old plain farmer stock, she was quite as unassuming, and her manners with the young Underwoods were a good deal like those of a superior old housekeeper, only perhaps less authoritative and familiar; but she was not to be kept away from the subject of her real anxiety. 'I wish I could see your sister, and speak to her; he ought to have some advice rather than let it run on in this way. I'm sure Mr. Froggatt would be willing to do anything. It has been a great concern to him to have to leave such a heavy charge to him this spring, and with all the family cares on his head too, at his age. Miss Alda's wedding put off too--is it? And is the young gentleman here still?'

'No; his leave was over last Monday,' said Robina, 'a week after I came home.'

'I should like to have seen him! Your brother says he is grown up

such a fine-looking young man, and quite got over his lameness. A handsome couple they will be! I did see them ride through the place, but Miss Alda didn't see me.'

'You saw his horse?' broke in Lance, who considered Brown Murad as a superior specimen to either of the lovers, and Mrs. Froggatt, whose father had bred horses, and whose son was much more addicted to them than was for his good, was a much more intelligent auditor of the perfections now dilated on than could have been expected.

Yet nothing could keep off the dreaded subject, and even at table, Lance's disappointing deficiency in schoolboy voracity became the cause of a lamentation over his brother's small appetite, and an examination of Robina, resulting in her allowing that Felix seldom gave himself time to do more than snatch a crust of bread in the middle of the day, and did not always make up for it at tea-time. Mr. Froggatt shook his head and looked distressed, and his good lady went on discoursing about the basin of soup she always used to keep prepared for him, evidently longing, though not quite daring, to send a lecture to Wilmet on taking care of her brother. But what made more impression on both the children was, that after they had been into Mr. Froggatt's little conservatory with him, and had received into their charge a basket of camellias, violets, and calycanthus, with a pot of jonquils in the middle for Geraldine, the old gentleman said, as he bade them good-bye, 'Tell your sister, that if she thinks a day or two of laying by would be good for your brother, I should be ready and glad to change places with him. A little change might take away his cough; and I don't like his looks--no, I don't. He ought to be careful;' this to himself, with a long sigh.

Then the children got out into the garden, and with the natural impatience of the evil omen, exclaimed at the same moment--

'Croak, croak, croak, went the frogs,'

and

'Were there ever such a pair of good old coddles?'

But then they walked on for a full quarter of a mile before either said another word; and then it was, 'You don't think Felix looking ill, do you, Lance?'

'I never thought about his looks at all,' said Lance.

'No more did I,' said Robina, 'but he does cough; I hear him through the wall in the morning. Do you think there is anything in it, Lance?'

'How long has it been going on?'

'Ever since he came up to London. He got a chill in our garden when I was telling him about--' said Robina, stopping short of what she hated to mention.

'Then that's it!' said Lance, turning round with a face of one who had made a great discovery.

'It? What is the matter with him?'

'Yes,' said Lance. 'Hold your tongue, Robina; but Cherry and I thought long ago that he fancied that little Knevett himself. Then I made sure it was all a mistake; but now, depend upon it, that's what he is so cut up about''

It carried conviction to the hearer, perhaps because it fitted in with a girl's love of romance. 'Then that's why he won't talk to me!'

'Of course!'

And then they began putting together all the tokens of inclination which their small experience and large imagination could suggest, till they had pretty well decided the point in their own belief, and had amused themselves considerably; but the anxiety came back again.

'Do people get over such things, Lance? There was Ophelia, and there was Wilfred in Rokeby--only she was a woman, and he was pipy. Did you ever know of anybody really and truly?'

Lance meditated, but his experience reached no farther than the surgeon's assistant at Minsterham, who was reported to be continually in love, but who did not look greatly the worse for it.

And then Robina suggested that she did not remember that either Wilfred or Ophelia had a cough.

'But my father had,' said Lance in the depths of his throat. 'Don't you know, Robin, it was hard work and trouble and poverty that--_did it_?'

'Was it?' awe-struck, for she had been so young as to have no clear ideas.

'I've heard it told often enough. My Lady cut off the third curate; and that--and all the rest of it--helped to bring on the decline.'

'But, Lance! At least, that wasn't--love.'

'Nonsense, Robin! Don't you see, whatever takes the heart and spirit out of a man, makes him ready for illness to get hold of?' Lance plucked desperately at the hazels in the hedge, and his eyes were full of tears.

'O Lance, Lance, what can we do?'

'I don't know! I'd let him pitch into me from morning till night if that would do him any good!'

'I'm sure I am very sorry I grumbled. We'll give Wilmet Mr. Froggatt's message, and see what she thinks.'

Poor children! their consternation was such, that they must judge by their own eyes of Felix without loss of time; so they both marched into the shop with Mr. Froggatt's note, and there felt half baffled to see Felix looking much as usual, very busy trying to content a lady with nursery literature, and casting a glance at Robin as if she had no business there.

Wilmet received Mr. Froggatt's message without excitement. She thought it would be a very good thing, but she did not believe Felix would consent; and Alda broke out, 'Then we should have Mr. Froggatt inflicted on us all the evening!'

Nor did Felix consent. He said it was very kind, but his cold was almost gone, and he did not need it. Moreover he had his private doubts whether Alda would be decently gracious to Mr. Froggatt; and Wilmet, whose one object in life was to keep her sister contented and happy at home, could press nothing so disagreeable to her. Altogether, the reception of their hints at home was so prosaically placid, that they were both rather ashamed of the alarm into which they had worked themselves up. Even when Robina privately asked Cherry whether she thought Felix looking well, the answer was eager.

'Oh, very--very well! He looked pulled down when his cold was bad, but he is quite well now.'

'Mrs. Froggatt thought--'

'Oh, you've been talking to Mrs. Froggatt! She thinks nothing so kind as to say one is looking poorly. I said, "How well you are looking, Mrs. Froggatt," one day, and I assure you she only swallowed it by an act of Christian forgiveness. She is fondest of Felix, so of course he looks the worst.'

Robina got no more out of Geraldine, whose fears at that moment were in the form of utterly denying themselves. Commonplace life greatly reassured the two young things, and of the alarm there chiefly remained a certain shame at their own former discontent, and doubly tender feeling towards their fatherly elder brother. Now that they guessed something to be amiss with him, they had no irritation for him--and indeed he gave them no cause for any; the discomfort was partly indeed occasioned by the lack of his usual quiet mirth, but far more by Alda's fastidiousness, and Wilmet's vigilance lest she should be annoyed. This caused restrictions that weighed more heavily on the younger ones than on Lance and Robina, and had the effect of making Angela and Bernard rebellious. They had neither the principle nor the consideration of their two seniors; to them every one seemed

simply 'cross,' and against this crossness there was a constant struggle, either of disobedience or of grumble.

Both were at rather an insubordinate age. Angela, having begun school life with getting into a scrape greater than she understood, had acquired a naughty-girl reputation, of the kind that tempts the young mind to live up to it; and her high spirits, boisterous nature, and 'don't care' system made her irrepressible by any one but Wilmet, whose resolute hand might be murmured at, but was never relaxed. While Bernard, hitherto very fairly amenable to Cherry, and a capital little scholar, became infected with the spirit of riot and insubordination. Whatever fastidiousness the children took for fine-ladyism in Alda they treated unmercifully, and resented in their own fashion her complaints, and Wilmet's enforcement of regard to her tastes: nor was Lance always blameless in the tricks played upon her.

It was strange to see the difference made by one incongruous element. A few sneers at Cherry's pronunciation, an injudicious laugh when she was rebuking, and a general habit of making light of her, on Alda's part, upset all Bernard's habits of deference to the sister who had taught him all he knew. His lessons grew into daily battles--miserias to himself and far greater miserias to his teacher, and sufficient misery to the spectator to induce her to do that which the other sisters could scarcely have brought themselves to do on any provocation, namely to complain to Felix, and by and by make a representation, for the general good, she said, that it was a mere farce to leave the boy under Cherry's management.

Cherry, with bitter tears, was forced to own that she could no longer keep him in order nor make him learn, and there was no alternative but to send him to Mr. Ryder's. He had no voice nor ear, so that he could not follow in Lance's steps; and for the present, Bexley was the only resource.

Of course Cherry charged the whole of this upon her poor little self; and some amount of the trouble certainly was due to her incapacity not to show in voice and manner when she was under fret, anxiety, or depression; and now, poor child! all three at once had come upon her. Whether Alda's conversation or the children's naughtiness fretted her most, it would be hard to tell; she was in a continual state of unuttered, vague, and therefore most wearing anxiety on Felix's account, and the physical discomfort of the ungenial spring told on her whole frame and spirits. Alda's talk, when good-humoured, opened such vistas of brightness, amusement, conversation, and above all of beautiful scenes, that they awoke longings and cravings that Cherry had hardly known before. The weariness of the grinding monotony of home seemed to have infected her. She knew it for discontent, and was the more miserable over her want of power to control it, because of the terror that hung over her lest repinings might bring on them all the judicial punishment of a terrible break-up of the home she loved, even while the tedium of the daily round oppressed her. Alternate plaintiveness and weary sharpness of course aggravated both Alda and Bernard, and they knew nothing of the repentant wretchedness that

rather weakened than strengthened her.

Little Stella's unfailing docility and sweetness were her great solace. Even Alda was exceedingly fond of Stella, and would have spoiled her if the child had not been singularly firm in her intense love and loyalty to the heads of the family. Angel and Bear were too rough for her, and alarmed her sense of duty; but Lance was her hero; and the happiest moments of those holidays were spent in a certain loft above a warehouse in the court of the printing-office, only attainable by a long ladder. Here, secure that none but favoured ears could hear, Lance practised on his beloved violin, at every hour he could steal, emulating too often Mother Hubbard's dog 'fiddling to mice,' but his audience often including his three younger sisters. He had had scarcely any hints, but his was the nature that could pick music out of anything; and Angela, much more than Robin, was ecstatic in all that concerned the sixth sense, and watched and criticised with rapture, wanted to learn, and pouted at being told that it was not fit for a woman. Among those stacks of paper in the dusty loft, with the stamp and thud of the press close at hand, it was possible to forget, in creating sounds and longing to fulfil the dream of the spirit, that Alda was exacting and trying, Wilmet blind to the annoyances she caused, Cherry striving hard, and not always successfully, with the fretfulness of anxiety, and Felix--they durst not think in what state. That loft and that violin made their fairy-land, and one that rendered it most unusually hard for Lance to learn his holiday task.

'I'll tell you what, Lance,' said Robina at last, when he had vainly been trying to repeat it to her, with his eye on a sheet of music all the time, 'you can't do two things at once. If I were you, I would lock up that violin till the summer examination is over.'

He turned on her quite angrily. 'Very fine talking! Lock up all the pleasure I have in life! Thank you!'

'I'm quite sure you'll never get the exhibition if you have your head in this.'

'I shan't get the exhibition any way.'

'But if you do your utmost for it?'

'I shall do my utmost!'

'You can't if you have these tunes always running in your head, and are always wild to be picking them out.'

'Well, Robin, I sometimes think I should do more good with music than anything else.'

'Maybe,' said Robina, a sensible little woman; 'but you'll do no good by half and half. If you don't do well in the examination, Felix will be horribly vexed, and you'll always hate the thought of it.'

'I tell you I shall be as dull as ditch-water, and as stupid as Shapcote, if I don't have any pleasure.'

'I only don't want you to be stupider.'

Lance chucked up a pen-wiper and caught it.

'The fact is,' said Robina, 'all we've got to do is our best. If we don't, it is wrong in us, and it makes us more a weight on Felix; and I think it is our real duty to keep everything out of the way that hinders us, if it is ever so nice.'

'Is that Cock Robin, or Parson Rook with his little book?' said Lance, throwing the pen-wiper in her face.

But the week after, when Robina was at school again, she was called to receive a letter which had something hard in it.

'Did you leave a key behind you?' she was asked a little suspiciously, for there was nothing about it in the brief note.

'No, Miss Fennimore; but my brother has sent it to me to keep for him. It is the key of his violin-case, and he is not going to touch it till he is past his examination.'

From that time Miss Fennimore entertained a better opinion of Robina Underwood; but little recked Robina. She only felt secure that after this act of heroism Lance could not but gain the exhibition.

CHAPTER XVII

MIDSUMMER SUN

'For Phoebus' awful self encountered him
Amid the battle throng invisible,
In thickest darkness shrouded all his face;
He stood behind, and with extended palm
Dealt on Patroclus' neck and shoulder broad
A mighty buffet.'

Iliad, Book xvi. (EARL OF DERBY.)

Warmer weather came at last, and brought Mr. Froggatt back to his daily work, lifting a weight of responsibility from his young partner's shoulders.

The cough mended too, but did not entirely cease; and when June came

in with an unusual access of summer heat, there were those who felt it as trying as the sharp wind had been. One evening, when the home party had been sitting in the garden, and the fall of the dew sent Cherry indoors, Felix, as usual, gave her his arm, and lifted her step by step up the stairs. She felt, all over her frame, that what used to be almost nothing to the boy was a severe exertion to the man.

'You should not do it!' she said, as they both stood resting at the top, he leaning back against the wall, and wiping his forehead, where the big blue V of the veins stood out prominently.

'Having so often carried the calf--I should be able to carry--the cow,' he said, the smile not disguising the panting of his voice.

'You are to be at the agricultural meeting at Dearport tomorrow. I wish you would just go and see Dr. Lee.'

'I think I shall.' And there they were interrupted.

Poor Geraldine! What worlds of apprehension were founded on that quiet assent, his first intimation that he believed himself unwell! She kept absolute silence. She could not have uttered her terrors for ten thousand worlds.

She was on her couch under the apple-tree, in the late afternoon, trying to force her thoughts out of miserable possibilities, when she saw Felix come out of the house, flushed, heated, dusty, tired; but somehow she gathered hope from his air, as he threw himself down on the grass by her side, saying, 'Mr. Froggatt sent me out to cool.'

'Stella, dear,' to the little one, who had her story-book at hand, 'run and ask Sibby to bring Felix out a cup of tea.' Then she tried to guess at his face, but durst not look at him fully. 'Are you very tired?'

'Rather! That place was a mere oven of roaring! Well, Cherry,' pulling off his neck-tie, and settling himself, with an elbow on her couch, and his back against the tree, 'there's nothing amiss with my lungs.'

She shuddered all over, and almost bounded; then put her hand tenderly on his shoulder.

'Your doctor is a clever man, I can see,' he continued. 'He seemed to guess about me directly. He sounded my chest, and says it is all right now, but that there had been a little damage; he thought the long cough I had after the measles had left traces that this winter has told upon.'

'Ah!' A great gasp.

'But there's no active disease--none at all; nor likely, if I can

shake off this remnant of cough, and get into condition before the winter.'

Cherry sighed again at the white hand, and the network of blue veins on both it and the temple that was propped against it. 'You must _indeed_'! she wistfully said.

'I _must_, ' said Felix, sighing too, as with little mind for the struggle. 'I've brought home a detestable bottle of cod-liver oil on the spot, and am to take to all the good living I can swallow. Won't that delight Mr. Froggatt's good old soul? Then the worst of it is that I am to go away to some sea place for the hottest of the weather.'

'Oh, I'm so glad!'

'He taxed me with not taking food enough; and when I allowed that I had no turn for eating, insisted on this sea plan: but he laughed me to scorn when I asked whether I might not get a room at Dearport, and run backwards and forwards. "Ay," he said, "you have a good deal on your mind;" and I fell into the trap, and told him my partner had been ill, and we had a great deal to work up. And he went on to ask if I had not the charge of the family, and was not apt to get anxious about them; and he turned round on me, and ordered me to get a thorough holiday, and turn my back on everybody and everything; for there's nothing the matter with me but overwork and harass--' Something that did not amount to _and_ finished the sentence.

'O Felix, I know, I have felt,' she said, the tears standing in her eyes, and the colour rushing into her face at this first venture.

'Have you--little foolish thing?' he answered, but shifting hand and elbow so that nothing of his face could be seen but a bit of brow and temple, and that was crimson to the roots of his hair. 'Don't take it for more than it ever was,' he muttered.

'It was enough to hurt you grievously,' whispered the sister.

'It ought not,' he said. 'It was only the putting out of a vain foolish hope I had no right to indulge. Eh, Cherry!' as she made a little sound, 'tell me one thing; was it all imagination and folly that she--she could have--liked me?' He bent his head with almost as much suppressed emotion as if it had been a matter of present hope.

'Certainly not,' said Cherry. 'She liked your--your attentions; and I thought sometimes you were quite pulling her up to your level. If no one else--'

'I did not imagine it was visible,' he interrupted. 'I tried to be very guarded, but one does not know--'

'You were. Somehow one feels more than one sees.'

'And you thought she did? Then at least I was not quite a fool? I fancied that there was response enough to what seems to have shown in spite of me to warrant the dream that if ever a time came--!'

'If she had had depth enough!'

'But, of course,' said Felix in a tone of defence, 'she never really knew; he guessed still less.'

'No, I am sure he never guessed. There is that comfort,' said Cherry.

'It is the greatest I have had all along,' said Felix. 'For the rest, it was no wonder.'

'No,' said Cherry; 'but it all managed to fall in the very hardest way on you. No wonder it was too much for you!'

'It is odd,' mused Felix, 'how this one dream has seemed to take all the heart and soul out of one; there seemed no elasticity to meet other things. I must say all this doctor's advice has been seeming an amazing amount of trouble for what is not very well worth having in the end.'

'O Felix, Felix you will--'

'My Cherie, you don't think I'd drop off the coach while you are in it if I can help it, to say nothing of the rest! I suppose every one has something of the sort in his turn, and I'll take good care not to be let in for it again. Thank you, Cherry,' he added presently, and now looking at her, 'I am very glad to have had this out with you. I think I can make a fresh start now. What, silly little thing! crying, when I thought I had brought you good news!'

'You are quite sure you have told me all Dr. Lee said?' she demanded, holding his hands tight, and gazing into the face, which certainly, with the still heightened colour, looked both delicate and weary. 'You have been so much worse than you told!'

'No, indeed, I have felt very little but weariness and want of energy; but I am better now than I have felt for weeks. And what is more, Cherry, I don't feel like getting worse. I mean to set myself to live to get through the work my father left me.'

'Taking care of all of us! Is that all you care to live for, Felix?'

'All, just now. Don't look shocked, Cherry. You know it is all very fresh' ('Five months--poor Felix!' thought she), 'and there is the continual pain of knowing how wretched those people make the poor child. When she is happier, perhaps the shade will lighten. Don't be afraid, you dear little thing' (he was answering her piteous eyes), 'there's plenty of time to recover it. I suppose I am really very young still.'

'Not quite three and twenty! Oh, Felix! I am sure God will give you back happiness, you are so good and patient! Where will you go, and when?'

'How I wish you could go with me! Dr. Lee said he should like to send me to Switzerland; but as he might as well have said the moon, he said any sea place would do. Rest and good air are all that signifies; so I thought of Ewmouth, and then I might see Vale Leston again. I believe you want it as much as I. You are a little washed-out rag.'

'I shall be all right when I know you are better.' Then as Sibby brought out the tea, and Stella the toast she had insisted on making, he began to look at his short-hand notes. 'Never mind those. You are to rest, you know.--Stella, little one, run to the office, and if Mr. Froggatt is not busy, get him to come and have some tea.'

This was always a mission to Stella's taste; and Mr. Froggatt was soon installed in the only basket-chair that would hold him, and was professing his relief and satisfaction that Mr. Underwood had been wise enough to take advice at last. He had better go any day, the sooner the better; and even his desire to take the newspaper work with him would have been overruled, but for the simple fact that there was nobody else capable of it, in the present state of Mr. Froggatt's eyes.

Alda had been lying down in her own room. Her cup of tea--an institution that for any one else Wilmet would have deemed sinful waste--had been rung for, when she saw from the window that Mr. Froggatt was one of the party in the garden, and whereas Sibby did not choose to hear or attend to her whims, she came down full of wrath and indignation, as soon as she saw that Cherry was left alone under her tree, and Wilmet coming out to her with the step of one who was glad her day's work was over.

'Really, Sibby's inattention was shameful! Not choosing to bring the tea upstairs when it was rung for!'

'You forget how much Sibby has to do, Alda.'

'You have quite spoilt Sibby. I would not have such a servant on any account. I'm sure I don't know why the tea was so early, either. Cherry ordered it, I believe.'

'Yes,' said Cherry, 'because Felix came in so hot and tired.'

'He could have waited, I suppose,' began Alda; but Wilmet was asking anxiously, 'Is he so very tired? Where is he? I was afraid he would be knocked up, he looked so pale when he set off.'

'He is gone to write out his notes,' said Cherry; 'I think he is rested now. And, Mettie,' she added, knowing that he had rather not have to begin the subject again, 'I am glad to say he has been to see

Dr. Lee. And he says that his lungs are all safe, only he must be careful, and go away for a change.'

'Just as I say,' exclaimed Alda; 'no one can be well, living in such a hole! When are we to go?'

'My dear Alda,' said Wilmet, 'you forget. No one can possibly go but Felix; and it will be hard enough to manage for him.'

'Then I do think it is very selfish in him,' said Alda, 'when every one of us wants change! I'm as languid as possible; and look at Cherry.'

Felix selfish! Even Wilmet could not stand that, and answered with her most severely gentle manner, 'Nothing but necessity will induce Felix to do so. I beg you will say nothing of the sort again.'

Cherry was alarmed lest Wilmet might not be convinced of the necessity, and might think more of present pounds than future health; but in fact, Wilmet was as much relieved as Cherry herself by the medical opinion, for she had charged the failure of health entirely to the constitution instead of the heart, and moreover never was troubled with misgivings and heart-sinkings for the future. So, as for a needful and infallible cure, she set herself to arrange, writing again to Abednego Tripp, the Vale Leston clerk, whose possession of a market boat kept him conversant with Ewmouth, and who recommended rooms in the house of a former servant at the Rectory who had married a sailor.

Felix only waited to put his business in train, and make over Theodore to the care of Clement, who had just come home from Cambridge. The quantity of work and bustle had not been beneficial, and his sisters did not feel at all happy in sending him off by himself; while Alda was inclined to think the time a particularly cruel one, just as all the most unquiet spirits of the household would be coming home for the holidays, and his authority would be most wanted.

However, Wilmet was free first of all, and she was a more efficient guardian of the peace than ever Felix could be downstairs. Lance was to come on the evening of the 26th of June, after the examination for the exhibition, which, as he had told every one, he was quite sure not to gain. And then what was to be done with him, small and boyish as he still was?

The question was sighed over on that day by the three sisters as they sat endeavouring to be cool, and looking out at the glowing street where the few passengers seemed to be crawling like flies on a window-pane.

Presently a rather hesitating knock at the door was followed by the entrance of Mr. Froggatt, ushering in no other than Mr. Harewood.

In the moment of shaking hands, Cherry had foreboded enough to set her pulses throbbing so violently as to deafen her ears. Lance had failed, had run away in despair, to go to Fulbert rather than be a burthen; Felix would go in search of him--break a blood-vessel--and--

Nay--what was it? Lance! It really was Lance! Was not Wilmet talking of going! Mr. Harewood saying something about trains? She made a great effort to clear her senses, and the first thing she really distinguished was Wilmet saying, 'Thank you, I will put a few things together.'

Then she hurried away, and Cherry found Mr. Froggatt standing over her, saying kindly, 'Dear Miss Geraldine, don't be alarmed. There is often no bad result.'

'How was it? I don't understand,' said Alda.

Mr. Harewood owned himself not perfectly informed, but he feared the trouble had been in great part occasioned by his own poor boy William's carelessness. The two boys had strolled out the evening before, along the bank of the river, and had compared the copies of verses which were to be shown up at the examination. Afterwards they had bathed, and Will had left his verses meantime in the hollow of a tree, never remembering them till he found himself in his place in the Cathedral on the very morning of the examination. When he came out, not only did his duties as senior chorister chain him to the spot, but he had put off to the last moment the fair copying of his algebraic exercises, and his chance of the exhibition was as good as lost (the very loop-hole that Robina had predicted his carelessness would make), had not Lance, whose preparations were all made, as soon as he understood the difficulty, dashed headlong off, bare-headed as he stood at the school door, without waiting to fetch his cap, and laid the verses on his rival's desk just in time for them to be shown up. He had been absent about twenty minutes, and had scarcely been missed; but when his turn came, a few moments later, to bring his papers to the examiners, as soon as he stood up, he staggered, gazed round, cried out, and fell forward on his desk insensible. A doctor, who like Mr. Harewood himself had been present to hear a son's performance, had helped to raise him, and pronounced it to be a case of sunstroke; nor, when, half an hour later, the librarian set off to fetch his sister, had there been any sign of consciousness.

Mr. Harewood tried to be calm, but he was evidently in great distress; and Mr. Froggatt could not restrain large tears from dropping.

As to Cherry, she could only tremble, unable to speak or cry; and Mr. Froggatt called out to Alda to do something for her, when Alda said she would call Wilmet, which made Cherry burst out with 'Don't, don't!' and shudder the more with tearless sobs; but happily, Clement coming down, fetched her remedies, and did more by whispering a few kind words of hope and comfort.

He was going with Wilmet, who was as usual the self-possessed one; and while passively allowing Mr. Froggatt to give her biscuits and even wine, she left her few parting directions. 'Alda, take care of them all.--Stella, try to keep Tedo happy.--Cherry, don't give way and fancy things.--Above all, don't write to Felix! He must not be hurried home without necessity. I could telegraph if there was--' and there her steady voice faltered, she drew down her veil and turned to walk to the station, Clement carrying her bag, and Mr. Froggatt accompanying them to the train.

Very little was said on the way, before they reached the town whose last associations were so joyous. Mr. Harewood would have given Wilmet his arm, dreading the tidings that might meet her; but she was walking straight on, with head erect, as though neither needing nor seeking support.

They reached the low wicket-door of the Bailey, and as they entered the little court and passed the window, they saw that people were still standing about the bed in the corner. Everything was open, to admit such air as might stir that sultry heat. Some one came to the door, and said, 'No change.'

Then Wilmet and Clement advanced to the narrow old dark oak bed, and Mrs. Harewood made way for them, fresh tears starting at their presence. There he lay, their bright agile boy, with eyes half closed and fixed, and circled half way down his cheeks with livid purple, like bruises, the purple lips emitting a heavy breath, his crest of sunny hair hanging dank with the melting of the ice on his head.

Clement's lips trembled, and he dropped on his knees, hiding his face and stifling his sobs in his hands. Wilmet, after looking for permission to a gentleman at the foot of the bed, whom she took for the doctor, laid her hand on the helpless fingers, and bent to kiss the brow, saying softly and steadily, 'Lance, dear Lancey!'

The eyelids moved, the hand closed, there was a struggling stifled utterance: 'Wilmet, Wilmet, bring me back! Oh, bring me back!'

She looked up, and read in the watchers' faces that they were glad. 'Yes, dear Lance,' she said, in her soft steady voice, 'I am here. You will soon be better.'

He clung to her, as if blindly struggling with some terrible oppression, and the effort ended in violent sickness, exhausting him into unconsciousness again; but just then the real doctor came in, having been summoned by a message at the first symptom of change from the state of stupor. At the same time the Cathedral bell began to ring for evening prayer, and Lance at once was roused to endeavour to obey it, and when he was gently held back, murmured on about finding the places, and seeing Bill was not late. Mr. Harewood had to go, but whispered that he would ask the prayers of the congregation. It was comfortable to remember that Lance was thought of there, when, as the deep roll of the organ vibrated round the building, psalm, chant,

anthem, and response came thronging thick and confusedly on those unconscious lips.

Dr. Manby, however, told Wilmet not to be too much alarmed at this delirium, for the most immediate danger had passed when the lethargy had given way, and that though fever was probably setting in, there was fair hope that so healthy a boy would be able to struggle through it without permanent harm. There was a gentleness and consideration in his manner quite new to her after her dealings with Mr. Rugg, and she felt at the same time that he was not concealing the truth from her. She told how it was with her eldest brother, asking whether he ought to be sent for; and it was a great lightening of present fear to be told that there was now no need for haste, and that any change for the worse would give full time to bring him; moreover, that new faces were to be avoided. Should a nurse be sent from the hospital? Wilmet raised her steady sensible eyes, and said she could manage, she was well used to nursing.

'I see you are,' he answered, well satisfied, since there were besides the Precentor's housekeeper, who was used to act as matron to the boarding choir-boys, and apparently an unlimited power of Harewoods.

As to the place, Lance had at first been carried to his own bed, and even if there had been a regular infirmary, he was in no state to bear being moved. The other boys' goods had been removed, and they all were going home that evening; so that it was as cool and as quiet a place as could be had, since there was no doubt that the sounds from the Cathedral would be hushed for so critical a case.

Indeed, just as Dr. Manby had said this, both the Dean and the Precentor were seen coming through the Bailey on the way out of church to ask after the patient; and the former promised Wilmet that the bells and organ should both be silenced, and that the daily service should be in the Lady Chapel.

It appeared there had been little but the instrumental music that evening, and strangers who had heard the praises of the Minsterham choir must have been disappointed; for the psalms so entirely overcame the senior chorister that he could do nothing but sob, and at last was fain to stuff half the sleeve of his surplice into his mouth to hinder a howl such as the least of the boys actually burst out with. Most of the other lads were far past singing, and even two or three of the men, and such voices as did uplift themselves were none of the best or clearest.

That poor senior chorister--he crept back after his father into the room. It was his first entrance, for he had been kept all day at the examination, with what power of attention may be guessed; and when some half-recognition of him set the sufferer off into wanderings that showed habitual vigilance over his carelessness, he was so much distressed that he rushed out, and was heard crying so piteously in the court, that his mother went out to hush and comfort him. Never

strong, the shock, anxiety, and exertion had so worn her out, that her family would not let her come back; but their attention to the nurses did not relax--they were viewed as guests both by Mr. Beccles and the Harewoods; and when it was found that neither would come away to another house to dine, a little table was prepared in the court, close to the door, and the sister and brother, coaxed one by one, and made to eat and drink; while, as Clement could not bear to go home, a note was written, the delivery of which to the sisters Mr. Beccles undertook to secure. All the evening, Mr. Harewood or his eldest son, the engineer captain, the same whom Wilmet had taken for the doctor, sat at the other end of the room; while Lance lay, sometimes babbling school tasks mixed with anthems and hymns, sometimes in something between sleep and torpor, but always moaning and fevered.

This strange temporary infirmary, of which Wilmet was made free, consisted of two long narrow rooms, each with a row of quaint black oak beds and presses, between the double row of narrow lattice windows, looking into the court on one side, and the cloister on the other. There was a smaller room dividing these two chambers, and opening into both, which the under-master had vacated, and where the matron installed Miss Underwood's little bag.

Clement was a good deal impressed with the place, in the grand quiet shadow of the old Cathedral; and the room itself told much of his brother's daily life, in his own little section of it. The deep window-seat and old oak chest were loaded with piles of Punch, sheets of music, school-books, and grotesque sketches; bat, hockey-stick, and fishing-rod were in the corner; trencher cap and little black gown hung on their peg on the white-washed walls, and pinned beside them lists of the week's music, school-work, etc. In the corner by the press was a little rough deal table, covered with an old white shawl that Clement remembered as his mother's; and on it lay Lance's old brown Bible, the Prayer-book given him by the Bishop, Steps to the Altar, and Ken's Manual; over it hung the photograph of his father, and next above, an illumination of Cherry's, 'The joy of the LORD is your strength;' while above was a little print of the Good Shepherd. Nor was it a small testimony to the boy who had been senior in the room, that Clement found one or two other such little tables, evidently for private prayer. He had never believed such things could be out of St. Matthew's, nor where the books were not more of his own exclusive type than were Lance's; and perhaps there was some repentance for harsh judgment in his spirit as he knelt on by that little table long after Mr. Harewood, near midnight, had read a few prayers and gone to his house.

When Clement stood up, his sister made him lie down, as well as his long legs would permit, on one of the other beds, where he soon fell asleep; while she sat on, where she could see the spire rising aloft into the pale blue of the summer night's sky, while the perfect stillness was only broken by the quarterly chiming of the clock, re-echoed from its fellow in the town-hall. Every window and door was open, but the air was heated and oppressive till the early dewy coolness before dawn crept in, making her bend over Lance to cover

him less slightly. Then she met his eyes, heavy and bloodshot, but with himself in them.

'Wilmet, is that you?' he said, in a wondering tone.

'Yes, here I am, dear Lance.'

'Is it night or morning?'

'Morning. There, it is striking three-quarters past two.'

'Oh!' a long sigh. 'I'm so thirsty!'

She brought some drink; but as he tried to raise his head, the distressing sickness returned in full force, and in the midst the gasping cry, 'My head, my head!'

'Some more ice, Clem,' said Wilmet; but Clement looked up from the ice-pail in despair, for all was melted; and she could only steep handkerchiefs in the water and in eau-de-cologne, and lay them on the head, while Clement wondered if he could find a shop; but where was the use at three in the morning? and poor Lance rolled round wearily, sighing, 'Oh, I did not know one's head could ache so!'

Just then a step crossed the court, and a low voice said, 'Is he awake? I have brought some more ice.'

'O Jack, thank you!' faintly breathed Lance.

'Thank you!' fervently added Wilmet; 'we did not know what to do for some more!'

'I thought you must want some by this time. I have a little ice-machine for Indian use,' he added, as Clement looked at him like a sort of wizard.

He was small, sandy, and freckled after the Harewood fashion, and was besides dried up by Eastern suns, but one who brought such succour could not fail to be half celestial in the sister's eyes; and as he said, 'You are getting better,' her response was fervent in its quietness, though poor Lance, conscious only of oppression and suffering, merely replied with a groan, and seemed to be dozing again into torpor in the relief the ice had given.

Clement and Captain Harewood besought Wilmet to rest--the latter declaring himself to be too much of an East Indian to sleep at dawn; and she consented to lie down in the little room, where she had enough of wakeful slumber to strengthen her for the heat of the day, when the fever ran high, and all the most trying symptoms returned.

The doctor continued to forbid despondency, building much on the lucid interval in the cool of the morning, and ascribing much of the excitement of brain to the excessive, almost despairing, study that

Lance had been attempting in the last weeks before the examination. There had, too, been a concert given by one of the great ladies of the Close, for which there had been a good deal of practice, harassed by certain amateur humours, and the constant repetition of one poor little shallow song in the delirious murmur greatly pained the Precentor, and made him indulge in murmurs that boded ill to the ladies' chances with the choir-boys. The sultry weather was likewise a great enemy, and could hardly be mitigated by the continual fanning kept up chiefly by poor Bill Harewood, who seemed to have no comfort except in working the fan till he was ready to drop, and his brother or Clement took it from him.

Mrs. Harewood was quite knocked up, and her daughters were curiously inefficient people. Their father came and went all day; but the serviceable person was the engineer, with his experience of sun-strokes, his devices for coolness, and his cheerful words, stilling the torrent of rambling restlessness, so that Wilmet depended upon him as much as on the doctor himself.

On Saturday, the third day of the fever, which had rather increased than diminished, Wilmet begged Clement to go home for the night, to carry a report to the sisters, and fetch some things she wanted. He lingered, grieving and reluctant; while the heated atmosphere was like a solid weight on the sufferer, who lay, now and then murmuring some distressed phrase, as though labouring with some forgotten task; and Wilmet shunned touching the pulse again lest the reckoning should be higher than the last, and strove to construct a message conveying the hope that seemed to faint in the burthen of the day, insisting, above all, that guarded accounts should be sent to Felix, keeping carefully to Dr. Manby's report.

'I can be here before nine,' said Clement; 'I wish I could help going. I feel as if something must happen!'

'A thunderstorm,' said Captain Harewood in a reproving voice, as he plied the fan, with heat-drops on his brow; 'a thunderstorm, which will prove the best doctor. Take care, you will miss the train.'

Clement stooped to kiss the unconscious face, as though he had never prized his little brother before, and as some association of the touch of the lips awoke the murmur, 'Mamma, Mamma!' he sped away with eyes full of tears.

Before he could have reached the station, the storm was coming--great rounded masses of cloud, with silver-foamed edges and red lurid caverns, began to climb slowly up the sky, distant grumbles of thunder came gradually nearer, a few fitful gusts of wind came like sirocco, adding to the stifling heat, and were followed by exceeding stillness, broken by the first few big drops of rain, the visible flashes, and the nearer peals of thunder, till a sudden glare and boom overhead startled Lance into a frightened bewildered state, that so occupied Wilmet that she hardly heard the roaring, pattering hail-drops on the roofs and pavements; but when a sweet fresh wind blew

away the hail, the weary head was more at rest, the slumber more tranquil, the breathing freer and softer than it had been since that Wednesday.

Some two hours later she saw him looking at her with a sort of perplexed smile and the first words upon his tongue were, 'Is Bill first?'

'Nothing is settled till the Bishop comes home,' Captain Harewood answered.

'What time is it?' then asked Lance.

'Half-past eight.'

'It seems always half dark, said the boy, dreamily, 'and yet there's no curfew.'

'They have been so kind as not to ring the bells,' said Wilmet.

'Not ring the bells!' repeated Lance, in a feeble voice of amazement.

'No, nor play the organ,' said Wilmet; 'you have had to be so quiet, you know.'

'No organ! and for me!' repeated Lance, impressed almost as if the 'unchanging sun his daily course' had 'refused to run;' but it rather frightened him, for he added, 'Am I very ill, then?'

'Not now, I hope,' said Wilmet, tenderly, and possessing herself of his wrist; 'you are so much better to-night.'

He looked wistfully into her face. 'What's the matter with me?' he said. 'What does make my head go on in this dreadful way?'

'Dear Lance! It was that running in the hot sun.'

'Oh!' (a sort of sigh of discovery) 'I hope he had the verses.'

'Yes, indeed you gave them.'

'Then he must be first,' said Lance; and then, as his thankful nurses were preparing to give him some nourishment, he spoke again. 'Mettie, please come here;' and as she bent over him, 'is this being very ill?--like dying, I mean.'

'Not now, dearest,' said Wilmet, kissing him. 'You must be through with the worst, thank God.'

He asked no more, for his voice was low and faint, the pain and dizziness still considerable; and the being fed without raising himself occupied him till the doctor came for his evening visit, and confirmed the sister's comfort in his improvement. She sat gazing as

he fell asleep again, till Captain Harewood reminded her that her letter to Ewmouth must be sent before the mail closed. She turned to the window, where still lay her anxiously-worded bulletin, not yet closed; but as she took the pen, the blinding tears fell thick and soft as the summer rain outside.

'This will be a happy ending,' said John Harewood, as he saw her silently striving to clear her sight.

'Would you be so very kind as to write it for me?' she answered, pointing to the paper, with a lovely smile through her tears. 'He will believe it all the more.'

And as he took the pen, she retreated in quiet swiftness to her little room; but came back as he finished the few freshly hopeful lines; then going to the door with him, looked up with the same sweet tremulous smile. 'Thank you! What thankfulness it is! What a merciful rain this is! If you knew the relief it is to send this report to Felix! You cannot guess what this dear little fellow is to him.'

'I think I can, a little,' said John Harewood, with his heart in his voice; and Wilmet smiled again, her stately but usually rather severe beauty wonderfully softened and sweetened by emotion.

The improvement continued when Clement arrived on the Sunday morning; and though fevered, confused, and beset by odd fancies, especially about the silence of the Cathedral, Lance knew his brother, smiled at him, and returned his greeting. Clement had a more cheerful task than usual in what seemed to be his day's work--answering inquiries at the door, and taking in presents of fruit. All the Chapter and half the town seemed to call, or send, at least once a day; and little boys used to hang about the court, too shy to come to the door, but waiting to collect tidings from the attendants, and mutually using strong measures upon one another when either was betrayed into noise.

Clement called his sister aside to ask whether she could spare him, since she had the help of the matron and the Harewoods. 'I should be very glad to stay,' he averred, 'but somebody is really wanted at home.'

Wilmet had not been so much accustomed to consider Clement in the light of 'somebody,' as greatly to care whether he went or stayed, and only said, 'I can get on very well. No one is of so much use as Captain Harewood.'

'Just so,' said Clement; 'and I think I am doing more good at home. Imagine my finding all the windows open in that pouring rain, and Cherry sitting shivering.'

'Very foolish of Cherry,' said Wilmet.

'Poor Cherry! she could not help herself, and was only thankful when I had the courage to shut them in Alda's face. Then they don't know

what to do with Theodore.'

'Poor Tedo--that's the worst of it!'

'You see he is used to a man's hand and voice. He is very good with me, but Sibby has had dreadful work with him every night till I came home. And, Wilmet, couldn't you send a message who is to be mistress while you are away?'

'Alda, of course.'

'Alda doesn't seem to understand, and she will not let Cherry tell her.'

'Cherry always does bother Alda. I can't help it, Clem, they must rub on somehow and if you can make Theodore happy, the rest does not so much signify.'

Not signify! Clement did not know whether he was standing on his head or his heels, and never guessed that not only was she too much absorbed in the present thoroughly to realise the absent, but that she would not venture to send orders based on his report, which in her secret soul she qualified by his love of importance and interference. However, he went away, and was not seen again all the ensuing week--the early part of which was very trying, for the fever recurred regularly about noon and midnight, and always brought rambling, which since that conversation with Wilmet, had taken the turn of talking about being buried in a surplice, and of continually recurring to the 134th Psalm, which, it was now remembered, Lance had shortly before taken part in, over the grave of an old lay-vicar, who, boy and man, had served the Cathedral for nearly sixty years. Often, too, the poor little fellow seemed struggling with some sense of demerit--whether positive disgrace, or suspicion, or the general Christian feeling of unworthiness, Wilmet and John Harewood could never make out; and they did not choose to speak of these wanderings either to Will or to Mr. Beccles. In the intervals of consciousness, the thought of danger and death seemed to be lost in the weakness of exhaustion, and the dread of whatever brought back the pain, from which there was no respite except in cool air and perfect quiet. The least movement intensified it, and brought on the sickness that showed the brain to be still affected; and still worse was any endeavour to attend to the shortest and simplest devotions, when Mr. Harewood attempted them. Yet all the time there was amendment; the fever was every day less severe, the intervals longer, the sleep calmer, the doctor more securely hopeful; and by the end of a week from the time of the accident, recovery was beginning sensibly to set in.

Clement, meanwhile, did not appear; nor was he seen till the ensuing Monday, when he stood on the threshold of the open door at the Bailey, bewildered at the emptiness of the bed where he had last seen his brother--till a weak voice said, 'Here, Clem,' and he saw on another of the little old beds a small figure, in a loose soft white

silk Indian robe de chambre, the face shrunken into nothing but overhanging brow and purple haloed eyes, though the eyes themselves were smiling welcome in all their native blueness and clearness, and two thin white hands were held out.

'Out of bed, Lance! That is getting on!'

'Yes. They thought I should be cooler, and sleep better for it.'

'And are you all alone?' said Clement, hanging over him.

'The maids are about somewhere. Wilmet is gone to the Cathedral, while Jack got me up.'

'Then you must be a great deal better.'

'Oh yes; I haven't had any of that horrid fever since Friday.'

'And the pain?'

'Better, if I lie quite still and it is not hot, but I couldn't stand a bit when I tried. I hardly know how Jack carried me here.'

'You are little and light enough,' said Clement; 'but I'll help to carry you back. I am sorry not to have been here more, Lance, but I was so much wanted at home.'

'Thank you, I didn't want any one. Jack is such a fellow; and Wilmet--somehow, Clem, I never seem to have cared enough about W. W.'

'Nor I, till I saw what home is like without her,' murmured Clement.

'And isn't she beautiful, too?' added Lance; 'it is quite nice to lie and look at her at work. Don't you think her much better looking than Alda?'

'If handsome is that handsome does,' said Clement. 'You wouldn't like me to stay with you instead of Mettie, old chap?'

The helplessly alarmed look of illness came into Lance's eyes. 'Oh no, no; I couldn't spare Wilmet yet. She doesn't want to go?'

'No; I have said nothing to her; but Cherry is not well, and everything is at sixes and sevens; but there, never mind,' as the tears started into the sick boy's eyes, 'we'll manage; I should not have said anything about it.'

'Please don't,' said Lance. 'If she ought to go, let her, and don't tell me. I can't help it, Clem; I'm afraid to think if it ought to be, or I should make my head rage, and I should begin to talk nonsense again, and that's worst of all.'

'Do you know when you are talking nonsense?' said Clement, surprised,

and eager to lead off from the subject he felt he ought not to have broached.

'Oh, yes, I know that it is not the right thing, and the right thing won't come; and the worst of it is,' lowering his already feeble voice, 'saving one's prayers is hardest of all; I can't remember what I know best. I couldn't so much as go through the Magnificat if you were to shoot me.'

'But holloa! They don't generally come out of the Cathedral this way, do they?'

'Who?'

'The Bishop! Ay, and the Dean! Speaking to Wilmet. I believe they are coming here. Lie still, Lance.'

'I must,' he acquiesced, after half raising himself and falling back. 'Oh, can it be about the prize? Some of that stuff on my forehead, please, Clem.'

Wilmet came in first, ascertained that all was ready, put an arranging touch to Lance's pillows, and ushered in the two dignitaries, who shook his languid hand, and asked after him kindly.

'You have put the Chapter into great difficulties by disabling yourself and Harewood,' said the Bishop. 'What! did you not know that the poor fellow entirely broke down?' as the eager eyes inquired.

'Nobody would tell me anything about it,' said Lance.

'It could not be helped,' continued the Bishop, 'but the examiners said they felt it a great cruelty when they saw how utterly astray distress rendered him. However, his papers and yours were both so good--his verses especially, and your arithmetic--that it was impossible to reject them, so the decision was put off till my return on Saturday.'

'We think,' said the Dean, who was very old, very gentle, and very slow of speech--'we think, my little fellow, that though there is no doubt that Shapcote did best in the examination, and ought to have the exhibition, yet under the peculiar circumstances, you and Harewood can be retained as choir scholars for another year, so as to try again. You don't look sixteen, I'm sure, and we should be sorry to lose your voice.'

'I'm only just turned sixteen,' said Lance, 'only on the 14th of June. Thank you, sir;--thank you, my Lord;' and his face beamed joy, though his words faltered.

'Moreover,' proceeded the Bishop, 'I have the greatest pleasure in giving the good-conduct prize where, so far as I am able to judge, it has been well deserved.'

A perilous flush of joy overspread the pale face; he started up on his elbows, and his eyes danced rapture, as some one at the door handed in the beautiful red morocco quarto of the Cathedral music; and the Bishop, with a fatherly hand making him lie down again, laid the book beside him, as he gasped out something like thanks.

'We are quite convinced that you have deserved it,' repeated the Dean, again shaking hands with him, and then taking leave; but the Bishop remained, talking kindly to Clement about Cambridge, and inquiring for Felix; while Wilmet helped Lance's feeble fingers to turn the thick creamy pages on which he durst not fix his eyes.

Presently the Bishop sat down again, and said, 'I have acted on my own judgment in giving you this, my boy. I have seen enough of our choir these six years to know that what caused so much displeasure was certainly not to be laid to your charge.'

Lance made an uneasy movement, became alarmingly red, and said in a choked voice, 'I don't know but what it might, my Lord.'

'You mean that you knew of this custom of getting out at night through the Cathedral!'

'Yes, my Lord; I found out the way.'

There was a silence.

Then the Bishop said, 'After this, I can only leave it to your own conscience whether you ought to keep this book; but I think you would do wisely to let me know, remembering that I have no authority in the school.'

Lance brightened, and he answered, 'My Lord, I did get out once, but only once, and I don't think I did wrong. It was a long time ago--in the autumn.'

'Last autumn! Was it not then that there was a report of a chorister in his shirt sleeves being seen at the Green Man at eleven o'clock at night?'

'That was I, my Lord.'

Clement was ready to start forward, under the impression that Lance was talking his 'nonsense; but the Bishop said, 'You were named, but nobody believed it for a moment.'

'One of our little fellows was very ill, my Lord,' said Lance, excitement restoring something of his natural briskness. 'We thought he was going to have the cholera, and I went to get something for him. The chemists' shops were shut, so I went in there.'

'May I ask the question,' said the Bishop, rather as if taking a

liberty, 'why did you not call up Mr. Stokes?'

'We couldn't, my Lord, for it was all Mr. Shapcote's swans' eggs. He caught them--three of our least fellows, I mean--jumping at the branches that hung over the river wall, and he blackguard--abused them so that they got into a rage and vowed he shouldn't have a plum left on the tree. We seniors knew nothing about it; but they got over the wall at dark, and one ate eighty-five and the other eighty-one; but, little Dick--one of them, I mean--could only get down nineteen, and brought the rest in his pockets. It was the first time such a thing had happened, and it put me in a proper rage. The little one was the one I found out first; and I thought he was sulky, so I licked him till he howled, so that I was afraid I'd done him some dreadful harm, like a regular brute; and when I found it was his inside instead of his outside, I was so glad, I could have done anything for him. But we couldn't call Stokes, or the poor little chap would have suffered for it three times over.'

'That would have been hard measure! And did your remedy succeed?'

'Yes; I think a good deal was fright. He went to sleep on the brandy, and was all right next day.'

'And the gentlemen with 'the eighty-five and eighty-one suffered no inconvenience, of course!' said his Lordship, much amused. 'May I hear how you got out?'

'With Mr. Harewood's key,' said Lance. 'He used to keep it on a nail inside the study door, which opens into the passage leading into this court, and is never locked.'

'That is the key of the Cathedral library.'

'Yes, my lord; it unlocks the outer door, and the door into the north transept.'

'And after that--'

'You can shoot the bolt on the inside of the little side-door at the west front, and climb over the railing.'

'Boys are animals not to be kept in, that is certain! So you were pioneer! But you had nothing to do with those cards?'

'No, my Lord. But I ought not to have told how I got out, for there were some who would do it afterwards. However, those cards were none of ours.'

'Whose were they!'

'Walter Shapcote's, my Lord. He is gone now, so it does not signify.'

'That nephew Mr. Shapcote had in his office?'

'Yes, my Lord; he had got the command of poor Gus, because he had lent him money for some debt that Gus was afraid to let his father know of, and made him get the key, and let him out and in.'

'You all knew of this?'

'Yes, my Lord; but poor Gus was sure that his father would be so dreadful, that we durst not let out a word. Mr. Shapcote makes every soul afraid of him.'

'The young man is gone?'

'Yes, my Lord, to London.'

'And there is no danger of the like with Gus?'

'Oh no, my Lord. He's too like a sheep! and now his debt is paid--after the last concert--he's sure not to get into the same scrape again.'

'Thank you very sincerely,' said the Bishop. 'It is a great relief to me to know all this; and it is safe with me. I am only afraid I have made you talk more than is good for you.'

'And may I keep this, my Lord?' he wistfully asked.

'Indeed you may, my dear boy. If you have transgressed the letter of discipline, you have kept the spirit of charity. I am glad to keep you, as well as your voice. But I have tired you out.'

And laying a hand of blessing on his brow, the Bishop took leave, Wilmet going to the door with him, to answer his fears that the interview had been too much for her patient, with assurances that the relief and gratification must do good in the end.

He told her that the threat of the withholding of the prize had not been made by his authority, and that he had much regretted it. Just as the tidings of the sun-stroke and its cause had reached him, he had been with Mr. Nixon, the former Precentor, who had spoken warmly of Lance, saying that the whole tone of the boys had improved since his coming, though he was too much of a pickle ever to get the credit. Wilmet's pleasure was great; but before she could get back, Lance was nervously calling for her. The excitement was still great, his head was aching violently, and yet he could not leave off eager talking, which, as feverishness came on, began to degenerate into such rambling as terribly frightened Clement lest a relapse should be coming on. He wanted to hurry off to the doctor at once; but Wilmet, well knowing he would not be at home, repressed him, and quietly said she had some draughts ready, and knew what to do. While she was out of sight, preparing them, a great alarm came over the patient lest she should have left him; and all the rest of those noonday hours were spent in a continual restless desire to keep her in view, hold

her hand, and elicit her assurances that she was not going home, nor going to leave him--no, not on any account. The very presence of his brother seemed to increase the uneasiness; and in the deepest humiliation and despair, Clement allowed himself to be invited away by Captain Harewood to see the process of ice-making, and be so far comforted that the Bishop's visit was probably far more likely to have done the mischief than his own rash suggestion, and that there was no reason to fear it would last many hours. In fact, Lance was recovering favourably, and had had few drawbacks. 'So I tell everybody,' said John Harewood, 'especially poor Bill, who is still ready to break his heart every time Lance has a headache, and would chatter him to death when he is better. And that's the way with them all! There seems no one that can be tender and reasonable both at once, except your sister.'

Clement did full justice to that tenderness, when, out of sight himself, he had watched Wilmet's soothing firmness and patient reassuring softness, at last calming the feverish agitation into a sleep, which he was allowed to see for himself was gentle and wholesome. Only then--towards four o'clock--could Captain Harewood persuade her to let him keep guard, while she went to take the food that had been long waiting for her, and over which she could hear Clement's penitent explanation of his own unlucky proposal.

'I thought he seemed so well--able to get up and all; and they do think me a good nurse at St. Matthew's. I nursed Fred Somers almost entirely when he had the scarlet fever.' (Wilmet looked as if she pitied St. Matthew's.) 'But of course I see now that it is out of the question.'

'Entirely so,' said Wilmet, too kind to remind him of the qualifications he had evinced.

'And you cannot guess when he can come home?'

'Not in the least. Even if he could be moved, think of the noisiness of our house!'

Clement groaned. 'It was very wrong in me to speak to him before you, Wilmet,' he said; 'but I should be thankful if you could tell me what is to be done! Cherry was thoroughly chilled that evening of the thunderstorm, and has been very poorly ever since.'

'She always feels changes of weather.'

'That's what Alda tells you. She won't believe there is anything the matter; but poor Cherry has had rheumatic pain all over her, and her bad ankle seems to have a bit of bone coming out. Sibby thinks so. Now, ought she not to have her doctor?'

'Well! if--I wish I could be quite sure! It is such an unlucky thing that she has that dislike to Mr. Rugg.'

'Wilmet! You are as bad as Alda!'

'Clement,' she answered gently, 'you do not know what it is to have to reckon the expense. There is Felix's journey; and what this illness may cost, I cannot guess; and now Cherry! It is not that I grudge it; but I don't see what is to become of any of us if we spend unnecessarily--or necessarily either, for that matter.'

'I thought her doctor didn't charge.'

'He did not when she was at St. Faith's, but at home it is a different thing; but, of course, if it be really needful it cannot be helped.'

'And you couldn't come home and see--even for one hour?'

'Not yet, most certainly.'

'I think I had better write to Sister Constance!'

'If you really do find it impossible to get on, and Cherry is more than just ailing, and--and fractious' (the word came out at last); 'I don't like always calling for help, it seems presuming on kindness, and Robina will be helpful when she comes home; but no doubt Alda does not know what to do,' she added, in a deliberating tone.

'Then you authorise me?'

'I don't know what you mean by authorising.'

'Only that Alda will neither do anything herself, nor let any one else do it.'

'Poor Alda! It is a hard time for her, and she is not used to it. I am afraid she is out of her element among you all. Don't be vexed, Clem; you all ought to make allowances for her.'

'I make allowances from morning to night,' said Clement. 'I wonder how many Travis will have to make!'

Wilmet had finished her hasty meal, and wanted to get back to her patient, so she only protested by a reproving look and shake of the head; while Clement stood disconcerted, but less surprised than if he had not been familiar with the part of the family Cassandra.

CHAPTER XVIII

BY THE RIVER

'And Lancelot look'd, and was perplext in mind;
And being weak in body, said no more.'

TENNYSON.

It was a lovely afternoon, and the sun shone outside the green tracery of a hornbeam alley in the Deanery garden, leading from the cloister to the river. Here lay Lancelot, on the long cushion of a sofa, while Wilmet sat stitching at the last of the set of collars that would always bring so many recollections. For this was a Saturday afternoon, and on the Monday Lance was to go to Ewmouth to join Felix, who was to have his holiday extended another month on that account. Alda, who had had a quarter's allowance from her uncle, had made this possible; and Wilmet was doubly gratified by its having been her twin's gift and thought.

Wilmet would of course go home, and she found herself almost regretting the close of a time that had of late been very pleasant. She had not felt, as Geraldine would have done, the romance of living in the old monastic buildings, in the calm shadow of the grand old minster; yet something of the soothing of the great solemn quiet rested upon the spirit that had--since six years old--never known freedom from responsibility, and--since fifteen--had borne the burthen of household economies and of school teaching. It was a strange novelty to have meals provided without care of her own, no shortcomings of servants to make up, no claimant for her attention save a solitary patient, and that one with Lance's temper. Wilmet had undergone a good deal from Alda's clashes with the rest, even Felix's was only a temper well in hand, and alternate fretfulness and penitence were regarded by her as part and parcel of Geraldine's ailments; so that it was almost a surprise that her present convalescent never visited his discomforts upon her, but was always patient and good-humoured, smiling whenever he could, like his father before him, as if, according to the pretty Spanish saying, the sun had shone on his cradle at his birth. His unselfish nature had made him a little uneasy when with cooler senses he remembered Clement's hint, while love and instinct alike made him feel utterly unable to dispense with his motherly sister, but when she had assured him that nothing could make him leave her as yet, and when Sister Constance was known to be at Bexley, he threw it from his mind, and was perfectly happy and contented.

He could still exert no attention, could neither read nor be read to, nor occupy himself in any way; but he was amused by talk around him, and companionship was never lacking. Wilmet, whose forte had never been conversation, found herself in a stream of small talk with inquiring friends of all degrees in the hierarchy; but was most at her ease when the female Harewoods were prattling good-humoured inconsequent chatter. Willie lying on the grass murmuring with Lance, or John lured into stories of Indian surveying adventures in the cause of the Ordnance Map. And when she was carried off to have her meals with the family, she had put herself so entirely at the mercy

of circumstances, that she never seemed scandalised by their crazy unpunctuality, their wonderful free and easy ways, and customs of putting things to every use but the right, did not censure Grace or Lucy for dawdling and gossiping whole mornings away, and took it naturally when their mother inquired after her eldest brother by the alternate names of Festus and Frank, and when she mentioned Lance's disaster as his coup d'état. And here was the last of these pleasant afternoons, full of still sweet sounds, midsummer hum above, the soft ripple of the water close by, the cawing of the rooks in the Close--all such peace, that her heart quailed as she looked forward to the din of the High Street at Bexley, and she strangled a sigh half way up her throat.

The click of the cloister door was heard, and Lance awoke from a doze, saying, 'Is that Bill?--You've not been here since morning, you vagabone.'

'See what I've got for you,' said Bill. 'What do you say for that, now?'

For Lance, with sparkling eyes, was rising to his feet. 'Hurrah! Robin herself! O Robin a Bobbin, isn't this jolly?' and Robina was entangled in that wonderful embrace peculiar to their own two selves, too ecstatic for a word between them, though as she received her sister's kiss, she spoke rather pleadingly--'Cherry and Sister Constance said I might, Wilmet; and Mrs. Harewood was so very kind as to send Willie to fetch me to spend Sunday. Do you mind, Wilmet?'

'Mind! Of course she doesn't,' said Lance. 'I was hungry to see you, Bob.'

'It was very kind in Mrs. Harewood,' said Wilmet. 'I must go and thank her. Only, first, how is Cherry?'

'Much better. She has been out for a drive with Mr. Froggatt. It will be all right now you are coming home, Mettie! Oh! and Dr. Lee is delighted to hear of Lance's going to Ewmouth to make Felix stay longer there. Oh! if ever anything was so delightful as this place! only I must see your prize, Lancey.'

As the two children linked their arms round one another's waists to walk along the alley, all-sufficient to one another, maybe there shot a little pang across Wilmet's breast. No one had raptures for her. She was Felix's housekeeper, and represented mother to all; but since Alda had been taken from her, she had ceased to be any one's perfect equal and delight. She might be valued, but only like air, or bread, or any other necessary of life, but she was foremost with no one. Lance had been everything to her, and she to Lance, for full four weeks; but she should never awaken the look on his face she had seen for Robin. Such thoughts as these had never troubled her before; it had been quite enough to know herself indispensable to all, and there was no time for sentiment; but this strange time of nursing had inspired a new sensation of yearning, a softness and melancholy, that

she strove against vainly as weak and unnatural.

The change had not been unperceived by Lance; for as his little sister, looking at his sunken cheeks, and feeling his thin bony hand, poured out her pity, he answered, 'I've had rather a jolly time of it of late; Mettie is so delicious, you can't think how her very voice and eyes seemed to do me good. I'm sure that the bella-donna lily, cold hard painted thing, was a mistake; she must have been something much sweeter. What do you think of a honeysuckle? That's bright red and white, and its leaves come out when nothing else does.'

'But it trails about, and doesn't stand alone.'

'It has got a good stout hard stem, that can make a bush of its own when it hasn't anything to twine upon. I say, Robin, that's just what you women-folk should be, always ready to twine, and yet able to stick up for yourselves when you've got nothing to hang upon.'

'Well, if Wilmet was the honeysuckle, I'm sure Alda wasn't. O Lance, it has been so horrid coming home without any one I wanted, and all so queer and uncomfortable. I would as soon have been at school, or sooner, for there I had home to think about.'

'The last holidays weren't first-rate,' said Lance.

'No; but then I'd got you!'

'I wish Dr. Manby would prescribe you to come with me,' said Lance.

'It's something to have this little sight! And here! I wanted to give this back, Lance.'

'Ah!' as he took the key of the violin-case, 'We'll take a look at her, Robin, to see if she's quite well; but I couldn't make her speak, it would be like sticking daggers through my head.'

'Poor little key! I looked at it so often when you were so bad, and grieved to think you had missed all that pleasure. Only it was a comfort to know you had been so good about it.'

'I am glad you took it, Robin; I know I should have grown idle if I had had it. Depend on it, 'twas that gave me this year of grace and the Bishop's prize.'

'Oh! come and show me that! I hope it is not packed up.'

'No; I wanted to take it to show Felix, but Mettie says it is too big, and would come to grief. What prizes have you, Robin?'

'Three. General good marks, catechism, and history--beautiful books.'

'Then the avenging harpies have forgiven you?'

'Pretty well; and they were very kind when you were ill, and the girls are much nicer; I am glad we stayed on, except for Angel's sake. Do you know, Lance, I really am afraid she is going in for naughtiness.'

'Give a dog an ill name--' quoted Lance. 'Is that it?'

'I do believe it is that! She is such a Tom-boy! Fancy! One afternoon, there was an awful uproar, and her class were all found playing at races, some riding astride with handkerchiefs round the forms, which they had named after the real horses; and the others pretending to bet on them, with their books in their hands, shouting out at the top of their voices.'

'Go it, Angel,' said Lance, laughing; 'that's the way Clem's sisters improve the tone of the school.'

Robina still looked distressed, but that was soon forgotten in visiting Lance's quarters, and admiring his books, peeping respectfully at his silent violin, and being lionised as far as his strength would permit. They were hand in hand the whole evening, till he was sent to bed, and his sisters were claimed by the Harewoods.

The Cathedral was resuming its usual voices on the Sunday morning, and when the early bell brought Wilmet from her room, she found Lance up and dressed, his little black gown on, and his trencher cap in his hand.

'That's nice!' he said in admiration, as she advanced in her fresh white pique and blue ribbons. 'O Mettie, I'm so glad this isn't my last time here!' and he added, as she bent over him and kissed him, not quite able to speak, 'Please, Mettie, I beg your pardon for all the times I have been tiresome or cross.'

'My dear little boy--' She broke down, and finished with another kiss, for Robina was at hand, shy in her thankfulness, and clinging to Lance's hand; but as Will Harewood followed, grave and subdued, Lance went up to him, and put his arm into his. Mr. Harewood, the Captain, and Lucy, were all likewise there; but the greetings were silent, and then Mr. Harewood led them all through the library, and was followed by the two boys to the sacristy; for though the celebration was not choral, all those of the choir who were present were always robed. Wilmet hardly liked not to keep her boy beside her, but she could not be sorry when she saw the two friends once more heading the little procession together; and with such happy grave faces, though so different: one broad, ruddy, sandy; the other fair, wasted, delicate, the hollow cheeks scarcely more coloured than the white linen, and yet with a pure fresh air of bright hope and recovery.

The Cathedral was nobly and calmly beautiful in the summer morning; the sunbeams high up in the slender brilliant windows that crowned the east, and the voice sounding low and solemn in the distance at

the Altar. To Wilmet and Robina it was a great deal more than the joyous festival they had last shared in there, even though then they had exulted in their brother's jubilant notes; and now he scarcely breathed a faint response, left his book unopened, and knelt in the dreamy passiveness of one incapable of actions of the mind, but too simply happy and thankful to doubt of his welcome. In his place, Clement would have distressed himself and his advisers over this inability to perform his usual mental exercises of devotion; but Lance never seemed to question but that he ought to lay himself before the Altar in thankfulness as soon as he was able, as certain of being welcomed there, as by the kind hands that shook his in the sacristy.

He came to breakfast afterwards at the Harewoods', to put an end to his invalid ways; but the clatter soon was too much for him; and he spent the chief part of the day lying on his bed, able now to follow dreamily the echoes from the minster, the full glories of which his sisters were enjoying. There was afterwards a rush of his choir mates to shake hands with him; and little Dick Graeme, a delicate, sallow, black-eyed boy, in whom Wilmet believed she recognised the hero of the swans' eggs, could not be got rid of the whole day. He lived at a farm three miles off, and had been sent in to take his part on the Sunday; indeed, he had often been at the door to inquire, but had only been allowed momentary glimpses of Lance, whom he followed about like a little dog, till at last, late in the evening, the proposal was started of walking him down to the river, along which lay the path leading to his home.

It was a charming summer evening when they set forth; the three Underwoods, the two Harewood brothers, and little Graeme, slowly moving along, Robina in ecstasies with the loose-strife and forget-me-nots, and the boys absorbed in fish and water-rats, till Bill, holding Robin a little back, pointed to a pollard, and told her in a low hoarse voice, 'That was where I left those verses.'

'There!' Robina tried to measure with her eye the distance, which looked immense for such a run. She could not speak; but little Dick turned--

'Ay, 'twas a jolly run in the time. Spyers and I tried it, and both got blown; but nobody runs like Underwood.'

'Well, it does look a goodish distance,' said Lance. 'And Robin, do you know, it all came of this fellow being too good a poet. He thought it was the Tiber, you know.'

'The subject was the Tiber, wasn't it?'

'Ay; and Bill here got to spouting about Horace Cocles till he didn't know, nor I either, whether we were heathen Romans or not. It was a mercy he didn't go home in Cocles' costume.'

Bill did not laugh. He seemed to forget everything, bystanders and

all, and threw his arm round his friend's neck. 'O Lancey, don't say a word more. If you only could guess what--what this month has been like to me! And now to see you standing here, like your dear old self again! Oh! if I could only--' and he broke off and rushed away behind the tree, where they heard him sobbing.

Lance shrugged his shoulders. 'Poor old Bill! he will treat himself as if he did it on purpose, but he'll be better now he's had it out. But d'ye see, I can't go no farther now. So you, Dick, be off. Spare the feelings of your dutiful parents, and get home in Christianable time.'

'I say please, Underwood, may I have the bed by yours next half?'

'That's not as it pleases Underwood, but Mrs. Drake; but look here, Graeme, there's a little brat of a new treble coming into our dormitory. You stand his friend, and speak to Harewood if Bolt takes to bullying him.'

'But you'll be back?' said the child, his face all consternation.

'I hope so; but for fear of accidents, you know. Good night, Dick, and thank your mater for those stunning raspberries.'

'That's a good dodge,' said Will Harewood, emerging, 'to keep the little ape from bullying the little one himself. But you will be able to come back, Lance; 'tis as dull as ditch-water without you.'

'I shall be glad enough to come back,' said Lance, 'and make the most of this year. I didn't know how I cared for this place. There's nothing like it!' and he leant against a tree, looking back at the Cathedral, where the sunbeams were 'weaving a parting crown' for the tall tower, and the soft grey of the exquisite stone-work of the chapter-house contrasted with the fresh green of the trees, rising up from the sparkling river and emerald meadows. Presently he burst out, 'You beautiful old thing, and did you hush your grand glorious old voice only for me? I should like to be your own, and to serve you for ever!'

The other two felt a little awed at the outburst, and possibly Lance a little ashamed, for he suddenly started from his tree trunk, crying, 'I'm sure we ought to go home. However there are Jack and Mettie on beyond ever so far.' And he elevated his voice in a coo-ee, after what he believed to be Australian fashion; but his weakness prevailed, and he laughed at his own want of power to shout much above his breath. 'You do it, Bill.'

'Not !! Coo-ee indeed? 'Tis coo-coo there, river and moonlight and all.'

At one and the same moment, Lance exclaimed, 'Jack and Mettie! Thunder and ages!' and Robina, 'For shame, Willie!' while that personage cut a caper, at once expressive of affirmation and

amusement at their surprise.

'After all,' sagaciously observed Lance, 'I'm not so much surprised. I think I've made a pretty good Cupid.'

'You believe it, then?' cried Robina.

'Bless you,' affirmed Willie, 'we've been roasting Jack about it for the last fortnight--only the pater was so awfully afraid of your sister's hearing it, that he said any one who breathed the ghost of a joke near her should be shipped off to old Aunt Grace that instant.'

'Well, they have my consent and blessing,' said Lance.

'Amen,' responded his friend.

'Ho!' continued Lance, 'that's the meaning of old W. W. being so jolly. I wondered whether it was only that I thought so because I had nothing to do but to look at her.'

'Oh, you know she is a real true beauty and no mistake,' said Bill, beginning to feel a personal pride in her; 'there's Miles raving about her, and every one runs about saying, "Have you seen little Underwood's handsome sister?" Half the folks that came to ask after you did it to get a look at her; and if she stayed a week longer, she might have a dozen offers, only luckily Jack cut in first.'

'Well, I'm glad she is even with Alda,' was Lance's next sentiment.

'That's the one that is booked for the Red Indian you converted, ain't it?' asked Bill. 'Fact, Robina; we heard a new fellow was coming who had converted a Cherokee, and that the Bishop had christened him in his war paint and feathers. Mrs. Shapcote sent out invitations to a missionary tea in honour of him.'

'What, of the Cherokee?'

'No, no, of the little brute of a missionary chap, and we made up our minds to tar and feather him before he converted us; but long before we had found out which of the new trebles was the model Christian, old Shapcote had caught us two pitching into one another, because I said Bexley was a snobbish place full of pots and pans.'

'And that founded your friendship?'

'No, not quite, for we had a worse fight because I shut his Bible up in his face when he tried to look over the Lessons in the Cathedral.'

'Why, you all do,' said Robina.

'Yes, now; but before Nixon came we were a horrid set of little ruffians. Do you remember, Lance, how Roper offered you a bull's-eye in the Cathedral, and thrashed you afterwards because you wouldn't

have it?'

'O Lance! but that was persecution!' cried Robina. 'Who would have thought you went through things like that?'

'Ay,' said Bill, 'you believed in the little cherub chorister boys, that sing and look out of their great violet eyes, till they die of declines.'

'Ah!' said Lance, who was leaning on his arm rather wearily, 'Jack will do for himself if he tells Wilmet her eyes are violet; it is like a red rag to a bull.'

'Yes,' said Robina, 'she says nobody ever had eyes the colour of violets, and they would be hideous if they were.'

'I have seen them,' said Willie, gravely.

'Oh! where?' cried Robina. 'Darker blue than Edgar's?'

'It's generally only one at a time.'

'After a cricket match, eh?' suggested Lance.

'But, depend upon it,' said Bill, while Robina was recovering her laughing disgust, 'he may tell her her eyes are any colour he pleases by this time.'

'How do you know that?' sharply protested Robin; 'as if she would care for him more than for all of us, who can't spare her either!'

'I thought you were thick and plenty up the country?'

'Not of that sort,' said Lance.

'I don't believe it,' insisted Robina; 'why, she had never seen him a few weeks ago; she can't have had time to get to like him.'

'That's your simplicity,' said Bill. 'Now ain't that oracular--I mean ocular--demonstration? There they are, very moral of people making fools of themselves in books.'

'I wish they'd have done with it, then,' sighed Lance; 'my legs won't hold out much longer.'

'Yes, you must go in,' said Robin, bringing her sturdy shoulders for his other arm to rest on.

'But those two!' said Lance. 'Some one must stay to make it respectable. Don't laugh, you vagabone, you shake up the marrow of my bones; I'm her brother, and bound to see to her.'

'I'll stay out with Willie if that will make it right,' said Robina,

'only you must go to bed, and you have to be up so early too.'

So they saw him to the Bailey door, beyond which he declined further assistance, saying he could tumble into bed alone, and leaving them to their pleasant task of making propriety.

It was made after this sort. Bill delivered himself of a deep sigh, and observed, 'Well! if she's done for, I suppose I must take up with you; and after all, you're the jolliest.'

'I shall never be jolie, like Wilmet, if that's what you mean,' said Robina, not quite understanding whether it were jest or earnest.

'Well, if you ain't a regular stunner like her, it doesn't much matter. I never did see a face that I liked better than your round one, and I know I shall like it more and more. Won't you have me, Robina, one of these days?'

'O Willie! oughtn't one to wait till we are old enough to think about it?'

'I don't see why. I shall always be thinking I'm working for you, and I don't see why you shouldn't think the same of me. Won't you?' again he repeated. 'At least, of course I shall do all the work for you.'

'Oh no! I should not like that. I had rather be doing something for you, Willie. Look here, I am learning all I can now, and when I go out--'

'Go out?'

'For a governess.'

'Murther! I'll hinder that!'

'But, Willie, you can't make a fortune in five years, and I shall go out at eighteen. I think I shall begin the fortune soonest;' and she laughed merrily.

'Mother didn't make a fortune.'

'I didn't mean that exactly; but I'm learning all the superior branches, and if I got a hundred a year! Think of that, Will! If I went on with that till you are a clergyman and have a living, how nice it would be! There would be plenty to give away; and if we were poor, I would take girls to teach.'

'Do you think I shall ever let you do all the work that way?' said Will, strong in boyhood's infinite possibilities. 'I don't know how it's to be, but I'll keep you out of slaving, though you're a dear girl to think of it. Any way, Robin, you and I will hold together--always.'

'I am sure I shall never like anybody half so much,' said Robin.

'Shall we break a sixpence and keep the halves? That's the thing, ain't it? I believe I've got one--or fourpence, which is all the same.'

'No, no,' said Robina, backing; 'I don't think Mettie would like it. It doesn't seem right.'

'But aren't you in earnest. Robin?'

'Oh yes, indeed, indeed I am;' from the depths of a very earnest childish heart that little knew to what it pledged itself.

'And so am I! I'll never care for any one else, Robina--never.'

'Nor I, William. Here they come!'

The other two had not got near so far, though Captain Harewood was talking, and Wilmet listening, as would never have been the case without the influence Willie asserted; but the special charm that enchained Wilmet was entirely unapprehended by her, till just as the first star brightened, and the hues faded from the landscape, she bethought her of her patient, and perceived that he had gone in. 'How late it must be! I must go and see after him. I hope he is equal to the journey.'

'I will come and bring you an account of him on my way home, if I may.'

'Oh, thank you; but it is taxing your goodness too--too much.'

'Cannot you believe how glad I am to have a good excuse?' and the tone gave Wilmet a sudden thrill, so that she answered not; and he continued, 'I am going to beg leave to be sometimes at Bexley.'

'When Felix is at home,' faltered Wilmet.

'I can hardly afford to wait. My time at home is so short. I shall, I hope, make friends with him to-morrow, and perhaps you will neither of you forbid me to come again. I am asking nothing now, only opportunity to try to make you--'

'Oh, don't!' hurriedly broke in Wilmet, standing still in consternation.

'Nay,' he said in a pleading voice, 'I know it would be presumption to think so short an acquaintance could suffice, but you see I have so little time, and all I want is leave to use it in coming to see you.'

'Oh, don't!' she repeated. 'Indeed you had better not. It would be only pain. I couldn't! and I can't have Felix worried,' and there was

a startled sob in her voice; but he answered with the strength and sweetness that had upheld her in Lance's most suffering moments.

'I would not distress you or Felix for more than words can utter! I would not have breathed a hint of this most earnest wish of my heart till you had had some preparation, if it were not so impossible otherwise to have any chance of being with you and striving--'

'Please,' entreated Wilmet, 'that is just what should be avoided; it can never come to anything, and the sooner it is stopped the better.'

'Why should it never come to anything?' he asked, encouraged by detecting tears in her voice.

'Because you know--no, you don't know, or you never could think of such a thing--how wrong and impossible it would be for me!'

'No, I don't know. That is what I want to have the opportunity of knowing.'

'I can tell you before,' she answered, faintly. 'Oh, if you would but take my word for it, it would save so much--'

'No, that I cannot do,' he repeated. 'I must see for myself your preciousness at home.'

She broke in again. 'Please, please, I'm saying what I ought not; but it is to hinder distress. Don't want to let us get to like each other any better, for as yet it can't be more than what could be got over, and it is only making pain to let it grow.'

'That I deny. So far as I am concerned, the thing is done. If you wanted to save me that pain, you should have turned me out the moment I saw you call the boy back to life. A month like this is not so easily got over.'

Wilmet dropped her head, and made no answer.

'So, since you see,' he continued, 'you will spare me nothing by holding me aloof, will you not let me come and gladden myself while I may in your presence? And then when my time is up it may be more possible to judge--' (there was a faint 'Oh no,' but he heeded it not) '--whether you can bear such an ugly fellow enough to let him look to the time when home claims may be less pressing. I look for no answer. I only want to be able to ask for one three months hence, and I shall beg your brother to put it into my power so to do.'

'Ah! but to have Felix disturbed and worried is just what must not be. It has made him ill already; and if he thought--'

'I promise not to harass him,' said Captain Harewood, gently. 'You may trust me to take care that what I shall say will not cause him any very trying perplexity.'

'If you knew--' sighed Wilmet.

'I hope to know,' he replied. 'I do know enough already to be aware that you stand in no common relation to the rest; and if you have my heart, Wilmet, it must follow that somehow I share in your self-devotion. Do not fear my trying to make you less yourself. I want not to take you away from your burthens, but to share them.'

'Yes, you--that is your goodness; but would it be right in us?' she faltered.

'Leave your brother and me to judge of that,' he said.

They were already at the Bailey door, in the shadow of the buildings, the flood of moonlight lying on the tower above, and one little mysterious lamp under the deep brow of the archway of the passage. No more passed but one 'good-night' from each, he had not even seen her face, under her shady hat; while she hastened to her little room, glad to ascertain that Lance was fast asleep, and with a rush of new sensations bursting on her, against which she was strengthening all the dykes of her resolute nature. 'He--he--that it should be he! how good! how generous! how kind! Oh, it would be so happy! It will make me happy that he only just thought of it, but it won't do, it is no use. I'm not in love with him; I won't be, I'm not, I'm not!'

And as ardently as Wilmet had ever prayed for Lance's life and reason by that little bed, did she beseech not to be tempted to desert her duties; and all night she lay between sleep and waking, ever repeating to herself. 'I'm not in love, I'm not, I'm not!'

CHAPTER XIX

THE HOUSE WITHOUT PILLARS

'And who save she could soothe the boy,
Or turn his tears to tears of joy?'

SAMUEL ROGERS.

Lance's train was at six o'clock, and that by which the sisters were to return to Bexley so little later, that they would await it at the station, so the household was betimes more or less afoot. There was a frenzied scramble of maids and young ladies in hasty toilette; yet breakfast was only forthcoming by personal exertion on the part of the Captain, who made the coffee, boiled the eggs, and sent his brother foraging into the kitchen. Then a message came that mother must see the sweet girl to bid her good-bye; and Wilmet was dragged

up to find the paddy good natured face in bed, in an immense frilled nightcap, whence two horn-like curl papers protruded. She was kissed, cried over, and told she was the dearest girl, and Jack the best boy, in the four kingdoms; and while her head was turning round between dizziness at all that this cordiality implied, and a governess's confusion whether these were the four kingdoms of Ireland, or England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, a demand followed for the darling boy; but when she had gravely told the Captain that his mother wanted him, the result was to send him down laughing. 'No, no, I'm not the only darling boy in the world! 'Tis you, Lance. You know the way.'

Between finding her in bed, and being powerfully embraced, Lance's sense of decorum brought him down with his blanched cheeks so rosy red, that the family were choking with suppressed mirth when the omnibus called for the luggage, and the party set forth to walk to the station, Lance in a grass hat, enfolded by the Captain's hands in an ample puggery, and provided with a natty blue umbrella, presented by the Librarian, 'as a shield against the far-darting Apollo.'

'If this had been in my day,' he said, 'some wit would have produced a neat epigram on Phoebus playing his old tricks out of jealousy of Will's verses, but dainty feats of scholarship are gone out of date. Well, Patroclus, when we have you back again, I think we shall none of us mourn over the effects of your generous action.'

Wilmet was near enough to hear, and colour. She had imagined the last night's conversation unknown to all; but Underwood reticence was so incapable of guessing at Harewood communicativeness, that it never entered her brain to suspect the topic of conversation between the three juniors as they walked up the drowsy street.

Thanks to the difficulties of getting under weigh from the Harewood house, there was barely time for John and Lance to take their places, while Mr. Harewood got their tickets, and they were whirled off, leaving the others to promenade the platform, just then a complete solitude.

Mr. Harewood, with the attention of the old school, backed by something warmer, gave Wilmet his arm. He and his son John never seemed to belong to so ramshackle a household as the rest, and he was so gentle and fatherly, that when Wilmet found him aware of all, it was a relief to tell her objections without being answered by a lover. After all, she could only repeat that leaving home was so impossible for her, that, as she murmured, 'He had better not get to like me any more, it would be such a pity for him.'

'That,' said Mr. Harewood, with his air of old-fashioned gallantry, 'depends on the esteem in which wealth or merit is held.'

'And station,' said Wilmet, in an undertone.

'For that, my dear, one would be a fool not to honour you and your

brother; besides, it may make you more at ease to hear that my father was an apparitor, and I went to Oxford as a servitor, so that in birth you have the advantage of us. Of course, I do not mean that every one does not in the abstract prefer prosperous matches, but John has a fair independent competence, and can afford to do as he pleases; and, for my part, I should be very sorry if this were not what he pleased.'

'You are so very kind, but surely if--even if--it must be such long waiting, and you would not like that for him.'

'Let us arrive at the if before we settle about the waiting,' said Mr. Harewood. 'In truth, I have long looked on John as so much the most sensible person in my house, that all I feel called on to do is to hope for his success. I know both you and he will be wise enough not to be either selfish or unselfish in the wrong place.'

Wilmet did not quite understand, but she carried away the conviction that she need have no scruple as to the parents' cordial approbation; and she had had her cure from yesterday's sense of want of individual affection. As to the future? Of course it swelled her heart to think of such love and generous kindness, but she tried to believe that she was as much touched by the goodness of the father as by that of the son, and she would be on her guard against herself unless she saw some reasonable hope that home would ever dispense with her. Dear Wilmet; would she not at any other time have thought it an outrage to think of such a possibility? At any rate, she thought, nobody but Felix need ever know.

Little guessed she, as Robina sat opposite, kept silent by the presence of two stout old females, that the child was revolving the question whether she might tell Cherry. She knew that Wilmet would not like her affairs to be discussed without her own permission; but it seemed unfair that when all the Harewoods were open-mouthed, her own sister should know nothing. After all, much would depend on the chances of a tete-a-tete.

At the station stood Clement: 'That's right! I thought you would come by this train. What a comfort! How is Lance?'

'Almost well. How are you getting on?'

'You will soon see for yourself,' in an ominous tone.

Just then she was accosted by Mr. Ryder, who was waiting for his own train; and after courteous and anxious inquiries, said, 'I was thinking of writing to your eldest brother, but perhaps a word from you would do as well.'

'About Bernard?'

'Why, yes, I don't quite see my way about him. He is a sharp little fellow, and very well taught; in fact, he can afford to do nothing

but waste time. Somehow, a boy will now and then seem to come into school with the wrong foot foremost.'

'Has he fallen in with idle boys?'

'So I fear. I placed him in a form high for his age, but where the lags have got hold of him, and make him think idleness the thing. So I gather. I conclude he is not to remain here?'

'Do you mean that you wish him to be taken away?' asked Wilmet, in consternation.

'No, no; don't understand it in that sense,' said Mr. Ryder, anxiously. 'I only meant that he is doing no good here, and that possibly a change, or the stimulus of preparing for an examination, might rouse him. Good-bye.'

And there Mr. Ryder had to rush off to secure his seat.

'Oh! good morning, Miss Underwood!' This was from Mr. Mowbray Smith, a few steps beyond the station. 'I am glad to see you back. So your patient is gone to join your eldest brother? But we shall have you here on Sunday? Then there's the less occasion to name it; but some notice should be taken of the behaviour yesterday evening.'

'It was very sad,' interposed Clement, 'but when once set off by the christening, they could not stop themselves.'

'Scarcely a valid excuse,' said Mr. Smith, severely, as he made his parting bow. 'You know this was not all.'

Clement shrugged his shoulders, exclaiming, 'So he made that into a personality! You must know there was an unusually squalling baby, whose godmother went on giving its name as Huggeny; and there was a five minutes' exchange of "What?" on Mr. Smith's side, and Huggeny on hers, till a whisper came all along--forwarded from the mother, I suppose--"Same as they does their 'air"; and then Mr. Smith looked more mystified than ever; some one suggested, "Same as the Empress of the French."''

'Something might be excused on such provocation,' owned Wilmet, laughing.

'If that had been all,' said Clement; 'but Angel and Bernard choose to go and sit by themselves, and I could see, from Felix's place in the choir, that they were tittering long after. I shook my head, but Nares must needs make up an odious imitation; and Bernard not only touches Angel to make her look, but grins impudently at me. I found myself growing burning hot with shame, and whenever they looked at me their heads went down and their shoulders worked.'

'Naughty children,' said Wilmet, but with more than usual lenience to the combined effects of Huggeny and of Clement's severe countenance

in producing one of those paroxysms of giggle that seem invincible in proportion to their unbecomingness. The door was reached and instantly opened, Stella springing into her arms in ecstasy. 'Sister's come!--O Sister, Sister, Sister, don't ever go away any more.'

There was a great deal of confused kissing and embracing as she made her way upstairs. 'But oh, my Tedo, what has happened?' for she beheld a fine sample of Bill Harewood's violet eye.

'It was Bernard's stick went into his eye when we were playing at hockey,' said Stella. 'He did cry terribly, but Sister Constance put such nice stuff--'

'Sister Constance! oh, thank you! but hockey in the garden?'

'I thought it rather a remarkable proceeding,' quietly observed the Sister.

'I must hear more about it,' said Wilmet. 'My poor dear little man, can't he let Sister go for one instant?--Cherry dear, how are you?'

'All right now you are come. But dear little Lance, how is he looking?'

'Not much worse than you do, my Cherry,' said Wilmet, as she saw that the wizened old fairy look was come back. 'You have been worse than I knew.'

'Oh, I am all right now; and I have had such a treat of Sister Constance.'

'I want to take her back with me,' said the Sister. 'Dr. Lee would like to have her under his eye; and if you can spare her, I would write to-day, and she could go with me to-morrow.'

'It is very kind; it might be better for her.'

'Of course,' interrupted Alda, 'it is good for any one to be away from this horrid smell of baked earth, and all these riotous children.'

'Ah!' said Wilmet; 'didn't I see the shade of the lamp in the landing-place broken? How was that!'

'Oh! the children, of course,' said Alda.

But neither child spoke; and Wilmet perceived that only the twins were in the room, both hanging upon her, while she swallowed her hurried second breakfast.

'No one will tell,' said Clement. 'It was done the day I went over to Minsterham. I did all I could to find out.'

'Yes; and made them more obstinate than before,' said Alda.

Another catastrophe here suddenly struck Wilmet, namely, a long and very badly-mended rent in Stella's spotted pink frock, which, to say the truth, did not look as if it were Monday morning.

'Yes,' said Stella, 'I did try to mend it as well as I could, Sister, but there wasn't another work-a-day frock clean.'

'Your mending!' exclaimed Wilmet; 'but how did you tear it?'

'When I tumbled into the brambles, and was lost.'

'Lost, my dear? What does she mean?'

'It is quite true,' said Cherry. 'Angela and Bernard took her out fishing to Ball's hatch on Saturday, and lost her, only luckily we did not know anything about it till she was safe at home again, dear little darling!'

'But, Stella, how was it?' cried the horrified Wilmet, clasping her the closer.

'I could not bear to see the poor worms,' said Stella. 'Bear would cut them up to stick on his hook, so I got away out of sight of them, and gathered the dear little wild roses and honeysuckles; and when I wanted to find them again I couldn't, and nobody heard me when I called, and a robin looked at me, and I thought he wanted to bury me, and I ran away, and a great bush caught hold of me and scratched my legs, and tore out a great piece of the rim of my hat; and just then a good lady came by, and helped me up and to look for them, but we could not see them anywhere; so she took me to her house--such a dear little house all over roses--and she mended my hat, and I mended my frock, and she gave me some tea and plum-cake, and two dear little ponies came to the door, and a carriage, and she brought me home.'

'Who was she?'

'Miss Crabbe; she is new to the place,' said Cherry. 'Mr. Froggatt said she had only been once in the shop before. Tell Sister how you told her about yourself, Stella.'

'She asked my name,' said the child, 'and she said it was a very funny one, and she could not understand it; and then she wanted to know whose little girl I was, and I said, "Brother Felix's;" and then she said, "Have you no papa or mamma?" So I told her I hadn't a papa or mamma, but a father and mother up in heaven, and she said, "I should think so, poor little dear, if there is no one to take more care of you." I really did think she wanted to take me and keep me for an adopted child, so I told her that I had lots of dear good brothers and sisters that wanted me very much indeed, and I must go home to H. Froggatt and F. C. Underwood, High Street, Bexley.'

'I fancy,' said Cherry, 'that she thought Mr. Froggatt was Stella's grandfather, for she made him quite a speech about the neglect of the child--"such a nice-mannered little girl," she said; but she would not come in, nor let Alda be called.'

'Nor should I have gone down if Mr. Froggatt had thought proper to call me,' said Alda. 'Imagine me in his office!'

'I can't imagine not going anywhere to thank the person that brought home my little Star,' said Wilmet, holding her arm close round the child, and kissing her repeatedly. 'But what became of the other two?'

'I went out after them,' said Clement, 'and found them rushing wildly about after her, afraid to come home. To do them justice, I believe they were almost out of their minds, thinking she must have tumbled into the river.'

'Oh, indeed,' said Alda. 'That's your account of it.'

'Yes,' said Cherry eagerly, 'all that pretending not to care, and that it was a trick of Stella's, was nothing but reaction. And then, you know, Clem, you did improve the occasion.'

'There!' exclaimed Alda, 'you see how it is, Wilmet; nothing but vindication of those two intolerable children! Now, just come, Wilmet, and see if they are to be backed up in this.'

But as Wilmet, perfectly bewildered, and feeling no hope of comprehension among so many, followed Alda from the room and up the stairs, Stella came plunging after, with a cry, 'Alda, Alda, don't hurt them!' just as from a housemaid's closet half way up, Alda was bringing to light a basin containing a dozen tadpoles twirling their shadowy tails.

'Now, Wilmet,' she solemnly said, 'do you approve of all those horrid brutes swimming in my bath?'

'They aren't in the well, I hope,' said Wilmet.

'How can you be so absurd, Wilmet? That's the way those children showed their sorrow that Clement talks about. I'll never believe but he helped them.'

'To weep them,' said a voice above; and Angela's face was seen looking out of her bush of hair over the balusters of the top storey. 'They are just like black heraldic tears.'

'You don't mean that they put them in?' asked Wilmet.

'What else should I mean?'

'And didn't she squall?' shouted Bernard; and then came a duet--

'Dame, dame, what makes your ducks to squall,
Duck to squall, duck to squall, duck to squall?
Meeting o' pollywogs! Meeting wi' pollywogs?'

'Hush, children, this is shocking,' said Wilmet, in the low impressive voice by which she could always still a tumult. 'How could you take advantage of my absence to do this?'

'Because Alda deserved it,' cried Angela, bouncing downstairs. 'There, Alda! I said I should tell of you if you told of us.'

'Angela, that is not the way to speak to your elder sister.'

'She isn't like an elder sister!' exclaimed Angel. 'Stella would be ashamed to do like her, eating up the strawberries Mr. Froggatt brought for poor Cherry when she was ill.'

'I'm sure you had your share!' retorted Alda.

'You would have them in for dessert, and you helped us, only Sister Constance and Clem left all theirs for Cherry, and then you went by yourself and ate them all up.'

The very fact of shouting out such a charge showed a state of insubordination such as might make Wilmet's hair stand on end, and she simply disbelieved so childish an accusation against her own equal in age. 'You should not say such things, Angela,' she answered, in her low tone of reproof; 'there must be a mistake.'

'I am afraid it is quite true,' said Clement's quiet voice, as he stood arrested on his way by the block upon the landing-place.

'The children make such an uproar,' said the exasperated Alda. 'I'm sure I thought Geraldine's had been taken long before, and in this parching weather fruit is quite a necessity to me.'

Wilmet was too much aghast at the admission to speak. It was a strange tangle: Clement standing straight and still on the landing-place; Wilmet, with Theodore humming to himself, as innocent of the fray as the tadpoles that Stella was cherishing in the cupboard doorway; Alda, flushed and angry; and on the upper flight, Angela and Bernard dancing and roaming in vehement excitement between anger and alarm. 'Well that Lance was not in this hubbub! thought deafened and amazed Wilmet.

'What has this to do with the tadpoles?' she asked, in an endeavour to comprehend.

'We said she should be served out,' sung Bernard, 'with a polly--

polly--pollywog bath.'

'But, Bernard, hush!--Angel! don't you see it was no business of yours if Alda did forget?'

She was unprepared for the outbreak this brought on her. 'You, too, Wilmet! Every one backs up those children in their behaviour to me! Lady Herbert Somerville, and Clement, and all! If only Ferdinand saw it!'

'Just step up, Wilmet,' said Clement gently, 'and see whether the children are in league with me.'

He followed Wilmet up to the door of the barrack, an attic that he shared with Lance and Bernard, and showed the long beam that crossed it pasted with a series of little figures cut out in paper, representing a procession in elaborate vestments; and at the end a long-backed individual kneeling before the chair of a confessor, who bore a painful resemblance to the Vicar of St. Matthew's.

'We only wanted to make Tina feel at home,' giggled Angela.

'It would be no matter,' pursued Clement, 'if it were merely quizzing myself. I am used to that; but this is trenching on sacred ground.'

'Bless me, your old white beam!' exclaimed Angela, with an affected start.

'It is exceedingly improper and irreverent,' said Wilmet. 'I am ashamed that such a thing should have been done in this house.'

'Really,' said Alda, 'it seems to me very droll and clever, with no harm in it at all; only people like Clement never can take a joke.'

'You can't mean to justify such a one as this,' said Wilmet; but, to her still greater astonishment, Alda broke out,

'There! You are turning against me! You are taking Clement's part, though you didn't care what they did to me--not if it had been snakes and adders!'

This, decidedly in Mrs. Thomas Underwood's style, elicited a peal of laughter from the two naughty children, and the corners of Clement's mouth relaxed, bringing Alda to a gush of tears. 'You never used to be like this to me, Wilmet.'

'I never saw you like this, dear Alda,' said Wilmet, low and gently, but in decided repression. 'Come into our room, and let me try to understand.'

So began a morning of mutual complaints, as if everybody were against everybody, agreeing in nothing but in appealing to the elder sister. First, there was Alda's story. Never had there been such a miserable

time--with Geraldine interfering, fussy, fretful, fault-finding; Clement intolerable in primness and conceit, only making the children worse when he pretended to keep them in order, and making such a fuss about Geraldine, when nothing ailed her but change of weather, incurring the expense of the Dearport doctor, and bringing down the Sister upon them, so awkward to have her in the drawing-room in that dress, but Sisters always thrust themselves into families. She hoped she had shown my Lady that she was not to be overawed by a title--such affectation, not using it! No consideration for her; the servants regularly spoil, both of them; Martha a vulgar insolent creature, and Sibby disgustingly familiar and slovenly, no good at all, not even to keep Theodore out of the way. At which Theodore, knowing no more than his own name and Alda's displeasure, set up a dismal howl; and as Wilmet chose to coax and fondle him into silence instead of scolding and turning him out, Alda went off in a huff, muttering about asylums and proper places; and Wilmet descended to the kitchen, the little weak hand clasped tight into hers.

A sore sight awaited her below; the bills of this month for luxuries of sinful extravagance in her economical eyes! Chicken and asparagus, ducks and peas, even in the height of their season, were enormities to such housekeeping as hers, and had raised the sum total to four times the amount that her foreboding soul had dreaded. It exceeded her present supplies, and was a grave addition to the expenses of the two illnesses, that were serious enough already.

Martha was eloquent, not to say defiant, in self-defence. 'You see, Miss Underwood, if I'd been let alone, or Miss Cherry had been the one to take my orders from, which we could have made it out to your satisfaction; but with Miss Halder, which expects everything to be just like what it was in the fammerly up in London, which it stands to reason as it can't; which she hasn't got no more notion than a baby of prices, nor seasons, nor nothink; which is very determined, too, which won't suffer a word from nobody; which if you hadn't been coming home, Miss Underwood, I'd have given warning, which have always given you satisfaction.'

Wilmet's satisfaction was not increased when she encountered Sibby. 'Ah, my darling Missie dear, ye're the jewel that's been longed for! The whole house has been mad entirely, and lost widout you; the children rampaging and playing pranks, and Miss Cherry dwining and pining to a skeleton, so that but for Master Clem and that holy woman, the Sистер, 'tis scarce alive ye'd have found her. Miss Alda, she's the very wonder of the worruld for jealousy and unfeelingness. I up and told her at last there was well-nigh as much differ between you and she, as between Stella and this blessed lamb that she spites; for if you have not carried off all the wit and understanding, sure 'tis you that has got all the heart, and the head, and the hands.'

'And the partial old nurse, Sibby! You see I had no time nor thought but for poor Lance, and Alda was so new to it.'

'Ah, Missie dear, you were always the one to vindicate her, but 'tis

no use! Newness! 'Twasn't newness that makes her turn the back of her hand to this darling innocent, till he cries if he's left a moment with her.--Ay, my precious, what would have become of you and me but for Masther Clem?--I tell you, Miss Wilmet, I never thought that long boy the aquil of his brothers till I saw him in time of need. Yer father himself--Heaven be his bed!--couldn't have been tenderer with Theodore nor Miss Cherry, by night or by day, an' never a cross word when he was bothered past his life with Miss Alda's ugliness an' the children's boldness.

'Oh, those children! What is come to them, Sibby?'

'Only funning and merriment, Missie dear. They'd never have had to be faulted if Miss Alda had let Miss Cherry deal with them; but she could neither rule them herself, nor bear to see them ruled; and though she was like a mad cow if they played their pranks on her, she backs them up if Miss Cherry, or Master Clem, or even the Sister, do but say a word to them, so 'tis no wonder if the poor dears have been a bit off their heads, but they'll be as quiet as doves now ye're back again. Oh, Missie dear, my own child, but it's you that are the light of my eyes, looking the blooming beauty that you are.'

The foster-mother's genuine compliment could not lighten the load that had grown every moment heavier, and more compunctious for the deaf ear she had turned to Clement. Wilmet said a word or two of apology to him when she met him on the stairs, loaded with books to study in the garden.

'Never mind,' he magnanimously answered, 'it is all right now you are come, and it was impossible before. Only, please do say something warm to Sister Constance, for Alda is barely civil to her.'

'I am very sorry; I did not think Alda had that sort of prejudice,' said Wilmet, whose instinct of defence of Alda had wonderfully diminished.

'The chief prejudice came of my sending for her,' said Clement.

'Besides, Sister Constance spoke out very sharply about the strawberries and when we had a couple of chickens, and Alda scolded me for helping her to a leg instead of a wing, Sister Constance said, "Oh, I supposed you had them on Geraldine's account;" and she gives the children leave to do anything Sister Constance objects to. These things are hardly their fault. But, I say, Mettie, now you are come, and it is all right, do you think I might go to St. Matthew's? The Vicar and Mr. Sterling are alone, while the other curates are holiday-making, and they say I could really be of some use to them, and they would give me some help with this reading for my examination. Somers is there too, and I have not seen him since Christmas.'

'Indeed,' said Wilmet, 'no one has deserved a holiday more than you, Clement! You have done your best.'

This--almost the first home praise or thanks that had fallen to his lot--elicited that real grace of humility for which poor self-conscious Clement really strove. 'I have tried, Mettie,' he said, with tears in his eyes; 'but it was not as if it had been one of the others. There must be something very wrong about me, to make me so disagreeable.'

'You have gained two hearts,' said Wilmet, 'Sibby's and this little fellow's.'

For Theodore had attached himself limpet fashion to Clement, who with difficulty piled his books so as to leave a hand free for him.

'He had better come with me,' said Wilmet; 'your reading must have been dreadfully interrupted.'

'It has, rather,' said Clement, whose examination was in alarming proximity; 'but I don't mind him, I can work to his tunes as well as Felix can; and all is right now you are come.'

That was the burthen of every one's song. It came next from Cherry, whom she found in her own room; 'There was so much bustle in the sitting-room,' she said.

'My dear, you have gone through a great deal!'

"'There's nae luck about the house when our gude man's awa'," said Cherry. 'Clem played and whistled that so often, that Alda begged never to hear it again; but unluckily Tedo had caught it, and I don't think she quite believes he doesn't hum it on purpose! But now, how delicious it is to have got at least our gude woman! And, oh dear! Wilmet, I beg your pardon; but you do look so lovely, I can't help telling you so! or is it the pleasure of seeing you?'

'My poor Cherry! I did not think half enough about you.'

'That would have done no good. Most of this rose out of my own crossness and horridness. If I could only be anxious without being peevish!'

'Now, Cherry, don't waste time in telling me it was your own fault; I know all about that! I really want to understand how it has all been with Alda and Clement. I am afraid Alda has not been behaving nicely.'

To hear Wilmet allow Alda to be other than impeccable so amazed Cherry, that she could scarcely answer. 'O Mettle, I never knew what you and Felix must be. I have so often thought of a house divided against itself, one against two, and two against three. We have been all _to wrongs_, and Clem and I have said we would not be a party; and yet we could not help it, for we always had to stand up together! Then Angel and Bear were against every one, and Alda set them against

Clem, and fancied he did against her, which was not true. I should have minded nothing if Alda had not been so angry at Clement's sending for Sister Constance. You did give him leave, though?'

'Yes, and I should have done so much more decidedly if I had known.'

At that moment Sister Constance knocked at the door, with her work in her hand, and Wilmet inferred that this was the refuge from Alda and the drawing-room. To Cherry's surprise, Wilmet, instead of ignoring everything unsatisfactory, began at once, 'Please come in, Sister Constance; I wanted to thank you, and tell you how sorry and ashamed I am! I am afraid you have not been treated as--'

'Don't say any more, my dear,' as the tears were in her eyes; 'don't think about it.'

'I ought to think!' said Wilmet. 'I have been trying to understand things ever since I came home; but everybody except Cherry and Clem blames everybody, and they only blame themselves! I can't understand the rights of anything!'

'My dear,' said Sister Constance, 'I think it would be impossible to go into the details of all that has happened. Shall I tell you how it seemed to me?'

'Pray do!'

'I thought that the authority of an elder reared in so different a school necessarily was producing a few collisions. There was some ignorance, and a good deal of dislike of interference, and the younger ones would not have been human not to take advantage of it; but it is over now you are come home, and I strongly recommend an act of oblivion.'

'Oh! I don't want to punish the poor children,' said Wilmet.

'Oblivion, I said, not only amnesty;' and as she did not see perfect comprehension in Wilmet's face, she added, 'I mean, not only that the children should be forgiven, but that their elders should not go hunting for causes, and thinking how this or that could have been prevented.'

'I suppose not,' said Wilmet. 'It is all plain enough;' and the sigh that followed quite amazed Cherry, who smiled up in her face, saying, 'Plain enough that we can't do without you.'

'No,' said Wilmet, kissing Cherry's uplifted face ere leaving the room; but it was with such an effort at a responding smile, that Cherry exclaimed, 'Oh dear! how dreadfully we have vexed her!' And Sister Constance thought the more.

Yet again Wilmet had to hear another testimony to the anarchy in her absence. Those formidable bills had obliged her to apply to Alda for

an advance of the sum she had offered for Lance's journey; and this, after some petulance and faltering, elicited that some old forgotten London bills had come down and swamped this Midsummer quarter's allowance, so that the promise must stand over till--till Michaelmas; or it might be that Ferdinand's matters were arranged, and then what would such a paltry sum be? Wilmet turned away in shame and disgust at having trusted for a moment to such offers. She could only do what she had never done before--apply to Mr. Froggatt for an advance on Felix's account: and she detained him after dinner for the purpose.

He was as kind as possible, assuring her that he should have been hurt if she had not come to him. And then, in his blandest way, he thought it right to hint that 'Young people were sometimes a little unguarded.' She was prepared for the story of the loss of Stella, but she was not prepared to hear of a gossiping intercourse over the newly arrived Punches, etc., carried on in the early morning with Redstone, not only by Bernard but Angela. She was but eleven years old, so it was no worse than the taste of childish underhand coquetry and giggling; there was no fear of its continuance after Felix's return, and, indeed, good old Mr Froggatt had kept guard by coming in two hours earlier ever since the discovery; but the propensity dismayed Wilmet more than all that had yet happened, and on this head she thought it right to reprove Angela seriously.

'Dear me, Wilmet, you are always telling us not to think ourselves above our station. Mr. Redstone is just as fit to speak to as Felix was before he was a partner.'

'Should you like Felix to have found you gossiping in the reading-room?'

'Well,' said audacious Angela, 'half the fun in things is the chance of being caught.'

'My dear, you don't know what you are saying,' replied Wilmet dejectedly, as if exhausted beyond the power of working out her reproof! and Angela had to fight hard against any softening, telling Bernard that W. W. was a tremendous old maid, who had no notion of a lark.

Robina, who stood in the peculiar position of neither accusing nor being accused, would not add her voice to the chorus of welcome, and did not wonder that every hour wore off something from the radiance of the beautiful bloom brought from the Bailey. Indeed, the unusual gravity and reserve of the younger sister struck Cherry's observant eyes, and made her think at first that she had been much pained by having to part with Lance in his weak half-recovered state; but when at tea-time the whole history of the illness was inquired into in detail by the assembled family, the downcast eyes and cheeks with which Robin encountered every mention of Captain Harewood's good offices led to the inference that she had in her excitement forgotten the bounds where the brook and river meet, and was in an anguish of shame; Wilmet meantime looking flushed with the fag of her vexatious

day, and speaking plentifully of this same Captain, proving to herself all the while that she was doing so with ordinary gratitude and composure.

Robina was quartered upon Geraldine in the holiday crowding of the house; and somewhere about four o'clock on the summer morning, Cherry, wakening as usual, and reaching for her book, heard a voice from the corner asking if she wanted anything. 'No, thank you, Bobbie. Go to sleep again.'

'I can't; I've been thinking about it all night. I think he's coming to-day.'

'Who?'

'Captain Harewood. He promised to come and tell us how Lance and Felix are.'

'I am very glad; but Wilmet never said so.'

'No, but-- O Cherry, I wish we could contrive some nice quiet place, but nothing is ever quiet in this house.'

'No,' said Geraldine, who was but too well aware of the fact, 'though I can't imagine that any Harewood can be distressed on that score.'

'Oh, but--' said Robina, to whom the communication began to feel so momentous, that she could not help toying round it before coming to the point--'I know; at least, I am sure he will want to see her particularly.'

'You Robin, what have you got into your head?' said Cherry, trying to misunderstand, but feeling a foreboding throb of consternation.

'It is not my head. Willie told me.' And as she detected a sigh of relief, 'And it is no nonsense of his either. He did it on Sunday evening by the river-side.'

'He did it?' repeated Geraldine, willing to take a moment's refuge in the confusion of antecedents, though too well aware what must be coming.

'You know what I mean. He--Jack--John--Captain Harewood, had it out with her when we were all walking together.'

'My dear, impossible!'

'I mean, we were out of hearing, but we saw them at it, and walked up and down till Lance got tired out, and Willie and I stayed to make it proper.'

Geraldine relieved herself by a little laugh, and said, in a superior tone of elderly wisdom, 'But, my dear, there might be a walk even

without what you call doing it.'

'Yes,' reiterated Robina; 'but I know, for the Captain shut himself up with Mr. Harewood when we came in, and Bill heard his father telling his mother about it at night through the wall.'

'For shame, Robin!'

'Oh! he told them long ago that he could hear, and they don't care; besides, Mrs. Harewood told him himself when he went in to wish her good morning, and she kissed me and Lance too about it, and said they hadn't their equals. And poor Mettie thinks no one knows of it but their two selves, and maybe Mr. Harewood!'

'But, Robin, I don't know how to understand it. I think she would have told Alda, at least.'

'Perhaps she has to-night,' said Robina; 'but, you see, she didn't accept him.'

'Oh! then it doesn't signify.'

'Not out and out, I mean; and it is only because of us. At least, we are sure she likes him.'

'We! You and Willie!'

'And Lance. He saw it all the time he was getting well. Besides, the Captain told his father that she wouldn't listen to him, and would have hindered his going to Felix if Lance had been fit to travel alone.'

'Then it is not an engagement now?'

'No, she won't let it be.'

'And he is coming to-day?'

'Yes, after he has seen Felix. O Cherry! he is so nice, kind and bright, like all the Harewoods, and not ridiculous; and Lance does like him so!'

'Does Wilmet?'

'We are almost sure. As Lance says, she has never looked so bright, or so sweet, or so pretty. Do you think it is love, Cherry?'

'We shall see,' said Cherry. 'If she tells us nothing, we can judge; and if--if--'

Her voice died away into contemplation; and after waiting in vain for more, Robina somewhat resentfully decided that 'she had fallen asleep in her very face.'

No more was said till dressing-time, when there were a few speculations whether Alda knew; and Cherry could not help auguring that something had opened Wilmet's eyes to her twin's possible deficiencies. Sister Constance came, and seeing her patient's paleness, accused the sisters of untimely bedroom colloquies; and as they pleaded guilty, Robin was struck by the air of fixed resolution on Cherry's thin white face.

There was no sign of any confidence having been made to Alda. Wilmet plunged into her long-deferred holiday task of inspecting the family linen; and when she came back with a deep basket, an announcement that every one must mend and adapt, and portions of darning and piecing for Geraldine and Robina, they began to feel as if the morning's conversation was a dream.

But just as dinner was near its close, there were steps on the stairs; the drawing-room door was opened and shut, and Sibby, unnecessarily coming through the folding leaves, announced over the head of Clement, 'Captain Harewood.'

'Come to tell about Lance!' cried Angela, leaping up, and followed by Bernard, Alda, and even Mr. Froggatt; indeed, in the existing connection of chairs, tables, and doors, a clearance of that side of the table was needful before any one else could stir. Wilmet moved after them, and Clement was heard exclaiming, 'You are pinning me down, Bobbie!'

'I know! Oh, shut the door! There are more than enough there already.'

'True,' said Sister Constance, signing to Clement to obey. 'I meant to go to my room, but Cherry wants to hear of her brothers.'

'No, she doesn't!' cried Robina. 'At least-- Oh! will nobody get the others out, and leave them to themselves!'

'Why, Bobbie, what nonsense is this?' said Clement. 'One would think you took them for Ferdinand and Alda.'

'It is all the same!--Stella, you run out to the garden--by that door, you child! And then it all came out to the two fresh auditors, who listened with conviction. 'And now,' concluded Robina, 'there is not a place where he can so much as speak to her! What shall we do to get them away?'

'You do not know yet that she wishes it,' said Sister Constance, who had been a wife before she was a Sister, and saw that it was matronly tact and tenderness that the crisis needed; 'but I'll tell you what you can safely and naturally do. Go in and fetch Cherry's folding chair, and call the children to carry her appurtenances down to the garden. That will make a break, and Wilmet can take advantage of it if she sees fit.'

'Alda is worse than ten children,' said Clement; 'she has an inordinate appetite for captains in the absence of her own.'

'It can't be helped. Better do too little than too much.'

And finding Robina shy and giggling, and Clement shy and irresolute, Sister Constance herself made the diversion by opening the door, when Wilmet's nervous look and manner was confirmation strong. 'Lady Herbert Somerville--Captain Harewood,' was Alda's formal introduction in her bad taste; while the Sister, after shaking hands, bade Bernard take Geraldine's chair to the lawn.

'Oh, are we to go out?' said Alda. 'A good move. Of all things I detest in summer, a town house is the worst. I'll just fetch a hat, I want to show my pet view.--Our brothers are always fighting about their churches, Captain Harewood.'

The thing was done; Mr. Froggatt was already gone, and as Alda's trappings were never quickly adjusted, it needed very little contrivance to leave a not unwilling pair on one side of the doors, and cut off the rest. Robina, too much excited to stand still, flew about the stairs till Alda appeared in a tiny hat fluttering with velvet tails.

'Are they gone out?'

'Yes;' for quite enough to constitute a 'they' were gone; and when Alda reached them, they sedulously set themselves to detain her, and thereby betrayed the reason.

'Nonsense! How absurd! That horrid little fright of a red-haired man! No doubt poor dear Wilmet only wants me to go and put an end to it.'

Strictly speaking, this was self-assertion. She had not the assurance to intrude, and she contented herself with keeping Cherry on thorns by threatening to go in, and declaring that the whole must be untrue, since Wilmet had not told her.

Time went on very slowly; and at last Wilmet, about four o'clock, was seen advancing, with Theodore in one hand and her great basket of mending in the other. And before Alda had time to rise from her chair, Robina darted across the grass, with flaming cheeks and low, hurried, frightened confession--'Wilmet, please, it is honest to tell you; Willie Harewood knows, and told me, and I couldn't help it; I told them to keep away.'

'It always happens so,' said Wilmet, less discomposed than Robina expected, though she had evidently been shedding tears. 'Not that there is anything to tell.'

'Nothing!' cried Robina, looking blank.

'Of course not. He came to bring me a note from Felix. I hope no one knows but those three.'

'And Sister Constance.'

'Then take care no one does.'

'But, O Wilmet, please! You have not put an end to it all?'

'No,' said Wilmet. 'They will not let me, though I think it would have been wiser. I do not know how it is to be, except that it is utterly impossible for the present.'

With this much from the fountain-head, Robina was forced to content herself; and she had tact enough not to join the trio under the tree, but to betake herself to Clement, who had gone off with his books.

'So,' said Alda lightly, 'you have cheated us of another view of your conquest, Mettie.'

'He wanted to catch the 3.45 train,' said Wilmet gravely.

'You must have been very unmerciful to despatch him so soon. I thought you must want me to come to your rescue, but those romantic children wouldn't let me.'

'Thank you,' said Wilmet.

'My dear! You don't mean that you are smitten? Well! I can't flatter you as to his beauty. And yet, after all, situated as you are, it is a catch--that is, if he has anything but his pay; but of course he hasn't.'

'Yes,' said Wilmet abstractedly, 'his father told me he had--what did he call it?--"a fair independent competence of his own." Oh! they are so kind!'

'Then, O Wilmet, is it really so?' asked Geraldine, with eager eyes, clasped hands, and quivering frame, infinitely fuller of visible emotion than either of the handsome twins.

'I--don't know.'

'My dear Wilmet,' cried Alda, excited, 'you can't surely have anything better in view!'

'No,' said Wilmet, even now keeping herself blind to the offensiveness of Alda's suggestion; 'but as it is utterly impossible for me to think of--leaving home, I did think it would have been wiser to put a stop to it while there wa--is time,' and the tears began to gather again.

'And have you?'

'They won't let me.'

'Who?'

'_He_--and his father, and Felix,' said Wilmet, speaking steadily, but the tears rolling down her cheeks.

'Felix! Oh, what does he say?'

'You may see;' and she held out a letter, which Alda and Cherry read together, while she rested her elbow on her knee, her brow on her hand, and let fall the tears, which with her were always soft, free, and healthy outlets of emotion, not disabling, but rather relieving.

Mrs. Pettigrew's Lodgings,
North Beach, East Ewmouth,
20th July, 10 P.M.

MY DEAREST WILMET--What I have heard to-day is a great satisfaction. I had hardly hoped that you could have been brought within the reach of any one so worthy of you. My only fear is that you are too scrupulous and self-sacrificing to contemplate fairly, and without prejudice, what is best for us all. You will imagine yourself blinded by inclination, and not attend to common sense. Harewood tells me he trusts you have no objection on personal grounds. (I hope this does not sound as if he were presuming; if so, it is my fault. Remember, I am more used to writing 'summaries for the week' than letters on delicate subjects.) But at any rate, my Mettie, I see there is much worth and weight in his affection, and that you could not manage to snub him as entirely as you wanted to do. (Didn't you?) Now, it seems to me, that if you two are really drawn to one another, both being such as you are, it is the call of a Voice that you have no right to reject or stifle. I do not mean by this that anything immediate need take place; but granting your preference, I think it would be wrong not to avow it, or to refuse, because you scruple to keep him waiting while you may be necessary at home. If you imagine that by such rejection you would be doing better for the children and me, I beg leave to tell you it is a generous blunder. Remember that, as things have turned out, I am quite as much the only dependence for the others as I was seven years ago. I felt this painfully in the spring, when I was doubtful what turn my health would take; and the comfort of knowing you would all have such a man to look to would be unspeakable--indeed, he has already lightened me of much care and anxiety. Do not take this as pressing you. Between this and the end of his leave, there will be time for consideration. Nothing need be done in haste, least of all the crushing your liking under the delusion of serving us. So do not forbid him the house; and unless your objection be on any other score, do not make up your mind till you have seen me. I should of course have been with you instead of writing, if it were not for Lance. Till I saw the dear little fellow, I had no notion how very ill he has been. The five hours' journey had

quite knocked him up, and he was fit for nothing but his bed when he came; but he revived in the evening. I only hope I shall take as good care of him as the first-rate nurses he describes so enthusiastically. That month must have been worth years of common acquaintance. I wish I knew what more to say to show you how glad I am of this day's work, and to persuade you to see matters as I do.--
Ever your loving brother,

F. C. UNDERWOOD.

P.S.--Lance is quite himself this morning, and was up to watch us bathing before six o'clock.

'Oh! what did Captain Harewood say of Felix?' was Cherry's cry, almost with shame and pain at not having asked before.

'You know, he had never seen him,' said Wilmet; 'but he said he did not seem to him in the least unwell--and he watched carefully, as I had begged him. He said he struck him as naturally delicate-looking; but that those blue veins in his temples do not show, and he has no cough at all, nor any difficulty in swimming, or walking up a steep cliff. He made me laugh, for he said he hardly believed his eyes when Lance tumbled himself out of the train on something so little bigger or older than himself. He says the way we all talk of "my eldest brother" made him expect something taller than Clement, and more imposing than the senior verger; but he understood it all when he saw him and Lance together. They have two very nice rooms; and Felix has put Lance into the bedroom, which is luckily cool, and sleeps on a sofa bed in the parlour; and the landlady will do anything for them.'

'But how is it to be?' broke in Alda crossly. 'You and Felix seem to be encouraging him to come dangling here, when we all agreed that Ferdinand must keep away in Felix's absence, though matters are in such a different state.'

'So I told him, dear Alda,' gently said Wilmet; 'but he declared he would bring his sisters, or poor Mrs. Harewood herself, if nothing else would satisfy me: and what could I do, after all their kindness?'

'Umph!' muttered Alda; 'they are a queer set.'

'Now, Alda,' said Wilmet earnestly, 'you must not talk without knowing. Till I went there, I never understood how much goodness and principle there could be without my stiffness and particularity. I know I have often been very unnecessarily disagreeable and disapproving, and I hope I am shaken out of it in time.'

'Dear Mettie, no one is like you,' cried Cherry, with a little effusion, stretching out her hand, and laying it on her sister's shoulder. 'Oh, if we had not all been so vile while you were away!'

'It would not have made any difference, my dear! It would be

impossible to leave Felix without help. And think of Theodore!

Alda muttered something, that no one would hear, about asylums; and the tell-tale tears coming again, Wilmet sprang up, and bending down to kiss Cherry, declared in her most authoritative voice that nothing should be said to the younger children, nor to any one out of the house; then picked up the tea-cups, and carried them in.

Excitements were, however, not yet over for the day. A telegram was put into Alda's hands, containing the words--

'A. T. is an unmitigated brute. I sail for N. Y. to-night. All will be right when I come back.'

The mysterious hint restored Alda at once to all the privileges of the reigning heroine!

CHAPTER XX

VALE LESTON

'The way to make thy son rich is to fill
His mind with rest before his trunk with riches;
For wealth without contentment climbs a hill,
To feel those tempests that fly over ditches,
But if thy son can make ten pounds his measure,
Then all thou addest may be called his treasure.'

GEORGE HERBERT.

'I say, Felix, you've not told me about Vale Leston.'

The two brothers were established under the lee of an old boat, beneath the deep shadow of the red earth cliffs, festooned with ivy, wild clematis, everlasting pea, thrift, and samphire. Not far off, niched beneath the same cliff, were two or three cottage lodging-houses, two-storied, with rough grey slate roofs, glaring white walls, and green shutters to the windows that looked out over the shingly beach to the lazily rippling summer sea.

Ewmouth was a lazy place. Felix had felt half asleep through the earlier days of his stay, and Lance seemed to be lulled into a continual doze whenever he was unoccupied, and that was almost always. It had grieved his elder brother to see this naturally vivacious being so inert and content with inaction, only strolling about a little in early morning and late evening, and languid and

wearily, if not actually suffering, during the heat and glare of the day. He was now, with his air-pillow and a railway rug, lying on the beach beside Felix, who with his safety inkstand planted in the sand, was at work condensing the parliamentary debates for the Pursuivant, and was glad to perceive that he was so far alive as to be leaning on his elbow, slowly shovelling the sand or smaller pebbles with the frail tenement of a late crab, and it was another good sign to hear his voice in a voluntary inquiry about Vale Leston.

'I have not been there yet.'

'Not there?'

'No. Old Abednego Tripp comes over here every market day, and he's the only person I wanted to see.'

'I thought you came here because you wanted to see the place?'

'Yes; but I was not up to the walk when I came here; and while you were ill I never durst go out of reach of the telegraph, and latterly I waited for you. After all, I have not much mind to it. I don't see the good of setting oneself a coveting one's neighbour's house.'

'It wouldn't be my house, any way,' said Lance quaintly. 'How far is it?'

'Rather more than three miles. We'll get a boat some day and do it.'

'That will be jolly!' and after shovelling a little longer, Lance added, 'How came we to be turned out?'

'That's just what I can't tell. I was only seven, you know, and my father never would talk of it. Sibby used to revile the mane nagur, Mither Fulbert, till it was current in the nursery that he was a black man who expelled us vi et armis. One day, my father found four or five of us in a row slashing at an old black doll, by way of killing Mither Fulbert, and prohibited such executions. I think, too, that he quashed an attempt to call our own Fulbert by his other name.'

'I wonder what the nagur did?'

'By the light of maturer nature, I imagine that he may have succeeded as heir-at-law, and that his maneness may have consisted in not giving the living to my father; but I cannot tell. It always seemed my father's great desire to put it out of our minds. I remember before we left the place his catching me in a furious rage with some one who told me my pony was to be sold. He carried me off, and told me it was all true, and we were going away, and he trusted to me to be brave and make it as little hard to Mamma and the little girls as could be. He said the place had belonged to old Uncle Underwood, and that we had no right to stay there after his death. That was all the explanation he gave me, first or last; and I don't think we thought

much about it after the neck of the change was broken.'

'You remember it, though.'

'I believe I know every step of the house and garden. I have never ceased to dream of them; and I am as much afraid of disturbing old impressions as of reviving wishes.'

'Holloa! what's up?' exclaimed Lance, as the landlady was seen coming in quest of them. 'I thought I saw a tidy little tiger going in there just now.'

'A note from Mr. Staples, if you please, Sir, and they wait for an answer.'

'I didn't know you had any acquaintance here.'

'Mr. Staples is the solicitor who did the business about Admiral Chester's legacy. He is retired now, and only holds some county office. He found me out last week, I believe, from some letters of mine going wool-gathering to the other F. Underwood. He called and said he knew my father, and was very civil and friendly. He sent to inquire after you the day you came. This is what he says:--

MY DEAR MR. FELIX UNDERWOOD--Your relative at Vale Leston wishes me to dine with him to-morrow evening. If you and your brother would like to accompany me on the drive, meet me at six o'clock on the top of the cliff. If you would prefer to return earlier than I do, I can direct you to a boatman to take you down by the river.--Believe me,
yours truly, C. STAPLES.

'Hurrah! that's not half a bad fellow for an attorney,' cried Lance.

'Shall not you be tired? Will it not be too hot for you?'

'Not a bit of it. He,' indicating the sun, 'can only get at me asquint by that time, and I'm a match for him with my blue umbrella. Come, fire away, you tardy Norseman. Say we are good for it. Fancy boating back!'

And Lance whistled a few bars of 'The Hardy Norseman,' the liveliest thing he had done since his illness.

At the appointed hour, the brothers were standing on the top of the cliff, with a broad estuary before them; on the opposite side of which lay the town of Ewmouth at the foot of the old castle, with fresh modern fortifications towards the sea. The town, with its church towers and gas chimneys, sloped away from it; vessels thronged the harbour; and a long weird-looking thready suspension-bridge spanned the broad tide-river to East Ewmouth, the village fast growing into a suburb. There had not been more than time to point out

the details to Lance before a waggonet drove up from one of the roads that branched among pleasant 'villa residences;' and in it appeared a white-haired but hearty-looking gentleman, prepossessing and merry, very unlike Lance's notion of attorneys, who shook hands with them warmly, and took care to put the boy under the shade of the driving-seat.

It was a pretty drive, through rich meadows, shut in by the sloping wooded hills which gradually closed nearer; and by and by over the shoulder of one looked a very tall church tower, whereat Felix started with a thrill of responsive recognition, and suddenly faltered in the political discussion Mr. Staples had started, but dropped at once, looking at the young man's face with kindly interest.

At the same time road and river both made a sudden turn into a much narrower and wilder valley, the hills beyond more rough and rocky; but the river still broad and smooth, and crossed by a handsome high-backed five-arched bridge, the centre arch grandly high and broad, the other two rapidly diminishing on either side. Over this the carriage turned; and from the crown Lance beheld an almost collegiate-looking mass of grey building, enclosing sunny lawns and flower-beds, and surrounded by park-like grounds and trees, all sloping towards the river, and backed by steep hills of wood and moorland, whence a little brook danced with much impetus down to the calm steady main stream of Ewe. The church and remnants of the old priory occupied the forefront of a sort of peninsula, the sweep of the Ewe on the south and east, and the little lively Leston on the north. There was slope enough to raise the buildings beyond damp, and display the flower-beds beautifully as they lay falling away from the house. The churchyard lay furthest north, skirted by the two rivers, and the east end with the lovely floriated window of the Lady Chapel rising some thirty yards from the bank of the Ewe, the outline a little broken by an immense willow tree that wept its fountain-like foliage into the river. The south transept was cloistered, and joined to the building beyond, a long low grey house with one row of windows above the sloping roof of the cloister, and this again connected with a big family mansion, built of the same gray stone with the rest, but in the style of the seventeenth century, and a good deal modernised upon that. A great plate-glass window looked out on the river in the east front, which projected nearly as far as did the Lady Chapel, the space between being, as before said, laid out in a formal parterre, with stone steps leading down to the river.

'Oh, what a place! what a place!' shouted Lance, starting up in the carriage. 'It's like the minster, and the jolly old river besides! Two of them! Oh! what fishing there must be!'

'I did not know it was really so beautiful,' said Felix in a low voice.

'You remember it?' said Mr. Staples.--'I suppose you can't?' to Lance.

'Oh no! I wasn't born! More's the pity! Do the salmon come up here, Sir?'

'Yes, since the fisheries have been protected; but young Mr. Underwood is a great fisherman, and I fear it is not easy to get a card.'

'Oh, I wasn't thinking about leave, Sir, thank you. I've got no tackle nor anything; but I _am_ glad _we_ have salmon,' said Lance, as though he had acquired an accession of dignity.

Descending from the bridge, they were in a road skirting the river, and on which presently opened the lodge gates of the Rectory. Here Mr. Staples got out, telling his servant to drive the young gentlemen round to the village.

'I say, Felix,' said Lance, as they were whirled on along the lane which swept round the long wall overhung by trees, 'that old party must know all about it.'

'Most likely,' said Felix; 'but if there had been any good in my hearing, my father could have told me himself. How well I remember his giving me my first ride along this lane! Do you smell the bean field? I don't believe I have thought of the scent since.'

Felix seemed absorbed in the pleasures of recognition; and Lance, amazed at the beauty and what seemed to him the splendour of the place, looked up at his brother with a kind of romantic feeling for a disinherited knight, as he contrasted the scene with the counter and printing-office.

The lane led to the village street, a very pretty one sloping upwards, and lying on each side of the Leston, which rippled along as clear as crystal, crossed every here and there by footbridges, some wooden, some a single stone; while the cottages on the opposite side were perched on a high shelf or terrace, and were approached by charming irregular flights of stairs with low walls or balustrades. Over the rail of one, smoking a pipe in summer evening enjoyment, was seen Abednego Tripp, with long nose, brown parchment cheeks, and lank hair not yet grey--one of the genuine almost extinct species of parish clerk. As the carriage stopped, he began to descend, keys in hand, for the church was a lion, and many carriages did stop there; but it was not till Felix jumped out and hailed him that he knew who were his visitors.

'Bless me, if it is not Master Felix after all! I did think you was never coming, Sir. And this is the young gentleman as has been so ill. You're kindly welcome, Sir. I think he'd favour poor Master Eddard if he didn't look so nesh.'

'I shall get well here,' said Lance. 'If it is not my native air, it ought to be.'

'Will you come and rest a bit, Sir? or would you like to go to the church?'

'The church,' they said. Felix first explained what he knew would give pleasure--that they had come depending on him for a cup of tea, and a cast in his boat which was wont to convey the marketables of Vale Leston twice a week to Ewmouth.

Abednego sped up his stairs like a lamplighter, to cause his granddaughter to make preparations, and was speedily down again, delighted to hear Felix prove his memory by inquiries after the inhabitants of the old dwellings.

'Ha! the Miss Hepburns!' said Felix, looking at a tall narrow house completely embowered in trailing roses, and with the rails of the bridge of entrance wreathed with clematis. 'Are they there still?'

'Oh yes. Sir, all the four on 'em; and a sight of good they does to the poor!'

'I wonder whether I ought to call?' said Felix; 'they used to be very kind to me.'

'What, is that Rob's godmother, that never gave her anything but that queer name?' asked Lance.

'I shouldn't think they were rich,' said Felix. 'I fancy they used to be very fond of my mother, and made her promise that the next girl should be named for one of them. There was Miss Bridget, and Miss Martha, and something else as bad, and Robina was the least objectionable of the lot. I think they used to write to my mother; but it is late in the day for calling.'

'Here comes Miss Bridget,' said the clerk, as there appeared in sight a tall, rigid, angular figure, with a big brown hat and long straight cloak, and a decidedly charity-looking basket in her hand.

Felix stepped forward with his hand to his hat. 'Miss Hepburn, I believe. I must introduce myself--Felix Underwood'

The lady's first move had been a startled shy drawing herself up and into herself, at being addressed by a stranger. Then she looked up with an amazed 'Felix Underwood! Little Felix!' and as he smiled and bowed, she rumbled and put out a hesitating hand.

'Yes. Tripp did tell us something--something of your being at Ewmouth, but we were not sure.'

'We had not been able to come over before,' said Felix, thinking she meant to imply that he ought to have called. 'We came for health and have not been equal to the walk.'

'Oh, indeed. Nothing infectious, I hope?'

'Oh no,' he said, explaining in a few words the total want of connection between his case and Lance's.

'I am glad. I'll--I'll tell my sisters. I'm glad to have seen you.'

There was something faltering and ill-assured in her manner, and in a moment she turned back with 'Mr. Underwood, where are you stopping?'

He answered; and with 'I'll tell my sisters,' she parted with them again.

'That's Miss Bridget,' commented old Tripp. 'She's the one as allys says, "I'll tell my sisters." They do say as Miss Isabella, she be the master on 'em all.'

Felix and Lance smiled to one another the assurance that every family had it's Wilmet; but while the younger brother shrugged his shoulders, the elder felt a certain chill in the contrast with those days of old, when the sugar-plums and picture-books of the whole sisterhood were all at his service, and bethought him that times were changed.

They entered the churchyard by a little side-gate. The church was a grand pile of every style of architecture that had prevailed since the Cistercians had settled in Vale Leston, and of every defacement that the alternate neglect and good-will of the Underwoods could perpetrate. The grand tower at the west end was, however, past their power to spoil, and they had not done much damage to the exterior, except in a window or buttress here and there. But within! The brothers, used to the heavy correctness of the St. Oswald's restoration, stood aghast when Abednego admitted them by the door of excommunication, straight into the chancel, magnificently deep, but with the meanest of rails, a reredos where Moses and Aaron kept guard over the Commandments in black and gold, and walls bristling with genii and angels of all descriptions, weeping over Underwoods of different generations. Lance stood open-mouthed before a namesake of his own, whose huge monumental slab was upborne by the exertions of a kind of Tartarean cherub, solely consisting of a skull and a pair of bats' wings!

'My stars! where did that brute come from?' muttered Lance under his breath. 'He's got no trifle of a piece of work!'

However, Felix had taken in that the chancel had respectable poppy-headed benches, though the lower part of the church was completely 'emparoked in pues,' such as surprised Lance out of all bounds when he withdrew his eyes from the white marble death's head.

'My stars!' again he said, 'this is what I've heard of, but never saw.'

'Ay, Sir,' said Mr. Tripp, 'every one that come here do be crying out upon the pews; and to be sure, I see the folk sleepin' in them as is shameful!'

'Well he might, for his place was the lowest in a lofty three-decker, against one pier of the chancel arch, surmounted by a golden angel blowing a trumpet, and with lettering round the sounding-board, recording it to have been the gift of the Reverend Lancelot Underwood, Rector and Vicar of this parish--the owner of the mural slab before mentioned. That angel recalled to Felix that the sight of it had been his great pleasure in going to church, only marred by the fact that he was out of sight of it in the chancel.

'Why, you weren't in the choir then?' said Lance.

'Choir! no, Sir,' said the clerk. 'They sits in the gallery. The chancel is for Mr. Underwood's family--the Rector, Sir. They seats was just put up instead of the red baize pew before old Mr. Underwood as was then died, and your poor papa went away. And that there font was put, as 'tis there, just when the twin young ladies was christened.'

'Where was I christened, then?'

'In the bowl as we used to have on the Communion, Sir.'

It was plain how far Edward Underwood had dared to work at renovation, and that nothing had since been done. The Lady-chapel, with a wonderful ceiling of Tudor fans and pendants, was full of benches and ragged leaves of books for such Sunday schooling as took place there, the national school having been built half a mile off, that the children might not be obnoxious to the Rectory. The church was a good way behind the ordinary churches of 1861, and struck the two brothers the more from the system in which they had been brought up.

'What a state Clem would be in!' uttered Lance, as they came out.

'It is of no use to think about it,' said Felix. 'Let us enjoy the beautiful exterior.'

'Ay, Sir,' said old Tripp, 'parties do be saying as how it is a mortal pity to see such a church go to wrack; and I do believe the Squire wouldn't be so hard to move if it warn't for the Passon--that's young Mr. Fulbert, the vicar.'

'I don't understand all these rectors and vicars,' said Lance. 'I thought they never hung out together.'

'Why, you see, Master Lancelot, as how this is what they calls a lay rectory, as goes like a landed estate from father to son, without there being any call for 'em to be clergy; and the Vicar, he is just put in to do Passon's work, only he gets his situation for life, like

I do, not like them curates.'

'I see,' said Felix; 'and the rectors have generally taken Holy Orders, and presented themselves to the vicarage.'

'Yes, Sir, that's how it ought to be; only this here Squire--not being no Passon, though Rector he be--he puts in a gentleman to keep it warm till his son, young Mr. Fulbert, our Vicar as is, was growed up, and hard work they say it was to get him to bend his mind to it; nor he'd not have done it at last, but for his father's paying of his bills, and giving consent to his marrying Miss Shaw. And since that, bless you, Sir, the curates have done nothing but change, change, change, till 'tis enough to ruin a good clerk. You knows what that is, Master Felix, you that be one of the cloth.' (For Felix allowed himself no unprofessional coats.)

'It is only the cloth, Mr. Tripp; don't you see I sport a blue tie! I am a bookseller.'

'A bookseller!' The old man recoiled. 'You'll not be passing your jokes on me, Sir. A book-writer--I understands.'

'No, a bookseller in earnest. I have a share in a very good business at Bexley; I've been at it ever since I was sixteen.'

The old clerk was quite overcome; he leant upon a headstone and stared at Felix without speaking, and then it was a sort of soliloquy. 'To think of poor dear Master Eddard's son being come to that! and he looking a dozen times more like a clergyman and a gentleman than ever this young Mr. Fulbert will!

'Never mind, Mr. Tripp,' said Felix; 'there's one of us on the way to be a clergyman--Edward Clement, you know, that I wrote to you about; and maybe this fellow too. Don't look so angry with me. I was obliged to do the best I could to bring in something for the thirteen of us.'

'And we're as proud of him as can be!' added Lance, affectionately and indignantly.

'Ah, well,' said the old aristocrat, 'that may be, for you never knew them he came of. There was my old Lady Geraldine, as was his great-grandmother, who gave a new coat or new gown to every poor body in the parish at Christmas, and as much roast beef as they could eat; and wore a shawl as come from the Injies and cost two hundred pounds! She was a lady! Bless me, what would she have said to see the day--'

'That she was glad to have a great-grandson good for something,' stoutly answered Lance. 'I declare, Mr. Tripp, you'd have liked him better if he had come a begging!'

'So I do,' said Felix; 'and what's more, Mr. Tripp is going to refuse me because he is too fine to sit down to tea with a tradesman!'

'No, no, sir,' said old Tripp, with tears in his eyes. 'You'll not go for to say that. If it was the last morsel I had, I'd be proud to share it with one of Master Eddard's sons; but I can't but think as how we rung the bells and drunk your health when you was born, just as we did for the Prince of Wales, and how proud poor Master Eddard looked. No doubt he was spared the knowing of it.'

'No,' said Felix, 'it was settled with his full consent.'

Abednego seemed more distressed than ever. 'Poor Master Eddard! he must have been brought very low. Such a gentleman as he was! Never spoke a proud or rude word, Sir, but used to hold up his head like the first lord in the land, and fire and colour up and start like one of young Mr. Fulbert's thoroughbreds if any one said an impudent word.'

'That no one ever ventured,' said Felix. 'He was as much respected at Bexley--yes, and is still--as ever he could be here. I wish you could see my brother Edgar, he is more like him than either of us. Ah, here's the old garden gate, I wish we could go into the shrubbery.'

Tripp was rather for trying it. He said the gardeners would be gone home, and the elder master at dinner--the younger, with his wife, was absent; but Felix could not bear the sense of spying, though he did not withhold Lance from a rush into the garden paths, where he did not discover much. Then they looked into the eddy at the meeting of the waters; and turning back to Tripp's neatest of kitchens, were there regaled upon shrimps, rashers hissing from the fire, and the peculiar native species of hot-buttered cake, which Felix recollected as viewed in the nursery as the ne plus ultra of excellence, probably because it was an almost prohibited dainty. Lance was in his element, delighting himself and Miss Kerenhappuch Tripp by assisting her to toast, to butter, and even to wash up, calling Felix to witness that he always helped Cherry in the holidays; when just as they were rising to seek the boat, Mr. Staples came climbing up the steps.

'I thought I should find you here,' he said. 'Mr. Underwood very much wishes you would come and spend the rest of the evening with him.'

'The old humbug!' burst out Lance. 'You won't go, will you, Felix?'

Felix thought a moment, then walked with Mr. Staples to the corner of the narrow ledge in front of the cottage. 'Mr. Staples,' he said, 'I know nothing about it. I trust to you to tell me whether this man treated my father so that I ought not to accept attention from him.'

'Hm? ha? I should not say so. He treated him unkindly, ungenerously, but he hardly knew how much so, and he had the letter of the law on his side. I verily believe he regrets it, and that your father, being what he was, would be the last to wish you to hold aloof.'

'Most likely,' said Felix. 'I am sure he forgave whatever there was

to forgive.'

'It is not my doing, I assure you. He spoke of your letters that had gone astray, and that led to more, till when he found you were in the village, he said he should like to see you. He is breaking up; his son has given him a good deal of trouble, and I believe he is altogether concerned for what has passed.'

'And he will not suppose we want anything from him?' said Felix, with something of the almost unavoidable pride of independent poverty.

'Certainly not. I have guarded against that.'

'Then I suppose we must.--That is, how is your head? are you too much tired, Lance?'

'No,' said Lance, almost sulkily; for he was much inclined to make fatigue a plea for escaping the 'mane nagur' and enjoying the boat, and was rather unreasonably disposed to think it all a plot on the part of Mr. Staples for spoiling the evening. Felix might have been equally glad of the excuse, but he believed his father would have thought this act of conciliation a duty, and followed Mr. Staples across the churchyard, where all the little boys in the place seemed to be playing marbles on the flagged paths. Its neglected state was a painful contrast to the exquisitely laid-out shrubbery, as trim as gardeners could make it, and improved and altered beyond Felix's recognition.

Entering the house, Mr. Staples led the way to the dining-room, where there was a large empty table in the middle of the room, and in the deep bay of the window a smaller one, laid out with wine and dessert, where sat 'old Fulbert.' Having always heard him so called, the brothers were surprised to find him no more than elderly. He must have been originally a thorough florid handsome Underwood, and had the remains of military bearing, though with an air of feebleness and want of health, and a good deal of asthmatic oppression on his breath. He did not rise, but held out his hand, saying, 'Good evening. Thank you for coming to see a sick man.'

'I am sorry to see you so unwell, Sir.'

'Thank you, I'm on the mend. Sit down. Take a glass of wine--claret?'

Felix accepted, wondering if his father would regard it as an act of pardon.

'And you?'

'No thank you, Sir.'

'No wine? You are the one that has been so ill? No objection to melon, eh?'

And Lancelot, whose illness had left a strong hankering for fruit, was considerably appeased by the first cut into the cool buff flesh.

'Is he the next brother to you?'

'Oh no. There are three brothers and three sisters between us.'

'And what are they doing? There were one or two with Tom Underwood. Didn't the young fellow offend him and turn out idle?'

'Not that, Sir,' said Felix, his colour rising: 'but he had no turn for a clerkship, and a good deal for art. He is studying at the Royal Academy, but there never was any quarrel; he is often at Thomas Underwood's.'

'And the rest?'

'One has the Ewshire Scholarship at St. Cadoc's; and there's one in Australia.'

'And this lad--what's his name?'

'Lancelot. He is in the choir school at Minsterham Cathedral, and hopes to get a scholarship.'

'Is that all of you?'

'Two more boys, quite little, and the six girls.'

'Any of them able to do anything for themselves?'

'The eldest is a teacher in a school at Bexley,' said Felix, not delighted with the cross-examination; and Alda, the one that lived with the Tom Underwoods, is engaged to a man of good fortune. Then two of the younger ones are at schools, where an allowance is made for poor clergyman's daughters.'

'How long has your mother been dead?'

'Four years and a half.'

'And you have managed all single-handed?'

'With my eldest sister's help, Sir.'

'Taken to the press, have you?' (Mr. Staples must have made the best of his vocation.) 'What's your paper?'

'The Bexley Pursuivant. Most likely you never heard of it. It is only a little county paper;' and then feeling that to stop there was a subterfuge, he added, 'Our main business is the retail trade.'

Mr. Underwood was chiefly intent on the next question, the politics

of the paper, though he said he need hardly ask. 'All you young stuck-up fellows run in one team--all destructives.'

'No, no, Sir,' broke in Mr. Staples eagerly. 'Mr. Felix is staunch to the back-bone.'

Felix was never more tempted to deny his principles than when he found them brought forward as a recommendation; but he could only explain that the Pursuivant was an old established county gentleman's style of paper, in the agricultural interest. Whereupon the Squire mounted his political hobby in such sort and with such abusive violence, especially as to the local representatives of the adverse party, that Felix could not help feeling that if such were indeed the opinions of his own side, he should certainly be on the other. One good effect was the sparing him any more personal catechising. Mr. Underwood shouted himself weary, without requiring any reply save what Mr. Staple's local knowledge supplied; and when the carriage was announced, the guests were dismissed with a hearty shake of the hands, and invitation to call again--'It was a comfort to talk of public matters to a young man of sense;' and Lance found a sovereign in his hand. He was not sure that he was obliged.

'Well,' said Mr. Staples, rubbing his hands with satisfaction as they drove off, 'what do you think of the Squire?'

'He talks very loud,' said Felix, who had for some time been watching the increase of Lance's headache, and now was trying to give him a rest on shoulder and arm.

Mr. Staples gave what help he could towards making the tired boy comfortable, and then returned to the subject in all their minds. 'So your father never told you those particulars?'

'No; I think it was his great object not to dwell on them, nor let us look back with regret or anger.'

'Just like him. I never saw such a case, never! I'll show you a remarkable letter of his. But, first, you ought to understand the way the matter stood. To begin with the relationship.'

'I know nothing about them, only that my father and mother were second cousins; but I don't even know to which of them my great-uncle Underwood was really uncle.'

'To your mother. He had very strong feelings as to the duty of the head of a family, and made his house a home for all that needed it. When Miss Mary was sent home an orphan from India--James's, his favourite brother's, child--he asked his cousin's widow, Mrs. Edward Underwood, to bring her boy, superintend the house, and look after the little girl; and she was glad enough, for the captain had died of his wounds at Waterloo, and she had little but her widow's pension.'

'I know,' said Felix. 'Then whose son is the Squire?'

'The son of Lancelot, who was the second brother, between the Reverend Fulbert (your great-uncle) and James, your mother's father. So he was heir-at-law, but he was a wildish sort of lad, unfit to take Holy Orders; and there came to be an understanding that if his uncle would buy his commission and purchase his steps, he would not look for the Rectory and the estate. On that understanding your father took Orders and married; but on old Mr. Underwood's death there was only a draught of a will, which he had not been in a state to execute, leaving a handsome legacy to Fulbert, but the whole property to your father and mother. It seemed a matter of course that, as the only compensation, Fulbert should have presented his cousin Edward to the vicarage--400 pounds a year; but as ill-luck would have it, he took offence at some sermon--a Lent one about self-indulgence, I believe it was--swore he wouldn't have a Puseyite parson preaching at him, and went into such a rage that it is thought to be partly by way of getting off giving him the living, and getting it held for his son.'

'I see, said Felix.

'It was a dirty trick; and I was a younger man at the time, and it struck me that if your father chose to try the case, the testator's intentions being clear, and instructions in his own hand extant, it was ten to one it might be given in his favour. I even took a counsel's opinion, thinking that at any rate an intimation that the case was to be tried before possession was given up might bring Fulbert to terms with regard to the living.'

'And he would not?'

'No. I should like to show you his letter. Would you do me the honour of dining with me to-morrow?'

Felix was obliged to mutter something about ladies and no dress-coats, but this was silenced, and he made a promise contingent on Lance's fitness. He was puzzled by the relations in which Mr. Staples seemed to stand with the lay-rector; but he found that they were not of business, only that elections and county affairs brought them together, and that Mr. Underwood was regarded with a sort of compassion by the men of his own standing, who used to go and visit him whenever they could be secure of not encountering the cold welcome and ill-breeding of his daughter-in-law--the grievance of his life.

'Did you see any one you remembered?' further asked Mr. Staples.

'One of the Miss Hepburns, who did not seem very well to know whether to acknowledge me or not.'

'Ha, ha!' chuckled Mr. Staples. 'Queer old girls they are. Very high. Very good to the poor. All the good that is done in Vale Leston is by them; but anything between a swell and a pauper don't exist for them. They're as poor as Job, and their pride is all they have, so they

make the most of it.'

So, after all, the day had not been quite without mortification, and Felix felt it a little more than he thought it was worth.

Lance was a good deal excited by the sight of his ancestral home. He had an eye for scenery, and longed to bask in it again; boating seemed delightful; and he was amazed, not to say elated, by the grandeur of the house, which exceeded any--save Centry Park--in his limited experience. His mind was set on explorations there, and on the whole history; while Felix, to whom all was less new and more sorrowful, was inclined to hang back from any unwise awakening of unsettling regrets; but there was no declining Mr. Staples' kindness, and he had much desire to see the letter. So the two youths put on their Sunday coats, assisted one another's ties, and looked each other well over before encountering the formidable mass of ladies Felix had seen in church, and about whom he was far more shy than Lance, who had seen a good deal more of the species at Minsterham.

It turned out very pleasant; the frank good-natured mother and daughters made themselves very agreeable, and though no one was as pretty as Alice Knevett, they were all so far superior to her in manner and cultivation that the mixing with them could not fail to soften any sting of disappointment that might remain. Lance was made much of as an invalid, and very much liked the privileges that did not hinder an evening game of croquet, since Mr. Staples evidently intended his conference with Felix to be *tete-a-tete*.

It took place in a pleasant little study, fitted with green morocco and walnut, that spoke well for the solicitor's taste and prosperity, and looking out on the pretty lawn, with the long shadows of the trees, the croquet players flitting about, and the sea glittering in the distance.

The letter was ready, folded up lengthwise and docketed, business fashion; but when opened, the familiar handwriting seemed to bring back the father, even to the sound of his voice.

Vale Leston Rectory, 18th January.

MY DEAR STAPLES--My wife and I feel greatly obliged, to you for your good-will and zeal on our behalf, and have not for a moment justified your dread of being thought officious. In other circumstances, I might be tempted to fight the battle; but it is impossible for several reasons. Were we the losers, we should be totally unable to pay the costs, and a load either of debt or obligation would be a burthen we have no right to assume. Moreover, the uncertainty of our position pending the decision would be as mischievous to myself as to the parishioners. It would destroy any fitness to be their Vicar, whether we gained or not. The holding the Rectory is in itself an abuse; and now that the grapes are sour, I am glad not to encounter the question of conscience, and so shall not adopt any means--to my

mind doubtful--for bringing it on myself. This being the case, you will see that the idea of alarming Fulbert Underwood falls to the ground. Supposing he were coerced into the compromise, what a pleasing pair--squire and parson--would be the result! No, my kind friend, be content to see things remain as they are. We carry with us the certainty of our good uncle's kindness, and the non-fulfilment of his intentions is clearly providential. I have heard of a promising curacy, where I shall get the training I need after feeling my wilful way as I have done here. My wife, being the expectant heiress and lay-rectoress, shall write to satisfy you that she is not suffering from my coercion.--Yours, most sincerely obliged,

E. F. UNDERWOOD.

And on another sheet followed:--

DEAR MR. STAPLES--I think my husband is quite right, and that to go to law would only make things much worse. It is very kind in you, but I really do not care about anything so long as I have my husband and children, and can feel that my dear uncle meant all that was kind. Indeed, I really think my husband enjoys the prospect of a new and more active kind of work. He is sure to be happy anywhere, and as long as that is the case, all will be right; and he says that it will be much better for the children not to grow up in luxury. With many warm thanks.--

Yours very truly,

M. W. UNDERWOOD.

'May I copy them?' asked Felix, looking up with his eyes fuller of tears than suited his reserved disposition.

His father's letter, full of his constant brave cheerfulness in self-abnegation, had not overcome him like the few words that brought back the lovely young mamma he now remembered at Vale Leston, but whom he had too soon known only as the patient, over-tasked, drudging mother, and latterly in the faded helpless invalid. How little she had guessed the life that was before her!

Mr. Staples readily supplied him with the materials, adding, 'I will take care you have the letters by and by. I value them too much to part with them in my lifetime.' And presently he interrupted Felix's writing by saying, 'I much wished to have seen Mr. and Mrs. Edward Underwood again, but it seemed to me that they were unwilling to keep up a correspondence.'

'They were so busy,' said Felix.

'No doubt; and I thought they might feel a visit an intrusion. Otherwise, I often thought of running down from town.'

'My father would have been very glad.'

'I did wish to have seen him again--and your mother, almost a child as she was even at that time, with her flock of pretty children. I shall never forget her--the beauty and darling of all the neighbourhood as she used to be. All we young men used to rave about her long before she was out.' Mr. Staples smiled at some recollection, and added, 'I never spoke to her four times in my life; but I was as bad as any of them--presumptuous as you may think it.'

'I am glad you did not see her again,' burst from Felix, the tears starting forth as he copied her hopeful words. 'She altered sadly.'

'Ah! indeed.'

The concerned tone forced Felix to add, 'It came so much more heavily on her than on any of us, care and work and years of seeing my father's health failing; and in the last week of his life she had a fall, that brought on softening of the brain.'

Somehow, the whole had never struck him as so piteous before as in the contrast with her youthful brightness, and when he saw Mr. Staples greatly affected. He could only write on through a mist of tears, while the solicitor walked about the room, blowing his nose violently, and muttering sentences never developed; till at last he came behind Felix's chair, and laying his hand on his shoulder, said, 'After all, it will come round. You are next heir.'

'Heir? There's Fulbert Underwood!' exclaimed Felix.

'True; but he's been some years married, and there's no sign of a family. Depend upon it, we shall see Vale Leston come back yet.'

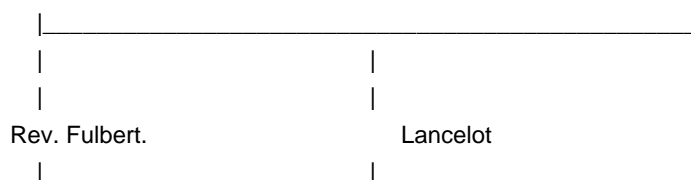
'It would make no difference now,' muttered Felix, as he traced his mother's fearless lines; nay, if he had a personal thought, it was of what he might have ventured towards Alice Knevett.

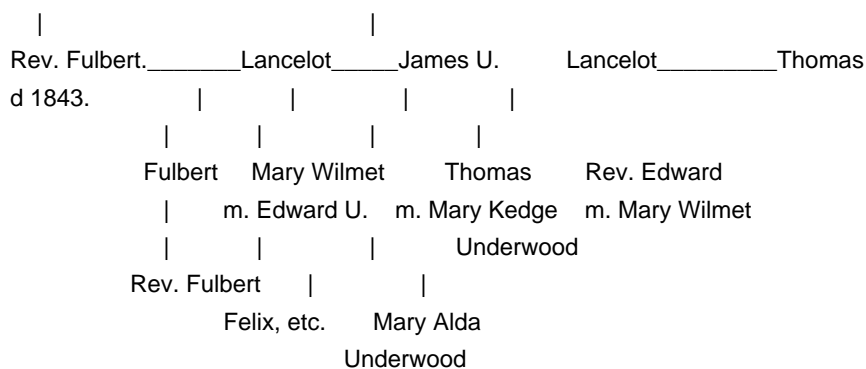
'Not to them,' said Mr. Staples, 'but a good deal to you, my young friend.'

'Now, Mr. Staples,' said Felix, smiling, 'aren't you doing our best to unsettle a young man in business?'

'Well, well, you are too reasonable. A contingency--only a contingency. But I should like to show you.' And he hastily sketched a pedigree that had at least the advantage of showing Felix his relationships.

Rev. Lancelot.





'There! Through your mother you stand next in the line--are heir-at-law, you see. May I live to see that day! That's all.'

The thought did not affect Felix much at the moment. He was too full of what might have been, and the 'contingency' was such a remote one! So after answering to the best of his ability whether any of his sisters were like his mother, he was glad to get out, and forget it all in croquet. His musical capacities were discovered too; but the attempt to profit by them proved quite too much for Lance, to whose brain the notes of the piano were absolute and severe pain.

A formal little note came on the ensuing morning, in which 'the Misses Hepburn'--in the third person--requested the favour of the company of Mr. Felix Underwood and his brother at luncheon. Felix felt a little stung. He could recollect warm passages between the ladies and his mother, and had been their pet long enough to wonder at this cold reception, and question whether it were not more dignified to reject advances made in such a manner; but his heart yearned towards those who had been kind to him in his youth, and he believed that his mother would have wished him to renew the intercourse, and therefore decided upon going, but it was too hot and sunny a day for Lance to walk, and Felix so entirely expected the visit to be wearisome and disagreeable, if not mortifying, that he could only resolve on it as a duty, and would not expose his brother to it.

So he plodded off alone, and a curious visit he had. It was not easy for him to guess at the sacredness of those traditions of gentility and superiority that the 'Misses Hepburn' held--not so much for their own sakes as in faithful loyalty to the parents many years dead, and to the family duty that imposed a certain careful exclusiveness on them in deference to the noble lineage they could reckon, and the head of the house, whom none of them had ever seen. He could not have guessed the warm feeling towards 'dear Mary' that had struggled so hard with the sense of duty, and had gained the victory over the soreness at the dropping of correspondence, and the idea that it was a dereliction to bend to one 'who had lowered himself,' as Mrs. Fulbert Underwood said he had.

What he saw was a tiny drawing-room, full of flowers and gimcracks,

and fuller of four tall angular women, in dark dresses in the rear of the fashion, and sandy hair. They had decided in council, or rather Miss Isabella had decided for them, that since he was to be received, they would remember only his gentle blood; and therefore they shook hands with him, and the difference of the clasp alone could have shown the difference of character--the patronising, the nervous, the tenderly agitated, the hearty.

He found them better informed than the Squire had been as to the condition of the family--at least, so he presumed from the text of their inquiries. Not a word did they say of his own employment--it was to be treated as a thing not to be spoken of; but the welfare of the others was inquired after, and especially of Robina--who was the name-child of the eldest sister, the gentlest of the set, and the most in the background, quiet and tearful--pleased to hear that her godchild was at school, and as Felix emphatically said 'a very good girl,' anxious that he should take charge of 'a little token' for her.

The little token turned out to be Ministering Children; and this gave Felix a further hint, which prepared him for the tone in which some of his information was received, when he had only mentioned Geraldine as gone for health's sake to the St. Faith's Sisterhood.

The ladies looked at one another, Miss Isabella cleared her throat, and he knew a warning was coming; so he quickly said, 'One of the ladies, a clergyman's widow, was very kind to my father in his illness, and is really the best friend we have left in England.'

'Your dear father was too much inclined to those specious doctrines that are only too fascinating to youth. I hope you do not outrun him.'

'I hope not,' said Felix, very sincerely; and he then succeeded in interesting his monitor by speaking of Fulbert, and using him as a bridge to lead to an account of Mr. Audley's Australian doings.

It was altogether a stiff uncomfortable visit; the very politeness of the good ladies made Felix feel that they viewed his position as altered, and he could not but feel a strong hope that he should never again have to make this offering at the shrine of ancient friendship.

On coming home in the evening, Felix found a note on the table.

'Croquet to wit?' asked Lance, as Felix tried to read it by the almost vanished twilight.

'What's this?'

'We hope you and your brother will join us in a picnic at Kitt's Head on Saturday.'

'Having discharged my ladies' commission, I proceed to that which I have authority from your relation for intimating to you--namely, that failing heirs of his own son, he has entailed the Vale Leston property upon you, thus rendering its alienation by the Reverend Fulbert impossible. I believe the arrangement was made within the last week. Congratulations would hardly be suitable, but I cannot refuse myself the pleasure of saying how sincerely I rejoice.'

'What--what?' cried Lance, jumping up. 'You to have that splendiferous river, and the salmon, and all. Won't you get a magnificent organ for that church?'

'My dear Lance, don't you see that all this means is, that if young Fulbert has no children, I shall come after him.'

'Oh, he won't! I'm sure he won't. Things always do come right. Oh, what a coup d'etat mine was after all! Things always do come right. You, that were born to it! Didn't old Tripp say how they had had the bells rung for you? I should like to set them going this minute!'

'They should be on your own cap, then!' said Felix, laughing and yet sharing in a castle or two--how Cherry should have a pony-carriage! how Clement should be turned loose upon the Church! how Lance should pursue the salmon at home and the humanities at the University! how Bernard should have a real good gentleman's education--but Felix soon brought himself back again. 'Remember, Lance, not a word of this at home or anywhere else.'

'Not tell any one ?' cried the boy, crest-fallen.

'Don't you see, Lance, besides the impropriety of talking of what involves two deaths, it would be the most senseless thing in the world to let this make the least difference. Old Fulbert may change his mind, or young Fulbert have a son; at any rate, he is not five-and-thirty, and just as likely as not to outlive me.'

'Fee! Fee! you are quite well, you wretched Norseman!'

'Oh! I didn't mean that; but anybody may outlive anybody for that matter. Anyway, there's no chance of any of these schemes coming to pass while we are young enough to care, even if they ever do; and if they unsettle us now, it would be unmitigated damage.'

'I see that,' said Lance; 'but as, by good luck, I'm No. 8, it can't do me much harm to think about it, and I don't see why the others should not.'

'Do you think some of them would be content to go on as we are doing, with this in their heads? And if any one in the town knew it, whatever I might do, people would think I was getting above my business. I doubt whether even Froggy himself would have the same reliance on me.'

'Then shan't you even tell Wilmet and Cherry?'

'I hope not. I don't think Wilmet could keep it from Alda, or Cherry from Edgar; and just imagine what it would be to have it come round through Kensington Palace Gardens that we were reckoning on it! Besides, it will make no earthly difference to anybody, unless, maybe, to Edgar's son.'

The mention of such a being brought Felix somehow to a sudden silence; and in the meantime supper and a candle were brought in, revealing a thick letter from Geraldine, which had at first escaped notice. There were two enclosures; but as Felix read her writing, he broke out with an exclamation of consternation that startled Lance.

'Hollo! What is it?' And as he received no answer--'Wilmet's not given up Jack? Eh? Nor Cherry fallen in love next? Clem hasn't turned bare-footed friar?' crowding together the wildest suggestions he could think of to force answer.

'Hush! That dear child--'

'She doesn't want to be a sister? You'll tell her you'd see her at Jericho first!'

'No. It is about her foot.'

'Not worse!'

'No; but, dear little thing, she wants to have it taken off, because she fancies if she was more effective, it might be one difficulty out of Wilmet's way!'

'She's a blessed little brick! But would it be so?'

'Well, I remember in the time of the measles, the last time I ever let that fellow Rugg come near her, he thought proper to tell somebody in her hearing that if she was in a fit state of health, it would be the only remedy. She wasn't, and it was quite uncalled for, and it put the poor little thing in such an agony, that at last Sibby came and wrapped me up in a blanket to sit by her, and talk very big about nobody being able to do it without my leave, and my not intending to consent to any such thing. I thought she had forgotten all about it, but it seems that she has not; and she imagines that, as she says, "with a cork foot that I could stand upon, instead of always keeping this one up in fear of hurting it, I could get about the house with only a stick, and be of some use, and then dear Mettie's happiness might not be so far off."

'And what does Mettie say?'

'She knows nothing; Cherry implores me not to tell her, for she says that it would be impossible for Mettie to come and nurse her, and she

would rather have Sister Constance than any one.'

'Than Mettie! Deluded child!' cried Lance.

'Her great wish is to have it done now at St. Faith's. She told Clement before she left home, because she thought they would insist on some one at home knowing; but "Don't think me very sly," she says; "I would not tell Sister Constance what was in my head till I came here, for fear she should think it her duty to speak to Wilmet; and now, they will not hear of it without your knowing. I did wish to have surprised you all! About the cost I have thought. You know Dr. Lee attends me for nothing while I am here, and I told you that Sister Constance has sent up all my book of illustrations of Queen Isabel, and some of the water-coloured drawings, to her sister, Lady Liddesdale, and how much she has been getting for them--quite enough to set me up with a foot that will not be half such a nuisance as this old dead-alive one, which has never let me have any peace these twelve years. I am trying to be good; but indeed I feel as if it might be wrong to try to be rid of my cross. So I abide by your decision, dear Felix. You are my king, and I put myself in your hands; only you must not be anxious. You should have known nothing if I could have helped it."

'Go on,' grunted Lance, with his face hidden, as Felix paused.

'That's all; but here are notes from Sister Constance and Dr. Lee.'

The Sister's explanation was that it had been entirely Geraldine's own thought, and that her willingness and eagerness made a great difference in such a nature as hers. She told Felix not to think of coming--the fewer the better; and he could come in a few hours in case of need. It was advisable that the decision should be made quickly, since to nervous sensitiveness like Cherry's the very effort to bear suspense reacted on the bodily frame. 'If you know what I mean,' concluded Sister Constance, 'heroism is likely to carry the little creature through what would be far more trying if this were proposed to her for her own sake.'

And Dr. Lee's letter gave the medical view, decidedly inclining to the opinion that the probabilities were in favour of the operation, and that the conditions were never likely to be more promising than at present.

'Dear child! I wish I were there!'

'Can't we go?'

'What, you? Think of the train.'

Lance shook his head. 'Couldn't I stay by myself, and you run up?'

'I don't think I can help it.'

But the excitement of the evening broke Lance's sleep, and the next day he was quite ill; while Felix not only saw that he must not be left, but perceived after the first that Sister Constance's warning ought to be respected, and that an arrival would only agitate Cherry's nerves. So he wrote his sanction with a very heavy heart, betraying as little emotion as was consistent with the tenderness so essential to support brave but fragile little Geraldine.

The anxiety seemed to have swallowed up the recollection of Mr. Staples' message; indeed, it was not willingly that Felix answered his note, and made a half engagement to the picnic.

Felix was struck by seeing how much, under the circumstances, Lance missed the daily service to which he had been used all his life.

'I didn't mind it at first,' said the chorister, 'it seemed a part of the holiday; but somehow the day seems all stupid and astray without it.'

But there was no church with it to be heard of; and indeed one attempt on Sunday at East Ewmouth resulted in Lance's collapsing into some of his most distressing symptoms, caused, as he declared, by the overpowering might and untuneableness of the singing, but quite bad enough to make Felix resolve against permitting further experiments, and thus walk off by himself on the next Wednesday forenoon when he heard the bell.

There was a long lecture that he had not bargained for, and when he came out with a slightly impatient impulse, the first thing he saw was a blue umbrella, a white hat, and a hand waving a paper. In silence Felix read--

'Constance Somerville to Felix Underwood.--11.30. Favourably over. No cause for anxiety.'

They were rather grave and awe-struck, and scarcely spoke all the way home--indeed, Felix was chiefly thinking how to get Lance home out of the sun without hurrying or over-heating him, but after dinner came a reaction; the boy went frantic with admiration of a beautiful yacht that was standing into the bay, and Felix, with his letter to Sister Constance to write, one to Australia to finish, and his leading articles to draw up, was forced to command peace in something of the old rough-and-ready style; and even when Lance vanished, he was to be heard singing scraps of comic songs in the distance.

By and by he came in carrying a board taller than himself. 'Please your Majesty, I'll be as mute as a mole; but I must do this here, for Mrs. Pettigrew is baking.'

'What in the name of wonder, have you got there?' asked Felix, as Lance proceeded to lay his board on the sofa (his day and Felix's night--bed) and place on it a white and soppy mass.

'A little dab out, as Sibby calls it,' said Lance. 'It's my puggery. Ever since it fell overboard it has been a disgrace to human nature, so I have been washing it, and now I've got an iron heating.'

'What a mess you will make of it!' observed Felix, with a grimace of disgust, as Lance returned again from the kitchen, holding the iron scientifically near his cheek.'

'That's all you know about it! Why, I've ironed dozens of pocket-handkerchiefs--at least, not dozens, but my own, dozens of times--in the Harewood tubs.'

'I thought the Chapter washed you?'

'So it does, in reason; but last spring there was a doom on my pocket-handkerchiefs. The Harewood puppy ate up one; one dropped into the canal; I tied up a fellow that had got a cut with one, and the beggar never returned it; and two or three more went I don't know how. I knew W. W. would be in a dreadful state if I asked for a fresh lot, so I used to wash out the last two by turns, till I got some tip and bought some fresh ones--such jolly ones, all over acrobats and British flags; and after all, didn't I catch it? Wilmet was no end of disgusted to miss her little stupid speckotty ones, vowed these weren't decent for the Cathedral, and boned them all for Theodore! Now, hush! or I shall come to grief!'

Felix held his pen suspended to watch the dexterity that reduced the crude mass to smooth muslin, which in its expanded state looked as impracticable as before.

'Now, do you mean to get Mrs. Pettigrew to put it on in those elegant festoons?'

'You just mind your leader, Blunderbore! A man who has had women to do for him all his life is a pitiable being!'

And Lance, according to instructions obtained from John Harewood, wreathed his hat triumphantly in the white drapery, and completed Felix's surprise and amusement by producing a needle and thread, and setting to work on various needful repairs of his own buttons and his brother's, over which he shook his head in amusement as he chuckled at the decay which had befallen the garments of so neat a personage as Felix, and which had been very distressing to himself.

'Ah! thank you. I never knew what Robinson Crusoe felt like before!' said Felix, as Lance came on a wrist-band minus button.

'Robinson Crusoe! You'd soon have been like Man Friday before he caught him.'

'But doesn't the matron mend for you?'

'She pretends; but I should like to see her face if one brought her a

chance thing to do. My eyes! if that isn't old Staples! I must absquatulate.'

Which after all he had no time to effect, with all his works, before their friend came to ask whether they were relieved about their sister, and was amused at the handy little schoolboy's ingenious preparations. 'After all, I find it is to be more of an affair than I expected; I thought it was to be only ourselves and the Brandons, but they are the kind of people who always pick up every one.'

'Does that yacht belong here?' eagerly asked Lance.

'That! It is the Kittiwake--Captain Audley's.'

'Ha! That's what Fulbert went to Alexandria in! What fun!'

'He is the son of Sir Robert Audley. Do you know him?'

'His brother was my father's fellow-curate,' said Felix, 'and is our guardian and kindest friend. I have seen this one in London. Will he be at this picnic?'

'Not likely. He is shy and uncertain, very hearty and friendly when you do meet him, but reluctant to go into society, and often taking no notice one day, when he has seemed like one's best friend the day before. They say he has never got over the loss of his wife; but I don't like such manners.'

'Does he live here, then!'

'He rents the little Tudor cottage under the cliff year by year, for the sake of his yachting--for he won't go near the regular stations. He's got his boy at school at Stoneborough, and stays here all the winter.'

When the brothers were walking part of the way back with their visitor, they met the gentleman in question, with three boys after him, and he was evidently in a cordial mood; for after shaking hands with Mr. Staples, he exclaimed, 'I am sure I ought to know you!'

'Felix Underwood,' said the owner of that name.

'_Indeed_! Not staying with your worthy relations?'

'No, I am down here with my brother, who has been laid up by a sunstroke, and wanted sea air.'

'I wish I had been at home' said the Captain, who had taken a great fancy to Felix when they had been together in London two years before; 'but I've been giving my boy and his cousins, the two young Somervilles, a trip to the Hebrides; and now, just as I am come home, I fall upon Mrs. Brandon, hounding me out to an abominable picnic, and my youngsters are wild to go. Are you in for it? I believe we

shall go round to the cove in the yacht. Can I take you two?’

Felix gladly accepted, aware that their transport was a difficulty to the Stapleses, and that the Kittiwake would be felicity to Lance, who had fraternised with the boys, and went off with them to see the vessel. He returned brimful of delight and fatigue, only just in time to tumble into bed as fast as possible, and Felix was thus able to get his work off his mind by midnight.

The morning’s letters set them quite at rest. Sister Constance and Clement both wrote: Geraldine had been calm and resolute from the time Felix’s consent arrived, and doubt was over, and Clement, though tender, and striving hard to be firm, had been chiefly useful in calling out her words of encouragement. He had spent the time of the operation in the oratory, and there had been so entirely overcome by the tidings that all was safely over, that he was hardly fit to go to Cherry when he was sent for, and that was not soon, for the effect of chloroform on her had indeed been to annihilate pain, but only half to make her unconscious, for she went on talking to Felix about the expedience all the time, ever repeating the old motto, ‘Under Wode, Under Rode;’ and the trance had lasted for a good while, though when once over, she remembered nothing of it, and was only so rejoiced and thankful that it was difficult to keep her calm enough. She sent her brothers her love, and entreated them not to say a word at home. Lady Liddesdale had contrived the sale of the book of illustrations--a work that had been Cherry’s delight of many years, so that she could feel that she herself had earned what would cover the expense incurred, all but the medical attendance, freely given to an inmate of St. Faith’s. ‘Tell Felix I am as happy as a queen,’ was the final message; ‘tell him to give thanks for me.’

Felix’s voice trembled, shook, and gave way, as he read; and at last he sprang up, and walked about the room, saying that no one ever had such brothers and sisters as himself. There was something almost oppressive in the relief from so much anxiety, and it was some time before he roused his ordinary senses to say, ‘Well! we must finish breakfast, or we shan’t be ready for the Captain. How round the world is! Those boys must be Sister Constance’s nephews--Lady Liddesdale’s sons.’

‘Those boys,’ said Lance. ‘What, Sum and Frank? Well, I did think it queer that the sailors on board the Kittiwake called every one My Lord.’

‘Sum, I imagine, must mean Lord Somerville. What did you think of them?’

‘Nicish chaps of eleven and twelve. Nothing like such swells as Tom Bruce! The little one wanted to know where I was at school, and his senior snubbed him; so I supposed he saw by the looks of me that I wasn’t upper-crust public school; and when I said I was a choir-boy, the other--Charley Audley--said, “Oh, then you’re one of the awful lot my father always jaws about when he’s out of sorts!” I told him I

was very sorry, and it wasn't my fault, but yours; and then we got on like a house on fire.'

CHAPTER XXI

A KETTLE OF FISH

'Our Pursuivant at arms will show
Both why we came and when we go.'

SCOTT.

The place of the picnic was a good way off, being the point of the promontory that shut in the mouth of the river, a great crag, with a long reef of rocks running out into the sea, playfully called the Kitten's Tail, though the antiquarians always deposed that the head had nothing to do with cats or kits, but with the disposition to erect chapels to St. Christopher on the points of land where they might first greet the mariners' eyes. Beneath this crag, sheltered by the first and larger joints of the Kitten's Tail, was a delightful sandy nook, where appeared a multitude of smart hats, male and female, a great many strangers even to Captain Audley, who would fain have recognised none of them. In a strong access of his almost morbid silence, he devoted himself to Felix, and kept aloof from almost every one. Even at the dinner, spread on a very sloping bit of beach, picnic exigencies enabled him to be nearly tete-a-tete with Felix, who found himself almost back to back to a lady in a brilliant foreign pheasant's plume, with glass dew-drops at the points.

In a pause of their own conversation, they heard the inquiry, 'Do you know who that boy is--that fair delicate-looking lad just opposite, with the white muslin round his hat?'

'Oh--that!' answered the pheasant lady; 'that is young Lord Somerville, son to the Marquess of Liddesdale. He and his brother, Lord Francis, have been out yachting with Captain Audley.'

The Captain smiled as he looked at the boys. 'Ay,' he observed, with a flash of his bright dark eyes, 'he has the advantage over Sum.'

For Lance had resumed his lark-like air, and it was perhaps the more striking from the fragility and transparency that remained about his looks; and he was full of animation, as he, with a reinforcement of boys, clustered round a merry sunny-faced girl, full of joyous drollery.

'Very queer and eccentric--quite a bear,' was the next thing they heard; whereat Captain Audley nodded and smiled to Felix. After the

general turmoil caused by the change of courses had subsided, that penetrating voice was heard again. 'Yes, we came home sooner than we had intended. The fact was, we found that old Mr. Underwood was being beset by some of those relations. You remember? Oh, yes; they have sunk very low--got into trade, absolutely got into trade! One of them a mere common singing-boy. Mr. Underwood is getting aged--quite past--and we did not know what advantage might be taken of him.'

'Your turn now,' murmured Captain Audley, with a look of diversion calculated to allay the wounded flush on his neighbour's cheek.

'Do you mean Mr. Edward Underwood's sons?' said a voice on the other side. 'I always understood them to be very respectable and well conducted.'

'Oh, very likely! Only I do happen to know that one of them has been a great trouble and vexation to Tom Underwood; and we didn't want the same over again with the poor old Squire.'

'Did I understand you that any of them were here?' added the other voice; 'for I had just been struck by the likeness of that boy opposite, talking to my sister, to poor Mr. Edward Underwood, as I remember him.'

'Oh no, Mrs. Rivers; I assure you that's young Lord Somerville!'

Captain Audley made an effort, rather difficult in his Turkish position, to crane his head beyond the interposing figures, recognised and bowed to the speaker, who greeted him by name, and thus diminished the flow of Mrs. Fulbert Underwood's conversation by her awe of the high and mighty bear whom she scarcely knew by sight. He had no taste for scenes, and did not put either her or Felix to pain by mentioning his name; but when the last act of the meal was over, and people began to move, he made his way in the direction of the inquiring voice. 'Mrs. Rivers, let me introduce Mr. Felix Underwood.'

'I am very happy--' and there was a cordial smile and a hand held out. 'Are you here for long? My father would be so much pleased to see you.'

It was a rather worn pale face; but the ease and sweetness of manner, and the perfect fitness of the dress, made a whole that gave Felix a sense of the most perfect lady he had met with, except his mother and Sister Constance.

'I am at Ewmouth, with one of my brothers who has been ill.'

'Lord Somerville?' and all three burst out laughing. 'My sister has found him out, I see. She and your little boy are old friends, Captain Audley.'

'Yes, you have been very kind to him. But I am as much surprised to

see you here as you can be to see my friend. Are you from home?'

'We go back this evening. We slept at the Crewes' last night. My husband had business there; and when they asked us to this picnic, it was a good opportunity for Gertrude to learn the beauties of her county.'

'Which she seems to be doing under full escort,' laughed Captain Audley, as the young lady and the young boy flock were seen descending to the rocks.

'She has a strong taste for little boys,' said the elder sister.

'You have the Somerville boys here, haven't you, though?'

'Yes; there had been scarlatina or something or other in their school, and their mother was afraid of them among their sisters, till I had purified them by a sea voyage.'

Probably Mrs. Fulbert never found out her mistake; for Lord Somerville reported that he had never been so pitched into in his life as by an old girl in a 'stunning tile,' who found him washing out an empty pie-dish for the benefit of some maritime monsters that he wanted to carry home to his sisters; but that when Lance came up, she was as meek as a mouse. Certainly, the two boys were little sturdy fellows, burnt lobster-like up to the roots of their bleached and rough hair; and their costumes were more adapted to the deck of the Kittiwake in all weathers than to genteel society. Their sisters were in an aquarium fever, and their sport all through their expedition had been researches for what they had learnt in Scotland to call 'beasts'; and now the collection was to be completed from the mouth of the Ewe, and the scrambling and tumbling it involved were enchanting.

Kate Staples, who usually considered Lance her charge, was not sorry to see a croquet player disposed of among his own congeners, for the game seemed such a necessary of life, that it was actually prepared for on the sands, to the extreme contempt of the anemone hunters. 'Play at croquet, forsooth, when rocks aren't to be had to scramble on every day!' And scramble ecstatically they did, up and over slippery stone and rock festooned with olive weed, peeping into pools of crystal clearness, and admiring rosy fans of weed, and jewel-like actinias embellished by the magic beauty of intense clear brightness. The boys took off shoes and stockings, turned up trousers, and scrambled and paddled like creatures to the manner born.

'O dear! I wish I might!' sighed the young lady.

'Why don't you?' said Charlie Audley. 'Kate and Em and Annie always do--don't they, Frank?'

'Of course they do, or how would they ever get on!'

'Come along then, Miss Gertrude,' said Charlie. 'You can't think how jolly it is!'

And soon another pair of little white feet were dancing on the rocks. 'Oh dear! what a blunder of civilisation it is to wear shoes at all! How delicious a hold one gets!'

'I can't think why people do wear them! They never are anything but a bother,' said Lance.

'To play at football with,' suggested Somerville from the top of a rock.

'But women don't,' said Gertrude.

'I think women do it, and make us, that they may have something to worry about,' said Frank. 'Damp stockings are the bother of creation till one goes to school; and then, isn't it Jolly!'

'Except the chilblains,' called out Charlie.

'I believe,' said Lance, 'chilblains come of shoes.'

'No, they can't,' argued Charlie, 'for one has them on one's hands.'

'Well,' said Gertrude, 'let's form ourselves into a society for the suppression of shoes and stockings!'

'Hurrah!' cried Lance. 'I know one person at least that it would be a blessing to.'

The question was, how the five bold reformers were to begin. Frank suggested drowning all the present stock, and pretended to be about to begin, but was of course prevented by a scream.

'Public opinion must be prepared first,' said Lance.

'And that,' said Gertrude, 'we'd better do by a great example! Here, we'll show what can be done. Why shouldn't we get out to the end of the Kitten's Tail?'

'One can't to the end,' said Charlie; 'there's a place big enough for a gig to go through half way out.'

'And about the tide?' said Lance.

'Tide,' said Charlie, looking at his watch--'tide wouldn't think of playing us such a dirty trick as turning for an hour and a half.'

'And the jolliest beasts of all always live in places like that,' added Somerville. 'Come on, President of the Society for the Suppression of Shoes--to the front!'

On moved the august Society, now scrambling to a dry flat, now threading a mauvais pas, clinging to festoons of sea-weed; the three little boys climbed like monkeys or sailors; but Lance, agile as he was, had not had the same amount of training, and felt besides that it was requisite to be ready to give a helping hand to Miss Gertrude. She got on very well, being full of lightness and springiness, only she was a little inclined to be adventurous, and to chatter at critical moments.

'We must have got out a quarter of a mile.'

'Oh no, not that!'

'No? I'm sure it is! How small they look on the beach! I wonder if they can see us! Hark! they're singing--'

"'Drink to me only with thine eyes:" that's Felix's crack glee,' said Lance, 'what fun for him!'

'This is much better fun!' cried the general voice. 'They'll never see us if we wave now!'

'No, no; don't let's wave now! Wait till we get to the farthest point.'

'And there we'll plant our ensign!'

'What shall we do for a flag? We haven't got the Britisher here!'

'No; it must be the flag of the SSSS's.'

'That ought to be a bit of bare skin.'

'No, no--a pair of feet--motto, "Off, vile lendings!'"

'I say, I don't think you can get any farther,' interposed Somerville. 'I've been on four rocks farther, and I'm sure you will never get back again if you go on.'

'Oh, that's base! I'm sure this one isn't so hard.'

She was creeping along a ledge, holding the sea-weed with one hand and Lance by the other.

'I really don't think it passable,' he said; 'there's scarcely the width of one's foot beyond.'

'Hurrah!' shouted Frank. 'Here's the father of all the Daisianas!'

'Oh! oh! he's my cousin. I must see him!' cried Gertrude, with a scramble and a laugh, which ended in a sudden slip--luckily, not into the open sea, but into a very steep-sided bath-like pool; and Lance, whom of course she gripped hard, was pulled after her, both over head

and ears; and though they scrambled on their feet in a moment, there they stood up to their shoulders in water.

'Get the Daisiana now you are there!' shouted Frank.

'How are we ever to get out?' said Gertrude, looking up the walls, six feet at least on the lowest side.

'If we had a rope,' said Charlie.

'Make signals--call,' said Somerville, all suiting the action to the word. 'No, they don't hear! they are all singing away. You, Franky, you're too little to be any good, make the best of your way to call somebody.'

'The tide will come in!' said Frank. 'Mamma and Aunt Emmie were once shut in by the tide, and Uncle Edwin. And there was a fellow who was quite drowned--dead--and that was why I was named Francis.'

'That's what you may call a cheering reminiscence at a happy moment,' said Lance, recollecting that he was far more nearly a man than any one present, and instinctively feeling the need of brightening all into cheerful activity, for the girl looked thoroughly frightened.

'Yes, Lord Frank, the best thing you can do is to go for somebody; but we'll be out long first. Can't we make a rope! Have you a sash or anything Miss Gertrude? Don't fear, we'll soon be out.'

Happily she had both a sash and a broad ribbon round her hat; and Lance tore off his puggery.

'I can do it best,' called Charlie. 'I know all the sailors' knots.'

'It will never bear,' said Gertrude.

'Oh yes, it will. You'll not trust your whole weight to it. Is it done?'

'Besides, how can they draw me up?'

'We'd best get behind that rock, Sum,' suggested Charlie, 'then she won't pull us in.'

Charlie's sailor experience was very useful; and he shouted advice to Lance, who was tying the extemporaneous rope round Gertrude, not very easily, owing to the material, and to its being done under water.

'Now, then, you do your best at climbing--here,' he said. 'They'll pull you; and look! There, first my knee--yes--now my shoulder--now--' And standing for a moment on his shoulder, Gertrude was really able with a desperate grapple to surmount the wall of her prison, and scramble out beside the two cousins, whose pulls had been very helpful.

Lance's clambering was a harder matter, for he did not venture to trust much to the rope, though the girl's strength was added to that of the two boys; and it was a severe climb up the scarcely indented, slippery, moist, slimy rock, where his hands and feet could hardly find any hold; and when at length he reached the top, he was so panting and dizzy, that Somerville at first held him to hinder his slipping backward into the sea. No one could get at King or Queen Daisiana, so it was left in its glory; while the young people struggled back over rocks that seemed much steeper, and pools far deeper, than in their advance; Lance still trying to be helpful, but with a mazed sense of the same sort of desperate effort with which he had run back with Bill's verses; for not only had his small strength been overtaxed, but the immersion in water was affecting his head.

Lord Francis had made much quicker progress; and boy as he was, showed his breeding by not rushing open-mouthed on the party with his intelligence, but seeking the Captain, who was smoking the pipe of solitude upon a rock apart. He at once sent Frank to the servants, who were enjoying the relics of the feast, to fetch some wine, and tell the boat's crew to make ready at once, and then went off himself to seek Mrs. Rivers. Felix, who had spied the little messenger speeding up to the Captain, was already on his way to the rocks, and reached the party in good time; for draggled, drenched, and with clinging garments, they were so slow in getting on, that it was no delusion that the water was higher, and the rocks lower; and even Gertrude had neither breath nor spirits to gabble when that grave anxious face met her, and a strong careful hand lifted and helped, first her, then Lance, up and down every difficulty; and when she perceived how the newcomer avoided point-blank looking at the bare ankles that had sometimes to make long stretches, a burning red came up into her face, half of shame, half of indignation at being made ashamed. And after all, when the place where her hose and shoon had been left was reached, the niched shelf in the rock turned out to have been surrounded by the tide, so that they were quite unattainable either by herself or the little boys; and Felix, putting the arm by which Lance had held by him over Somerville's shoulder told them to go on before, and himself made two long strides and a scramble before he could reach the boots and stockings, and give them to the young lady, unable to help looking nearly as grave and vexed as if it had been Angela herself; indeed, he was vexed, for he had an ideal of the young ladyhood of his mother's old native region, and did not like it to be disturbed. He moved away far enough for her to think he had left her to her fate, till she was on her feet and coming on, and then there he was again, in a moment the attentive squire. Revived by her short rest, and on less perilous ground, she glanced at his face in readiness to disperse her discomfort with something saucy, but somehow, it would not do; and she was tamely conducted to terra firma, where her sister saluted her with 'O Daisy! what a child you are to have charge of!'

That restored her enough to answer, 'I'm quite delighted something should have happened under your keeping! No harm done. Salt water never gives cold.'

'I don't mind it for you,' said the elder sister; 'you have not been ill.--But indeed, Mr. Underwood, I am very sorry,' she added. 'What will be best for your brother?'

'Here!' said Captain Audley, taking from Frank a flask of sherry, and overruling the objection made by the brothers that stimulants were forbidden. He further insisted on taking Lance at once to his own berth on board the yacht while Mrs. Rivers meant to conduct her sister to the preventive house.

'So,' said Lance, rather ruefully, as he shook hands, 'there ends the SSSS.'

'Not at all! Its use is proved. We should have been cooked by this time in the Daisiana cauldron, if we had had great cumbrous boots on.'

It was a valiant effort, and she cast a glance out of the corner of her eye at the elder brother, but it had not relaxed a muscle of his grave anxious face, which was in truth chiefly bent on watching Lance's involuntary shiverings; and she again turned crimson, perhaps from her share of the chill, and was dragged off, muttering, 'What intolerable folks guardian brothers are! Henry Ward was a mild specimen compared to this one!'

About noon on the following day, Mrs. Pettigrew's little girl abruptly opened the parlour door, and with 'Please, ye're wanted,' turned in a tall, thin, grey-haired, spectacled gentleman, who, as Lance started up from the sofa, exclaimed, 'Don't disturb yourself; I came to thank you, and inquire after you after the adventure my mad-cap daughter led you into.'

'I hope she is all right,' said Lance, solicitously.

'As right as Daisiana himself; more so than I fear you are. Let me see you comfortable. Lie down again, pray.'

'Oh, I don't care about lying down, thank you, Sir; I only sleep for want of something to do;' but though he did not put his feet up, he was feeling far too languid not to relax his bolt-upright attitude, and lean back on his pillows.

'That will do. Bad headache?'

'It is nearly gone off now, thank you, Sir; it was bad all night, but it is much better since I have been asleep.'

'Let me see,' laying his left hand on the wrist that hung over the edge of the sofa. 'Ay, I hope that wicked little siren has done no great damage. Pulled you below, true mermaid fashion--eh?'

'I meant to have pulled her out.'

'Instead of which she made a lad into a ladder to climb out on.'
Which bad pun served the purpose of making the boy laugh enough to be at his ease. 'She is much indebted, and so am I. I like to meet an old friend's son. Are you alone?'

'My brother is only gone to the post-office. He will be in before long; but it saves a post to take the letters before twelve, and he ought to be out as much as he can.'

'Is he here on his own account, or yours?'

'He came down first, before I was ill. It was bother and overwork and a cough. Everything always does come to worry him, whenever he ought to have rest or pleasure.' And Lance who was thoroughly weary and dispirited, was nearly ready to cry.

'Even when he goes out for a picnic, young ladies must needs drown themselves!'

This made Lance smile; but he added, with a quivering lip, 'He would not go to bed till I could go to sleep last night, and that was not till past two, and he looks quite done up this morning.'

'Is any one attending you?'

'Dr. Manby did at Minsterham--nobody here.'

'What's been amiss with you--fever?'

'Plenty of fever, but it was from sun-stroke.'

'Ah! you boys have thinner skulls than we used to have! How long ago?'

'Seven weeks yesterday,' said Lance, wearily.

'And you are sadly weary of weakness?'

'I don't mind that so much,' and the kindness of face, voice, and gesture made the poor boy's eyes overflow; 'but I'm no good, and I can't tell whether I ever shall be again!'

'It is a great deal too soon to trouble yourself about that.'

'That's what they all tell me!' cried Lance impatiently, and the tears rushed forth again. 'Manby only laughs, and tells me I shall be a Solon yet if I don't vex myself; and how can I tell whether he means it?'

'Well, dear boy, have it all out; I promise to mean whatever I say.'

'You are a doctor then, Sir?'

'What!' the boy doesn't know me, as sure as my name's Dick May!

'Oh!' cried Lance, 'that was what I heard Felix saying to Captain Audley--that he did so wish Dr. May could look at me!'

'That's all right, then. Come, then, what is weighing on you--weakness?'

'Just not weakness,' said Lance. 'I didn't care so much when I could scarcely get about; but now I can walk any distance, and still I have not a bit more sense!'

'Is your memory gone?'

'I don't think so; only, if I fix my mind to recollect, and it doesn't come by chance, I'm all abroad, and perfectly senseless and idiotic!'

'And it brings on pain?'

'Yes, if I try five minutes together.'

'You don't try to read or write?'

'I can't--and--' then came the tears again-- 'music is just like red-hot hammers to me.' There was a great fight with sobs, rather puzzling to one who did not know what music was to the chorister. 'And what is to be the end of it?'

'That rest and patience will make you as well as ever.'

'Do you really think so? But, Sir, I have a little brother seven and a half years old, with no understanding at all--not able to speak; and if there were two of us on Felix's hands like that! If I could only be put away somewhere, so that Felix should not have the burthen of me!'

'My poor little fellow! Is this what is preying on you all this time?'

'Not always--only when I am doing nothing, and that is most times,' he said, dejectedly; but the Doctor smiled.

'Then you may take the very anxiety as a proof that your brain is recovering. You cannot expect to shake off the effects quickly; but if you are only patient with yourself, you will do perfectly well. Are you a son of the clergy?'

'No, I am a chorister at Minsterham. I have another year there, when I can go back, if ever--'

'Don't say if ever! You will, if you only will keep from fretting and

hurrying, and will accept that beautiful motto of the Underwoods.'

Lance smiled responsively, and said more cheerfully, 'You are quite sure, Sir.'

'As sure as any man can be, that there is no reason to anticipate what you dread. It is quite possible that you may be more or less liable to bad headaches, and find it needful to avoid exposure to summer sunshine; but I should think you as likely to do your work in the world as any one I ever saw.'

The light on Lance's face did not wholly spring from this reply. With 'There's Felix!' he had bounded out of the room the next moment, and his incautious voice could be heard through the window--'Fee, Fee, here's her father! that brick of a Miss Gertrude's, I mean. He's as jolly as he ought to be, and knew all our people. But just--I say--how's Cherry?'

'All well; here's a note from the dear little thing herself,' said Felix; and in another moment, with his bag strapped over his shoulder, he had brought the bright sedateness of his face into the little parlour. 'Dr. May! how very kind in you!'

'Not kindness, but common propriety, to come and see how much mischief my naughty child had done.'

'I don't think there's any real mischief,' said the elder brother, looking at the much-refreshed face.

'I think not, and so am free to be glad of the catastrophe that has brought me in the way of an old friend. Yes, I may say so, for I must have known you!'

'Yes,' said Felix, 'we used to watch for you when you came to my uncle. You always had some fun with us.'

'I remember a pair of twins, who were an irresistible attraction. I hope they have grown up accordingly. You look as if you ought to have pretty sisters.'

Felix laughed, and said the twins were reckoned as very pretty.

'How many of you are there--was it not thirteen? Did not those boys get the clergy-orphan?'

'One did, thank you. He is on a farm in Australia now, and I am thinking whether to try for little Bernard; but I am afraid his case would be a stale one, being of seven years' standing.'

'If you want it done, my daughter, Mrs. Rivers, is a dragon of diplomacy in canvassing; but why not send him to Stoneborough? Cheviot takes a selection of cleric's sons at 30 pounds, and we would have an eye to him.'

'Thank you, if we can only manage it; but I must see what my sister says--our financier.'

'One of those little apple-blossom twins? Let me look at you. Do you mean to tell me that this fellow has been the whole standby of that long family these seven years?' he added, turning to Lance.

'To be sure he has!' cried Lance, eagerly.

'Lance,' said Felix, rather indignantly. 'You forget Wilmet. And Thomas Underwood entirely educated two of us.'

'And,' said the Doctor, looking oddly but searchingly from one to the other, 'you've been the bundle of sticks in the fable. Never gone together by the ears? Ah!' as both brothers burst out laughing at the question, 'I'd not have asked if I had not seen how you could answer. I've seen what makes me so afraid of brothers in authority that it does me good to look at you two.'

Felix looked up. The Stoneborough murder case was about two years old, and of course he had to study and condense the details, and had come on the names of Dr. May and his son in the evidence.

The further words met his sudden conjecture. 'Ay, boys, you little know what you may be spared by home peace and confidence! Well, and what may you be doing, Felix? Your bag looks as if you had turned postman to the district.'

'There's my chief business, Sir, coupled with bookselling and stationery,' said Felix, as he pushed across a copy of the Pursuivant that lay on the table. 'I have been well paid from the first, and am in partnership now, so we have got along very well.'

'Ay, ay! Very good trade, I should think? You must send me your paper, Felix; I want one I can trust to lie about the house.'

'You will find it very stupid and local, Sir.'

It was curious how what from Mr. Staples was answered with an effort, seemed from Dr. May to draw out confidence. One point was, that Mr. Staples never seemed sure how to treat him, and often betrayed a tear of hurting his feelings; while with Dr. May he was himself and nothing else. The Doctor stayed to share their dinner, such as it was in consideration of their being lodgers as didn't give trouble--i.e. some plain boiled fish, fresh indeed, but of queer name and quality, and without sauce, and some steak not distantly related to an old shoe; but both seemed to think so little about it, that the Doctor, who was always mourning over the daintiness of the present day, approved them all the more.

Just as they had finished Captain Audley came in with his boys, on their way to start off the Somervilles by the train, and it was

agreed that when he took his son back to school at Stoneborough, Felix and Lance should come with him and spend the day.

And a pleasant day it was, as pleasant as the unsettled wanderings of a long day in a strange place could be, and memorable for one curious fact--namely, that for the first time in her life Gertrude May was shy!

Not with Lance. She had a good deal of pastime with him in the cool garden, while Felix was being walked over the schoolyards in the sun; and they were excellent friends, though Ethel certainly had a certain repugnance to the discovery of how big a boy it was with whom Gertrude had danced barefooted on the rocks. Of course Ethel was the kindly mistress of the house as usual, but she was worn and strained in spirits just then, and disinclined to exert herself beyond the needful welcome to her father's guests. So she let them all go out, and went on with her own occupations, thinking that it was well that Daisy should take her part in entertaining guests, since 'that boy' was evidently a thorough little gentleman; and then shrinking a little as she heard their voices over Aubrey's museum, including the Coombe Hole curiosities.

No, it was not towards Lance that Daisy was shy; but when all sat round the dinner-table, she was unusually silent, and listened to the conversation far more than was her wont, though it was chiefly political. When Felix spoke to her, she absolutely coloured rosy red and faltered, unable to conquer the shamefacedness that their encounter had left her, and when the party had taken leave, and she was standing in the twilight, Ethel, to her great surprise, found the child quietly crying.

'Nothing!' she said, angry at being detected.

'It can't be nothing.'

'Yes it is. Only I do so hate--hate myself for being a tomboy!'

'One often does go on with that a little too long, and then comes the horrible feel.'

'And that it should have happened with him of all people in the world!'

'Ah, Daisy, I wish I had come out with you!'

'Fudge, Ethel! Not to-day. Do you think I care about that boy? I should think not! But--but--I wanted to think him a nasty prig, but I can't!'

'Who?'

'Why, that eldest brother. When he found me scrambling about with my stockings off, he didn't speak, but he looked, as Richard might,

surprised and sorry. I thought it was impertinent--at least I wanted to, but-- And now he'll always think me--nasty!

'My dear, if one must have a lesson of that kind, it is as well it should be from some one that one is never likely to see or hear of again.'

'Oh! but not from the very best and noblest of people one ever will hear of. Yes, Ethel, I'm not gone mad! That boy has been telling me all about his brother; and indeed I never did hear or know about any one who was a real hero in a quiet way! No, whenever I hear of a hero, I shall think of Mr. Underwood. And, oh dear, that I should have made such a goose of myself!'

It was quite unaffected--a spark of real reverence had lighted at last on Gertrude's mind. 'To turn tradesman for the sake of one's brothers and sisters, that I do call heroic!' she said; and maintained his cause, even to putting down F. U. as her 'favourite hero' in lists of likes and dislikes.

But there was no great chance of Gertrude again encountering her hero, for the morning after their day at Stoneborough Lance was beginning to experiment on his powers by skimming newspapers, especially the Pursuivant, because he knew it before, all but the last local items, that could only be added at the moment of going to press. Suddenly he broke out, 'Holloa! you never told me this! Mowbray Smith has put his foot in it this time.'

'What?' said Felix, pausing in the act of opening an envelope from Mr. Froggatt.

'Pocketing the coal and school money--ay, and the alms.'

'Eh? Impossible! Let me look.'

'There. A letter signed "Scrutator." There's a great deal more than I can read, all about under-paid curates and sycophants. My Lady is catching it, I should say! It must be true, or Froggy would not have put it in.'

'He never admitted that!' said Felix, tearing open his letter. 'He is in utter dismay, asks whether I could have seen the thing, tells me to telegraph yes or no, that he may know whether to speak to Redstone. What's this about tribute to my father?'

'Here! "Once it was deemed well that the ecclesiastical staff should be by birth and character, if not by pecuniary fortune, above suspicion; but the universal application of the general screw system has warned off all who had a predilection for an unfettered tongue, and we all know what hands accompany one in chains."'

'Libellous!' cried Felix, running his eye over the article. 'It looks as if it had strayed out of the Dearport Hermes. I'd not have had

this happen for ten thousand pounds! Clap-trap about fat rectors and starved curates! Jackman's writing, I'd lay any wager!

'You don't think he did it?'

'Smith? Muddled his accounts! Nothing more likely; charges like this are not got up without some grounds of some sort; but as to intentional fraud, that's utter nonsense. Well, I'm off to the station, and I hope in half an hour's time Master Redstone will be quaking.'

Ten days of the holiday still remained; and Captain Audley, with boat and yacht, greatly added to its pleasures, which both brothers were able thoroughly to enjoy, living almost entirely out of doors, and valuing each hour as they became fewer.

This matter, however, made Felix very uneasy. He wrote to the curate, offering all the amends in his power, and undertaking that if Mr. Smith would send him an explanatory letter, he would back it up with a strong leading article; and he waited anxiously for further intelligence.

Mr. Froggatt's letter came first. Redstone, fond of dabbling in editorship, had taken reproof in great dudgeon, affecting great surprise at being blamed for inserting a letter from a respectable gentleman without submitting it to Mr. Froggatt, who had entirely dropped the editorship, or delaying it to another issue by sending it to Ewmouth. The respectable gentleman was young Jackman, who was no doubt delighted to have such a firebrand to cast. It was a great grief and annoyance to Mr. Froggatt, who had always steered clear of personalities, and been inoffensive if sometimes dull; and both assault and defence were distressing to him--i.e. if defence were possible, for he seemed doubtful whether silence would not lead to the least scandal. Even Wilmet wrote: 'Every one seems to think Mr. Smith is to blame; and he is so huffy, that it looks only too much as if he were afraid of inquiry.'

This was too true a character of his replies. That intended for the paper had not a line of real defence, but was a mere tirade on the dignity of his office, and the impudence of the charges. Felix dashed it away, enraged at its useless folly; nor was the private one more satisfactory. It was but a half acceptance of Felix's total disclaimer; and the resentful wording made it difficult to discern whether the imputation were bona fide regarded as not worth refuting, or whether indignation were made an excuse for denial instead of proof. A separate sheet seemed to have been added. 'The whole is to be subjected to the scrutiny of a parish meeting on Tuesday, when, though the minute accuracy of a professional accountant is not to be expected of one whose province is not to serve tables, it will be evident that only malignity to the Church could have devised the attack to which your paper has given currency.'

'Well,' broke out Lance, as Felix with a voice of ineffable disgust read the final sentence, 'if that is not being a knave, it is very like a long-eared animal!'

'I'll tell you what, Lance, they'll take him between their teeth, and worry him till there's not an inch left whole of him. Jackman and his pack will tear him down; and even Bruce and Jones, and our own good old Froggy, will give him up when they see his books won't balance.'

'Serve him right!' cried Lance. 'What fun to see his airs taken down, when he's served with the sauce he's so fond of for other people! I only wish they'd got my Lady too!'

'I must go home, that's all,' said Felix. 'If I got there on Wednesday, I might see if I could not get his accounts into presentable order.'

'What?'

'If I don't, I am afraid no one else will.'

'He will not let you.'

'I think I can make him.'

'But such a cur as he has always been to you!'

'I don't think he will object now. I know he can't do the thing himself; and if little Bisset could, depend upon it his mother would not let him stir a finger for fear of being implicated. Now I do know the ways of those accounts. I've done them with my father and with Mr. Audley. Any way, I must be at home for the meeting. Imagine Redstone reporting it! But you can stay out the week, and come home in the yacht.'

For Captain Audley had promised to take the brothers round to Dearport, but Lance could not bear to be left behind; and it ended in their walking up to the Tudor cottage to make their excuses, when the good-natured captain declared that he could put to sea that very night and land them at Dearport in good time.

So after a hurried grateful farewell to the Staples family, the holiday closed with a voyage that both were able to enjoy to the utmost before they sailed into the harbour at Dearport, and walked up to St. Faith's. Captain Audley, who had not seen Sister Constance since her husband's death, had an access of shyness and would not encounter the 'Lady Abbess,' as he called her; but his last words to Felix were a promise that if Bernard went to Stoneborough, he would have him out now and then for a holiday with his own boy.

There had been time to send notice to Geraldine, and her brothers had hoped to have taken her home with them; but though she looked clear and bright, she was not out of the doctor's hands, and was under

orders to stay another week. The sight of her brothers made her very homesick, in spite of being the spoilt child of the Sisterhood, in the pleasant matted room, with its sea view, its prints, and photographs; but then she wanted to have her way prepared with Wilmet. Her vision had been to walk in imposingly, and take them all by surprise; but that notion had vanished as the time drew nearer, and she found that her new art required practice, while the dread of making a sensation grew upon her. She was ashamed of having even thought of compensating for Wilmet's absence, and entreated Felix to communicate the fact, without a word of the presumption that had nerved her courage.

The three looked over one another, as if each had undergone much since the last meeting; but the sight of Felix greatly relieved Cherry. He was sunburnt and vigorous, and his voice had resumed its depth of quiet content, instead of having that unconsciously weary sound of patience and exertion that had often gone to her heart. Lance, whom she had not seen since Easter, had assumed a look of rapid growth; his features had lost their childish form, and were disproportionate; and his complexion still had the fitful colouring of convalescence; but his eyes were dancing, and his talk ecstatic as to Vale Leston and the Kittiwake, where he was ready, at that moment, to become a cabin-boy.

'O Cherry! Cherry! you never dreamt of anything so delicious as that night's fishing!'

'That, I will answer for, she never did,' said Felix. 'When I saw the exquisite delight it afforded, not only to this Lance but to Captain Audley, to fill the boat with slimy, flapping, uncomfortable dying fishes, I felt that I was never made for a gentleman.'

'Do you mean that you didn't like it?' exclaimed Lance, turning round aghast.

'I should have been much happier balancing the books.'

'And he wasn't even sick!' said Lance, holding up his hands.

'He hadn't that excuse,' laughed Cherry. 'However, midnight fishing is not indispensable! I should like to have seen how he looked at Vale Leston.'

Lance was in great hopes that Felix would betray the possibilities, and mayhap, but for his presence, prudence might have evaporated beneath the warm breath of Cherry's sympathy; but the answer was only a discreet laugh and reply, 'Like a man who wanted his sister! I wish I could just fill your eyes with the loveliness of it, Cherry;' and in the midst of his description, in came Sister Constance, bringing with her Sister Emmeline (sister in blood as well as religion), wanting to hear about the nephews, and the Kitten's Tail adventure, and amused to find Lance a little shy about it--certainly not disposed to dwell on it with his usual unceremonious drollery of

narrative. They would not let Felix go without an inspection by Dr. Lee, which was perfectly satisfactory as to the rally of the constitution from the depression that had threatened disease, though it was impressed both on him and on Cherry that he must be careful next winter, and never neglect a cold; and with this promise the brothers took the train, and in half an hour were at home--rather an empty home, for the schools were all in operation again, and Wilmet was not at liberty for some little time after their arrival.

When she did come in, she was disappointed not to find Geraldine, and that Felix had become so absorbed in the business that had brought him home, that he only sent in word that he was obliged to go into the town, and tea must not wait for him. Lance remained, but the burthen of two secrets rendered him uncommunicative, when Wilmet tried to understand the cause of Cherry's delay at St. Faith's; and Alda was curious about Vale Leston and Mrs. Fulbert, whom she had seen at Kensington Palace Gardens. It did not take much acumen to exclaim, 'Still no children! Then there must be a chance for us!'

'That is not likely,' said Wilmet: 'it must be all in their own power; and the Vicar must be quite a young man. Is he not, Lance?'

'How should I know?'

'Didn't you see him?'

'I saw his wife, and that was enough.'

'About five-and-thirty,' said Alda. 'Of course it will all go to Uncle Tom. Money always goes to money.'

'How flushed you are, Lance!' said Wilmet. 'Are you tired?'

'Rather. I am going out into the garden.'

There, however, he was pursued by Bernard with a war-whoop, and by Theodore with his concertina; and Stella presently reported that he was gone up to bed.

'And I am afraid his room is very hot and noisy,' sighed Wilmet.

'He is only tired and cross after his two nights at sea,' said Alda.

'Lance cross!'

'My dear Wilmet, it is very bad taste in families always to maintain each other's impeccability!'

Alda was still the only person capable of defeating Wilmet, and she managed to render her very uncomfortable before the end of the evening, when hours passed and still Felix did not come in; and Alda suggested, in the intervals of yawning, that Wilmet would soon learn how green it was to sit up, now that Felix had got out of leading-

strings, and set up bachelor habits.

At first Wilmet was highly indignant; but when Alda persisted that she was rather glad to see Felix like other young men, and that Wilmet would know better when she was married, and then yawned herself off to bed, there was a sense of great discomfort to accompany the solitary vigil, which not only involved fancies of possible accidents, but was harassed by this assault on faith in the virtue and sincerity of man. Could it really be the part of a wise woman to wink at being deceived as an inferior creature, with impossible expectations of truth and purity? Yet Alda knew the world!

How much heart-sickness was darned into Lance's impossible heel before the clock chimed two! A step, and not a policeman's, came along the pavement and paused at the door, as, while the bell was cautiously pulled, down she flew!

'My dear Mettie, I am so sorry, so ashamed, of not having sent home to tell you; but if I had made the least move, it might have upset everything!'

'What _have_ you been about?'

'Going over Mowbray Smith's accounts.'

'Oh!'

'I am very sorry! How tired you must be! I was vexed not to be able to give you notice, but you know what poor Smith is.'

'I don't know why you had to do it all, and at this time of night,' said Wilmet, still a little hurt.

'It is the only chance for him to-morrow at the meeting to have his accounts clear; so I called under the plea of seeing about the letter in Pur, and with much ado got him to realise a little more of his position, and let me look at the books. That was at five.'

'And you have been at it ever since? O Felix!' as he stretched his arms and gave a vast yawn.

'Ay! If I had shown any consciousness of the time, he would have shut up at once; and he would not let me take them home to do to-morrow morning.'

'It _is_ to-morrow morning!'

'So it is! I must make haste, for I must try to see Mr. Ryder and Jones before the meeting. Good-night, dear old W. W. I meant to have had other talk.'

'But oh! you must have some supper!'

'I've had it--sumptuous! Stilton cheese!'

So Wilmet's faith in masculine nature rebounded as high as Alda had striven to sink it!

Patience was a good deal needed the next day; for Felix, had to rush away from breakfast, and never appeared at all at dinner. He had to be present at the very stormy meeting, though only to take notes, and thus had the annoyance of seeing Mr. Smith destroying his own cause by his incapacity to understand the statement so carefully drawn up, until Mr. Ryder (on whom the enemy had reckoned as a champion) took the papers out of the helpless hand, comprehended Felix's figures at a glance, and set them lucidly forth, such as they were; but even then there were blots which there were plenty of persons ready to hit. The truth was, that between Lady Price's economies, and the unwillingness to call vestry meetings, moneys intended for one purpose had been used for another, and articles not within the denomination of charities had been charged on funds raised for that exclusive object.

The assembly comprised the usual variety: the malicious foes of religion, headed by Jackman; the more numerous enemies, not of what they supposed religion, but of the Church; the adversaries, not of the Church, but of the Curate; and the few loyally unwilling to condemn a clergyman, but disgusted at the affair, and staggered by his management. Perhaps the rabid and ribald violence of the hostile party did Mr. Smith good with the respectable; and there were many, too, whose dictum was--'Felix Underwood says it is all right!' At any rate, though the Bishop was memorialised, it was in a much better spirit than had been likely at first; and it was not to be done without notice to the Rector. And when this was over, every one as usual went to the rendezvous at 'Froggatt's,' either to discuss or inquire; and the release of both partners on that summer evening was later than ever it had been before.

But then what a welcome upstairs! what a clamour of happy tongues! what an ecstatic humming of 'The Hardy Norseman!' what a clinging to and climbing on him! If he had the cares, he had much of the joys, of the goodman of the house! But presently he missed the voice usually blithest of all, and asked for Lance.

'He was here a little while ago,' said Wilmet, 'drinking his tea. He must have gone up to bed.'

'No,' said Bernard; 'I've just been up to the barrack, and he isn't there.'

'You've not let him sleep in the attic!' exclaimed Felix. 'Why, under the leads it is like an oven!'

'I am very sorry,' said Wilmet, 'but I could not see how to help it. Your room is worse, with the glare of the setting sun; and so is Cherry's at this time of the evening.'

'Then he must have Mr. Froggatt's.'

'I thought,' said Alda, 'that you never took liberties with Mr. Froggatt?'

'Nonsense!' said Felix. 'There are only two bedrooms in this house fit for that boy in his present state--yours and Mr. Froggatt's. Which shall we have, Wilmet?'

'Mr. Froggatt's,' she answered at once. 'If you will not have another cup, I'll get it ready for him at once.'

'I've just done. I'll come and help you. But where can the boy be? In the garden?'

'No,' said Wilmet, taking a survey from the window.

'I have hardly seen him all day,' added Alda. 'I suppose he has pursuits of his own.'

'Pursuits!' said Felix, looking really anxious; 'poor little chap, he can't do without constant care and quiet!'

Wilmet made no answer, but rose and left the room; Alda muttered something about his looking quite well, which Felix did not stay to hear, following his sister out with a word about looking for him. At the same moment a little soft hand was thrust into his, and Stella, as soon as the door was shut, said, 'Please, I know where Lance is, but it's a secret.'

'Not from me, I hope?'

said Felix, catching her up in his arms.

'I think not,' said Stella meditatively. 'He only told me not to let Bear and Tedo know, because they make a row. He is only up over the back warehouse, where he used to play the fiddle to us last Easter.'

'The only cool quiet place he could find!' said Felix, with more of a look of reproach than he had ever given Wilmet.

It went to her heart. 'I did not know what to do,' she said meekly. 'I wanted very much to go into the barrack ourselves, but Alda said it would kill her, and you know it has always been a sore subject that we would not let her have Mr. Froggatt's room. I ought not to have given way.'

'Alda's selfishness is a great power,' muttered Felix; and Wilmet was too much ashamed to contradict him, except by 'She is vexed because she has not heard from Ferdinand,' as they hastily made their way to the warehouse, which, being on the north side of higher buildings, never did get scorched through.

Felix went up a step-ladder, Wilmet following; and there, sure

enough, was Lance, lying in a nest of paper shavings, with head on his air-pillow. 'Oh, you've unearthed me, have you? I wish you'd let me stay here all night!' he said, with some weary fretfulness; but the next moment burst into a peal of laughter, as Wilmet's head appeared above the floor. 'Pallas Athene ascends! Oh! what a place it would be to act a play--only then all the fry would find it out! I hope they haven't! I told the Star not to tell!'

'My poor dear Lance, is this the only quiet place you could find? and you let us all neglect you, and never complained!' exclaimed Wilmet, kissing his hot forehead.

'Why, it's only my stupidity,' said Lance, wearily but gratefully; 'and you can't make places quiet or cool! If you would just let me sleep here!'

'No; but you shall have Mr. Froggatt's room. He will not want it now. Come along, Lance, we'll bring your things down. The barrack is a great deal too hot for you to go into!'

He did not make any resistance; but as they landed from the ladder, threw his arm round Wilmet, and leant against her with a sort of lazy mischievous tenderness, as he said, 'Isn't the Froggery wanted for--somebody else?' and tried to look up in her face.

'Ferdinand always goes to the Fortinbras Arms,' answered Wilmet, with admirable composure.

'Oh! that's a precedent,' said Lance, ostentatiously winking at Felix, who was very glad the ice was broken. 'When is he coming, Mettie?'

'I think Alda hoped he might have run down to-night, on hearing of your return.'

There they paused while entering the house and going upstairs, but no sooner were they in the barrack, which was certainly insufferably hot, than Lance returned to the charge.

'But when is he coming? Not Fernan--he's an old story.'

'Yes, said Felix, walking up to Wilmet to fold together the corners of the sheets they were stripping from Lance's bed, and looking into her eyes so archly as to bring up an incarnadine blush, 'I want particularly to improve my acquaintance, if you don't.--What shall we do, Lance?'

'Advertise in Pur,' suggested Lance. 'The editor returned. Young men may apply!'

'Don't, boys!' exclaimed Wilmet, in tones belonging to bygone days, when neither she nor Felix had been too serious to tease or be teased. 'He is much better than you,' she added, with a pretty

confused petulance, when Felix put on a pleading inquisitive face.
'When he found we didn't like it he went away to visit his uncle.'

'Better than we! There, Lance!' said Felix, in a gratified provoking tone of discovery.

'In one sense,' said Wilmet, walking down before him.

'I am very glad you have found it out,' added Felix, as they entered Mr. Froggatt's cool well-blinded bedroom, the only well-furnished one in the house.

'It is no laughing matter,' said Wilmet seriously.

'That's well,' was the dry answer.

But there Felix perceived that she was on the verge of tears, and he kindly and quietly helped her to despatch her arrangements for Lance before any more was said; only as they turned to bid the tired boy goodnight, he said, 'Where does the uncle live? I shall telegraph to-morrow, you cruel person!'

'Hush! silly boy--goodnight,' said Wilmet, with a quivering voice, then, as she shut the door, 'Please don't go on this way, Felix--I wouldn't have had it happen for any consideration.'

'I suppose not,' said Felix, as they returned to the twilight garden; but as it has--Why, my Mettie, dear!' as she pressed close to him, and hid her face on his shoulder, with a strong craving for the help and sympathy from which the motherless girl had hitherto been debarred.

'O Felix! I wish he would not be so good and kind! I wish you would not try to make me give in!'

'My dear girl,' said Felix, with his arm round her. 'You know I would not if I did not see that you had given in.'

'No, I haven't!' she cried. 'Why should you want to persuade me? Isn't it very cruel and hard to let him give all himself to one that can't come to him? He will have to go out and live all dreary and lonely for years and years, and come home to find nothing but a stupid old worn-out drudge, with all these pretty looks gone off! Felix, be reasonable, _please_! Can't you see that I ought not to let things go that way?'

'Do you mean,' said Felix, 'that you would be quite content to put an end to all this--let Harewood go away believing you indifferent, and never see him again?'

'Felix, why do you--?' with tears in her eyes.

'Because I am quite sure that the consideration you want to show him

would be no kindness. The pain of having his affection thrown over' (he spoke with a spasm in the throat) 'would be greater than you would like to inflict, if you were forced by truth to own you did not care for him; and if he be what I think, the carrying away security of your feeling for him will be gladness enough. And as for the looks, I have a better opinion of yours than to think they won't wear! Any way, dearest, it seems to me that you have won the heart of a good man, and that if you like him, it is your duty to give him the comfort of knowing it without thinking about to-morrows.'

'But I know so much more would come if I did just allow that much! And I might get to wish to leave you all,' she said in an appalled voice. 'And there seems to me not the slightest chance. You see Alda and Cherry never will get on together; and Cherry seems glad of an excuse to stay from home. I thought she would have cared to come back when you did.'

'Poor Cherry!' said Felix, hesitating, with a little of her own nervous awe of broaching the subject.

'You don't mean that there is anything seriously amiss!' she cried, startled.

'Wilmet, do you remember what Rugg said would be the very best thing for that poor child?'

She stood still, dismayed and angered. 'They aren't tormenting the poor little thing about that?'

'It is not their doing,'

'It can't have become necessary! Sister Constance would have told me! Felix say she is not worse!'

'No, much better. But, Wilmet, what we could not bear to think of, she thought of for herself, and begged to have it done.'

'Then I must go to her.'

'There is no occasion. She knew you could not be spared. It was done on the 10th, and she will soon walk better than she has done all these years.'

'Done! without our knowledge?'

'She wished to spare us all, but that was not allowed. I was written to, and told that her strong desire was such a favourable condition, that I had better consent, so as not to protract the strain of spirits. She made a point of no one else knowing except Clement.'

'Ah!' Wilmet spoke as if under a weight, 'that was the day Clement went down to Dearport, and came home so late! How could Sister Constance consent not to tell me?'

'You must forgive her, for it was the little one's desire! Of course we should have been fetched if anything had gone wrong; but she has done perfectly well; and there she is, very happy, and so full of fun, that the Sisters say she keeps them all alive.'

'Done? I cannot fancy it!' said Wilmet. 'Do you know, I believe it has been my bugbear for years past to think I might have to persuade her to this?'

'To tell you the truth, so it has to me.'

'Little nervous timid thing, I can't even understand her thinking of it!'

'She wanted me not to tell you, but I would not promise. She could not rest without trying not to be an obstacle to--'

Wilmet interrupted with a cry of pain.

'Isn't it a noble little thing?'

'But it is so silly!' broke out Wilmet, not choosing her words amid her tears.

'So she thinks now, poor child; she is quite ashamed of the presumptuous notion that did brace and carry her through.'

'I don't like her to be disappointed,' said Wilmet; 'but it is quite ridiculous.'

'Only comfort her a little, Mettie dear, for she is very much afraid you will think she has taken a great liberty with your property.'

'I only wish I could kiss her this moment.'

'Well, run down by the train to-morrow. They would all be delighted.'

'No, no, Felix, impossible. Think of the cost!'

'Half a crown! Sinful waste!' said Felix, in a tone of alarming levity.

'Felix, if you only knew what the housekeeping mounted up in that unhappy month that I was away! I did not like to tell you before, but--'

'Well!' at the dreadful pause.

'I had to get fifteen pounds from Mr. Froggatt's; and Alda finds, after all, that she cannot advance the money for Lance's journey.'

'So you are pinching it out by pence, my poor W. W.!'

'Nothing extra must be done till this is made up.'

'Yet it seems needful that Bernard should go to school. I wrote about--'

'No,' she resolutely interrupted. 'Bernard must wait over this year. Thirty pounds. Utterly out of the question!'

'Her tone gave Felix an unusual sense of chill penury, and brought Vale Leston before his eyes. He laughed rather bitterly, saying, 'Perhaps some day neither thirty pence nor thirty pounds may have so direful a sound!'

'I never mean to learn to waste.'

'You may have to learn to spend.'

'That's enough to set me against it!' she exclaimed, with a good deal of pain; and he found how nearly he had broken his resolution, and how her application of his words to herself had saved him. He followed the lead.

'Nay; you were glad of Alda's prosperity?'

'Oh yes; but poor Alda has been hindered from being like one of us,' she said. 'We have fought it out together. And I should not mind so much if he were poor like us, and had to wait on his own account.'

'I appreciate that,' said Felix; 'but at least you will let the poor fellow come and judge for himself?'

'If--if only, Felix, you will promise not to try to tempt me into deserting you all, when I know it would be wrong.'

'If I will promise you not to cut my own throat, eh? Come, W. W., put out of your head "what it may lead to," confess that you are afraid of getting connected with such a mad harum-scarum set!'

'It isn't,' broke out Wilmet. 'I never saw any one so thoughtful and considerate. They are all so kind and warm-hearted, that I grew quite ashamed of my own fidgetiness; and he--he always knew the right thing at the right time. You can't think how his look seemed to hold me up, when poor Lance was moaning and talking nonsense!'

Having thus let herself out as she had never dared, nor indeed been tempted to do, since the first dawn of the courtship, Wilmet at last relieved herself of some of the vast sense of emotion that she had been forcing back for the last month. Hitherto the mistress of the house had seemed older than the master; but now the elder brother took the place of both parents--ay, and of sister--as, all her fencing over, she poured out her heart, and let him sympathise, cheer, soothe, and encourage, more by kind tones than actual words.

The harvest-moon shone over the house-tops, as a month before she had shone by the river-side; and the Pillars of the House walked up and down till Alda grew desperate, and sallied out to tell them that it was past eleven.

It was only such snatches of time that Felix could give to home affairs, for his hands were full of arrears of business, and the excitement respecting Mr. Smith necessarily occupied him. Pending the arrival of letters from the Rector, every tongue was in commotion, and the reading-room was a focus of debate and centre of intelligence. So many letters, either in assault or defence, were addressed to the editor of the Pursuivant, that only a supplement as big as the Times could have contained them. Every poor person who had not had every demand supplied from the charities was running about, adding to the grievance at every encounter with tender-hearted lady or justice-loving gentleman, whose blood boiled over into a letter for the Pursuivant, which, when sifted and refused, was transferred to the Dearport Hermes, or Erms, as most of its supporters termed it.

CHAPTER XXII

THE REAL THING AND NO MISTAKE

'With asses all his time he spent,
Their club's perpetual president,
He caught their manners, looks, and airs--
An ass in everything but ears.'

GAY.

The master of the house was unable to contribute much more than his name to the propriety of the arrival of the suitors, and this made Wilmet the more determined that Geraldine should precede them. Nor, since the half-crown must be disbursed on an escort for her, did the housewifely conscience object to the expedition, for Wilmet could not but long to thank the Superior and Sister Constance, and to obtain Dr. Lee's advice as to future management. Her coming was great joy to Cherry, who had dreaded the meeting almost with a sense of guilt, though still hoping Felix had been silent on her motive; and Wilmet did not betray him, but only treated her sister with a mixture of almost shy tenderness and reverence. Nor did Cherry dare to ask a question as to Wilmet's own affairs, nor even about Ferdinand Travis, lest she should seem to be leading in that direction. However, Wilmet, in a persuasive tone, communicated that Ferdinand had been long without writing, and though Cherry tried to be sorry for Alda, her spirit quailed at the state of temper her sister evidently meant to prepare her for.

But fate was more kind than she expected. That very Saturday brought both gentlemen, and by the same train. They made each other out as they were leaving their bags at the Fortinbras Arms, and arrived together in marked contrast--the tall, dark, regular-featured, soft-eyed Life-guardsmen, and the little sandy, freckled, sun-dried engineer; and thus two courtships had to be carried on in the two rooms, only supplemented by the narrow parallelogram of a garden! For Ferdinand Travis was back again, rather amused at the family astonishment at the rapidity of his journey to America, which to his Transatlantic notions of travel was as nothing, and indeed had been chiefly performed in a big steamer, where he could smoke to his heart's content.

For the first few days there was a good deal of restraint: Wilmet was more shy than in the unconscious days of Bexley, while John Harewood was devoid of his family's assurance and bonhomie, and so thoroughly modest and diffident as to risk nothing by precipitation in begging for a decision. Felix, inexperienced, and strongly sensible of his office as guardian of his sister's dignity, would not hint at the result of his investigations into Wilmet's sentiments; and it was to Geraldine that Captain Harewood's attentions were chiefly paid. Knowing Alda's resolute monopoly of her Cacique, Cherry at first held back, and restrained her keen enjoyment of real conversation; but she found Wilmet thankful to have the talk done for her, and content to sit at work, listening almost in silence, but proud that her Captain should be interested in her sister, and pleased to see Cherry's expressive face flash and sparkle all over for him. While Wilmet was at Miss Pearson's, Cherry was his chief resource; they read, drew, and talked, and in that half-hour's out-of-door exercise, which Dr. Lee had so strongly enjoined, his arm was at her service. They were soon on the borders of confidence, though never quite plunging over them. Perhaps the broad open-mouthed raillery at his home made the gentle reticence of the Underwoods the more agreeable to him; at any rate, he did not try to break through it, nor to presume beyond the step he had gained. Alda, who could best perhaps have acted as helper, had her own affairs to attend to; and they were evidently unsatisfactory, for Ferdinand was more than ever the silent melancholy Don, and she was to domestic eyes visibly cross, and her half-year at home had rendered her much less capable of concealing ill-humour. Something was owing to wear and suspense, together with the effects of the summer heat and confined monotonous life without change or luxury; but much was chargeable on the manifestations of temper to which she had given way in the home circle. She told Wilmet the trouble, which Ferdinand wished to have kept from open discussion till he had received a final statement of his means to lay before Felix. He had received no remittances since the spring, and on demanding his own share of the capital and investments, had found it, instead of the lion's, a ridiculously small portion. The whole fortunes of the house of Travis had been built on his mother's inheritance; but the accounts laid before him represented all the unprosperous speculations undertaken by his father, William, while the small ventures of his Uncle Alfred had,

alongside of them, swelled into the huge wealth of which Ferdinand had been bred to believe himself the heir! So palpably outrageous was this representation, that he had persuaded himself that personal investigation on the spot would clear it up, or perhaps more truly his blood was up, and he could not bear to be inactive. He had rushed over to New York, and of course he had been baffled. Exposure was of no use where sympathy was for the lucky rather than the duped and luckless, and where the Anglicised Life-guardsman could expect it least of all--at a time, too, when all business affairs were convulsed by the uncertainties of civil war. Alda could not believe at first that he had done his utmost, and seemed to have reproached him with weakness and mismanagement; but by her own account she had roused the innate lion. He would not tell her what had passed in the interview with his uncle, but he had shuddered over the remembrance; and when she upbraided him with not having gone far enough, he terrified her by the fierceness with which he had turned upon her, bidding her never recur to what she knew nothing about, and muttering to himself, 'Far enough--thank God I went no further, or I should not be here now!' and then falling into deep gloom. He had certainly made Alda afraid of him, and she burst into tears as she told Wilmet, declaring herself the most miserable girl in the world.

'No, that you can't be, Alda, while he is so good and true.'

'But he says he must sell out! Think of that! Never was anybody so taken in as I have been!'

'Don't talk so, Alda. It is just as if you had engaged yourself to a Life-guardsman and nothing else.'

'I wonder how you would like to be buried in some horrid wild place in America, where you would never see anybody!'

'One would not want to see anybody but him.'

'That's your nonsense! How tired of it one would be!'

'There would be no time. It would be so nice to do everything for him oneself!'

'In some horrid uncivilised place, with no servants! I'm not going to be a drudge. It is all very well for you, who like it, and have no notion of society, but for me--! And there he is furious to take me out. Men grow so wild and rough too in such places. You never saw anything blaze like his eyes!'

'I don't understand you. Could not you trust yourself anywhere with him?'

'You have no right to say such things,' pouted Alda, 'only because I have a little common prudence. Some one must have it!'

There was no denying that life in the far west would be a foolish

thing either for or with Alda; and Felix thought so when Ferdinand came to him for consultation over the letters that made it finally clear that Alfred Travis had appropriated everything available but half a block of unreclaimed land on the wrong side of America, and a few thousands invested in Peter Brown's firm; and what was worse, the sudden failure of the supplies had occasioned serious debts. Ferdinand's own plan was to clear these off with the price of his commission, and take Alda out with him to rule in American luxury over the unbounded resources of the magnificent land, the very name and scent of which had awakened in him his old prairie-land instincts, and her absolute refusal and even alarm at his enjoyment had greatly mortified him. 'She should not even have to rough it,' he said. 'I could make her like a queen out there, if she would only believe it.'

Felix could not but think Alda might be wise, though it was not pretty wisdom. Go out alone and make the fortune! Ferdinand did not seem to think the separation possible. He said he would rather go to work in Peter Brown's office, where he had already a hold; and his familiarity with Spanish would secure him usefulness and promotion, and five or six years would bring them into a position to marry. He did not look fit for desk-work in London, but his mind was made up to any privation, so that he could be in reach of Alda, and hope to give her what he had once thought easily within his grasp.

Hearing this, Felix propounded an old longing of his--namely, to make the Pursuivant a daily paper, and use means for promptitude of intelligence, such as might neutralise the unpopularity it was incurring on behalf of Mr. Smith. Rumours of a rival paper were afloat; but if Ferdinand would throw in his capital, and undertake the joint editorship and proprietorship, the hold that the Pursuivant already had warranted quite success enough to permit an immediate marriage. There would be no need to be concerned with the shop; they might take a cottage in the country, and he need not ride in so often as every day. In fact, it was his capital rather than his personal assistance that was wanted. He caught at the notion. He was too Transatlantic to have any dignities to stand upon, and he said almost with tears in his eyes that he could never be so happy as in working with Felix; and he went off to the Fortinbras Arms, only lamenting that it was too late to tell Alda; while Felix, on his side, could not help knocking at Geraldine's door. Within he found another auditor, Wilmet, who still always helped Cherry to bed. 'It will be the making of the Pursuivant,' he said. How often I have sighed, "If I had but capital, or Mr. Froggatt enterprise!"

'Ah, Felicissimo mio, that Pursuivant is as dear to you as any brother or sister of us all!'

'So it ought to be, for it has been the making of us.--Come Cherry, confess that you had rather see Pur triumph, than--'

'Than you at Vale Leston,' said Cherry, not knowing what a bolt she shot. 'It would be grand to steal a march on the enemy!'

'And safe?' asked Wilmet.

Felix demonstrated to the comprehending ears of his sisters the circulation that he could securely reckon upon.

'There would be an immense deal more to do,' said Cherry; but at that he smiled, full of vigour.

'True; but we should have a larger staff. There would be Fernan--'

'For the racing articles,' said Cherry dryly.

'And a good deal besides, which only needs application; and that he has.'

'He has great resolution,' said Cherry, 'but he always seems to me a sort of Christian panther of the wilderness; and you seem to be getting him into a cage.'

'Not such a cage as Peter Brown's office; and besides it is only when he is lashed up that the panther leaps about his den. Generally he is a quiet determined animal, with the practical Yankee element strong in him. It may be true, as Edgar says, that he does not see an inch on either side of his nose, but that only makes him go right away in the line he does see. I know he will work well.'

'If Alda--' said Cherry.

'Oh, she will be willing. A cottage in the country! Besides, it is the only reasonable possibility.'

'I should think it would satisfy her,' said Wilmet.

'And then--'

Everybody understood that 'And then.' It was Alda's pretension to be at the head of the family that was the chief obstacle to Wilmet's abdicating that post. Without her, Geraldine, stronger and less lame, might undertake the charge of the comparatively few permanently at home. Might indeed hardly expressed the amount of uncertainty as to her capability; and yet but for that 'And then,' Wilmet would hardly have yielded as she did the next day.

Stella had a blackberry fever. Possibly Wilmet's frugal regimen engendered a hankering for fruit, or it might have been the mere love of enterprise that rendered her eagerly desirous of an expedition to a lane where splendid blackberries were reported to grow. Since the day she had been lost, she had never been allowed to go out with Bernard; but in Lance she had acquired a much more complaisant playfellow, who not only promised his escort to the lane, but the purchase of the sugar, and aid in the concoction of the jam; but he durst not venture till late in the day, and thereupon John Harewood

suggested, 'Would not your sister be at liberty by that time?'

'Lance can take care of me,' said Stella; but in her eyes the whole romance of the expedition was destroyed by his acquiescence. 'We'll catch her as she comes out, and make her go with us.'

'Among all the girls?' laughed Cherry; and Captain Harewood coloured, shook his head, and shuddered.

'The girls won't hurt me,' said Lance, 'not if there were twenty hundred. I'll bring her from the very teeth of them. Jack may wait round the corner if he likes.'

The party waited till their patience was worn to a thread for the opening of the tall olive door, until Lance valiantly resolved on a single-handed assault, and had just mounted the steps when it suddenly opened, and he found himself obstructing the path of a swarm of little girls and big, who all stared, most giggled, and some greeted him. To the least of these he confided that he wanted his sister, when she innocently piloted him to the school-room, where Wilmet, with her hat on, was keeping guard over three victims detained by unfinished tasks. Every one gazed at him as if he had been a sort of Actaeon; but nothing daunted, he answered his sister's anxious exclamation. 'Nothing is the matter; but we are going for a walk, and want you.--Miss Maria,' he cried, as the sound of the unfeminine step and voice brought in one of the heads, 'please do let off these impositions, we do so want her!'

'What, you here! This is an invasion!' she added good-humouredly. 'Am I to take it as a convalescent's privilege?'

'Thank you, Ma'am,' said Lance, bowing with his audacious sweetness; 'and please let me have Wilmet. I'd do the impositions myself, only I don't know French.'

The victims tittered uncontrollably, and Miss Maria laughed, as one who, like her neighbours, descried why Wilmet was in request. 'I will attend to these exercises, Miss Underwood,' she said. 'You must not lose this fine evening for the idleness of these young ladies.'

'Indeed, Ma'am!' began Wilmet, in a blaze of colour. 'I never thought of such a thing.'

'I daresay not, my dear,' said Miss Maria; 'but now you had better do it. I wish you a pleasant walk.'

'Lance, how could you?' broke out Wilmet, as they descended the steps. 'I never was so ashamed in my life.'

'Never mind. We are going to get blackberries at Mile End Lane, and I shall lose Stella to a dead certainty if you don't come and look after her.'

'My dear Lance, I can't go all that way without their knowing it at home.'

'Oh! that's all settled with Cherry.'

'And where's Alda?'

'Off somewhere with her Don. Come, W. W., or who knows whether Stella and I shall ever come home?'

By this time they had reached the corner where Captain Harewood and Stella were lying perdu, and Wilmet made no more resistance, only keeping the little girl's not altogether willing hand till they came to the stile leading to the field and woodland, and then Stella's durance ended, and her adventures with Lance became as free as though no grave 'sister' had been near.

Perhaps, since Wilmet had perceived that surrender was her fate, she was willing that the summons should be over and a mutual understanding reached, so as to waste no more of the time already so short. However that might be, though the talk began with Lance's health and Cherry's talents, there was a tendency towards topics closer still; nor did she start aside, but rather listened pensively as to a strain that touched her quiet soul more deeply than she showed in word or gesture.

The blackberry lane was deep and hollow, the brambles outstretching their arching wreaths, laden with heavy clusters of shining fruit, glossy black, scarlet, or green, sometimes with a lingering pearly flower. A step-ladder stile led down into it from the field, and on the topmost step, her back against the rail, sat Wilmet. On the lowest, turned at right angles to the first, was John Harewood, looking up to her; while scrambling on the bank, contending with the brambles, were the younger ones; Lance, unable to help now and then sending a furtive glance through the tangle.

It was a pretty sight. Sitting aloft, Wilmet was framed by an archway of meeting branches, with nothing but the pale opal of the evening sky behind the beautifully-shaped head and shoulders, and the clear-cut features, drooping just enough to enhance her own peculiar modest dignity, and give it a soft graciousness that had once been wanting. Her dress was the same in which Captain Harewood had first seen her-- a plain black hat, a pale fawn-coloured skirt, and a loose open jacket over a white cambric vest and sleeves, only that now there had been a budding forth of dainty fresh knots of rose-coloured ribbon at the throat and down the front, as though a slight sensibility to the vanities as well as the cares of life had begun to dawn on the grave young house-mother.

Leaning back against the rough rail to assist the hand of the climber, John Harewood looked up with as much worship in his countenance as ever good man feels for the being he loves in all her maiden glory. Thus they had been for some moments, only

broken by the children's distant calls, till the fervent words broke from him, 'May I not speak now?'

No word of reply sounded, but the delicate lips quivered and parted; the eyes were cast down, and seemed to swim in a soft mist of brightness; the queenly head bent, and the roseate tint on the cheek deepened and spread, while something came over the face that caused the low glad exclamation, 'You sweetest, I do believe you can love me!'

A tremulous smile, a glitter of tears on the eye-lashes--a whisper, 'You won't let me be able to help it!'

Then the hands were clasped, and no words but 'Thank you' would come to the young man's lips; and then, and the sound reminded him, he bowed his head, adding, 'Thank God!'

'Thank God!' echoed Wilmet softly. 'For indeed,' she added, as she let her eyes fully meet his ardent gaze, 'I know you will help me to do whatever may be His Will.'

'He helping me,' said John Harewood; and there was a reverent silence of untold peace and bliss, first interrupted by his long sigh of infinite relief and joy, and then, as he looked and looked with all his soul in his eyes, an exclamation, almost in spite of himself, 'You beautiful creature, you are mine indeed!'

Her colour deepened, but her lips moved into an odd little smile, out of which came the words, 'Isn't that rather foolish?'

'I couldn't help it--I beg your pardon,' said he, reddening. 'You do look so lovely! but indeed it is not the externals only, but what looks through.'

'And that is what makes me afraid,' said Wilmet, as the dew gathered on her eye-lashes. 'I don't think I'm so nice as you take me for.'

'Probably you don't,' he said, smiling.

'But just hear me,' she said, laying her hand on his, as if to silence him. 'You ought to know what all the others would tell you if they were not too kind. I know they all feel me strict, and managing and domineering! Yes, it makes you laugh, but I really am. I don't think you would have liked me at all if you had not seen me out of my usual life, with only Lance--' and as all she said only made him press her hand the closer-- 'You see, I've always had to do things. Ever since I was a little girl I have had to keep order, great boys and all, and I know it has made me disagreeable;' then in answer to some sound more incredulously negative than words, 'Yes indeed! Felix and all go to Cherry with whatever comes very near them. She hasn't been hardened and sharpened and dried like me, and wasn't stupid to begin with.'

'Cherry is very clever, but she is--not--'

'Now don't. I know how it is. I know I'm horribly pretty, and I've been a wonder always for keeping the house going, and doing for them all, and so you fancy me everything charming, but I do so wish you could really know, as my brothers do, how it takes out of one all that is nice and sweet, and that people like.'

'People?' said John, smiling; but seeing that a mirthful even though a loving answer was not what she wanted, he gravely said, 'I do understand, dearest, that you have had to be too much of an authority to be altogether the companion and confidante that Geraldine is free to be, but perhaps I feel that this renders you more wholly and altogether my own.'

'Oh?'--a strange half sob--'do you know, I had just begun to know how solitary I was when Lance was so happy to get Robina, when you--'

'And if I told you all, you would know that I was feeling a certain loneliness at home, and that if you had asked my sisters they would have said that Jack was not the harmonious element he appeared. There--there's a pleasing prospect!'

'But you'll not let me be masterful?' said Wilmet earnestly.

'Just as much as is good for me--for us,' he said smiling.

Then after a moment's silence, he took out of his pocket a little box, and making a table of her lap, took out a ring of twined ruby and diamonds, such as could not but startle the instincts of Wilmet's soul.

'Oh, it is a great deal too beautiful! Please, I couldn't--'

'You must. It was my mother's.'

'Then she cannot like to part with it.'

'Did you not know that she died when I was five years old? Look!' and he showed where within the lid of the box was written, 'For my Little Johnny's Wife. August 1839. L. H.'

'Ought you not to keep it till--' faltered Wilmet, growing crimson as she found what she was saying.

'No,' he said decidedly, 'not after this. When I spoke to my father that Sunday evening, he unlocked his desk and gave me this, which I had not seen since I remember playing with it on my mother's bed. You will wear it, dearest. You will let me have the pleasure of knowing you have it on.'

The answer was the drawing off of her glove, and he fitted it on, but it was rather loose. 'I am afraid it will want a guard,' he said.

'I'll ask Felix whether I may take one of Mamma's,' she said.

For the shapely notable fingers had never worn a ring before this almost sacred pledge; and the few jewels either too valuable or not valuable enough for the parents to have parted with in times of need had never been touched.

'Do,' he said; 'I shall like that. The year 1839. Was not that the year a certain little girl was born?'

'The month. Our birthday is on the 19th.' And the coincidence gave all the foolish delight such facts do under the circumstances.

'Was this long before she died?' asked Wilmet.

'The last day of that August. You never saw her brass in the cloister?'

'No; I never guessed that you were not Mrs. Harewood's son, though I wondered at your being so unlike the rest.'

'She has been kindness itself,' he warmly said. 'My father did well both for himself and me in marrying.'

'Tell me of your own mother,' said Wilmet, looking from the sparkling stones to the initials. 'L.-- What was her name?'

'Lucy. Lucy Oglandby. My father was tutor at Oglandby Hall. There was a long attachment, through much opposition; and even when he was made priest-vicar after waiting six years, her father could not consent. After six years more, when her health was failing, he gave a sort of sanction on his death-bed. The rest of the family contrived to get her fortune so tied up that after her death it was of no use to any one till I came of age. She only lived seven years after her marriage, and then the Oglandbys wanted to take possession of me, and I fancy that drove my father into marrying.'

'Was it with them you went to stay?'

'Yes, my father makes a point of it; and they have a turn for patronising me, if I would turn my back on home.'

'Now I understand better,' said Wilmet.

You understand how much you were wanting to me,' he said, rightly interpreting the words. 'After five years' absence, while my sisters were growing up, you can perceive that dear, fond, and hearty as our house is, it did not fulfil all that perhaps I had been rather unreasonable in expecting. O Wilmet, this time of leave would have been very different if you had not come to the precincts!'

And so they fell back on the exquisite time present, which neither

wished to disturb by looking beyond; and perhaps John felt as though his bird had scarcely perched, and any endeavours to hold it might make it flutter loose, while she was too glad of the calm and repose to renew the struggle between conflicting claims.

At last, with basket laden with dark fruit, and lips vying with the babes in the wood, Stella was launched on them by Lance, when his sense of time overpowered his half shy, half diverted respect for their bliss. He was very curious, but had to be satisfied with Captain Harewood's manner of tossing Stella over the style, and bright look at himself.

They did not get into the town till the chimes of half-past seven were pealing. Captain Harewood hurried into the hotel, to prepare for the evening; and Wilmet was mounting the stairs, still under the spell of her newly-found joy, when she was startled by Alda's voice in a key of querulous anger.

'Exactly like you, always laying out for attention.'

'What's this?' said Wilmet, as she saw Alda in her habit, standing with her back to the open door, and Geraldine leaning on the table, trembling and tearful, crimson and burning even to passion in her panting reply, 'I don't know--except that he helped me in from the garden.'

'That's what I say,' retorted Alda. 'She is always putting herself forward to be interesting and get waited on. All affectation. I don't know such a flirt anywhere.'

'Hush, Alda! you are insulting Cherry,' said Wilmet, in her tone of command.

'Take care of yourself, Wilmet,' cried Alda; 'it is the way she goes on all day with Captain Harewood--reading poetry, and drawing, and all.'

'Captain Harewood knows,' said Wilmet, coming to the support of the quivering Geraldine, 'that the kinder he is to Cherry the better I like it.'

'Oh, if you do, it is your own concern. I only spoke for your sake. And Alda marched off, while Wilmet's strong tender arms helped Cherry into her own room, and tended her through one of those gusts, part repentant, part hysterical, which had belonged to her earlier girlhood, though the present was now enhanced by the tumult of insulted maidenliness. Formerly, Wilmet had not treated these attacks on the soft system, but now all her bracing severity was gone. Greatly incensed with Alda, she gave her whole self to sympathy with the victim, showing herself so ineffably sweet and loving, that Cherry felt a thrill of delicious surprise; and as her eye lit on the glittering ring, a little ecstatic cry, still slightly hysterical, welcomed the token.

'O Wilmet, oh! You have! You have--'

'To be sure I have,' answered Wilmet, not in the least heeding what she said in her anxiety to calm her sister. 'It is all right, if only you will not go and be silly about it.'

The woman was so much more than her words, that their odd simplicity, coming from the grand-looking figure bending over her in tender solicitude, touched Cherry the more, and she threw her arms round her sister's neck, whispering, 'Oh! I am so glad!'

Poor Wilmet! At that moment all her gladness had gone into a weight like lead on her heart, though it only made her more gentle. 'Dear Cherry,' she softly said, 'don't talk of anything to upset you. Will you be good and lie quite still while I take off my things, and then I'll come and dress you? You must not be knocked up to-night.'

'Oh! I had much rather stay here!'

'No indeed! John would be so disappointed. He does like you so much, and I always depend on you to make it pleasant for him. You can't send word that Alda has been scolding you.'

'Oh dear! why can't I behave decently to her the moment we are alone together?'

'Don't begin on that, for pity's sake, or you'll get crying again,' broke out Wilmet, in her natural voice. 'Tis she can't behave properly to anybody--that's all; so don't think any more about anything, like a good child, but lie still till I come back.'

So up went Wilmet, not rejoicing in her room-mate, whom she found, as usual, all injured innocence and self-justification.

'You have been petting Cherry all this time! She is quite spoilt among you! It is quite true what I said, though she didn't like it. In society, I never saw a more arrant flirt, with her pathetic ill-used airs. Why, Ferdinand actually found fault to-day with my manner to her!'

Save for the effects, Wilmet was glad to hear it. 'Well, Alda, it is not always kind.'

'I only don't fuss and coax her; I see through her better than you do. She is the sharp one. As I told Ferdinand, it is I who have reason to complain of his manner to her, only I know it is not his fault. If there were no other objection to this preposterous scheme of Felix's, she would be a reason against it.'

'For shame, Alda! You don't consider what you are saying of your sister.'

'I do!' said Alda. 'I have been more in the world than you, Wilmet, and I know what comes of sticking oneself down close to one's family, especially when there is that sort of spoilt invalid, backed up in all kinds of unreasonable expectations. I advise you to take care, Wilmet; you don't know what goes on in your absence. I should not wonder if it never came to an engagement after all.'

At that moment Felix's step and knock were at the door. Wilmet went to it, and both her hands were clasped in her brother's. 'My Wilmet, my dear, this is well!'

Then Alda turned from her glass and understood. 'What? He has spoken? O Wilmet, and you never told me!'

'I had not time.'

'And what a splendid ring! but it is not a proper engaged-ring. You can't wear it.'

'I must! He wishes it. It was his mother's--Felix, may I have one of Mamma's for a guard?'

'May you!' said Felix, smiling.

'I should like you to give it to me. Come in.'

He came to inspect the unlocking of the ponderous old inlaid dressing-case, with velvet-lined compartments mostly empty, or only with little labelled papers of first curls, down as far as 'Edward Clement, 1842,' after which stern reality had absorbed sentiment--a sad declension from the blue enamel shrine with a pearl cypher, where Felix's downy flax reposed.

To do Alda justice, there was no greed in her nature, and she even offered Wilmet a turquoise hoop of her own, instead of a little battered ring of three plaited strands of gold, which their mother had worn till her widowhood, and they believed to be the ring of her betrothal. And when Wilmet suggested that the locket would delight Cherry, Alda's ready assent inspired the hope that she felt some compunction for her jealous unkindness.

The locket did prove a soothing charm, coupled with the little consultation as to the ribbon, and the capture of a smooth brown lock of the present to add to the original. And as the manly fingers dealt with the hasp, and the kind smile welcomed her pleasure, Cherry's heart felt that while she had her Felix, Alda need little comprehend her craving for attention from any one.

Yet her greeting to John Harewood was shy, tame, and frightened, compared with Alda's pretty graceful cordiality, as she told him that she was delighted, and envied Lance his powers of diplomacy. In fact, it was Alda who kept up the conversation, and made things pleasant,

with the ease of society; while Felix was shy, Wilmet longed for silence, and Ferdinand looked like a picture of Spanish melancholy, such as had almost infected the whole table.

'I believe I must ask you to bestow a little time on me,' he said, as soon as the meal was over; and Alda made it evident that she meant to be in the conclave, which took place in the back drawing-room. It was at once made evident that the Pursuivant proposal was abhorrent to her; not that she behaved to Felix, nor indeed did she ever do so to any of his sex, as she permitted herself to do to Geraldine, but she showed great displeasure at the idea having been started.

'Things are unfortunate enough already,' she said, with something like Wilmet's dignity; 'but I should never forgive such hopeless ruin to dear Ferdinand's prospects.'

'Have I not told you that no prospect is anything to me if you can only be mine?'

'We know all that,' said Alda, drawing herself away rather sharply from the caressing hand, 'and therefore I must think for you, and I will not be the means of lowering your position in life.'

'Alda, dearest!' cried Ferdinand, glancing at Felix in such genuine distress as made him interfere in pity.

'We understand about position, Ferdinand; and you and Alda have been able to observe how far life is enjoyable in this lowered position.'

'Felix,' said Alda, who had evidently wound herself up for this crisis, 'you know very well that you stand quite out of common rules; but I am sure you can see that however valuable your work may be, it would be wrong to draw Ferdinand to the same level.'

'As for that,' said Ferdinand moodily, yet with the air of a banished prince, 'Felix knows what my father was; and if I knew that my grandfather was an honest man, it would be well. A stray wanderer, cast up at your door, has no right to talk of levels.'

'You are not to talk,' said Alda, more affectionately. 'You are too generous to be allowed to think.'

'In plain English, Alda,' said her brother, 'the objection is yours.'

'I cannot see him sacrifice himself for my sake,' said Alda.

'As though it could be a sacrifice!' exclaimed Ferdinand, 'when it opens the way to make you my own at once, my peerless beauty! If you--'

'Come, we have had all this over before,' said Alda, shrinking a little petulantly as he hovered over her, speaking with the fervour

of his Mexican nature, and his eyes glowing with eagerness; 'if you will not have common sense, I must.'

'Common sense! It is not common sense I want! It is love!'

'If you doubt my affection--' said Alda, with dignity, drawing back.

'No! no! no! I never was so profane. Only it drives me frantic to hear you so coolly willing to keep us apart for--'

'Because my affection is less selfish and narrow than yours,' said Alda, raising her voice as his became like a roll of distant thunder. 'I tell you I will not be the means of binding you to a petty provincial paper, that may give an immediate pittance, but will lead to nothing. Would that be love worth having? I appeal to Felix, his scheme though it was.'

Felix was a very uncomfortable third party, especially as Alda's appeal implied a certain accusation of himself. 'I own,' he said, 'that this situation is not likely to lead to promotion, but it would be competence. Ferdinand would be satisfied, but you--'

'I, who know what he is used to, cannot be satisfied for him.'

'As if you--' gasped the lover; but Alda would not let him go on.

'No,' she said, 'we must be patient. For him to remain in the Life-guards would be madness. but a few years at Mr. Brown's, with the interest he already has in the business, will open a career to him.'

'And I can run down every Sunday,' said Ferdinand. 'It is her determination; I suppose she is right, Felix, but I wish-- If I could wish her otherwise, she should be less prudent!'

'I cannot see that she has any right to ask it of you,' indignantly exclaimed Felix.

But he found this was putting his head into a hornet's nest. Ferdinand would not have contested her right to send him down among the lions, and would never have given her back her troth, like Knight Des Lorges. No, he hotly contended that Alda had a perfect right to make her own terms, and still more hotly, though most inconsistently, that to work at Peter Brown's was his own free choice.

It was incontestable that a South American merchant's career offered more possibilities of rising into opulence and consideration than the proprietorship of a country paper; and though Felix privately doubted whether desk-work would suit Ferdinand half as well as the work where he himself could have contributed wits, he could say no more. Ferdinand was greatly disappointed; but there was no sacrifice that he would not make, and persist in with his silent Spanish perseverance, for Alda's sake. Indeed, he could not bear not to begin at once. He would return at once to his regiment, send in his papers,

and dispose of his horses and equipments, making arrangements with Peter Brown to enter his house. He seemed to be in a fever till the matter was in train, and was entirely past remonstrance. And Felix recognised that the lovers must act for themselves, and could only feel thoroughly vexed with Alda, and equally vexed with himself for the consternation with which he thought of having her at home three years longer!

It was the next evening; and not only had Alda's own lover departed, but Captain Harewood was missing, and with him Lance, and the only explanation was from Bernard, that they were gone to Minsterham. No doubt Wilmet was sensible of a blank when she came home, though she would not allow it, and stoutly defended her Captain's right of going where and when he pleased without notice. She had to fight his battles, till late in the evening he walked in. 'Here we are! It is later than I expected.'

'Where's Lance?'

'He came in with me. Gone to his room, then.--Here, Geraldine, this little gentleman requests the honour of your leaning on him.'

'Oh, what a beauty! What a dear little ivory monster! Turbaned head, serpent's tail, and such a fascinating face!'

'Is the cane the right length! I measured yours.'

'You don't mean that he is for me! So smooth and so steady! Where does he come from?'

'From Benares--I bought him at the great fair; and from the moment I saw you, it was plain that in the eternal fitness of things he was destined to you.'

'To make a Pagan of her,' said Felix. 'See her worshipping her little idol!'

'Not my idol, but my prop and companion for life.'

'Your Lord Gerald, laughed Felix, as she walked triumphantly round the room, perhaps her first unnecessary promenade since she was seven years old.

'This is just the time I didn't expect you,' said Wilmet; 'is the seven o'clock train put on again?'

'We didn't come by the train.' And Felix and Cherry smiled at one another as they detected that Wilmet's economical soul was vexed. 'I wanted Lance to see his doctor again, and the railway seems so bad for his head that I drove.'

'How very kind!' exclaimed Wilmet.

'I am afraid I have not managed it well. I would not make an appointment, lest it should be a glaring day; so Manby was out, and we could only leave a message before going to the precincts. Lance was in wild spirits, and the boys gave him such an uproarious welcome, that old Canon Burley sent in to know what was the matter, and was told it was only little Underwood come back. He dined with us, but I am afraid I was off guard, for I never thought of his going and taking a place in the Cathedral.'

'I should think not!' said Wilmet, 'except that it is in the nature of boys to be provoking, even about church-going. Then it has knocked him up.'

'He was forced to come out in the Psalms; and Poulter, one of the lay-vicars, got anxious about him, and went after him when the Lesson began, found him with his head down on the table in the sacristy, and thought he had fainted, but he was only crying and entirely done up. Manby came just as Poulter brought him in, and gave him a proper good lecture.'

'A very good thing,' said Wilmet, 'if one could only get him to believe there is any need of care when his head is not actually painful. What did Mr. Manby think of him?'

'He says he is as well as could reasonably be hoped--quite recovered from the fever; but the sun-stroke was as severe as any he has seen in England, and coming on the top of all that overwork, both study and music, it has left an amount of irritability and excitability of brain that must not be trifled with. He made poor Lance confess all the little experiments he has been trying on himself, and ordered him to leave off whatever he is about at the first threatening of dizziness or pain.'

'Then there's not much chance of his going back?'

'Not before Christmas at soonest. One would think the poor little fellow must have been aware of that; but the verdict cut him up very much. I thought he had better be quiet till the heat of the day was past, so he lay on my bed till six o'clock, and then he said he was better, but he hardly spoke all the way home.'

Wilmet went at once to see after him, and found him already in bed; but whether sleepy, suffering, or sorrowful, she could not make out, for he hid his eyes from the candle, and only muttered 'No, thank you,' in reply to whatever she offered, till she yielded to his evident longing for darkness and silence.

He was up and about in the morning; but when at noon Bernard rushed in from school, he was neither in the drawing-room, garden, nor office, and the door of his--or rather Mr. Froggatt's--bedroom was locked. Bernard bounced at it, calling, 'Let me in, I say; I'll not make a row.'

'There aren't any more of you?' parleyed Lance.

'No! Let me in, I say!--kicking at the panels--'I must speak to you!'

'I'm coming; hold your din!' And Lance revealed himself without coat or boots.

'Holloa--how dark! You were never asleep? I came, because one can never catch you without a string of girls and babies after you.'

'Cut on,' said Lance resignedly, shaking up his horse-hair pillow: while Bernard seated himself on the table, and in the half-light of the shuttered room began to disentangle some knotted twine.

'Did you come here to do that?' said Lance, wanting to finish his nap, and chiefly restrained by the trouble of the thing from kicking the intruder out.

'Only, I say, Lance, have you any tin?'

'Not the valley of a brass farthing!' (The last pence of the Vale Leston sovereign had gone into Stella's jam.)

'Wouldn't Felix give you some?'

'I don't know.' (Very gruffly.)

'I wish you'd ask.'

'You have as many tongues as I.'

'Well, you see Felix is not half a bad fellow for one's governor, but he doesn't know what's what; and Sims says he'll go to him if I don't come down with something before to-morrow.'

'Sims! Sims in Smoke-jack Alley? Is that your sort?' demanded Lance, in ineffable disgust.

'He's been keeping a dog for me,' said Bernard sulkily.

'A dog!' Lance sat up in astonishment immeasurable.

'Yes. Its the thing, and no mistake,' said Bernard eagerly.

'His name is Stingo; only we are not quite sure whether he is a bull-terrier or a short-haired King Charles.'

Lance dropped back, wriggling in suppressed convulsions, as he demanded, 'Where did you steal this unmistakeable animal?'

'I bought him,' said Bernard, with a certain magnificence intended to be overawing.

'Then where did you steal the money!'

'Travis,' said Bernard, who considered Christian names unworthy of male lips. 'He always used to tip me a sovereign, and Ben Bowyer, the dog-fancier, said Stingo was worth thirty shillings any day, only he let me have him for eight and six, because he wanted to sell off his stock.'

'I thought as much. And Sims keeps him for you?'

'At ninepence a week; but the brute is at me for ever, and says it is twelve weeks.'

'Pray, how were you to raise ninepence a week? By waiting on Providence or turning coach-wheels?'

'I had some then; and Froggy sometimes gives one half a crown, but the old beast hasn't lately, just because I wanted it--nor Travis either, bad luck to him! quoth this grateful young man. 'I put them all off, making sure of him; and now he's cut and never tipped me at all! It's an abominable sell, and they are all at me.'

'All! what more? Have it out,' grunted Lance, with a sound of bodily pain in his tone such as would have silenced any one above ten years old, and a bored contemptuous manner that would have crushed any attempt at confidence--if he had been the right person to confess to.

Nevertheless, Bernard mumbled, 'Shooting-gallery. And Mother Goldie vowed she would lug me up to Wilmet if I don't fork out!'

'Mother Goldie! You little disgusting ape! You've been tucking in what you owed in pies and tarts! cried Lance, who was too constitutionally heedless of the palate to have any charity for its temptations.

'It's all Wilmet's fault,' said Bernard. 'She never gives one anything fit to eat. There was that beastly lamp out there went and got broke, and what does she do but crib it out of our grub! Now, Lance, was any living soul served like that before? She gave us only that beastly stir-about at breakfast' (Bernard worked his single adjective hard), 'no butter nor sugar at tea, and no pudding, except when there's that beastly mess of rice.'

'I'm sure I've seen pudding.'

'Oh! she came round when Felix came home. She knew he wouldn't stand it. Alda used to buy marmalade and anchovy on her own hook, so I don't see why I shouldn't.'

'Alda didn't go on tick, I suppose.'

'Serve Wilmet right if we all did. I don't believe there's a beggar

so badly fed. Nares says--'

'You unnatural little sneak, you haven't been and gone and complained to him!'

'No; but all the town is crying out upon her shabbiness. They say it is a perfect shame how little butcher's meat she gets. Nares's mother and sisters do nothing but laugh at it, and Nares says nothing will make us comfortable but a bankruptcy. Hollo!'

For a well-aimed swing of the bolster laid him sprawling on the floor.

'Take that for mentioning such a word!'

'My eyes, Lance, is it swearing?' said Bernard, with a little affectation of innocence. 'How you have been and bumped my knees;' and he sat on the floor, pulling up his trousers to gain a view; 'there'll be a bruise as big as half a crown! Well, but Nares says it was a real blessing to them; for before it old Nares was always in a rage, and his mother boohooing; and now it is over they live like fighting-cocks, on champagne, and lobster-salad, and mulli--what's his name?--first chop; and the women dress in silks and velvets and feathers, no end of swells! and they say it is regular stoopid to pinch like that, for no one will believe we ain't going to smash while she is such a screw!'

'If you weren't nothing but a little donkey,' said Lance, sitting coiled up with his head on his knee, grimly contemplating him, 'you'd be a show specimen of precocious depravity.'

'I declare,' persisted Bernard, 'Nares says it is coming as sure as fate; for his governor, and Jackman, and Collis are going to stump up the old Pursuivant with their new Bexley Tribune, and Redstone is to be sub-editor.'

'The black-hearted rascal!' cried Lance, bounding on his feet in a rage. 'He ought to be kicked out of the shop this instant!'

'Now don't, Lance,' entreated Bernard, 'for Nares will pitch into me for telling. He says they've got an opening through the Pur backing up that mean beggar Smith; and Collis and Jackman will find the cash, and Nares's father is to be editor, and they vow Froggatt and Underwood will be beat out of the field.'

'Catch them,' said Lance, and he stood leaning against the solid old carved bed-post in silence, till Bernard returned to the insolvency at present far more pressing.

'Won't you help me about Stingo?' he said.

'Do you want me to send him to the dog-show, ticketed "The Real Animal and no mistake"?'

'Don't, Lance,' said the boy peevishly. 'I thought you were good-natured, and would lend me some tin, or at least stop the blackguard from being such a baboon. He's found out that Travis has cut, and he says he'll come to Felix this very day,' ended he, not far from crying.

'I can't anyhow, to-day, Bear,' said Lance, more kindly. 'My head is very bad, and you've not mended it.'

'It was well enough when you broke my knees,' grumbled Bernard. 'Come, Lance, you used to be a fellow to help one.'

'I can't, I tell you,' said Lance, hastily throwing himself back on the bed, and shutting his eyes. 'It isn't that I won't, but I can't. I couldn't walk straight down the street for giddiness; and if I did, I don't suppose I could talk sense.'

Bernard was startled by the tone as well as the words; but he had not arrived at much pity for any one but himself, and he whined, 'But what shall I do, then?' repeating it dolefully, as Lance lay for some moments silent and with closed eyes.

'Bother!' he broke out angrily at last. 'Look here. Tell the blackguard--let me see--I don't well know what I'm saying. Tell him you've spoken to me--no, to your brother--mind, you needn't say which--and that he'll come and see about it. Now give me that bolster, and take yourself off. Tell them I want no dinner, and don't let any one come! Get along, and shut the door.'

Bernard could extract no more, and departed as the dinner-bell rang, leaving him without energy even to lock the door. Presently Felix was standing anxiously over him; but he reiterated that he could not bear to think of food, and only wanted to be left alone; but just as his brother was leaving him, he said, 'Fee, do you know that Redstone is going over to the enemy?'

'The opposition paper? Nothing more likely. How did you hear?'

'Bear picked it up. I say, wasn't that little beggar to have gone to Stoneborough?'

'Not possible, Lance, I've gone into it with Wilmet. She is in trouble about household expenses, as it is; and with this rival paper on our hands, I can't undertake anything extra. Has he been bothering you? I'm very sorry, but we must keep him here.'

Lance shut his eyes without reply; but no sooner was he left alone than he rolled over, gave vent to a heavy groan from the bottom of his heart, and clenched his hands as he lay. Then followed some heavy sobs, and a few great tears; but gradually a look of purpose and hope came over his face, and he slept. He was lying between sleeping and waking, when a quiet step and cautious knock made him call out, 'Come

in, Jack.'

'Your sister wants to know if you are better, and ready for some tea.'

'Thank you, I'm mending. Is Wilmet come home?'

'Yes, but only to become the prey of an ancient female.'

'Mrs. Bisset! Come to inspect you!'

'She won't, then! Shall I get you some tea?'

'No, thank you. But, I say, Jack, do you see my big box that we brought home yesterday? Would you just dig into it for me?'

John Harewood applied himself to disentangle a frightful knot, observing, 'This looks like Bill's handiwork.'

'Ay! Bill put all my traps together when our other fellows came back.'

'Together indeed!' said the Captain, looking at the heterogeneous collection.

'There's nothing to hurt,' said Lance. 'Do you see a green box?'

'A fiddle-case, you boy?'

'A violin-case,' said Lance, with dignity. 'Give it me.' And taking out his purse, he produced its only contents--namely, the key--tried to sit up to unlock his treasure, but was forced by giddiness to lie back again with a gasp, and hold out the key to his friend.

'Come, I should think a fiddle the last thing you could want just now,' said John.

'Just so. I'm afraid it is. Only, just let me see if she is all right. Ay!' and then, after a gaze, a fond touch or two, an irrepressible sigh strangled in the midst, 'lock her up again! You ain't by any chance going home to-morrow?'

'Do you want anything?'

'Why, when I got her at old Spicer's sale for twenty-two and sixpence, Poulter was beside himself at my luck, and said she was worth double that any day, and he would give it me if I got tired of her. Now, if I'd only known yesterday, I could have done it myself, but I can't go, and I can't write--but if you could but send or take it to Poulter, and get the money for me!'

'Do you feel bound to give Poulter the refusal! for if it is really a good instrument, it ought to be worth more than that.'

'Poulter has been very good to me. He taught me to play on it,' said Lance; 'that is, he showed me a little; but Robin made me lock it up and give her the key all last spring, for fear of hindering my mugging; and I can't touch her now, so she has been very little use to me. I promised Poulter, and I think he should have her. Besides, I want the money slick at once. It's no good sticking it in a window to wait for some one to give what it is worth.'

John marvelled what need of money could have come upon the boy in the last twenty-four hours, but he was too discreet a friend to take advantage of necessity to ask questions, and said, 'The fact was, I was thinking of running up to town to get a sewing-machine for your sister, but if I start by the earlier train, I can see Poulter on the way, and if he does not want it himself, he can tell me where to dispose of it to the best advantage.'

'Only it must be ready money,' said Lance; it must be owned with scarcely the alacrity of gratitude John deserved. 'If it didn't make much difference, I wish Poulter could have her, for then I should sometimes see her and handle her again, and I think he would use her well.'

'Very well, I'll tell him.'

'And don't tell any one here,' added Lance. 'You don't go and tell W. W. everything, do you?' he added, wistful and perplexed.

'Not other people's secrets,' said John. 'Now I am going to fetch you some food; you are looking quite faint, you have had nothing since yesterday's dinner.'

Poor Lance! when John was gone, he turned with another groan, once more took the violin in his arms, laid it on his shoulder, and made the motions of playing, then kissed it, and whispering, 'Poulter will be good to you, my pretty. It's not for that little beggar of a Bear! It's for Felix, for Felix--' and then at a sound of steps hastily replaced it, shut the box, and fell back again, dizzy and exhausted.

The next day, he betook himself to a refuge more impregnable to Bernard than even Mr. Froggatt's bedroom, namely the office, which suited his sociable nature, and where he was always welcome. He found employment there, too, in cutting out extracts from newspapers, labelling library books, and packing parcels, and sometimes also, it must be owned, in drawing caricatures of the figures he spied through the chinks of the door.

CHAPTER XXIII

SMOKE-JACK ALLEY

Launce. It is no matter if the ty'd were lost, for it is the unkindest ty'd that ever man ty'd.

Panthino. What's the unkindest ty'd?

Launce. Why, he that's ty'd here--Crab, my dog.

SHAKESPEARE.

John Harewood returned, bringing with him what Alda took for a dressing-case, and Cherry for a drawing-box, but which proved to contain a wonderful genie to save the well-worn fingers many a prick. To Lance he first administered the magical words, 'All right,' and then making an opportunity, he put five sovereigns into his hand. Lance's first impulse was, however, not to thank, but to exclaim, 'Then Poulter has not got it?'

No, Poulter's conscience had forbidden him to purchase 'little Underwood's' treasure at what he knew to be so much beneath its value; but he had given Captain Harewood his best advice and recommendations, and by that means the violin had been taken at a London shop, still at a price beneath his estimate, but the utmost that could be expected where ready money was the point. Lance ought to have been delighted, and his native politeness made him repeat, 'Thank you'; but he could not quite keep down his regret--'Now I shall never see or hear her again.'

However, the next day, when Bernard flew upon him at twelve o'clock, asseverating that there was shade all the way, he allowed himself to be persuaded, prudently carrying with him only ten shillings, and trusting to his blue umbrella rather than to Bernard's shade, which could hardly have been obtained by sidling against the walls.

Bernard did not seem to have enjoyed much more of Stingo's society than Lance of his violin's--the produce of the same bounty. He confessed that he had only ventured on taking the dog out three times in a string, and on one of these occasions he had broken loose after a cat, on another had fought with Nares's dog, and on the third had snapped at Angela.

'You didn't take Angel into these places!'

'No, she came to meet me.'

'That's a sign of grace, but, Bear, I can't stand these diggings at all. I've a great mind to turn back.'

'You won't!' cried Bernard. 'You must have been here often when you were a grammar-school fellow.'

'Not we! This is a cut below us! Fulbert would never have been caught here!'

'But you are going to get me out of this fix?'

'Haven't I said I will? only hold your tongue, and let me alone to manage the rascal. If you open your mouth, I've done with it.'

Bernard was forced to acquiesce, though Lance's manner vexed and irritated him. Popular and valuable as Lance had been with the choristers, he was not dealing as well with his brother, perhaps partly because he was more consciously trying to influence him; and likewise because the state of his health and his prospects so far affected his manner, that though never ill-humoured, it had lost some of the easy careless sweetness of high spirits, and assumed an ironical tone, exasperating to a child who could not brook ridicule. He was ashamed and dismayed at the place where Bernard was leading him, so low and disreputable that the boys of his time had never haunted it, and his own gamin propensities had never extended so far. It was a tumble-down quarter; the houses, deplorable hovels, run up hastily for the workmen at the potteries, and every third or fourth a beershop; and in the midst dwelt Mr. Sims, a maimed poacher, who kept a large live-stock with which to trade on the sporting tastes of the youth of Bexley.

Probably he was gratified to see that 'my brother' meant nothing more imposing than the chorister; but Lance had so cultivated his opportunities at Dick Graeme's home, as to be more knowing on the subject than Felix would have been. Indeed, it did not take much science to estimate the value of the 'real animal,' whose market price seemed to have fallen considerably. Lance, as he looked at the pied, bandy-legged, long-nosed cur, felt it impossible to set his cost against his keep, nor was he designed by nature for driving bargains; but Sims' expectations were founded on the probable, and the debt was annulled for three-and-sixpence and Stingo himself. Much civility was expended on Lance; dogs, rabbits, and other curiosities were exhibited, and an invitation given to come with the other young gents to admire the favourite terrier's exploits upon a cage of rats shortly expected, admission free.

'You will come, won't you?' cried Bernard eagerly, as they went out.

'What? To all the vilest sports in the place!'

'But, Lance, you told me about the rat hunt at Mr. Graeme's.'

'What? Turning out the barn, with Mr. Graeme himself, and Bill, and all the rest? Do you think that's like letting a lot of wretched beasts out of a trap to be snapped up by a cur of a dog, with no end of drinking foul-mouthed blackguards betting on him?'

'You are always so savage, Lance; and now you've gone and paid away

all the money.'

'What more?'

'There's the shooting-gallery, you see.'

Lance did see a public-house called the Flying Stag, where Bernard had contrived to incur a debt of a few shillings under Nares's patronage. While inquiring after the amount, he saw Mr. Mowbray Smith coming along the alley, and was more amused than shocked at the amazement his own presence there would cause the Curate; but just then he perceived that men were standing scowling at their doors, and slovenly women thronging out like ants when their hill is disturbed: and asking an explanation from the damsel in earrings who attended to him, he heard that 'the chaps are determined that that there Smith shall not have the impudence to show his face here again, for a hypocrite, defrauding of the poor. You'd best be away, young gents, there will be a fracaw!'

'A row!' cried Bernard, between excitement and alarm. 'Shall we stay and see it? Won't Smith spy us?'

Lance deigned no reply, but seeing the rough-looking men gathering as if to obstruct the Curate's way, he shot across the street to shake hands with him.

'You! I am sorry to see you!' said Mr. Smith severely; at which Lance gave what under other circumstances would have been an impudent smile, and asked, 'Have you anywhere here to go?'

'I am just come away from a sick man. But you know how wrong it is to bring your little brother here. Take him away,' he added, trying to prevent them from joining him, and at the same time a voice shouted, 'Let him alone, young gents, he aint your sort;' and a hissing and hooting broke out all round, 'A parson as ought to have his gown pulled over his head!'

'What's gone of the coals?' 'How about the blankets?'

Bernard got a tight grip, out of sight, of Lance's coat; Mr. Smith grew red and bit his lips; but Lance walked close to him, and as they began to be jostled, took his arm, holding the blue sunshade over both their heads. Unsavoury missiles began to fly; but a woman screeched, 'Bad luck to ye, ye vagabone! ye've ruinated the young gentleman's purty blue umberella!'

'Down with it, young chap,' called another, 'or ye'll be served with the same sauce!'

'Serve un right too!' was the rejoinder. "'Tis they Underwoods, as never stands up for poor men's rights, and is all for the tyrants.'
(All this full of abusive epithets.)

'Who said that?' broke out Lance, beginning hastily to close his umbrella, and trying to wrench his arm from Mr. Smith; 'I'm ready for him.'

But Mr. Smith, with an angry 'Are you mad?' held him fast; and his struggles provoked a good-humoured laugh at the little champion, still so white and slight.

'No, no,' said a big powerful man, collaring a great lad who had been thrusting forward at Lance's defiance, 'we don't have no mills with natomies like you! Go home and mind yer own business. Your father was another guess sort of parson, and I'll not see a finger laid on you. Be off, till we've given that other bad lot a bit of our mind.'

'Not !!' growled Lance. 'I'll have it out with that rascal there.-- Nonsense, Mr. Smith; I can, I say--and I will!'

But the big man and Mr. Smith were perfectly in accordance this time; and without a word between them, the impulse of the coal-heaver's weight somehow opened a path, where, shoved by the one, and dragged by the other, Lance was at the corner--then round it--the crowd followed no farther.

'A plucky little chap that!' quoth the coal-heaver to Mr. Smith. 'You may thank your stars that he's his father's son, or it would have been the worse for you! And if ever you show the face of you here again, you know what to expect.'

'I expect nothing but what I am willing to receive in my Master's service,' said Mr. Smith, firmly meeting his eyes. 'Meantime, thank you for the help you have given me with these boys. Good morning. You will judge me more fairly another time.'

The man added another contemptuous oath to those with which he had freely laden his discourse; but Lance paused a moment to say, 'Thank you too, you meant it well; but I wish you'd have let me have it out with that foul-mouthed cad.'

'Wait till ye're a match for him, and welcome,' said the man. 'Bless ye! what could that fist do with Black Bill?'

'For shame, boys! come away,' said the infinitely disgusted Curate, and not a word was spoken down the first street, Bernard was still trembling with excitement, and Lance, conscious perhaps that though his interference had answered his purpose, he had been betrayed into what he now saw to have been absurd.

At last the Curate spoke, his naturally harsh voice wavering a little between reproach and acknowledgment. 'I am very sorry for all this, Lancelot Underwood. I believe you joined me out of a kind and generous feeling, of which I am sensible; otherwise, I should feel it my duty to report to your brother where I met you.'

'You are quite welcome,' said Lance, coolly.

'And I must say,' continued Mr. Smith, 'that if your whole training, as well as your recent severe illness, do not withhold you from such associations, at least I entreat you to pause before leading your little brother into them.'

Lance made no answer, except to halt at a public drinking fountain, to wash away the damage his umbrella had sustained; and there, with a serious 'Take care!' the Curate left the brothers.

'Catch me going to his help again!' exclaimed Bernard, entirely unconscious that his own gratitude to Lance was on a par with Mr. Smith's. 'He may get out of the next row as he can!'

'Ah! Bear! You see how you are corrupting my innocent youth!'

'A meddling donkey! I wish he had a rotten egg in each eye! Now it will all come out.'

'What will?'

'Where we have been.'

'That's the best thing that could happen.'

'You don't mean that you mean to let it out?'

'If you expect me to tell lies for you, you are out there.'

'But, Lance, Lance,' in an agony, 'you wouldn't be such a sneak, when I trusted you?'

Lance laughed. The bare idea of betrayal seemed so absurd, that he scarcely thought it worth removing.

The two were slackening their pace as they saw Felix at the carriage-door of a lady customer; and Lance said gravely, 'I'll see to Mother Goldie; but now, Bear, that you are out of this scrape, I give you fair warning, that if I find you grubbing your nose into that sort of thing again, I'll put a stop to it, one way or another.'

'I'm not a bit worse than the rest. All the other fellows do it.'

'Oh, I suppose, if you think Stingo the right thing in dogs, you think Nares the right thing in fellows!'

At that moment the customer drove off, and Felix having spied the blue sunshade, tarried at the door to administer a remonstrance to Lance on being so foolish as to venture into the noon-day sun. He was not able to come in to dinner till it was half over, and then it was with a merry look and question, 'What's this, boys, about Mowbray Smith being mobbed in Smoke-jack Alley and your making in to the

rescue?’

‘Oh,’ said Lance, ‘there was an attempt at getting up a shindy, but it was of the meanest description. No one knew how to set about it. There was only one Irishman there, and he was a woman.’ (This with a wink to Sibby.)

‘And you didn’t offer to fight big Ben Blake?’

‘Ben Blake, on the contrary, elbowed us all safe out, because my father was another guess sort of parson!’

‘And there was a horrible little cad making faces,’ exclaimed Bernard, unable to resist claiming part of the glory,’ and I was just going to have pitched into him--’

‘What--you saw the row getting up, and went to stand by Smith?’ said Felix.

‘Yes,’ said Bernard boldly; ‘and nobody durst lay a finger on him when we were on each side of him!’

At which everybody burst out laughing, including Mr. Froggatt, and Lance most of all. ‘Who was it then,’ he struggled to say gravely, ‘that pulled so hard at the back of my coat? I suppose it must have been some little cad. I thought it had been you.’

‘Well, it was time to hold you back, when you were going to fight that great lout!’

‘For my part,’ said Lance, ‘I think it must have been Smith and I that were holding the Great Bear back by his tail from fighting big Ben Blake. Eh?’

Bernard, never able to bear being laughed at, looked intensely sulky, and a true description of the affair being asked by Mr. Froggatt, Lance gave it, exactly enough, but with so much of the comic side that every one was in fits of merriment, all of which, in his present mood, the younger boy imagined to be aimed at him. He was too full of angry self-consequence really to attend, so as to see how entirely disconnected with himself the laughter was; all he cared for was that Lance should not betray him; and to assure himself on this head, it must be confessed that he hovered on the upper stairs out of sight, while Felix was lingering on the lower to say to Lance, ‘Of course it was only Smith’s affair that took you into Smoke-jack Alley?’

‘Not exactly,’ said Lance.

Bernard trembled with resentment and alarm.

‘I don’t want to ask questions, but you know it is not a nice place for yourself or for Bernard.’

'My dear governor, I know that as well or better than you do, and it won't be my fault if I go there again.'

'Don't let it be anybody's fault,' returned Felix, and vanished through the office door; while Lance, sighing wearily, was heard repairing to his refuge in his own room, and Bernard grimly and moodily swung himself downstairs on his way to afternoon school, believing himself a much aggrieved party. Here was Lance, whom he had believed a fellow-inhabitant of the Alsatia of boyhood turned into one of those natural enemies, moral police, who wanted to do him good! True, Lance had helped him out of his scrape, and guarded his secret; but Bernard could not forgive either his own alarm, or the 'not exactly'; and the terms of confidence so evident between him and Felix seemed to place them in the same hateful category. Worse than all, Lance had laughed at him, and Bernard was far too proud and self-important not to feel every joke like so many nettle-stings. He had expected an easy careless helper; he had found what he could not comprehend, whether boy or man, but at any rate a thing with that intolerable possession, a conscience, and a strong purpose of keeping him out of mischief.

To detect which purpose was to be resolved on thwarting it. Nor, it must be allowed, was Lance's management perfect. He wanted to make himself a companion such as would content the boy instead of the Nareses, but to cross the interval of amusement between sixteen and ten required condescension, that could not but be perceived and rejected, nor did he perceive that ridicule was an engine most fatal in dealing with Bernard. Of course nothing like all this passed through the boy's mind. Lance simply saw that his little brother was getting into mischief, and tried to play with him to keep him out of it, but was neither well nor happy enough to do so naturally, and therefore did not succeed. Yet if he had abstained from showing Bernard a picture in the style of Punch, of the real animal and no mistake, and Bernard himself pointing to Felix and observing that the governor didn't know what's what, he might have prevailed to prevent the boy from eluding him and going to Mr. Sims' rat-hunt.

Of all this Felix: knew nothing. He still had much lee-way to make up, in consequence of his absence, and the excitement in the town told upon the business.

Mr. Bevan's reply had been a timid endeavour at peace-making which foes called shuffling, and friends could only call weakness, so that it added to the general exasperation. Then came the Archdeacon's investigation, which elucidated the Curate's moral integrity, but showed how money subscribed for charity had gone in the church expenses, that ought to have been otherwise provided for. It was allowed that the Rector had been only to blame in leaving the whole administration to the Curate under his wife's dominion, and as the lady could not be put forward, Mr. Smith was left to bear the whole brunt of the storm.

His obsequiousness to Lady Price had alienated his brother clergy,

and his fellow-curate allowed himself to be kept aloof by his mother, in a manner that became ungenerous. Half petulant, and wholly ungracious, as Mr. Smith's manner was in receiving assistance, only strong principle could lead any one to befriend him; and his few advisers found it difficult to hinder him from making a public exposure of 'my Lady,' or from throwing up his work suddenly and leaving the town, which would of course have been fatal to his prospects.

The Pursuivant had a difficult course to steer, Mr. Froggatt would fain have ignored the strife altogether, but the original note of defiance having been sounded by his trumpet, this was not possible, and the border line between justice and partisanship was not easy to keep. Whether the young editor did keep it was a question. To Mr. Smith he seemed a tame, lukewarm supporter; to Mr. Froggatt, a dangerously conscientious and incautious champion; and the vociferous public despised the dull propriety, and narrow partisanship, of the old country paper. Finally, on the first Saturday in October, there appeared the first sheet of the Bexley Tribune, with a cutting article on bloated dignitaries and blood-sucking parasites, and an equally personal review of all the Proudie literature. On the Monday morning one hundred and twenty-nine Pursuivants remained on hand. Redstone took the trouble to count them, and to look into the office to ask Mr. Underwood where they should be stowed away.

'I wish he was smothered in them, the malicious brute!' said Lance, grinding his teeth, when Felix had given a summary answer. 'What a blessing to see the ugly back of him on the 1st of November!'

'I'm not so sure of that,' said Felix, as he sorted the letters of the Sunday post.

'Do you think he can. do us any harm?'

'No; but he seems a specimen of an article hard to supply at the same price.'

'Are those answers to your advertisement?'

'Yes, and very unpromising.'

Lance came to look them over with him, and to put aside those worth showing to Mr. Froggatt; but it seemed that an assistant suitable in appearance and intelligence was so costly as to alarm their old-fashioned notions. He must be efficient, for Mr. Froggatt was equal to little exertion, and never came in on bad days; and to give an increased salary when the paper was struggling with a rival was serious; yet the only moderate proposal was from a father at Dearport, who wanted his son boarded, lodged, and treated as one of the family.

'That is impossible,' said Felix, 'unless the Froggatts would do it.'

'Eighteen!' said Lance. 'I'm sixteen, and up to the ways of the place! Why don't you set me to work before I have eaten my head off?'

'It would not do for you afterwards,' said Felix; 'I don't like your rushing out to serve.'

'But really, Felix, I mean it. I can do all Redstone does, except lifting some of the weights; and I am as old as you when you began.'

'No, no, Lance; your line is cut out for you.'

'It was,' said Lance, 'but I'm off it, and no good as I am; and if you could save Redstone's salary, you might send Bear to Stoneborough, instead of letting him stay here and go to the dogs.'

'Ah!' groaned Felix, 'it is hard that all this should come to upset his chances.'

'Are you really afraid those rascals can do us much harm?'

'We have a sound county circulation beyond their reach, but every copy they sell is so much out of our pockets; and there are so many people possessed with a love of the low and scurrilous, as well as so many who differ in politics, that it must thrive unless they stultify themselves. Don't look so appalled, Lancey boy; we aint coming to grief, only it will be a close shave at home this winter.'

'Then, Felix, let me help! You don't know the comfort it would be.'

'Not so loud,' said Felix, stepping into the shop. Lance stood thoughtful, then hearing more footsteps, ran out, and found two or three boys come for school materials, and some maids waiting to change volumes for their ladies. He gave his ready help; and there ensued a lull, for it was a wet day, such as to make Mr. Froggatt's coming doubtful. Felix took a second survey of the applications.

'Now, Fee, do think about this; I am in earnest.'

'So am I, Lance; I am very thankful to you, but it is not to be thought of.'

'Why not? Am I too small? For that's mending. There's one good thing in being ill, it sets one growing. My thick go-to-meeting trousers that I left at Minsterham are gone up to my ancles; I must ask Wilmet if Clem hasn't left a pair that have got too seedy for Cambridge.'

'It is not that, Lance, but the disadvantage it might be to you in after-life.'

'If I took to it for good?'

'No, no, Lance; one is enough.'

'Stay. Don't shut me up that way. Recollect what this horrid donothingness is doing for me. I am losing all chance of the exhibition, and they can't keep me on at the Cathedral without, for my voice has got like an old crow's; and besides, if I can't read, what's the good of standing for scholarships?'

'You will feel very differently when your head is stronger. Besides, if there should be anything in what we were told at Ewmouth, it would be a pity to get more involved with trade.'

'I thought that was never to be spoken of.'

'And this is my first time. Don't take it as a licence.'

'I could see the sense of that, if it were you,' said Lance, 'but not for No. 5.'

'No. 1 would have his place and work found for him, but No. 5 might not find it easy to turn to something else.'

'Well!' said Lance, considering, 'you said that possibility was not to make any difference to us. Wouldn't it be making the wrong sort of difference to let it keep a great lout like me in idleness while Bernard is going to the bad?'

'What do you mean about Bernard?' said Felix, now thoroughly roused. 'Is it worse than you and Fulbert were in your gamin days?'

'I am afraid so,' said Lance. 'Ful took better care of himself than he seemed to do, and his friends were decent fellows, not like the lot that have hooked in poor little Bear.'

'I suppose it was some scrape of his that took you into Smoke-jack Alley. I thought you would get him out best without me.'

'The little dog, he was always after me when I didn't want him, but now I can't get at him. In short, there's nothing for it but cutting the connection between him and Jem Nares.'

'Just tell me how far it goes. What has he been doing with him?'

'Taking him to see rat-killing at Sims' in Smoke-jack Alley.'

'You couldn't hinder it?'

'No. Indeed, Felix, I did my best,' and the tears sprang into the boy's eyes; 'I did all but go after him, for I knew that would be worse than no good.'

'You need not apologise to me,' said Felix, laying down his pen; 'I have been very wrong. Between this business of Smith's and all the rest of it, I have hardly known which way to turn. I knew that I had not taken the right line with Fulbert, and interference made him

worse, and I thought you had taken Bear in hand. Why, Lancey, I never meant to upset you. You have done all you could.'

'I did think I was good for that,' said Lance ruefully, 'after all our old swells at Minsterham said about influence on the choir and bosh. That when it comes to one's own brother--'

The tears were almost girl-like, and Felix's comfort was in the tone that suited them. 'Indeed, Lance, you may be doing him more good than you know. I thank you with all my heart; you are a much more real help and comfort to us all than you guess.'

'That's what you say to Cherry!' said Lance, impatiently. 'Now I can be real help, if you would only let me, and then Bernard could go out of the way of these fellows.'

'That he shall do, if I have to dip into the Chester legacy again.'

'Better take my way,' said Lance, reviving; 'a young man with good references only wants board and lodging.'

'It is not possible, Lance. It would not be respectful to the Bishop or the Dean, who have strained a point to keep you. There--I hear Mr. Kenyon's voice in the shop. I must go.'

'Only one thing, Felix. Will you hear what Jack Harewood says to it?'

To this Felix readily assented. He was hurried and harassed nearly to the extent of his time and capacity; he could not pause to give full consideration to his young brother's project, and was glad that the ungracious task of silencing it should be imposed on one less immediately interested.

John Harewood was always at Wilmet's side after four o'clock. Before that time he sometimes went to his home; he often spent the afternoon with Geraldine, but he was not usually about the house in the morning. So Lance, in a fever of impatience, wandered till he hunted him down writing letters in the coffee-room at the Fortinbras Arms.

'Jack, I say, come and have a walk.'

'Pleasant weather!'

'You want to be watered, after all that parching in India. It isn't raining now, and such a jolly cool day!'

'Jollier for you than a finer day, mayhap,' said the good-natured soldier, who greatly commiserated Lance's enforced idleness, and only wondered at his not making it a greater misery to every one else. He also understood what the inured ears of the family never guessed, since Lance never complained, the distress of Theodore's constant hum and concertina to sensitive ears and excited nerves; and had observed that Lance had flagged ever since the journey to Minsterham, with

less of vigour and more of sharpness. Sure that something was preying on the boy, he deferred his least important letters, to splash away with him in mud and mist, and hear him explain his views, with the fullness often more possible towards friend than family.

John was greatly surprised, but did not make any crushing objection, and listened with thorough sympathy. He doubted, however, whether Lance would be doing any real good, and not only throwing more, instead of less work upon Felix. Sensibly enough the boy went into the matter. He said that when Felix began, the staff had also consisted of Mr. Froggatt, Redstone, a lad called Stubbs, and a boy. Now Felix did much more than Mr. Froggatt had then done, and Stubbs was a useful piece of mechanism without a head, and Lance believed himself quite able to fill the place Felix had taken at the same age; indeed, he had far less either to learn or to overcome, and though his arithmetical powers were still in abeyance, he had rather excelled in that line at the Cathedral school.

'I know, of course,' said Lance, 'that a man from a London house would be of more use; but there's this awful salary, and he would never care to look after Felix.'

'I allow that; but even if you can be of much present use, is it not at the expense of greater usefulness by and by?'

'I am sick of that! Edgar and Clem both mean to be of use by and by, and what comes of it? Edgar has spent Felix's two hundred pounds that he borrowed, and now has got his own, all to repay when he is a great painter. And he is six years older than I am! Now if I earned my guinea a week, as Felix did, it would be real good now, and I should be learning the trade for the future.'

'That's the question. First, would the guinea a week make so much appreciable difference?'

'Is that all you know about it, Jack? First, I should be earning my keep, not eating my head off; and then Bernard might be sent safe off to school.'

'You don't mean to say that otherwise he could not?'

'It has been a terribly costly year. There's Edgar. Then Clem couldn't settle in at Cambridge for nothing, there's been Alda turned back on Felix's hands; there's been illness, and goodness knows what the doctors may charge; and there's Felix's outing and mine!'

John answered by opening his pocket-book and showing Dr. Manby's account receipted.

'O Jack! You don't mean--'

'Considering that Will was the sole cause of the doctor being wanted at all, we could only wish to bear the damages.'

'I hope you have told Wilmet. It would be a ton weight off her mind.'

'I hope she would think the Chapter did it; but if you think she is anxious, let her know that it is all right.'

'You are a brick, John! But Felix himself said it would be a close shave. I wish I could throttle that Bexley Tribune, and all its dirty supporters!'

'Do you know, Lance, I am very much struck with your brother's--ay, and old Froggatt's conduct in this matter.'

Lance flushed with pleasure. 'Go ahead, Jack!'

'Of course, for a paper to keep its politics is nothing; but to take up the cause of an unpopular man, whose slights have been marked--'

'Who has been a malicious little cad,' chimed in the chorister.

'To take up his cause simply as a matter of justice, and therewith of the Church, without truckling to public opinion, at absolute risk and loss, seems to me generosity and principle quite out of the common way.'

'You're about right there,' said Lance, intensely gratified; 'and doesn't it make one burn to help the old fellow?'

'Quite true. The question is, which way to help him; and while I grant you that the being idle at home just now is a terrible trial, whether it might not be better to be patient under it, than to disqualify yourself for a line in which you might do more--that is if it does disqualify you.'

'What line do you mean?' said Lance.

'Scholarship, the University.'

'That wasn't what I wanted most,' said Lance; 'and as for that, I'm disqualified enough by all this waste of time.'

'What was your wish, then?'

'I'll tell you,' said Lance, with lowered voice. 'When I used to lie catching notes of the chanting, and knowing that the organ was quiet for me, I used to feel that if I got well, I must give up my life to it, and study music in full earnest, so as to be a real lift to people's praise, perhaps in our own Cathedral. I thought maybe I could get in as a lay-vicar when my year is up, and work at harmony under Miles, and take a musical degree. But then came that day when the organ seemed to be crushing and grinding my head to bits--and of all Psalms in the world it was the forty-second! and Manby telling me on my life not to try to do anything for I can't tell how long.'

'Was that the reason you sold your violin?'

'No, of course not; except that it was a sin and a shame to keep it for no good, when I thought a pound might pull that little ape Bernard out of the mire. And I've been asking questions, and find it would take huge time and cost to study music so as to be worth anything; and here am I, a great lout, not doing that or any other good on the face of the earth--as much worse than Theodore as I am bigger. So if I can help Felix, when he is fighting the fight in the Pursuivant for God's honour and good and right, wouldn't that be a sort of service?'

'So undertaken,' said John, with a huskiness in his voice. 'Well, Lance, I will talk it over with Felix, if you like.'

For John Harewood, not having any strong musical bias, did not greatly appreciate the career that Lance had chalked out for himself; and while thrilled by the boy's devotional feeling, thought it tinged by enthusiasm, and had seen enough of Cathedral singing-men to have no wish to see him among them. If the loss of time was to prevent a University career, he thought book-selling under Felix's eye the preferable occupation.

Discussion was, however, deferred by the arrival of a home friend, who had sought him out at the hotel; and Lance had to go home without him, and wear through the day between dawdling, drawing, and playing with Stella, as best he might, till after school-hours; when, eager to turn to the account of his wardrobe these moments when Wilmet was free from her Captain, he drew her into his room.

Presently after, Felix heard the most amazing noises to which his family had ever treated him, and thankful that the wet day had reduced the denizens of the reading-room to one deaf old gentleman, he hurried upstairs, and beheld through the open door of Mr. Froggatt's room, Bernard raving, roaring, dancing, and stamping, in an over-mastering passion, and tearing some paper up with teeth and hands. Just then Lance grasped his collar, and tried in vain to rescue the paper; but he fought with fists, bites, and kicks, like something frantic, until Felix, with a bound forward, suddenly captured him, and dragged him back, still tearing and crunching the paper.

'For shame! Be quiet! You are heard all over the place.--Shut the door.'

The door was shut by Wilmet, while Bernard stood quailing under the stern face, strong hand, and tone of displeasure in which Felix demanded, 'What is the meaning of this?'

'That Bernard refuses to wear Lance's outgrown clothes,' said Wilmet.

'Do you mean that this is the cause of this disgraceful outbreak?'

'I--don't see why--' growled Bernard, 'why I should wear everybody's beastly old things.'

'It is right you should hear the whole, Felix,' said Wilmet. 'When I showed him that Lance would have some still shabbier clothes of Clement's altered for him, he said if Lance chose to be a snob, he would not. Lance answered that it was a choice between that and petticoats; and then he fell into this extraordinary state, when I can only hope he did not know what he was saying or doing.'

'He was drawing me,' bellowed Bernard, 'drawing me in his brute of a book!' and he was so infuriated, that words never before heard by his sister followed, as he quivered and stamped even under Felix's grasp, which at length forced him into desisting; but the command, 'Go up to your room this instant,' could only be carried out by main force, amid tremendous kicking and struggling, Felix carrying him, and Wilmet following to unfasten the hands that clutched at the rail; while Lance stood aghast at one door, and Cherry in an agony at another, and Stella crept into a corner and hid her face in terror.

'Well, we never had the like of this before!' said Felix, coming down, having locked him in, and heard him begin to bounce about the barrack, like prisoners in the breaking-out frenzy. 'Can it be all about the clothes?'

'I don't think you know what a grievance the having to take to old ones has always been to him, poor little boy!' said Cherry, very nearly crying, for Bernard was so much her own child that in spite of his having cast her off she was in full instinct of defence; 'and he dislikes Lance's most of all, because of the Cathedral peculiarities.'

'Ah! you have always humoured him by taking off that chorister's frill,' said Wilmet; 'but there could be no objection to those trousers. They were almost new when Fulbert left them, and Lance has only had them for best one winter.'

Felix could not help laughing. 'Long had she worn, and now Belinda wears,' he quoted. 'My dear Mettle, the effect is better than the detail. You should spare us the pedigree, however respectable.'

'Well, I said nothing about it,' said Wilmet. 'Was it what you said about petticoats, Lance?'

'Lance does tease and aggravate that child unbearably!' exclaimed Cherry, too much vexed not to be relieved to turn her blame upon somebody, 'and it is very unkind of him, for he knows Bernard cannot bear to be laughed at.'

'Hush! Cherry,' said Wilmet; 'if Lance did, he didn't mean it. It has been quite too much--'

'Indeed it has, said Felix. 'You had better lie down at once, Lance.'

A good deal more than Bernard's outbreak had gone to the pain and dizziness that prevented Lance from even attempting to reply to Cherry's accusation, but made him turn quietly back into his room; while Felix was obliged to hurry downstairs again; and Alda made her frequent remark that 'those boys were really unbearable.'

'Poor Lance! it was not his fault, said Wilmet.

'You don't know, Wilmet!' said Cherry indignantly. 'I did hope that when he came home, my poor little Bernard might get better managed-- he used to be so fond of him; but he has done nothing but worry and laugh at him, and I don't at all wonder it has come to this. I shall go up and see about the poor little fellow.'

'Do you mean to let her go and pet him after such outrageous naughtiness?' asked Alda, as Cherry moved to begin the difficult ascent.

'I should not do it myself,' said Wilmet; 'but I daresay she will do him good.'

Alda held up her hands in wonder. How many quarrels might have been going on at that moment, if three of the family at least had not exercised the forbearance she so little understood.

Cherry and her Lord Gerald mounted the attic stairs. It was for the first time in her life, and she was so imperfect in the geography of the upper floor, that she had to open one or two doors before she found 'the barrack,' with Bernard lying kicking his heels fiercely at the beam across the low room. The amazing presence of Geraldine suspended this occupation. 'How did you come here?' he gasped.

'I came to see you, Bear. My poor Bear! I am so sorry!' said Cherry, sitting down on one of the beds; 'how could you go on so?'

There was rebuke and pain in her voice, and Bernard resented it. 'They've no business to bait me, he said. 'I've no peace in my life!'

'But that doesn't make it right to fly into such dreadful passions.'

'I wouldn't do it if they'd let me alone. I don't see why I should be the one to wear every one's nasty old clothes.'

'Why, Felix and Clement couldn't well wear yours!'

'It was all Lance's doing. Lance has bothered me out of existence ever since he came home.'

'But you should try to bear it, if he is a little cross and tiresome. You know he is not at all well yet, and all this has quite knocked him up.'

'I'm glad of it!' said Bernard viciously. 'Served him right for setting Wilmet on, and then drawing his abominable pictures; as if it wasn't enough to have spoilt all my pleasure, and sold Stingo!'

'What was Stingo?'

'Oh, just a dog--'

'A dog!'

'Yes, my dog; and Lance went and sold him, and then drew a beastly picture of him and me.'

'But, Bernard, how could you have a dog?'

'Oh, I bought him with some money Travis gave me, and a cad down in the town kept him for me; but then Travis didn't give me any more--'

'But, Bernard, you must have known you ought not. Did you get into debt?'

'Ay, just for a few shillings; and the brute threatened me so that I just asked Lance--'

'Was he such a dangerous dog? O Bear!'

'No, no--the man that kept him. I thought Lance would tackle him without making a row.'

'And did he?'

'Ay. He said he hadn't got a penny, and he kept me waiting ever so long; but I fancy he got it from Harewood. He might as well have let me keep Stingo!'

Cherry's views of the relations between Lance and Bernard had begun to adjust themselves, and she began to reason on the impropriety of keeping the dog; but she soon perceived that this was only ranging herself on the side of the enemy, and exciting the obduracy of her favourite, who was determined to be a victim. In truth, Bernard was not repentant enough to treat her with confidence, and his world was so entirely beyond her knowledge, that she did not possess the threads that would have led to it. All that she did perceive was, that much of Bernard's irritation was at the endeavour to keep him out of mischief, and that her own gentle persuasions were almost as distasteful as Lance's jests. She sat on, arguing, talking, entreating, till it had long been quite dark; and Wilmet at last came up to say that she must not stay any longer in the cold, and to ask Bernard whether he would say he was sorry.

'I didn't want her to come here bothering,' was Bernard's grateful remark.

'Well, I advise you to take care you are in a better mood before Felix comes,' said Wilmet. --'Come, Cherry, it is not safe for you to go down alone.'

Cherry could only entreat, 'Do, Bear, do,' and try to kiss the averted cheek.

She did not know that as soon as the door was shut on him and the little flicker of gas, Bernard fell into an anguish of sobs and tears, the work of her persevering love, softening and lessening the obstinate pride so far that the next visitors met with a much better reception than they might have done. The first came stumbling up with a weary step, and pushed open the door, saying, 'Here, Bear, don't bear malice. I'm awfully sorry I ever drew that thing! I'll never do you again. So shake hands, and have done with it.'

'All right,' returned Bernard, outstretching his hand as one who felt that amends were made him, but could not receive them graciously; and Lance's weary and confused senses were satisfied. He never perceived hard lumps of offence unless he ran his head very hard against them, and even now little guessed the amount of annoyance his raillery had given.

And next came a quick, resolute tread that made the little fellow shiver with apprehension, never guessing at his brother's self-debate whether obstinate impenitence ought not to bring the rod, and wondering recollection of his own displeasure when Mr. Audley recommended its disuse in the fatherless household. Felix held by the spirit rather than the letter, and had decided that unless he found submission, signal punishment must ensue.

It was an immense relief to him to detect by eye and ear that the child had been crying, and to be able to say that seeing that he was sorry made it possible to attend to Lance's kind entreaty not to be hard upon him. Absolute words of penitence Felix did not try to exact; but after a few words of sympathy, which Bernard had by no means expected, on the hardship of the second-hand wardrobe, and a reminder of the necessity, he proceeded to rebuke for the passionate behaviour, and above all for the language Bernard had used; expressing to the full how much it had shocked and appalled him, by showing what sort of associates the boy must have chosen since he had learnt such words at all, and what a shame and disgrace he felt it that one of the brothers should ever have uttered them. And Bernard-- who had learnt that Satanic primer with a certain shame and repugnance, under the strong desire to show himself neither girl, muff, nor choir-boy, and certainly would never in his right senses have betrayed his proficiency at home--was a good deal impressed, and finally began to cry again, and to promise to cure himself.

Believed to have thus fulfilled the least pleasing of all his duties, Felix went down to his long-delayed evening meal, and therewith to a family council. Lance was gone to bed, and his proposal was the more

freely discussed, as well as his relations with Bernard.

'That boy must go at once to Stoneborough,' said Felix. 'I shall write to Dr. Cheviot to-night.'

Wilmet sighed. 'I suppose I ought not to have objected,' she said; 'but I did think Lance would have kept him in order.'

'He has tried,' said Felix.

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END OF VOL. I

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better mood before

Felix comes,' said Wilmet. --'Come, Cherry, it is not safe for you to

go down alone.'

Cherry could only entreat, 'Do, Bear, do,' and try to kiss the averted cheek.

She did not know that as soon as the door was shut on him and the little flicker of gas, Bernard fell into an anguish of sobs and tears, the work of her persevering love, softening and lessening the obstinate pride so far that the next visitors met with a much better reception than they might have done. The first came stumbling up with a weary step, and pushed open the door, saying, 'Here, Bear, don't bear malice. I'm awfully sorry I ever drew that thing! I'll never do you again. So shake hands, and have done with it.'

'All right,' returned Bernard, outstretching his hand as one who felt that amends were made him, but could not receive them graciously; and Lance's weary and confused senses were satisfied. He never perceived hard lumps of offence unless he ran his head very hard against them, and even now little guessed the amount of annoyance his raillery had given.

And next came a quick, resolute tread that made the little fellow shiver with apprehension, never guessing at his brother's self-debate whether obstinate impenitence ought not to bring the rod, and wondering recollection of his own displeasure when Mr. Audley recommended its disuse in the fatherless household. Felix held by the spirit rather than the letter, and had decided that unless he found

submission, signal punishment must ensue.

It was an immense relief to him to detect by eye and ear that the child had been crying, and to be able to say that seeing that he was sorry made it possible to attend to Lance's kind entreaty not to be hard upon him. Absolute words of penitence Felix did not try to exact; but after a few words of sympathy, which Bernard had by no means expected, on the hardship of the second-hand wardrobe, and a reminder of the necessity, he proceeded to rebuke for the passionate behaviour, and above all for the language Bernard had used; expressing to the full how much it had shocked and appalled him, by showing what sort of associates the boy must have chosen since he had learnt such words at all, and what a shame and disgrace he felt it that one of the brothers should ever have uttered them. And Bernard-- who had learnt that Satanic primer with a certain shame and repugnance, under the strong desire to show himself neither girl, muff, nor choir-boy, and certainly would never in his right senses have betrayed his proficiency at home--was a good deal impressed, and finally began to cry again, and to promise to cure himself.

Believed to have thus fulfilled the least pleasing of all his duties, Felix went down to his long-delayed evening meal, and therewith to a family council. Lance was gone to bed, and his proposal was the more freely discussed, as well as his relations with Bernard.

'That boy must go at once to Stoneborough,' said Felix. 'I shall

write to Dr. Cheviot to-night.'

Wilmet sighed. 'I suppose I ought not to have objected,' she said;

'but I did think Lance would have kept him in order.'

'He has tried,' said Felix.

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