BRUNA'S REVENGE,

AND OTHER TALES.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"CASTE," "MY SON'S WIFE," "PEARL,'

&c. &c.

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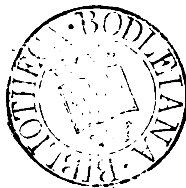

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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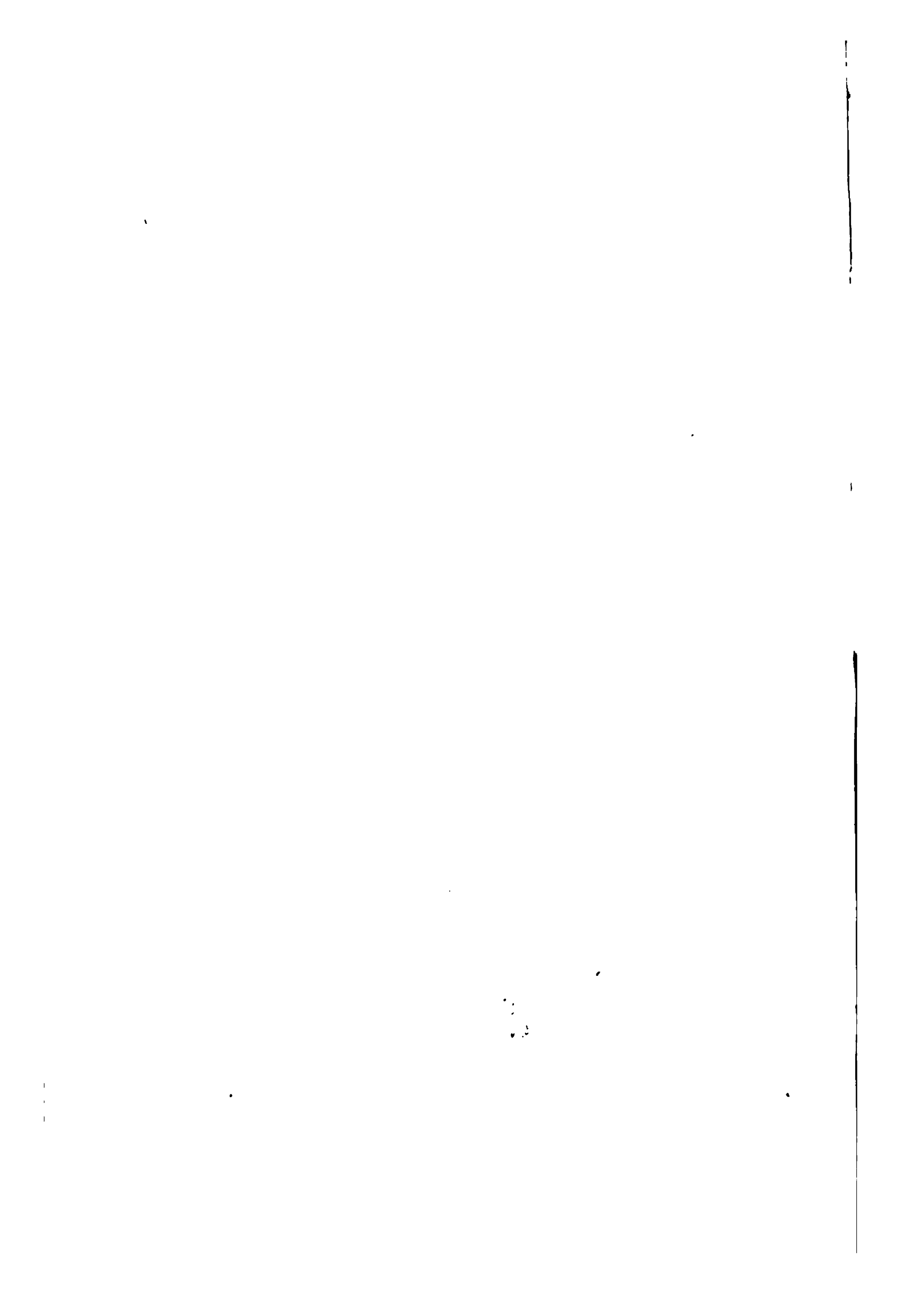
(CONTINUED.)



BRUNA'S REVENGE.

CHAPTER XIX.

"MADAME BRUNE."

THE very night he arrived in Paris, Percy, as it chanced, was able to see "Madame Brune" on the stage, in her most admired "part." The first sentence he heard her recite, the first few notes she sang (he had purposely averted his eyes when the curtain was drawn up), were enough to convince him that he had found Bruna. But when he allowed himself to look at her, that his eyes might confirm his ears, he could almost have doubted—he would gladly have hidden his face in his hands, and wept like a woman

or a child. It was on so changed a Bruna that he had looked—so aged, so worn, so wasted. Yet, by-and-by, when the first shock of recognition had passed, he found himself, for the hour, sufficiently carried away by the artist (magnificent, it seemed to him, in her presentation of the pure power, the spirituality of passion) to be able to put aside, for that hour, the sorrow of his love for the woman whom, as it appeared to him, the artist had consumed.

Bruna had always been slight—she was now a mere shadow; her eyes had always been the ruling feature of her face, but now there seemed nothing of that face except the eyes. In her whole effect there was something weird, spectral, all but ghastly—it was somewhat as if a well-nigh disembodied spirit sang and moved for the amusement of that gorgeous throng. Her splendid voice had begun to ring somewhat hollow, as if too thin a shell contained it.

It was only with the greatest difficulty

that Percy could obtain Madame Brune's address. When at last he did obtain it, he was assured that it would be entirely useless to him, as Madame received nobody, strictly and absolutely nobody. At her door next morning he was told the same thing; and learnt besides that to-day she was ill, entirely prostrate; exhausted, even beyond what had lately been usual with her, by the representation of the evening before.

The only concession Percy could gain by bribes, persuasion, threats (of Madame's displeasure when she should learn that an old friend had been turned from the door) was this, that the hall-porter caused Madame's personal attendant, a grey-headed mulatto woman, to be summoned, to confirm his own words. This woman was inexorable, refusing to take card, note, or message to her mistress. Percy was about to return to his hotel, and try an appeal through the post, when it occurred to him to make one last

experiment. He took a ring he knew Bruna would remember from his finger, and put it on the woman's, telling her just to wear it next time she attended her mistress.

"That is immediately," she said. "It is Madame's bell which rings."

She left Percy in custody of the porter, locking behind her the door she passed through. More than half an hour Percy waited, then the woman returned, sullenly saying,

"You're to come in; but with your ring you've nearly killed my mistress."

She led Percy through a handsome suite of apartments to a small dressing-room. It was empty, but a shawl flung on a couch, an open book upon the floor close to it, a coffee-service upon the table, spoke of recent use. Percy walked to a window, and stood looking out, trying to master his excessive agitation. The ceaseless hum and roar of the street appeared to be in his own brain,

or to be carrying his senses away with it. He had not slept, he had hardly eaten since he left Beech-holmes.

Presently, though he heard no noise, no door open or close, no footfall, and no dress rustle, he felt that Bruna was in the room. He did not, as one would have expected, instantly turn and go towards her: he felt a strange reluctance to do so. But, when she had softly breathed rather than spoken his name, he could not longer delay. She had paused and was leaning on the table. If, the night before, he had been shocked by the change in her, he was now appalled. In spite of the great light of joy over her face, or, possibly, the more because of it, she looked, he thought, ghastly—-a dying woman. His look, the tone in which her name cried itself out of his heart, told her his thought.

For a few instants they considered each other; then Bruna's arms were outstretched, her face was upturned in inexpressible long-

ing—a longing as of a tired child for its mother—and the worn, wasted, weary woman rested in Percy's arms, against a heart which, it seemed to him, must burst in its efforts to contain so complicated an anguish.

Bruna soon gently disengaged herself, and threw herself on the couch, pointing him to a low chair close by it. For a few moments she lay with shut lids and motionless. She wore, he noticed, his ring upon her finger, and no other ring—no ornament of any kind. Her dress was of heavy, unrelieved white: soft, warm, and lustreless, of some flannel-like texture, and folded loosely about her. To Percy's horror, he found it suggesting itself to him as her shroud; in much such another, when he was but a child, he had seen his mother dressed for her coffin.

To break the spell of almost terror stealing over him, he touched and took Bruna's hand. It was of corpse-like coldness; but

at his touch she opened her eyes upon him and spoke.

"I am told I am not to agitate myself," she said, with a wonderful sort of smile; "so we will try and be quiet. I don't belong to myself just now, you see—my engagement is not run out. Six nights more, and it will be finished; but I sometimes feel as if I should be finished first. And so, Percy, we meet at last! And where is my sweet Ann? Ah! I understand — you thought it well to see me alone first; but, Percy, you may bring Ann. I dare meet her."

There was a proud gladness in face and voice as she said that. He raised the hand he held to his lips, and again they looked at each other—a long, silent look—till, suddenly, Bruna snatched her hand from his, drooped her face into the bend of her arm, and sobbed, and sobbed, by the violence of those sobs shaking her wasted frame alarmingly.

In ungovernable agitation, Percy laid his head against her knees, and kissed her dress with passionate kisses. Bruna was the first to grow calm.

"This is not keeping quiet," she said, with an attempt to smile. "The fault is mine—always in all things the fault is all and always mine. It all came back on me so suddenly—the old Beech-holmes days, when, as it now seems to me, I might have been so happy, and all the misery and madness since; and with this came, for the moment, a feeling of being still so young to die, and longing, such a longing, but only for a moment, for happy life; and altogether things were too much for me, and more than I could bear quietly. Percy, when can I see Ann? I want to see Ann. You will let me see Ann soon? It must be soon."

"Bruna, are you so very ill?" asked Percy hoarsely. "Do the doctors think you so very ill?"

"I am nearly finished," she answered;

"not so much very ill as entirely used-up. And you would not wonder if you knew how I have worked and spent myself. And I am not sorry. It was only for a moment that a weak regret came over me. My life, you see, Percy, has been just one great mistake and discontent; and, I cannot help hoping that, if I have to live again, I shall be allowed some less unfortunate beginning. It is discontent, it seems to me, that has, so to speak, consumed me, always driving me to do more and differently. I may well call my life 'a fitful fever.' I have never valued anything while I had it, and have always regretted everything I have lost. 'Lost, lost, lost!' is what something has been crying in me ever since I left Beech-holmes. But it hasn't been all mad misery, Percy; there has been, also, mad triumph and exultation, moments in which I have felt the keen delight of life and power. There has been ecstasy in winning, though the thing won has immediately been felt to be nothing.

And, Percy, I have been able to do, and I have done, a few kind things." Here she paused.

Percy felt as if he struggled with overwhelming dreams. How distant and how long ago seemed all the late calm lovely life with Ann, and all the reposeful beauty of Beech-holmes! And in what a feverish delirium of grief and love and passion was his heart now beating!

"But Ann, Ann, Ann," Bruna by-and-by recommenced, and if she had been silent an hour or a minute since she last spoke, he could not have told. "You don't tell me about Ann. I want to see Ann, to hear Ann, to feel Ann. My heart is hungry for Ann. Is she in Paris with you?"

"No, Ann is not with me. Ann is at home. But you shall see her, Bruna. She shall come to you, or you shall go to her, as you choose."

"But it must be soon," said Bruna; then she echoed meditatively, "Ann is at home!

In England, at Beech-holmes. In my dreams, Percy, I am always at Beech-holmes, watching the waving hands of the beeches, hearing the rain patter on them, or the wind rustle and shiver in them. Ah, Percy, during the first weeks in that dreadful ship, and the first months on the more dreadful land, how bitterly I used to cry when I found it was all only dreaming, and that I had left Beech-holmes for ever!"

"Not for ever, Bruna, you must come back to it. You must rest in its quiet, and be healed by Ann's love. You must not die from us, now we have just found you. You must live, Bruna, you must live."

His tone had grown passionate. For an instant there was something of half-startled inquiry in Bruna's face, then she shook her head and smiled.

"I have lived, Percy. It is because I have lived that I now feel ready to die. You must not set your hearts on my living, you and Ann, it is too late for that. See

how thin I am, how little of me is left," raising her long white arms so that the loose sleeves fell back from them. "The people would soon refuse to look at such a skeleton. I should frighten them. However, this engagement ended, I mean to act no more. I have money, more than enough to last me, some to leave behind me. Have I a namesake among your children, Percy? But no, that is not likely, considering how you must have thought of me."

Percy took sudden but gentle hold of those thin arms, and wound them round his neck, and folded the wasted form to his breast and rocked it there.

"Ann shall fetch you home. Ann shall nurse you. Ann will soon make you strong and well. You must not die, Bruna. You shall not be able. We will hold you so fast, love you so close."

If it was selfishness in Percy, it was, at least, high testimony to his faith in Ann's

unselfishness and sincerity, that he was already thinking chiefly of Ann as the instrument of Bruna's restoration.

After a few minutes Bruna disengaged herself. For a few minutes she lay back, silent and exhausted; then she tried to lead the conversation to less agitating topics—asking and hearing when first they had learnt that she had not married Mr. Malcolm, and telling Percy, in bare, brief outline, her own story. She grew excited before she had finished telling this, her eyes flashed brilliantly, and her breath came pantingly.

"By God's good grace I passed scathless through the trials of that life," she ended. "You can tell Ann that I come out of it with my heart as clean as my hand. I can claim no merit for heroism in resisting temptation, for vice has never shown me a fair face. I have always seen and known clearly the ugliness and the foulness into

which I should fall if I walked heedlessly. And then the hope I kept before me, the dream of how I would end my days, helped me. I used to think that, when I had made a great name and fortune, I would return to Beech-holmes, and you would build me a pretty cottage in the park, and Ann would be ever so good to me, and your children would love 'Aunt Bruna.' You have children, Percy?"

"I am not married, Bruna."

"Not married!" Bruna shrank within herself, as if she had received a shock. "Not married!" she echoed. "And Ann?"

"Ann is also unmarried."

A great sombreness veiled Bruna's face.

"Still more a failure, then," she said. "In that, at least, I thought I had succeeded. Not married!"

There was a long silence. Then Bruna said,

"As I am dying, Percy, and as, all these

years, I suppose, you have remembered me, I will tell you that I knew, when I had lost you, that I loved you, Percy; but only as I can love, not as Ann loves. Oh! Percy, it is Ann who has always loved you —always and always! It is Ann you must love, Ann you must marry. It was for that, Percy, and chiefly that—at least I think so now—that I went away."

To this all his answer was answered to that first phrase, "as I am dying," and consisted in passionate outcry that she must not die.

It was with difficulty she could induce him to leave her. He seemed to fear that to leave her now was to lose her now. But at last, on her promise to see him for a short time to-morrow, he went.

Immediately on his return to his hotel, before waiting to calm and collect himself, he wrote to Ann "all about it." When Ann's answer came, she signed herself "Ever and for always your loving sister

Ann!" Percy, recognizing the significance of this signature, failed to recognize, of course, a thousandth part of what it had cost Ann to write it.

According to her agreement Bruna received Percy next day, but only allowed him to remain with her a short time, and made him promise not to try to see her again till her engagement was ended. She told him the interviews with him cost her more than she could afford to lose. She was looking less ill than on the previous day, and by this he was a little comforted. His promise not to see her till her engagement was ended was made to extend to not seeing her on the stage. She told him if he were anywhere in the house she should be conscious of his presence, even if he kept out of sight, and that this consciousness would deprive her of all power to throw herself into the part she had to play.

"And I have pride enough as an artist," added Bruna, "greatly to desire that there

should be no break-down, but that things should come to a fit end, decently and in order."

CHAPTER XX.

BRUNA'S HUMILIATION.

BRUNA was not destined to have things, in any way, complete themselves as she would have chosen that they should. On the last night but one of her engagement, mid-way in the most passionate scene, she suddenly and utterly broke down. While the audience, in a phrenzy of enthusiasm, applauded the actress who had that night surpassed herself, the helpless woman was carried from the stage, on which she was never more to reappear.

It was no mere swoon, as was at first supposed, but an entire failure of overstrain-

ed vital power, resulting in a kind of paralysis. The news rang through Paris, and was not long in reaching Percy. The first thing he did on hearing it, even before going to ascertain if it were true, was to telegraph for Ann.

Even before Percy had thought it possible, Ann was in Paris, and installed at Bruna's side. For nearly two months Bruna lay in almost complete mental unconsciousness (what seemed like idiocy), and in quite complete physical powerlessness. At the end of the second month she showed some signs of returning mental life, but was still as helpless as a baby.

At the end of the third month—it was a very mild Winter, and February had some April-like days—they took her, at her own reiterated desire, to England, to Ann's home, Beech-lawns. She had not been there long before she began to brighten and rally with unexpected rapidity; but, nevertheless, for many another week their love

was full of despair. Even if she lingered a year or two alive, no expectation that she would ever regain the use of her limbs had been given them. But as the Spring warmed to Summer, there was such a steady increase of all kinds of power, that they began to hope all things, even as Bruna felt obliged to abandon hope of what she felt to be the only fit ending to her life's melodrama.

One hot day of midsummer Bruna cried to Ann, with a burst of bitter weeping,

"Ann, while you left me alone I walked to the window."

Ann rejoiced over her, scolded her for having made the attempt when she was left alone, and might have fallen and hurt herself, and finally said,

"I must at once write that most dear, good news to Percy."

But when Ann found that Bruna's violent and bitter weeping, which she had supposed was caused by hysterical excitement, sur-

prise, and weakness combined, did not stay itself, Ann grew alarmed. She questioned Bruna as to whether she had hurt herself—had made herself feel worse.

"Worse!" echoed Bruna, excitedly, between her sobs—"oh! Ann, do you think I should cry for feeling worse? Can't you understand how bitter it is to me to feel that I cannot die—that I am going to live? Ann, Ann, Ann, can't you understand the humiliation, the despair of such an anti-climax!" And here the wild weeping changed to as wild laughter.

When, and this was not for some considerable time, Ann had soothed her patient to something like calm, and Bruna still demanded,

"Can't you understand what it is I mean?—can't you, Ann?"

Ann said,

"How should I, darling Bruna? Is it likely I should understand how you can grieve so bitterly at what makes us so

greatly rejoice? Have we not, Percy and I, all these weeks, all these months, as it were, lived that you might live? Must it not now seem to us cruel and strange that you should repine to live the life we have spent ourselves to win for you?—spent ourselves in praying, in watching, in weeping?"

There was a thrill in Ann's voice not often heard there, and in her face a strained passion of earnestness. Bruna looked into Ann's face, and said,

"Ann, it is not like you to seem not to understand. You must know what special cause I have to grieve most bitterly that I should live, and so by my future crown the fatuity of my foolish past."

"Forget your past, my dearest, live only for your future."

"Even were I utterly selfish, Ann, there would be pain in having to live." She added, with nervous laughter, "If you were an artist, Ann, you would know how I must

feel the keen humiliation of such an anti-climax."

"But you are a woman, too, Bruna, and you will find such womanly happiness in making Percy, who has so faithfully loved you, happy, that you will forget the artistic humiliation."

"But," persisted Bruna, "indeed, Ann, it is quite too humiliating to have to live and be happy! I have felt a certain serene self-satisfaction while I thought I was going to die, and leave you two behind, to be sorry for me, ever so sorry, but yet not so sorry as to exclude the possibility of your being 'happy ever after.' That seemed such a fit ending; but this other——"

"Is far fitter, darling," interposed Ann. "The humiliation is better for you than the serene self-satisfaction. Our lives seldom shape themselves according to our own planning."

"Ann, you surely know I have been only half serious. I am not so utterly selfish as

that what I have spoken of could be all, or the worst. Indeed, I am right to be afraid of life—sorry to live—right, Ann, even for my own sake, but far more for your sake, Ann, and Percy's. I am not fit for life. You yourself have told me, Ann, how it must be if I live—that I must be Percy's wife. And I know, Ann, I know better than I know anything, that it is not I, Ann, but you, who should be Percy's wife—you, my pure one, my true one—you who have always loved him——"

"And, Bruna, remember," interrupted Ann, "that I have had your confession, given me when you thought you had only a few hours to live, that you, too, have always loved Percy."

"I know, Ann, that I thought so when I had only a few hours to live, but I'm sure I don't know now if it is true, Ann; and, anyway, I do know what an English gentleman sacrifices—of position, of influence,

of repute—when he marries an actress. And this is not the worst that may be. Only think, Ann, if, when all that sacrifice is made, and I am his wife, the old wicked demon of restless discontent should re-enter on possession, the old wicked weariness of Percy's calm goodness, of the calm beauty of Beech-holmes, should seize upon me, and I should find my life intolerable, and should know that I made his intolerable, and so, to free myself, should tear his life up by the roots and fling it in his face, and rush out upon the world again. Ann, I cannot say, I cannot feel sure, but this will be so—indeed I cannot. To die now, before I do more mischief, seems such an easy, simple, happy ending."

"There is no such danger as you speak of, darling Bruna. You make yourself feverish by dwelling on such fears. Be calm, my dear one. You are changed beyond the possibility of any such danger."

"But for how long am I changed, Ann? You know the old complet—

'When the Devil was sick, the Devil a saint would be,
When the Devil got well, the Devil a saint was he!'"

Another day, later on (this day she had walked leaning on a stick, and on Ann's arm round the garden), complaining in the same direction, Bruna said,

"All my life has been a bad melodrama, Ann, while yours has been true pure poetry. You have quietly done the things I have made a tumultuous pretence of doing. The only ending that could have given any dignity to the melodrama of my life would have been my death. My feeling for art, and for the fitness of things, should alone have sufficed to kill me. But I am so tough I cannot die."

"I hope, darling, soon to hear you say, 'I am so happy, I cannot wish to die.'"

Again another day Bruna insisted on

hearing exactly the when and how of Ann's engagement to Percy; before Ann had finished the telling of her quiet story—to tell it quietly, as she did, cost Ann something—Bruna had flung herself from her couch to the ground at Ann's knees, crying that Ann must not be, should not be, sacrificed.

When Bruna was quiet again, Ann said,

"Look at it all as it is, dear, and you will see that I sacrifice nothing. If Percy loved not you, but me, the better of us two, I should not have given him up, Bruna—I should have kept to him, for all our sakes. But it is you, not me, Bruna, whom Percy loves first, best, and for always. What, then, is there for me to sacrifice? Not his love, for it is not mine. Not my happiness, for how could I be happy, knowing him less happy than he might be? I won't pretend I have not suffered, but I have not been

tried beyond what I was able to bear, thank God! It was just from the beginning shown me what I had to do, and I have not been tired and worn by doubt and conflict, but have been able to do it. Percy is entirely blameless towards me. Before he went to find you, I made him understand that if he found you, and found you what I knew he would find you, then I should be 'sister Ann' again for always."

Bruna moaned on, then and often, of her immense self-dissatisfaction; sometimes breaking out, with fiery intensity of self-scorn in face and voice, in such exclamations as—

"What a heroine I felt myself when I rode from Beech-holmes that day! I almost felt as if that terrible storm was just the fit blowing of trumpets as I rode out to do battle! A fine heroine I have indeed proved myself! After seven years of knocking about in the world, when the bloom is off

more than my beauty—for who, Ann, but you and Percy, will ever believe me blameless and stainless?—I let myself drift back again to whence I started. I took myself away from Percy then, and let him take me back now! Ann, it is really too much to bear! How can life be tolerable, weighted with such thoughts?"

"Why, Bruna, you are infinitely more happy than many, in that you are able in this life to repair the mistake of this life. Be patient a little, Bruna, and happiness will cure you of such thoughts."

When at last Bruna was almost well, Ann had time to be ill. Ann was just worn out. The long strain of nursing, watching, restraining, consoling, had broken her down. She had held out just long enough—just while the greatest need of her lasted, and now she gave in. Complaining of nothing, desiring nothing, she lay, day after day, white, weak, and still, not conscious of pain

or of sorrow. It was just a sense as of living in an empty house, and always listening to its solitariness and silence. As if she had literally yielded up her very self, and existed only as her own phantom. She could smile when they spoke to her; but she preferred not to be spoken to, and not to have to smile.

"It is only fair I should have my turn, Bruna," she said. "I mean to get well in good time for the wedding. Meanwhile, I should like everything to go on as if I were asleep."

She did get well in time for the wedding. It was early in the Autumn. The doctors advising that Bruna should spend this next Winter in some warm and stimulating climate, Percy took her abroad immediately.

"There, now I shall have six months, at least, to get used to things!" thought Ann, as, after bidding them "good-bye"

in London, she came home to Beech-lawns.

When they came home again in the Spring, Ann had, to all appearance, "got used to things." She was just "Sister Ann" again.

In time, as years went on, Ann lost that household title for another. "She was no longer "Sister Ann," but "Aunt Annie!"

In the early days of her wifehood and motherhood, Bruna, between tears and laughter, and with a curious mixture of gratitude and self-scorn, said,

"To think that it should be I, Ann, who turn out just an ordinary woman, settle down to just an ordinary woman's life, absorbed by husband, child, and 'things of the house!' To have died of decline in the orthodox manner of the interesting, sinning, and repenting heroine, would have been

satisfactory; but to marry, to have a child, to grow strong and stout, really stout—all but this last I could bear!—and this last I must also bear, but it really is very dreadful to me! Please, Ann, don't laugh! It really is!"

It is certain, too, that this "growing stout" was positively a thorn in the flesh to Bruna. Ann told her it was a sign she was happy and content, but she would answer petulantly that it was enough to prevent her from being so.

On the whole, I should hardly hesitate to pronounce that of these three, of whom this story has been told, Ann is the happiest. And yet——

To most women whose youth has left them with unfulfilled lives, there is in all beauty a power of pathos, apt, at times, to be almost intolerable. In the beauty, for instance, of the Summer world. Its per-

fumes are the "airs of youth," of "unforgotten fields, whose fragrance passed like a breath;" and the scent of its roses, its woodbines, its tall white lilies, its blossoming limes, its new-mown hay, will stir an almost unendurable while often entirely uncomprehended trouble—of regret, of longing, of memory of forgotten hope, of—we know neither why nor what.

Perhaps, at times, Ann, feeling something of this, felt her home too beautiful to live alone in. At times, too, especially during the first year or two after Percy's marriage, Ann, turning back into her own house, after watching them go away together, would say softly, "It is lonely!" But Ann had the power of having such complete joy in the joy of others, that she suffered as little from this loneliness, this longing, as any woman might.

When Ann was growing old, she thought and felt, what she often said, that while,

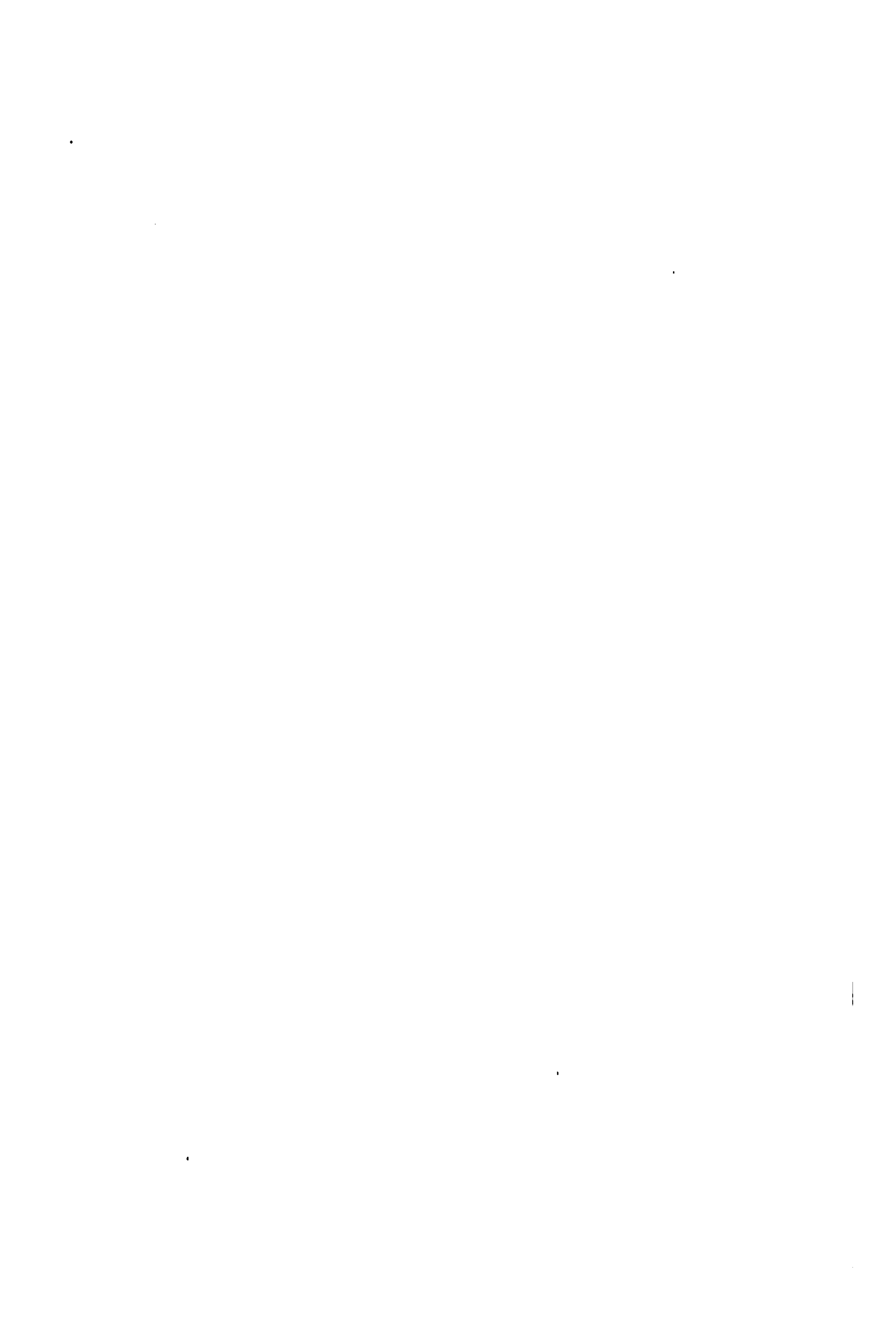
once a year, Spring came to beautify the world, and while children were born into the world, to gladden it, she could not understand being weary of it, or wishing to leave it as long as it was God's will she should remain in it.

On the whole, then, Ann was happy, happiest in this, that to her had been given that power of living out of herself through sympathy, which is one of God's choice gifts to a few, and is as different and as far beyond the ordinary woman's instinctive way of living in the happiness of those on whom her own happiness depends, as the poetry of love is different and beyond the prose of it.

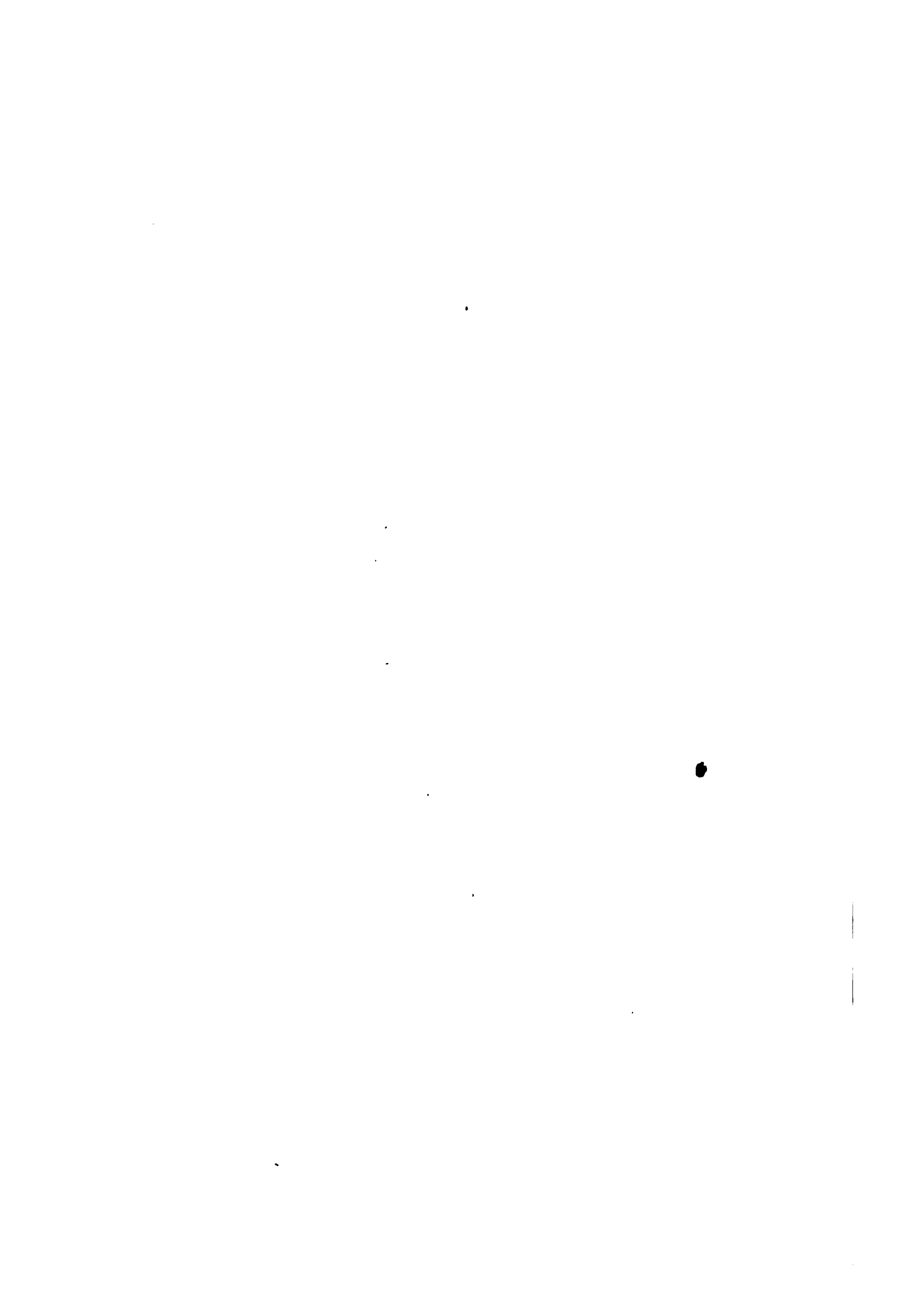
Percy, as he grew middle-aged, more and more settled into that sort of man of whom those kindly disposed towards them say, "He is so good," while the maliciously-inclined add, "But so uninteresting!"

Of Malcolm Malcolm, the great traveller,

news sometimes reached Beech-holmes, but only through the papers, and such news as Beech-holmes shared with all the world.



OLD HILTON'S DAUGHTER.



OLD HILTON'S DAUGHTER.

BOOK I.—April.

CHAPTER I.

AT THE ORCHARD-GATE.

LAURENCE MAYNARD, to his own surprise, had lost himself in the intricacies of the orchard-embowered and elmy lanes between Brockweir and Elmhurst. He had forgotten his watch, but by the slant of the afternoon sunshine, knew that it must be getting near the Manor-house dinner-hour.

Looking about him, doubtful as to which

of the four ways, at the junction of which he found himself, would take him the most directly to Elmhurst, he got a glimpse, through the boughs of blossoming apple-trees, of a cottage-window, a thatched cottage gable, and blue smoke up-curling from cottage chimneys. Tying his horse to the orchard-gate, he went under the blossoming trees, to the little gate of the cottage-garden. Not seeing anyone in the garden, he opened the gate and went to the house-porch. As he did this he believed he saw a pretty face peep at him from behind some plants in a window, and quickly hide itself. He tapped lightly at the half-closed cottage door with the handle of his hunting-whip. Nobody came. He listened, and could hear no sounds from within, save the ticking of a clock, the singing of a kettle, and the crackling of burning wood. He began to think the hastily withdrawn face must have existed only in his own imagination, and, after a second tap, and the words, "Is there any-

one within?" was about to run away, when he heard a slight movement, a footstep on the sanded floor, and the door was opened just a little further by a timid hand, and a soft little voice said,

"Please, sir, father's not at home."

"But, no doubt, you can give me the information I want, if you will be good enough." And Laurence took off his hat to the only half-seen girl. "I have lost my way—I mean so far that I don't remember which is the most direct road to Elmhurst. I used to know every turn of these lanes, but it seems I have forgotten a good deal."

"Is it the Manor, sir, Squire Maynard's, you are going to?"

The door was opened rather wider, and a glance of interested curiosity met, for just half a second, his glance of frank and respectful admiration.

"Yes, it is the Manor I want to go to."

The girl now came out into the afternoon sunshine, and shyly and blushingly, but

with no awkward bashfulness, gave him the information he needed. She was very pretty, bewitchingly pretty; and, in these days, is there not a peculiar charm, as of something at once new and old, dearly familiar and yet long strange, in the mere blushing shyness of a young girl?

At all events, Laurence Maynard thought there was. There was, he also thought, something almost of dignity in the girl's maidenly grace, in the manner in which she acknowledged his courteous thanks, and, when she had done so, withdrew. It made him smile, however, and rather spoilt the impression she had made, as far as the dignity went, when, looking round as he latched the garden-gate, he found the pretty creature peeping at him from between the flowering plants in the casement. Lifting his hat again, looking towards the cottage, after he had left the orchard and had mounted his horse, he was a little surprised to be gruffly accosted, from the opposite

direction to that in which his head was turned, with the words,

"Well, young sir, and what might you please to want?"

Young Maynard's pleasant and handsome face took rather a haughty expression as he turned towards the speaker—a little withered, stunted-looking old man, with a deep-lined, careworn face, and something in the eyes that seemed to speak both of a higher intelligence and a more refined moral nature than are usual in the peasant-class.

"Did you speak to me?" the young man questioned.

"Ay, that did I," and the question was repeated, a little less gruffly, but still with something of defiance in the tone.

"I wanted a little information, and I have received it."

"No offence meant—no offence meant."

The old man was now looking up into the face of the young one with an eager interest and curiosity.

"I took no offence; but the tone of your question might have been a little less uncivil."

"A poor man's forced by times to be more sharp than civil—leastways, when he's got a daughter like yon," with a sort of side shake of the head towards the cottage.

"That's not your daughter!" said Maynard incredulously, looking at the wizened and rugged face of the old man, and recalling the lovely bit of pink and white youthfulness which had appeared to him from out that cottage.

"Ain't she? I always thought she was."

"I beg your pardon. I mean—she looks so very young."

"Young enough to be my grand-daughter—that's true, and that's not all as makes it hard to think that such as she should be child to such as me. As for the age, I'm not as old as I look; however, I'm a gnarled, twisted old crab, decaying before

my time. Talking of crabs, too, perhaps it's not a bit more wonderful that I should have Bessie to my daughter than that this old crab-tree you're a-sitting under should break out into them blossoms."

"You're right there," said young Maynard, as he looked from the deformed and apparently decaying trunk of the old tree up into the fairy-like flutter of snowy and roseate petals which made so fair a canopy over his head.

As he looked, it occurred to him that the old man's words had a special appropriateness, for the girl, whose soft, dark, shy eyes had struck him as the sweetest eyes he had ever looked into, with her complexion of harmoniously-blended snowy rose and rosy snow, and her cotton gown of pink and white, was certainly as like apple-blossoms as anything of flesh and blood could be.

Laurence lingered a few more minutes at the gate talking to the old man, who gradu-

ally grew less hostile in his manner, till, presently, knocking one hand against the other, he suddenly exclaimed,

"I know you now, sir! There's the look of your mother as you always had in your eyes. I'd have known you before, but I thought you were still in foreign parts. We've got her picture—the good lady, your mother's—as she gave to my wife."

"Why, surely you are not Hilton, John Hilton, whom my nurse married?"

"Ay, but I am."

"Let us shake hands, John. I'm glad to shake hands with you. I've heard a great deal of you. You're a fine fellow."

"As to that, I don't know, sir. I did my best for her, but I could not keep her long. You'd not have thought she—such a delicate, pretty creature, and more than half a lady, as one might say, from consorting always with the gentlefolks—would have ever given in to marrying a fellow like me—older, too, than she was by full twenty

years; but she fell into trouble, poor soul, through her misfortune more than her fault, though I don't say as she wasn't just a bit to blame, and those as should have upheld her threw her off. She wasn't in this part of the country then, or the sweet lady, your mother, would have cared for her; and I had the chance of being kind to her, and she was thankful to me long past what was needful; and so, by time, it came about as she married me, and came home to my cottage here."

The old man looked towards the cottage with a glow of tenderness for the home that had been hers in his eyes; but presently drew his hand across them as he added—

"But, poor soul, she was never happy; she never seemed able to hold up her head after the sorrow and the shame that had been laid upon her. I thought, perhaps, Bessie would have caused her to be so as she did not despise to live, but she just dwined and pined, and Bessie was but three

years old when I laid her mother in the churchyard there," pointing to where a square church-tower just showed itself from among a noble group of elms.

"Your poor little girl had a sad, lonely childhood then."

"A sister of mine, a right good woman, and, for her station, much instructed, took care of Bessie for me till she died, just eighteen months ago."

"It's a pity she could not have lived a few years longer—till your pretty little daughter is married."

"Yes, as we judge, it's a pity."

"And that is Brockweir Church. If I had noticed that before, I should have had no doubt as to my way home. I should like some day to see this portrait of my mother you speak of. One day soon I shall come and ask you, or your daughter, to be so good as to show it me."

"You shall see it now, sir. Bessie shall bring it out."

All the gruffness and suspicion had vanished from Hilton's face and manner now he recognised in his visitor the Squire's young son, and knew he had not to do with any wandering Lovelace or foreign vagabond. He called across the orchard to Bessie, who shyly showed herself in the porch, then disappeared to execute the orders she received, and, a few minutes after, came blushing through the flickering sun and shade of the bowery place with the miniature in her hand.

Laurence, stooping his uncovered head, took it from her hand, and, as he did so, noticed what a pretty, rosy-white, long-fingered hand it was—a lady's hand, he thought; and it occurred to him to wonder what hands did the work of the little cottage—certainly not such hands as these.

"This is Squire Maynard's son, Mr. Laurence, Bessie," old Hilton said.

"And you, Miss Hilton, are the daughter of my mother's favourite, Ruth." And

young Laurence took and pressed the soft small hand. "Why was she not called by her mother's name? Ruth is such a sweet name. I don't mean to say that Bessie is not also a sweet name—it certainly is; and so thoroughly English—goes so well with English Spring-time—has the sound of blossom in it."

"Her mother would not have her called by her own name, thinking it might bring her sorrow."

Laurence studied the miniature, and, while he did this, Bessie studied his bronzed and bearded and pleasant sunny young face. Laurence sighed as he gave the picture back into Bessie's hand.

"I wish I could more distinctly remember her," he said. Then he added to Bessie, with a smile, "You don't see any of the likeness to her that your father sees?"

"I never knew her, sir," answered Bessie.

"Of course you never knew her. I mean

you don't see that I resemble her portrait?"

"It's in the eyes, sir—in the eyes," said old Hilton.

And Bessie's eyes for a moment encountered the eyes of the young Squire; but the next instant they drooped their fringing long lashes on cheeks suffused with crimson. Not that they had encountered any expression but one of kindly admiration from eyes that could not help having a sunny warmth and penetrating lovingness when they looked on anything so fair as this apple-blossom Bessie standing in the exquisite light of that afternoon under the other blossoms.

"There, child, you can take it in," said Bessie's father.

"A thousand thanks for your kind trouble, Miss Hilton."

"It was no trouble, sir," said Bessie, and fluttered away.

"This is a wonderfully lovely place of yours, Hilton," said Laurence.

"I expect there aren't many things in foreign parts that beat our orchards in blossom-time—leastways, on such a year as this; now are there, sir?"

"Indeed no," young Maynard answered heartily, as he looked round him.

It was the end of a very warm and genial April, and now the end of its most perfect day. The golden sunshine seemed to enter into the very texture of the soft fresh grass, and shine up from it. It fell caressingly upon the mossy, lichened trunks of the old trees, while to their masses of blossom it gave the climacteric touch of ethereal beauty, as it had done, so the young man thought, to Bessie's cheek, bringing out the soft deep under-glow of colour, and revealing the exquisite delicacy of its peach-like bloom; and to Bessie's hair, finding out the gold tints lurking in the midst of rich darkness.

"But I must be going," he suddenly remembered, after a full half-hour's chat with

Hilton, and when, through an opening in the orchard-aisles, he could see that the round red sun was just beginning to flatten itself on the horizon, and the hills to take their delicate tints of sunset greys, lilacs, and purples. With that winning smile of his, he exchanged a hearty hand-grasp with the old man; then, lifting his hat to a dimly-seen or an imagined Bessie in the porch, he went his way, as he did so picking and fastening into the button-hole of his coat a bit of blossom from the tree under which he had been sitting.

CHAPTER II.

HIS THOUGHTS ON THE WAY HOME.

AS it was now quite too late to think of being at Elmhurst Manor by the dinner-hour, Laurence let his horse walk leisurely along through the songful elmy lanes, where the twilight soon began to gather.

When he had ridden on a mile or so he found that he had lost, from the button-hole of his coat, that sprig of apple-blossom he had placed there. There was a moment's hesitation, then, laughing to himself, and at himself, because conscious of the association of ideas which made him do this, he turned his horse round and rode back again, searching for it along the road-side. By-and-by

he found it, and was glad to find it not lying in the dust of the highway, but resting on the grass, where the wind had lodged it. He dismounted to pick it up, and, this time, placed it inside his waistcoat.

"Apple-blossom, or the idyll of an April evening," young Maynard said to himself, smiling, but with more of tenderness than of mirth or mockery in his smile. He added, "And, surely, one might search the world over and find no sweeter little heroine for some delicious Arcadian love-story than that lovely Bessie Hilton!"

Then he rode on through the musical twilight, between banks starred with primroses, perfumed with hidden violets, under trees that flooded the dewy air with fragrance, and those soft, sweet, shy, dark eyes of Bessie's often seemed to look out upon him.

"Happy the man who has the privilege of making love to Bessie Hilton!" he thought. But what manner of man must this be? Surely not some stalwart young

blacksmith, some village baker, butcher, or carpenter, or mason? He could not fancy Bessie submitting to, much less responding to, the "courtship" of any such.

Then young Maynard's reverie grew dangerously delicious, for what could be the more natural next step than that of fancying himself in the place of that happy man, imagining that for him she blushed her pure warm blushes, that for him shy tenderness dawned in and shone from those dark eyes, that it was his privilege to taste the honey of those moist red lips, to feel the graceful little figure yielding to his embrace?

"What a fool I am! What a fool I am!" young Maynard cried aloud by-and-by, "But how is a man to help feeling that it would be infinitely sweeter to make love spontaneously, under the orchard-boughs, or in the cottage-porch, to a delicious little bit of lovely pink and white simplicity, rather than in a ball-room, at a

dinner-table, at an archery-meeting, or a croquet-party, to some young lady of experience—and all young ladies now-a-days seem to me to have experience—who plays her equal part at the game of love-making as coolly and scientifically as she plays any other game, appraises the value of your every word and look as she might your "move" in a game of chess, and probably discusses you, and all you did and did not do, all you said, or looked as if you meant to say, afterwards with mamma, or sister, or confidential friend—pronouncing you, perhaps, as 'not safe yet,' 'nibbling, but not yet hooked,' or something of that sort."

A little breeze, or the stir of birds frightened by his approach, just here shook down upon him a light shower of snowy petals from a great pear-tree under which he was passing.

"I really don't see," he went on, as, half-unconscious of what he was doing, he held the cool smooth petal that had fallen on

his hand to his lips, "how, in these days, there is a chance of anything ideal in one's love-making, if the love is to be made to a girl of one's own class. It seems to me to be almost like making love to another man, rather than to a woman. No, that's exaggeration, of course, but still it is something like that."

Laurence Maynard had sisters older than himself, serious and strong-minded young women, who discussed before him, with perhaps unfair freedom, the confidences of their friends and acquaintances; commenting freely on both actions and supposed motives, with the feeling, "It's only Laurence—it doesn't matter what we say before him!"

Because he was young, kind, gentle, and quiet, they treated him more as if he had been another girl, more girlish than themselves, than as a man. For them Laurence had never grown to manhood. So Laurence had been let unfairly behind the

scenes; what bloom might have remained for him upon the women with whom he came in contact was rubbed off by the hands of his sisters; and though for these sisters he had a considerable affection, and some respect, he could not imagine for a moment the manner of man that could "fall in love!" with either of them.

It was, therefore, no turn for low life that made young Laurence Maynard think enviously of the privileges of that man who should be Bessie Hilton's lover; it was rather a longing for the unspoiled simplicities of nature, combined with enough youth and inexperience to make him inclined to idealize, in the fashion of believing good things to be all good; that "best" which they might be, rather than that mixed and mitigated good which they are.

For instance, he did not remember that a cottage girl in Bessie's position might be exposed to coarse, low, even brutal influences and associations—that, had not Bessie's

position been exceptional beyond anything he yet knew it to be, she might have been in the habit of hearing daily and unblushingly such conversation as would have brought blushes to the cheeks of even the town-seasoned young ladies whom he judged so harshly; not, necessarily, from its being worse or lower, from a moral point of view, than things which did not so affect them, but from its being different, plainer, and something to which they were unaccustomed.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE DINING-ROOM.

"WHERE is my father?" was Laurence's first question when he got home.

"In the dining-room, sir."

"In the dark, then," commented Laurence, glancing at the half-open dining-room door.

"Yes, sir. Have you dined, Mr. Laurence, sir?"

"No, Hughes; you can bring me something." Then he put his head into the room, where he could just distinguish his father's white hair glimmering through the dusk, and said, "I'm sorry to have been

too late to dine with you, father. I lost myself."

"Lost yourself! I'd not have thought you could do that anywhere within fifty miles round Elmhurst."

"Nor I, father."

"It was time you came home, you see, my boy."

"Quite time, father. Will you be good enough to stay here, and give me the pleasure of your company while I eat whatever they're going to bring me? I'll just run up to my dressing-room, and be down in ten minutes."

"Be off, my son! I'll be here when you come down." He added to himself, "And glad enough to look at you, and to listen to you." Then the butler, entering with lights, he asked, "What are they going to give Mr. Laurence?—something better than cold meat, I hope." Satisfied with the man's answer, "All right," he said. "Set his chair here, Hughes, close to me—not all that

way off That's it. Now about the wine—what's that you're putting beside him? I see—that will do. You can set one of the windows open. The air is sweet and dry to-night, and the room might feel close to him, just in from his ride."

So the old Squire prepared himself for an hour's enjoyment alone with Laurence, his favourite son.

As Laurence changed his dress, the sprig of apple-blossom fell to his feet. He picked it up, wondered for a few moments what he would do with it, then opened a writing-desk and laid it in. There it lay for weeks, months, years. It was not a desk Laurence used. Then, one day, Laurence's wife, "sorting" his papers—she was privileged to pry, if she liked, into every hole and corner of his past and present—found it, and questioned about it. For a moment Laurence could not remember its history; then it all came back to him—when he had first plucked it, why it had been laid away.

The memories connected with it came over him, wafts from the April evening of that past year, when he had first met "Apple-blossom Bessie;" from the hawthorn-scented lanes of that May; from that June, with its perfumes of honeysuckles, and roses, and hay-fields; that July, heavy with fragrance of tall white lilies and blossoming limes. That year's harvest-fields seemed to whiten and wave and rustle in his ears, its Autumn-brown beeches to whisper and sway.

With half a blush, half a sigh, and something of moisture in his eyes, he told the history of the dead twig to soft, dark, sympathetic eyes bent upon his in earnest listening.

But that was years afterwards. This evening Laurence went down to his father, meaning to question him about the Hiltons, about the history of Bessie's mother, but the old gentleman was so full of topics on which he wished to talk—things connected with the estate and the tenants, and the

wild expenditure of his eccentric elder son —that Laurence found no opportunity of asking any questions, and even forgot that he had intended to do so. Except once, when, by-and-by, his father spoke to him of marrying, saying,

"It is you I have, in all ways, to depend upon; your brother will never be or do any good to himself or anyone else, and, indeed, I don't expect his life will be a long one."

Then, Laurence answered, blushing boyishly, "There is one thing I know, father, you will never wish me to do—to marry where I don't love," and was, for a moment crossed by a memory of Bessie's sweet shy eyes, and reminded of the questions he had meant to ask.

"Never, my boy, never!" was the old man's energetically-spoken response. "But, Laurie, the sooner you can bring to me some sweet girl, and tell me she is to be my daughter, the happier I shall be. She must be a woman, my boy, such as your

mother was; not one of the nondescript enormities of the present day. A girl who can blush when she ought to blush. Who can love her husband as a wife should, with submission and devotion; be so much above him as to feel herself below him; not set up for absolute equality. A girl who looks as if she could know what to do with a baby. A girl who will speak soft words and have gentle ways towards the old father. A girl who will learn to rule, in a steadfast and tender fashion, all whom she ought to rule, and will be easily ruled by the husband who should be her ruler and head. A girl who, as a matron, will be more pure and innocent-hearted than the maidens of the present day; such a girl, in short, as I don't know among the friends of your sisters; but seek her diligently till you find her, Laurie, and when you've found her make her yours, for indeed her worth will be 'far above rubies.'"

The old gentleman might have said much more; and was it not natural that while he

so spoke, the young man's thoughts were busy with blushing, shy-eyed Bessie Hilton? but just at this moment, through Miss Maynard's maid, there came a somewhat peremptorily-worded summons to the tea-table.

"If you're ready, if you've had as much wine as you wish, we'll go," the Squire said, rising immediately. "It does not do to keep your sisters waiting. Their time, you know, is always so fully occupied, so valuable!"

This was spoken with a touch of sarcasm, but, at the same time, with an evident desire to render immediate obedience to the call, which seemed to Laurence pathetic, suggesting the notion of King Lear's later days under the government of Regan and Goneril.

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE DRAWING-ROOM.

THERE were, curiously, few signs of feminine occupation at Elmhurst, in spite of its being in possession of three Miss Maynards. The drawing-room was "elegant," with the elegance that can be given by a clever upholsterer, entirely wanting in all homelike details. There were flowers in it, certainly—a bouquet cut by the gardener, and put in water by the butler. A conservatory which had been built by the present Squire for Laurence's mother opened from one end of the room. For his own credit's sake the gardener kept this well supplied with choice plants; but the pre-

sent ladies of the household took no interest whatever in it.

"It's a thousand pities you were not a girl," his sisters had often said to Laurence, during the short time since his return home.

To this he once answered, half gravely, half laughingly,

"I don't know that I can return the compliment by saying I think it a pity you were not boys, for I'm not sure it at all follows that the things which unfit you for being happy and beautiful women (I don't mean that you are not physically beautiful—it seems to me you are all, each in her particular way, very handsome), would help to make you noble and useful men."

Of course from a brother, and a younger brother, such a speech was considered to be presumptuous and priggish in the highest degree.

The room was well littered with books and papers, reports, reviews, pamphlets,

but there were no evidences of needlework, there were no soft cushions and warm sofa blankets; none of those wonderful comfortable uselessnesses of which many drawing-rooms are over-full. There were no pets either, neither birds nor dogs. When the old man and Laurence entered, arm-in-arm, one Miss Maynard was busy with the *Times*, another with a review; a third was writing at a side-table. Neither of them rose or spoke.

"Shall I make the tea, as I did last night?" asked Laurence.

"Do, there's a good boy. We are all tired. I'm sure you have been more idle than we have to-day."

"I don't doubt it," answered Laurence, as he laughingly took up the tea-pot. He filled the cups, and carried them, first to his father, then to his sisters, receiving from each of the latter an absent "Thanks."

"Why did you hurry us in here, girls?" asked the old gentleman, after a glance,

half of amusement, half of annoyance, at each of them. "You don't seem to want us, and we were so remarkably comfortable and well satisfied where we were."

"We don't want things to get late to-night, papa—we want the servants to be up very early in the morning, for we go to Cloudsdale by the early express, to attend a very important meeting."

So said Miss Maynard, from her writing-table.

"A meeting at which Louisa is going to speak," said the second Miss Maynard, from behind the *Times*.

"May I inquire the aim and object of the meeting?" asked Laurence.

"Better not, better not, Laurie," struck in the Squire, with an angry sparkle in his bright old eyes.

"Why better not, father?" from Laurence, amazedly.

"Because it is just as likely as not that the matters to be discussed at this public

meeting are not matters to be discussed with a man, and a brother, in private; though, if the man were not also a brother, Miss Maynard might, probably, be freer of speech."

"If the man were a fellow-worker, and not, as Laurence would be, a scoffer," was Miss Maynard's calm answer, given with imperturbable good-nature.

"Shall we go and hear what your sister has to say on this particular occasion?"

"You might do worse, papa," from Miss Maynard.

"No, thank you," said Laurence, pacing the room in considerable irritation. "I am so old-fashioned as to regard a woman's appearance on a platform as an unseemly and painful exhibition. If I could prevent my sister from thus exhibiting herself, I would. As I cannot do that, I will at least spare myself the pain of the dis—tasteful" (he had been about to say disgusting) "spectacle."

"A woman may, half-clothed, sing, act, or dance before any audieuce, and be the object of far less contumely, if of any, than if, decently covered, in a room, to an audience fit and few, she speaks, from a sense of duty, words which, she thinks, need to be spoken, and need to be spoken by a woman." So commented Miss Maynard, the oratress, from her writing-table, adding clamly, "Well, that is just a specimen of the sort of justice we have to expect from men. We are prepared for all this style of thing."

"There is one difference you omit to bear in mind, I think, Louisa. The women who sing, act, and dance are of a class apart. They are not our wives, or sisters, or daughters. You belong to no class apart—should be just a lady."

"Just a lady! I care nothing about being just a lady. I wish to be just a woman, a true woman, devoting myself to raising the less fortunate of my sex from the degradation into

which for ages, through their own abject animalism, the tyranny of man has plunged them. I——but, however, I know that to speak to you of these things is to throw pearls before swine."

"This individual 'swine' would endeavour to respect the pearls. Without any joking, Louisa, I would like, at some suitable time, to hear you fully on this question. Meanwhile, I am wanting to know, interested to know, anything you can tell me about the Hiltons." Laurence tried, thus abruptly, to change the subject, because he thought his father looked painfully excited. "I met with old Hilton to-day, and had some chat with him. He seemed to take for granted that I knew many things of which I am ignorant."

"The Hiltons—old Hilton—where do they live? I don't, at this moment, recall the name. We don't know very much of the people about."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Laurence

gravely. "I should have thought you would have known them all, and reigned like a queen among them."

"Oh! there are women enough to play the Lady Bountiful, and do that sort of thing. Our mission is not to do what any woman can do, but to lead the way towards wider fields of action—to be pioneers of progress. Now spare yourself the trouble of talking of neglect of duties lying nearest, and all that. We have gone through all that elementary stage, have settled it, and done with it."

"I wonder where we men are to look for our wives. You are all growing so wonderfully learned, enlightened, and hardened, there will be no such thing left as that soft charm of innocent ignorance which has a holy fascination for manly men."

"I can't see why you should call it holy—unholy would be a fitter adjective."

"I think not, Lou. You see, we men can't all at once give in to the notion that

women are, in all ways, of a higher order of being, of a superior intelligence. If we find a girl, therefore, a little ignorant of things of this world, we are the more ready to credit her with knowledge of things not of this world. If we find ourselves a little stronger, intellectually, than women, we are the more ready to find them morally and spiritually in advance of us."

"I know you are. And what fools you are for your pains! If you find a man to be half an idiot, you don't, therefore, incline to think it probable that in moral and spiritual development he is your superior. Why should you argue in this way of women?"

"Because women are women."

Miss Maynard shrugged her shoulders.

"I think, even if you don't know much of the people about here in general, you must know the Hiltons," Laurence persevered. "Old Hilton married a very pretty and sweet young woman, to whom our

mother was much attached—my nurse Ruth."

"I know now whom you mean. There is a pretty daughter, a very pretty daughter, who looks young enough to be the old man's grand-daughter. They live near Brockweir."

"Yes."

"Trust Laurence for finding out a pretty face!" All three sisters laughed, and Laurence reddened angrily; not at being laughed at, but at what he thought the coarseness of such laughter. "I might have known that this sudden interest in the Hiltons had something such a secret behind it. Now, Laurence, mind what you are about. Don't go and make a greater fool than she is already of that silly little girl. Mrs. Dovedale's pet, you remember, Laura. We have seen her at the Rectory—a spoilt pretty little blushing goose!"

"A stupid little frightened thing!" said

Laura. "Mrs. Dovedale makes no end of fuss about her."

"Mrs. Dovedale always appeared to me a very sensible, as well as a very sweet young woman," said Laurence. "I should be inclined both to take her estimate of any girl, and to believe that her influence could be nothing but wholesome."

"Of course!" from the Miss Maynards.

"Hear, hear!" from the Squire; who continued, "I have a particular regard and affection for little Mrs. Dovedale; but she is a pet aversion of these girls—chiefly, I believe, because they can't make a convert of her. She won't put her name down on their petition-lists, nor go in for any of their theories; and yet she is so wise, so cool of judgment and clear of head, that they're not able to despise her. One result of my observations of your sisters, and their friends and disciples, is, that I find they would rather have to do with the most frivolous of fools among their own sex than with

women of whom they might well be proud, gifted, and, in the true sense, strong-minded, who oppose their views. They rather like creatures they are able to despise, and whom they can use to point a moral; but women they can't either despise or convert they are apt to hate."

"Papa, you are quite coming out, now you have Laurence to back you. We shall have wonderful revelations of sly and salient observation now."

"Yes, my dears, I shall be able to hold up my head a little—I've been terribly brow-beaten and oppressed! But that I am still guardian of the purse-strings, and keeper of the cheque-book, I should have had wholly to go to the wall."

"In the good time coming, towards which so many thousands of noble spirits are patiently working, men will no longer so exclusively possess that power of appeal to the baser and more sordid elements of our nature."

"Girls, girls, girls! I often wonder what your sainted mother thinks of you, if she sees and hears you now."

"Not what you think she thinks, you may be sure, papa."

"As to Bessie Hilton," said Laura Maynard, "to go back to the beginning of this discourse, it seems to me that she is so spoilt, so certain to get into mischief the very first time any man with any pretension to being a gentleman tries to lead her into it, that really, as far as she is concerned, I don't think it much matters if it is Laurence, or some other, who does it."

Again Laurence blushed with mingled shame and anger, to hear what his sister said unblushingly.

A few minutes afterwards the three sisters retired, leaving Laurence and the old Squire together.

"I'd advise you to avoid Bessie Hilton," the old gentleman said. "I know her well. A good child enough, but too be-

witchingly pretty. You're not the sort of fellow to ruin a young girl's peace for the sake of a little amusement."

"I hope not, father."

After that they talked together sorrowfully over the three women who had just left them.

"It's in the air of these pestilential days," the old man said. "I have been entirely powerless to curb them—entirely."

"How is it they have neither of them married?"

"Well, you see, they rather despise the institution of matrimony as it stands at present, or affect to do so; yet, I can't say it is because the grapes are sour, for they have had chances. These, however, so my eldest daughter informed me, were not to be considered so much as offers of marriage as invitations to sell themselves into slavery!"

BOOK II.—May.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE LANE.

TWO or three weeks passed, during which young Maynard did not see Bessie Hilton. It can't be said he did not often think of those shy, sweet eyes of hers, but he did not encourage himself to do so; and he rather avoided than sought any chance of meeting her, going to and from the Dovedales by a road that did not lead him past her cottage. Yet, one evening, returning from the Brockweir Vicarage, on foot, just before dusk, jumping a gate into the lane,

he suddenly found himself right in front of Bessie.

Bessie was startled, and gave a foolish little cry. It was a cloudy evening, darker, therefore, than it should have been. It was rather chill, blowing up for rain; through the young leaves went an eerie and ominous quiver and shiver. Bessie had been feeling rather frightened—this was just the most lonely part of the road, and when, close in front of her, almost coming into contact with her, a man jumped suddenly into her path, she could not, before she had had time to recognise young Mr. Maynard, hinder herself from uttering that little cry.

"Miss Hilton, I heartily beg your pardon for startling you," said Laurence, hat in hand.

"It was very foolish of me to be startled. I did not think of its being you, sir."

"Thank you for implying that if you had

known it was me, you would not have been startled."

As he spoke, Laurence was thinking that the real Bessie was even lovelier than the Bessie he had been bearing in his mind: the eyes were even more softly beautiful, finer browed, with longer, silkier lashes; the mouth was fuller and riper, and of even more perfect shape, its little teeth more glancing white; the colour and texture of the delicious face were even more exquisite, and the figure was more complete in its light and fragile grace.

"I should have known, sir, that you would have done me no harm," Bessie said, simply. "But at the first instant I fancied, I suppose, that it might be some strange tramp or beggar, or some drunken man."

"As, of course, it might have been; which proves, beyond all doubt, that you should not be here, in this lonely lane, by yourself so late." This was said reprovingly.

"Mrs. Dovedale was out, sir——"

"So I found."

"And the children begged so hard that I would stay till their bed-time and tell them stories, and, somehow, it got dark before I knew, sir, but I thought father would have come to meet me."

"As he has not done so, as I have been so fortunate as to meet you, and as I am going the same way, I will have the pleasure of seeing you safe home."

"Please don't trouble, sir; when I'm once round the corner it is no longer so lonely, and ten minutes will take me home if I run."

"Unless you forbid my doing so, I will walk beside you," said Laurence, smiling. "I should be glad to see your father again."

At that moment great drops of rain began to pelt the hawthorn hedges, the beginning, evidently, of a heavy shower.

"This is no joke," Laurence said; "the rain is going to be heavy. You will soon be quite wet. You must allow me."

Before Bessie knew what he was intending, he had taken off his light overcoat, and was preparing to throw it over her shoulders.

"Indeed, indeed, Mr. Laurence, you must not do that! Please put it on again. Indeed this rain will do me no harm."

Bessie blushed up, and spoke quite excitedly, putting out her hands to ward off the coat.

"I'm very sorry not to be able to obey you when you tell me what I must not do," said Laurence, smiling; "but I'm such an old-fashioned fellow that I'm not able, even at your command, to walk beside you wearing a water-proof coat and knowing you to be getting wet. Be so kind as to stop, to stand still, half a moment. There," putting it lightly over her shoulders; "but the puzzle is how to keep it from slipping off."

Bessie stood meekly still now, with down-cast eyes.

"If I could just button this one button at the top, that would keep it on," he said. His ungloved hands, awkwardly busy in that endeavour, touched her soft round chin. Bessie lifted her head a little higher; without meaning it, her eyes were, for half an instant, lifted to his. They both flushed. "My fingers are too clumsy," he pronounced, desisting from his endeavour. "I will hold your books, and then you will be able to button that button yourself."

Bessie drew the coat round her, fastened the button, and they walked on gravely, side by side, in silence; till Bessie, as the rain steadily increased, could not refrain from the exclamation,

"Oh, sir, you are getting so wet, and you have so far to go!"

"Possibly, if we stand under this shelter a moment," said Laurence, as they came where a compact mass of hawthorn over-

hung the road, "the worst may blow over. Not that I mind getting wet, except in so far as it seems to trouble you."

"I am afraid it will not blow over, but is come on for a wet night."

But Bessie, though she nervously wished to be at home, and this strange sweet walk, which felt too delicious not, somehow, to be wrong, over, drew up under the shelter as she spoke, remembering that she was being kept dry at Laurence's expense.

"No, I don't think it will be a wet night," answered Laurence, ranging himself beside her. "The glass was high this morning. How pleasant the scent of the moistened green is—this has been such a dry Spring! And how the rain will freshen the dusty hedges and make everything blossom and bloom!"

"The leaves must be glad to drink, they must be so thirsty," said Bessie, blushing at the sound of her own voice, and feeling as if she had said something very foolish; fortu-

nately not knowing that from such lips as hers "foolishness" such as hers has an exquisite charm.

Then there was silence again, except for the patter, patter of the rain, and the chirping of some half-asleep bird close by.

"I begin to think you are right, and it may be a case of a night's rain," said Laurence, by-and-by. "If so, how delicious to-morrow will be! 'Sweet after rain ambrosial airs,'" he began quoting, more to himself than to his little companion; but he was conscious, even through the deepening dusk, that the soft dark eyes kindled intelligently.

"Do you know that poem?" he asked. "Mrs. Dovedale, who was speaking to me of you the other day, said you were fond of poetry."

"I like it very much indeed, sir, when I can understand it; but very often I cannot understand it, until some one explains it.

I have heard Mr. Dovedale read and explain that."

"You are very fond of Mrs. Dovedale, I suppose?"

"Very, very fond of her. Nobody could be kinder to me than she has been. She is so kind to everybody, and so good!"

"I, too, like Mrs. Dovedale very much," said Laurence, and repressed the things he felt tempted to say.

There was silence again, till presently Bessie, preparing to unfasten the coat, said, with an energy that, for the time, banished her shyness,

"Oh! do, please, Mr. Laurence, take back your coat, and let me run home. I know I shan't get wet enough to hurt, and I don't believe it means to leave off raining to-night."

"I begin to think so too. No, no, keep the coat, but we won't wait any longer, as you don't wish it."

He himself no longer wished it. The

temptation to talk to Bessie—foolishly, if he seriously meant what he said; wickedly, if he only said it to amuse himself—was too strong. Besides, at any moment some villager might pass, and it would need less, he knew, than the seeing of Bessie and himself together in that confidential way, at dusk, to set injurious gossip afloat concerning a girl like Bessie. So they went quickly on now towards the cottage.

In the porch old Hilton was standing, looking out. His tone to Bessie was not very tender.

"Where hast thee lingered, Bessie? I went to meet thee an hour agone, and came back thinking I'd missed thee."

Bessie gave the same explanation she had given to young Maynard, and Laurence added,

"I was so fortunate as to meet with Miss Hilton, and have had the pleasure of seeing her safe home. I hope, too, my coat has been of service to her."

"As to safe, she'd have been safe enough alone, sir; and for the coat, she'd have done better without it, excuse my saying so. A girl as might any day, if anything happened to her father, have to go to the fields to work, can't afford to be that nesh as she can't stand a bit of a Spring shower. Bessie, I'd have thought you'd have known your place better than to let the young Squire take off his coat for you."

They were now in the cottage parlour, where a light was burning. As he looked at Bessie, the old man's voice involuntarily softened; her eyes were full of tears of grieved surprise, and her sweet face was painfully suffused.

What could her father mean, Bessie wondered, by humiliating her in this way before young Mr. Maynard?—"a girl who might any day have to work in the fields!"

"It's hardly fair, Hilton, to blame your daughter for what she could not help. Though I've lived some years abroad, I

hope I've not so far forgotten the good old fashions and feelings of an English gentleman as to be able to walk safe and dry myself, and let a woman be pelted by the rain."

"If it's what you'd do for any woman, I've no right to quarrel with you for doing it for Bessie."

So saying, old Hilton got a clean cloth from the table-drawer, and began to rub down Laurence's shoulders with half-angry, half-affectionate energy.

Laurence submitted impatiently. He saw two tears of Bessie's fall to the floor, as she shook his coat, stroked the rain from it with her hands, then doubled it neatly and laid it over the back of a chair, smoothing it down caressingly after she had done so, quite unconscious that he watched her.

Laurence was angry with Hilton for his harsh tone to the pretty little creature, and yet he could not help respecting him the more for the motives he knew dictated the harshness. Feeling sure the old man

would relent the sooner, the sooner he was alone with his child, he made haste to take his leave.

"How many times have you seen the young squire?" was her father's first question to Bessie.

"Twice, father."

"Counting to-night?"

"To-night, and the day, last Tuesday fortnight, that he stopped here to ask the way, are the only times I have ever seen him."

"That's well. The fewer times you see him, my lass, the better. Not because I've anything to say against him. With that look of his mother in his eyes, I'm ready to believe him to be a good man, who knows his place and station, as I believe you to be a good girl, who knows yours. But, Bessie, there's lots of wickedness in this world, and it takes little enough to make evil talk. The village girls are hard on you, because I've never chosen that you should consort

with them. They'll talk away your good name as soon as look at you, if you give them the very least handle. Remember, Bessie, my girl, you're the pride of your old father's heart, the light of his life. If any harm came to you, more especially any shame, it would just kill me. Remember this, Bessie. And, my poor lass, it isn't enough to avoid doing wrong, you must 'avoid all appearance of evil,' as the Scripture tells you. You understand me, Bessie?"

The old man did what he very rarely did, kissed her; and Bessie, overcome by a mixture of feelings she did not in the least understand, burst into violent sobbing.

"There, there, you're tired, my girl. Go to bed, Bessie. In the morning you'll be better."

"Good night, then, father," she sobbed out, and stumbled blindly up the stairs to her little room, with its vine-shaded, white-curtained lattice.

The moon was up now, and, though it still rained and was cloudy, there was light enough for Bessie. She sat down in the great easy-chair which stood beside her bed, a chair which had been given to her mother by Laurence's mother, and tried to understand what it was that had happened to her —why she felt so grievously hurt.

Of course anything she had of pride was wounded. To have been told, and before Mr. Laurence Maynard, that any day she might have to go to the fields to work! And then the unusual harshness of her father, followed by tenderness as unusual, and the nature of the warnings he had given her. All these things combined to trouble her; but there is no doubt that what she was chiefly suffering from was the sudden revulsion of feeling.

Something in Laurence's way of treating her had made her feel so strangely, so exquisitely happy; not only this, but so much as if she were a lady; and then to be so

awakened from the delicious dream directly she passed inside the door of her cottage home!

Long after Bessie's tears and sobs had ceased, there was a sore and smarting feeling at her heart; but when they had ceased, instead of getting straight to her little bed, she stole downstairs once more, to make sure that her father had all he needed for his supper. At which he again kissed her, and called her a "good little forgiving soul." And Bessie felt happier, and, when she had said her prayers, soon fell asleep.

BOOK III.—June.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TIME OF ROSES—WILD ROSES.

IT was really a little difficult for Laurence to avoid frequently meeting Bessie Hilton. Half as Mrs. Dovedale's pupil, half as playfellow and instructress of the little children, she was part of each day at the Vicarage. Now Mr. Dovedale was Laurence's most intimate friend, and Mrs. Dovedale was his cousin. They were the two people of the neighbourhood for whom he had the greatest affection, and it was natural, therefore, that he should be pretty constantly on the road

between Elmhurst and Brockweir. Nor were Bessie's hours of being at the Dovedales fixed hours, which he could learn and avoid—they varied with the weather, the time of year, and Mrs. Dovedale's other engagements.

Bessie was a good girl, and did her part towards avoiding any chance encounters, flitting quickly through the lanes, instead of lingering, as many another girl would have yielded to the temptation to do—many another girl, too, who yet would not have had the same heart-hunger for a look from the kind face, and a few words from the kind voice.

The spot in the lane where he had jumped the gate and startled her, the place where he had put his coat round her, the overhanging hawthorn under which they had taken shelter—these things were never passed without recognition, without a glance up and down the lane, and from side to side, half of longing, half of alarm.

A whole month went by—part of May, part of June—during which Laurence and Bessie saw no more of each other, except that he twice detected her little figure flitting about the Vicarage orchard with the children, and that she twice or thrice recognised his hat and dust over-coat in the Vicarage hall.

Laurence reflected on this virtuous circumspection and self-restraint in a self-applauding spirit, one evening late in June, as he rode towards the Vicarage. He was inclined to question what could be the harm of indulging himself with a pleased look from those soft, shy eyes and a blushing smile from the lovely little face.

It was an evening of sweet south wind—all bland and balmy, full of delicious scents, from fields of blossoming beans and blooming clover, from honey-suckles, in the hedges, in the cottage gardens, and over the cottage porches, from new-mown hay, from flowering wheat and many another gracious-

breathed growing thing of less distinctly-recognisable savour—blowing strong and free as Laurence rode by field and lane towards the elm-embowered Vicarage.

At the Vicarage he put up his own horse, knowing that the man-of-all-work would be busy in the great meadow where the hay was down. Then, believing the house would probably be empty, he strolled through the garden and the orchard into the meadow. Unseen himself, and unheard, crossing the hay-strewn ground, he presently came upon a pretty group—Bessie Hilton and the Vicarage children. They were all busy about a bush of specially beautiful wild-roses. The children had made a great mound of hay for Bessie to stand upon, and were clamouring to her to pick now this, now that particular bud or blossom. Bessie, with upstretched white arm, was entirely occupied in trying to satisfy their desires, especially when her little favourite Annie, in her pretty coaxy way, asked, in her

child language, which is not to be imitated,

"Do you think, Bessie, you could stretch the least bit higher? There, at the tip-top, is such a branch! What a pity Bessy isn't taller."

Bessie's hat fell off. Bessie's hair tumbled down. And, just at this crisis, a voice from behind Bessie said,

"Do you think so, Annie? I don't. I think it would be a pity for Bessie to be taller."

And then the voice spoke over her head, and an arm stretched up above her.

"Allow me, Miss Hilton. You are a very ambitious little fairy to think you can reach that topmost bough. This is it, Annie, is it not?"

The branch was cut off and brought down, among triumphant shouts from the children. Bessie flushed, palpitating, with arms raised over her head, began to try and gather up her dishevelled hair. Laurence, noticing the scratches on the pretty round white arms,

could not help commenting on them with some tenderness of tone.

Poor little Bessie was in difficulties. She gave up struggling with her hair, which the wind caught and tossed from her grasp, as she tried to put it up, to lower her arms, and pull the sleeves of her muslin frock over the fortunate scratches. She was, altogether, much annoyed at the "untidiness" of her appearance, not having, as a modern young lady would have had, the consciousness of its extreme picturesqueness to console her.

"We have wanted so long to get at this rose-bush," she said, apologetically, "but we have not been able to till to-day, because of the long grass. Now, Annie, we must go indoors at once, to put them in water before they fade. Wild-roses fade so very soon."

"Do you know if Mr. and Mrs. Dovedale are at home? I thought I should find them here."

"They were here till half an hour ago, sir. They are in the library now, I think."

"Then, as you are going to the house, we can all go in together. Shall I carry you, Annie, over the hay-mountains?"

Annie had no objection.

"This is a wondrfully good rose year," Laurence remarked. "Both the hedge and the garden roses are very fine."

Bessie had made an effort to drop behind, but finding that Mr. Maynard waited for her, she summoned up her dignity and courage, and walked demurely by his side.

"Are you very fond of roses?" asked Laurence, wishing to provoke her to look at him.

"Yes, sir, I am very fond of them; but I think everybody is."

"I should like you to see those at Elmhurst—in what used to be my mother's rose-garden. For her sake my father takes great care of it, and pride in it. Is it too

long a walk for you? Wouldn't your father bring you some day, before the time of roses is past?"

Laurence himself was not fully aware of the coaxing tenderness of his tone, and the softness of loving admiration in his eyes. As he said those words, "before the time of roses is past," a sort of sentimental pathos came over him in thinking of this sweet blooming living rose beside him—by whom to be plucked? By whom its sweetness enjoyed? By whom?

Bessie having looked up, and met the young man's eyes, drooped her fringed lids over cheeks that had rather paled than reddened, and hardly found breath to say,

"I don't think father would take me."

"You think not? Why, then, one day, very soon, I must send or bring you a bunch of our roses. If you won't come to them, they must come to you."

Bessie did not find breath to breathe "Thank you," her heart was beating so

strangely, so she just glanced up, with that infinitely bewitching shy smile in her eyes.

It would be difficult to imagine anything more entirely lovely than Besse looked, walking hat in hand, her beautiful hair long and loose about her, through the haze of rosy sunset light that was falling athwart the meadow. The summer sun had given a little riper warmth to her complexion, and this, removing all look of delicacy, had, to Laurence's wholesome taste, improved, not diminished, her beauty.

It would be difficult, also, to imagine anything more lover-like than Laurence's expression as he, with little Annie nestling in his arms, bent eyes full of admiration, tenderness, and soft gladness in anything so fair, upon poor Bessie.

It was this aspect of things that struck and startled Mr. Dovedale when the group came in range of the library windows. He called his wife to his side.

"Mary, what does this mean?" he asked,

quite sternly. "This should not be—this will not do. Come, we will go and meet them."

Bessie, with the children, passed on to the house, feeling a little unhappy, through a delicious trouble of happiness, because she thought that Mr. Dovedale, whom she deeply reverenced, had looked at her somewhat reprovingly.

Laurence remained outdoors with the Dovedales, sauntering about the garden and meadow.

It was a dry, dewless, thorough Summer night. The soft wind, coming and going in sudden and strong gusts, tossing about the full-blossomed branches of the acacias, which were the glory of the Vicarage garden, filled the air with their rich perfume. The stars came out in a cloudless sky. The three close friends talked and talked. But Laurence had an unusual consciousness of the intimacy, into which he could not penetrate, of the other two; he felt lonely,

somehow. No woman leaning on his arm, and pressing tenderly against him, as Mrs. Dovedale leant on her husband's arm, and pressed against her husband. His attention wandered; his heart was not in his talk. By-and-by Mr. Dovedale said he wanted his supper; Mrs. Dovedale discovered it was ten o'clock, and Laurence, refusing to enter the house, said he must be riding home.

As he shook hands with Mrs. Dovedale, Laurence said,

"You don't let that sweet little Bessie Hilton," (trying to speak carelessly, but aware that he did not very well succeed in doing so) "walk home along these lanes alone, when she stays late, do you?"

Saying this, he was glad of the dusk, for he felt himself blush.

"Oh! no," Mrs. Dovedale answered. "Her father has spared her to me for a few days; she has been staying in the house, and does not go home till to-morrow morning."

Mr. Dovedale accompanied Laurence to the stable to help him to saddle his horse.

"That little girl's future gives me some anxiety," he remarked. "She is a dear little thing, but she's a mistake, and I can't very well see what's to become of her. She is pretty sure not to love where she can marry, and Dr. Kewitt tells me her father is not likely to last long. There's a young blacksmith at Newstreet who wants her, and whom her father encourages; but, of course, the little lady won't hear of it—does not want to marry, and so on. It's a great misfortune for a girl to be so far above her natural associates, both in nature and culture, as this child is. I often wonder if my wife has been wise in acting as she has done; yet she's only acted upon an unmistakeable general principle that wouldn't allow of one's letting a lovely flower perish for need of earth and water. For the present, the child is, we trust, safe enough with us and with her father; but, as I

began by saying, I often feel anxious about her future. I can only hope that some day some exceptional man, of her own class, may be found to marry the exceptional woman, and that, meanwhile, she may escape the notice of any man who would idly trifle with her. A little thoughtlessness on one side might result in life-long suffering on the other."

Laurence felt he was being lectured, a fact he rather resented. Mr. Dovedale had an uncomfortable consciousness of lecturing, and these two friends parted with something more of constraint than usual.

Young Mr. Maynard had some not very pleasant subjects to ponder over as he rode home through the perfumed and balmy summer night. That it should be supposed he would harm Bessie, the pretty, shy, soft, tender little thing, was not pleasant. The realization of the possibility of Bessie's being exposed to the coarse wooing of boorish rustics, called up by Mr. Dovedale's mention

of the young blacksmith, was not pleasant. The fact that he could not look and speak kindly to a pretty girl like Bessie without his friend's feeling it needful to beset him with solemn warnings, was not pleasant. Of course he had the sense to know that kindness from a young man in his position to a young girl's in Bessie's, might be the greatest cruelty; but Bessie, he tried to think, was so young, so innocent, so modest, so unconscious of her most unusual loveliness, as not to be deceived and, therefore, disappointed, as a commoner sort of girl might have been. In this he was right enough, but then there was the danger of this young, innocent, modest maiden, quite unconsciously to herself, letting her life set in one current of love towards him, although she might find no hope to feed that love.

Well, Laurence resolved that he would avoid little Bessie more strenuously than ever; if, by chance, they met, he would not indulge himself by stopping to speak, would

pass her with a bow, which, indeed, would be very hard upon himself, and also, he thought, upon her. But, first, he must just redeem his promise about the roses; that little bit of indulgence he must allow himself. He determined, therefore, that he would do this to-morrow evening, that he might the earlier set about honestly trying to dismiss the girl from his thoughts. If needful, he would go away on a short visit, or would get up a flirtation with one of his sisters' friends—no danger of wounding any artless susceptibilities there! It really was too ridiculous, he told himself, that at his age—he was no longer a boy—a little soft-eyed syren to whom he had spoken just three times, should have the power to haunt and trouble him in this way, tempting him to say and to look the thing he knew it to be unwise that he should say or look.

What was a man's will worth if he could not more than this control his imagination? The imagination he most especially wished

to rid himself of being that of the sweetness and richness which would be given to life by the love and devotion of such a darling little woman as Bessie Hilton!

It is quite likely that Laurence's sisters and their friends were, in great measure, responsible for the way in which Bessie's soft shy sweetness fascinated and attracted him. Laurence found himself speculating whether, in these days, a man who wished to be loved with old-fashioned devotion, such as pure women used to feel towards true men, might not be forced to seek his wife from among the women of a sphere beneath his own, and in some half Arcadian nook of unstirred rural simplicities to which the wind of new doctrine had not penetrated.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TIME OF ROSES—GARDEN-ROSES.

NEXT morning Laurence woke with a feeling that there was something pleasant which he meant to-day to allow himself to do.

The wind, which brought in to him, through wide-open windows, a mingled perfume of roses and of hay, seemed, also, to blow in upon him pleasant thoughts of Bessie Hilton. At six o'clock he was up and out, walking through the rose-garden, passing the shrubs and trees and bushes in review, mentally selecting the blossoms to be cut for Bessie in the evening. When the

evening came he was not sorry that his sisters were absent. They had driven over to a neighbouring town, to "attend a meeting they had been influential in calling." He was not sorry they were absent, because he would have disliked that they should question him as to the destination of his carefully-selected bouquet, and the rose-garden was full in view of most of the windows. He might not have been able coolly enough to parry their questions, and if, after slightly embarrassed fencing on his part, they should discover the truth, of course conclusions would be drawn that would be most injurious and unjust to poor, sweet, innocent little Bessie.

Just as he had arranged a nosegay, so exquisite, of roses chiefly in bud, that he felt it worthy to be looked upon by the soft dark eyes of her for whom it was intended, his father called to him from the terrace,

"Don't be merciless, my boy."

Laurence laughed, answering,

"Why, father, if I took a thousand roses more than I want, the next time you walked round the garden you would not miss them."

"That shows how little you understand the intimate nature of my individual acquaintance with each rose. Don't, however, for a moment fancy that I grudge Mrs. Dovedale that handful."

"They are not this time for Mrs. Dovedale," Laurence answered; then, looking up from them, he found that his father had left the terrace. So the rest of his confession remained unspoken.

He tied the roses into a compact mass, fastening them with matting between cabbage leaves; and a quarter of an hour after he was riding towards Brockweir with them in his hand. His feelings were curiously complex. There was a delicious feeling of lawless exultation, crossed by a consciousness of wrong-doing. "Well, well, I won't do anything of the kind again," he found himself saying aloud

more than once, in answer to the trouble-some inward monitor.

When he got to Brockweir, and turned down the lane towards Hilton's cottage, a blank sense of anticipatory disappointment fell upon him as he thought,

"Suppose Bessie is still at the Vicarage."

The orchard-gate was padlocked. He fastened his horse to it, and himself jumped over it. The garden-gate was shut; no Bessie visible in porch or garden.

Before going to the cottage door, Laurence paused to look round. What a little Paradise of a place it seemed! The air was embalmed with the fragrance of honey-suckles and of white pinks, of which great soft mats lay here and there. There was, also, a regular jungle of the solid, old-fashioned cabbage-rose; there were bushes of moss-roses, and, most beautiful, several great bushes of the maiden's-blush. Against the house grew the China or monthly rose.

Laurence began to think he was bringing

"coals to Newcastle." In the porch he saw a great basket of dead roses, and beside it a pair of garden-scissors; showing, he thought, what Bessie's latest occupation had been, and that she had returned from the Vicarage.

Laurence walked up the garden-path to the open door almost timidly. His heart gave a joyous bound as he saw Bessie flit past one of the casements.

"May I come in?" he asked, rapping lightly at the door.

In a moment Bessie stood blushing before him.

"I hope I did not startle or disturb you, Miss Hilton. I have taken the pleasure of bringing you a few roses." As he spoke, he busied himself in untying the matting and removing the leaves. He added, as he put the nosegay into her hands, "Your own garden is so charming, so full of glorious old-fashioned roses, that I don't feel proud of my present."

But Bessie glowed over them in such unfeigned delight as, for the moment, almost made her forget her shyness.

"Oh, how beautiful they are! I have never, never seen anything like them!" she breathed out, and she buried her face in them, or, rather, laid it softly and caressingly upon them, afraid to spoil them.

"How much more beautiful than all their beauty you are!" was the thought in Laurence's heart; and it betrayed itself in his eyes.

Though Bessie did not know what it was she felt shining down upon her from them, she felt a great power of some kind in them weighing down her own lids; so that, after one shy glance it seemed impossible she could look up at him again.

They were standing on the threshold of the room in which Bessie had been sitting. Laurence, looking past her into it, was struck with its homely grace and home-like charm.

"What a pretty little room!" he exclaimed.

Bessie led the way in.

"Won't you sit down, sir? Father will be in directly," she said, speaking, as it seemed to her, out of a dream, but not without consciousness that "father" would not hospitably welcome his guest.

"I don't think I've ever been in so pretty a room," said Laurence.

"Oh! Mr. Laurence, the rooms at the Manor are so beautiful! Once, not long ago, since they were all new furnished, the housekeeper showed me all over them. The family were away. When I was a very little child I used to be there often; but that's too long ago for me to remember how they were then."

"There's not a room at Elmhurst that has such a home-like charm as this room," Laurence maintained.

"All the pretty things I have are pre-

sents from Mrs. Dovedale," Bessie said, glancing round with meek pride.

The room really was very charming. The pretty, vine-fringed casement, looking past the little garden into one of the loveliest orchards of the neighbourhood, was draped with pure white muslin curtains; on the casement sill there were well-tended plants of myrtle and musk and geranium. The walls were covered with a light paper, the general tone of which was grey; on them hung a few photographs, and a few, at all events not bad, water-colour drawings. On the small oval table of black oak were a few books, a work-box, a writing-case, and a spray of wild roses (gathered by Laurence the night before) in a glass jug of clear water. The room boasted a small couch, an easy-chair, and two other chairs, all covered with light chintz, kept clean by marvellous specimens of Bessie's dainty skill in needle-work. On the old-fashioned mantelpiece

were some cheap white vases, of a good shape, full of fresh-gathered roses.

A man who could not be happy in such a home with such a wife deserved neither wife nor home, thought foolish Laurence.

"These sketches are Mrs. Dovedale's own doing, are they not?" Laurence asked, going from one to the other.

"Yes, sir."

"I wish—" Laurence began, turning upon Bessie, abruptly—then he stopped. His stop made Bessie glance up at him—a sweet, fleet, inquiring glance that dropped instantly to her roses. "I was going to say that I wished you would not call me 'sir,' Bessie."

Her face was immediately suffused with a warm flush. It was the first time he had called her Bessie. She had never before noticed what a pretty name it was.

"Forgive me," he pleaded. "Indeed, Miss Hilton, I meant no disrespect. Bessie seems to me such a sweet, fresh, Spring-

like blossomy sort of name, so exactly fit for you, that there is a pleasure in saying it. You will forgive me for having done so?"

"Indeed, no, sir, there is nothing to forgive. You have the right to call me Bessie, if you please; but it is only proper that I should call you 'sir.'"

She summoned a little modest dignity and self-possession to her aid as she said this.

"You are offended, though you pretend not to be," he persisted.

"Indeed, no, sir. Please don't think that. And just when you have been so kind, bringing me these dear beautiful roses. I liked it, sir—indeed I did. I liked you to call me Bessie."

She was so much in earnest that tears came to her eyes, and she blushed overpoweringly.

There was a moment of silence. Then Laurence put out his hand and said, with a

strange abruptness that made her look pained and startled,

"I must be going. Good-bye."

But when her soft little trembling fingers were in his, he did not immediately release them, as he should have done, and he crushed them very closely. When he did release them, he went away, feeling an exaggerated sense of his virtue in having resisted the temptation to draw her to him and kiss her cheek, and call her not only Bessie, but dear and sweet Bessie; and also an exaggerated sense of how delicious it would have been to have yielded to the temptation.

He had not ridden many yards from the orchard gate when he met Hilton and the young blacksmith. From both he got somewhat scowling looks and gruff greeting. He nevertheless stopped.

"I've just been to your house, Hilton."

"So I supposed, Squire, seeing that this

bit of lane don't lead anywhere else to speak of."

"I have taken your daughter a few roses from my mother's garden. Her mother's daughter has a sort of right to them."

Hilton, approaching close, laying his hand on the neck of young Maynard's horse, and looking into his face with a pathetic mixture of coaxing entreaty and of sternness, said,

"She'd have been better without 'em, Squire."

"A deal better,"—from the young blacksmith, who had unconsciously balled his fist as he spoke.

Laurence flashed upon him an angry, haughty look, and old Hilton said,

"Hold thy peace, fool! Who wants thy opinion?"

By the words of Bessie's father the young giant was cowed, because he was Bessie's father. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets, after a sheepish salutation to young

Maynard, which was courteously returned, and then walked on.

"Now, Hilton, what do you mean? Speak out, man."

Laurence looked steadily into the old man's pathetic eyes.

"What I mean, young sir, is just what I said," maintained the old man. "My girl would be better without your flowers, sir, or your smiles, or your kind words. Not that I believe you mean any harm, sir—upon my oath I don't. I can't look into your honest eyes, so like your mother's, and fancy you do. But the harm's to be done without meaning it, sir. Now, don't 'ee do it again, sir—now, don't 'ee," coaxingly; adding, "She's all I have, sir—all; and how can I help having it always in my mind how life was spoiled for her poor mother?"

Laurence, after a brief struggle within himself, wrung the old man's hand, and went his way.

Thoroughly out of tune now, he did not go to the Vicarage; he rode far and fast through the down-dropping dews of the Summer evening. It was late before he turned his horse's head towards home. He stood in need of sterner counsels than came to him under the stars and upon the breath of that Summer night, with its coming and going of exquisite Summer scents, its to and fro flitting of dusky-winged bats—those creatures which seem like concentrations, individualizations of the dusk itself. Something rustled through the trees when puffs of warm wind shook them, something whispered through the wheat, something looked out at him from the soft eyes of flowers that, here and there, gleamed out at him—wild roses from the hedges, or white roses from cottage gardens, pushing through hedges, or clambering over walls—that spoke to him of sweet eyes, honeyed lips, loving clasping hands, a warm, soft, yielding form, nestling happily in his embrace—

softly. "My darling little Bessie, I must try to forget you, and to let you forget me," were the words, or thoughts, that followed.

He felt he had gone quite as far as was safe with Bessie, if nothing was to come of it. He was a serious-minded young fellow, who could not find pleasure in playing with things; a pure-minded young fellow, for whom vice had no attraction; a good-hearted, unselfish young fellow, who would not have been able to take delight in what cost the ruin of the thing delighted in. With Bessie he wanted all or nothing. This was his first experience of love. And what it had suggested to him was the delight of having for a wife such a dainty little bit of sweetness and goodness and loveliness as Bessie Hilton.

To win and enjoy Bessie's love at the cost of her peace and happiness, to fancy he was loving while he was destroying her, was not what Laurence felt in any way tempted

to do. He knew perfectly well that in such a course there would be no delight, but the consciousness always of misery and anguish.

Laurence did not feel the happier for imagining that the young blacksmith, the suitor approved of by Bessie's father, was this evening trying, in his rustic fashion, to make himself acceptable to Bessie. He felt himself grow absurdly hot and angry at the idea, even, that the fellow's eyes should have license to feast on the damask of Bessie's cheek, the pure smooth whiteness of her brow.

Yet ought he to have felt the happier had he known the truth? Which was that Bessie, seeing her father come up the garden so accompanied, had, with her roses, fled to her own room, from which she had refused to come down till young Hudson had gone away. There she had stayed, feeding upon the beauty and the rich scent of her flowers, and upon the dangerous sweet thoughts

hovering round them, till tears of aching happiness fell upon them, and signs of a trouble she did not understand kept stirring the gentle little bosom against which she held them. Their heavy odour filling her room when she slept, influenced her dreams, coloured her first waking thoughts. And the first question she asked of the first sunbeam that fell upon her white wall was,

"When shall I see him again? When shall I see him again?"

And yet to see him had been always a dreadful pleasure, to be fled from rather than courted. Only yesterday, had she not been brought to bay by the knowledge that he had seen her as he passed the casement, she would have flown upstairs and kept herself still till he should have gone.

CHAPTER VIII.

AGAIN.

NEXT morning Laurence told his father of his wish to visit some friends of his, or rather, a friend of his—Liston Woodford, of Beechams, and his family.

"I'm sorry you can't feel happy at home with us for a while longer, my boy," his father said. "But I'm not surprised. There's something wrong in the home-atmosphere. There always is where there are no women," glancing, with a humorous expression, at his three handsome daughters, who showed a dignified calmness under this implied reproach.

"It's not that indeed, father. I'm happy

enough. You and I, who represent the feminine element of the Maynard family, get on so well together always."

"There's certainly more about you to remind me of your beloved and sainted mother than there is about any of your sisters. More's the pity that they're not more like her. Don't fancy I grudge your going away on a visit, Laurie, my boy—it's natural you should be looking about you; I wish you to do it. The sooner you bring me home some nice gentle little woman to be my daughter—a young woman such as young women used to be—the better I shall be pleased."

"Well, father, I will do my best to fall in love with some such woman, if I can find her where you would like me to find my wife."

Saying this, and the three Miss Maynards having withdrawn, in their business-like manner, to their respective morning work, Laurence meditated whether or not he

would tell his father the real reason of his sudden flight. He decided not to do so, lest the old gentleman should be prejudiced against the little maiden whose soft dark eyes banished his son.

That morning he wrote to Liston Woodford, telling him to expect him the next day. In the evening he rode over to Brockweir to say a short good-bye to the Dovedales.

Mr. Dovedale was not at home, he found; Mrs. Dovedale, he was told, was in the nursery school-room with the children, two of whom were not well.

The nursery school-room was a large room at the back of the house, with long windows opening into the garden. Laurence had always been allowed unceremonious access to this room; had often gone there unannounced, and he did so now. He intended to be quite frank with the Dovedales as to the reason of his sudden departure; and, to tell the truth, he was

rather glad to have, as he hoped he was going to have, the opportunity of telling his story to Mrs. Dovedale's soft eyes only, leaving her to repeat it to her husband.

As he went along the quaint old passage, he heard a delicious low-singing lullaby. He opened the door softly, lest he might waken some just-sung-to-sleep baby, and found neither Mrs. Dovedale nor any of the elder children in the room: only Bessie Hilton, walking to and fro, the baby in her arms, singing as she walked, and holding her pretty head so drooped that her cheek rested against the baby's cheek.

Outside the windows there was the clear, warm-glowing glory of sunset behind the elms at the bottom of the meadow. The rooks coming homewards, cawing contentedly, crossed the sky-line. Bessie's eyes were looking outwards; she was unconscious of the softly-opened door. She held in one hand the little bare feet of the child—a

lovely little girl-baby of six months old. In her whole aspect there was, Laurence thought, a touching mixture of pensive girlish grace and of the self-devotion of womanhood. It was a charming little home-scene. It was not till Bessie, turning in her walk, saw him, that he disturbed it by speaking.

"I thought I should find Mrs. Dovedale here," was all he said. Could he help speaking to her in a tone that was a caress, looking at her with fond admiration in his eyes? Who shall say?

Bessie's face was already flushed, and, for once, she looked tired. She did not blush any more, but said earnestly, her eyes filling with tears as she spoke,

"Oh, Mr. Laurence, little Annie has been so ill all day, and baby too; and we can't help being afraid that it may be scarlet fever. A woman who came here three days ago to ask Mrs. Dovedale for something, told her, just as she went away,

that her children were down with fever."

"Have you had scarlet fever, Bessie?" was Laurence's anxious question. What could be more natural than that this thought should pass to spoken question.

"I think not; and Mrs. Dovedale says, if the doctor thinks there is any symptom of it in the children, she shall not let me come to the house."

"Quite right, too!"

"But I shouldn't take it. And I should so like to help her to nurse the children, sir."

"I daresay you would, Bessie; but that couldn't be." Judicially examining the little face lying on Bessie's shoulder, Laurence said, "Surely there is not much the matter with this little one, Bessie?"

"You think not, sir? Don't you see what a flush she has? She is generally as white as a lily."

"She looks very placid and happy." Laurence checked himself suddenly as he

was about to add some idle words, and asked, "Do you think Mrs. Dovedale is too much engaged to see me?"

Good little Bessie, he rightly judged, was anxiously pre-occupied beyond the possibility of self-consciousness. He thought it would be brutal in him to disturb her with any folly, yet he felt he could not trust himself.

"Not now, sir. Little Annie seemed better, and has gone to sleep. Mrs. Dovedale has been lying down to rest a little. I will tell her you are here, sir."

"Won't that wake up the little one? Are you going to leave her in my charge?"

Bessie smiled and shook her head. She threw a light shawl lying at hand over the child, and went to the door. Laurence opened it for her.

"Shall I see you again to-night? You will come back again?"

"I don't think so, sir."

"Then good night, Bessie. Have you a hand to give me? It is good-bye as well as good night, for I am going away on a short visit."

"I hope it will be a pleasant one, sir."

Bessie looked pale now, he fancied; he fancied, too, a thrill in her voice. He released her hand: she passed through the door. He watched the charming little figure go up the stair, then he went back into the room, crossed to one of the windows, and stood looking out, with a grim sort of patient smile on his face. He was thinking, for one thing, with what strange persistence—cruel persistence, he could almost have called it—this little girl was thrown in his way. He did not exactly see the use of going away on a visit, if, when he returned, just the same sort of thing would begin again. Yet, there didn't seem any probability of anything else. Was he to give up visiting his best friends because of the danger of meeting Bessie

Hilton? The thought was too absurd. He could almost find it in his heart to be irritated with Bessie for being so bewitching!—as well as with himself for being so soft-hearted and weak.

CHAPTER IX.

COUNSEL.

LAURENCE was still looking out of the window, still occupied with these thoughts, when Mrs. Dovedale entered. At the closing of the door he turned and went to meet her.

"I am grieved, indeed, to hear of your trouble," he said.

"It has been a most anxious day, certainly, but I feel re-assured this evening, and hope, by to-morrow, to find all reasonable cause for anxiety past. For unreasonable anxiety we mothers always find cause."

"I am heartily glad to know you can speak so hopefully."

"You saw Bessie? She must be tired, poor child! That dear girl is indefatigable, and always, in any trouble, such a comfort to me! She has such sweet, wise, little ways! I shall miss her terribly."

"'Miss her!' Why miss her—is she going away?"

"I am going to look out for a situation for her, as nursery-governess. I suppose you don't know any family in which you think she would be happy, where such a person is wanted?"

"Certainly not. Why is she going away? Isn't it a great pity you should lose her? And how is her poor old father to spare her?"

"It is his wish that she should go. She herself knows nothing about it yet, poor child!"

"Why does he wish it?"

"Well, he came to me this morning, and we had a long talk about it. I don't know anyone I can talk with more to my satis-

faction than I can talk with old Mr. Hilton."

"Dear Mrs. Dovedale, that does not enlighten me, unless you tell me something of the nature of the talk."

"Of course, I know that, Laurence. But it is difficult to explain, and not do injustice to somebody. It's, in some ways, a sadly unsatisfactory world, it seems to me. Those in it who are in any way exceptional, different from what is ordinary in their position, better or lovelier, seem always singled out for less than average happiness, using happiness in any common sense."

"Of whom are you speaking?"

"I am thinking especially of two very different people in very different circumstances—of Bessie Hilton and of my husband."

"I can't exactly understand why you should think thus of either. Your husband, I know, has, in many ways, much to try him, from the ignorance, bigotry, and nar-

rowness of those he has to do with; still, I think him, on the whole, a most enviable man. As to Bessie—well—what do you mean?"

"I have some imperfect memory of lines (whose, I am ashamed to say, I can't at this moment remember) which speak of a land where the poet sees

> 'Beauty and anguish walking hand in hand
> The downward slope to Death.'

Thinking of Bessie—my little apple-blossom Bessie, whom I love as if she were my younger sister—I'm reminded of these lines."

"But why, my fair cousin? Do be a little definite. What mystery of misfortune is threatening this good and lovely child?"

"This: it seems to me she must either pass through life without loving, or she will love where she cannot hope to be loved again. Either of these misfortunes is heavy enough to make my heart cry for her. But this isn't all. I don't know that our village

is worse than other villages—indeed, we sometimes hope it is better, thinking, if not, for what have we lived and laboured? But there are many common people in it who resent difference from themselves, and a few bad people who find delight in trying to pull the good down to their own level. We have always been so proud of Bessie, as a girl against whom no tongue dared speak a word of reproach——"

"And does anyone now dare? Let me answer them."

"In being her champion, you would be her worst accuser. I must tell you what brought old Mr. Hilton to me this morning. He had been speaking, and, no doubt, plainly enough, to a neighbour, whose daughters are bold, bad girls; and was told, in answer, that he'd better mind his own business, and look to his own affairs—that the quiet ones were always the deepest."

"Well?" demanded Laurence, hotly.

"Of course, Bessie's poor old father in-

sisted on knowing what was meant. Then he was told that his pattern girl, who couldn't say a civil word to, or so much as look at, decent, honest young men who wanted her in the way of marriage, wasn't too shy to meet the young Squire of Elmhurst in the lanes, and loiter about with him after dark; nor to let him into the house times and times when she was alone there."

"What infamous calumny! Mrs. Dovedale, I assure you——"

"There is no need to assure me of anything. I know Bessie to be as thoroughly modest and maidenly as it is possible for a girl to be. I am so convinced of the falsehood of all that is objectionable in this that I should not dream of shocking Bessie by telling her of it, nor would her father. Still you see how it is. Actions, the most innocent, absolutely unavoidable meetings, are sure to be misconstrued and misrepresented; and, it seems to me to end in this,

that my poor, pretty Bessie must, for a time, leave Brockweir."

"I have not spoken to Bessie one word all the world might not hear; nor have I ever met her, save by chance, except on one occasion, and that only last evening, when I took her a bunch of roses."

"I am sorry you should have done that. You know you should not have done that."

"I am sorry too. But there is no need, Mrs. Dovedale, to hurry the poor child from house and home, and all who love her, immediately, for I came to bid you good-bye. As the wolf is leaving, the lamb may, for the present, remain."

"You are going away?"

"Yes. I came intending to tell you the truth about this flight of mine. It is just this—that those soft, dark eyes of Bessie's have innocently bewitched me, so that I don't feel it safe to run the risk of more chance meetings. My folly has gone so far that I am haunted by the notion of what it

would be to have Bessie for my wife, to give the old Manor-house such a mistress, my father such a daughter."

"A daughter who would drop him a courtesy each time he spoke to her, and call him 'sir'!"

"Well, yes, really. And would not such conduct as that be more becoming in a young girl towards an old man like my father, than such as he would be likely to experience from any ordinary girl of the period?"

"Certainly. And, nevertheless, would it not go far towards breaking your father's heart, if you brought home to him, to be his daughter, the child of a servant and a mechanic?"

"There it is! Not that her mother was a servant—except by accident. I have heard she was of good family. As to Hilton, there is more of the gentleman in him than in many a country squire of the neighbourhood."

"True; but it wouldn't do, Laurence—it wouldn't do."

"Can't you fancy how my father might come to love Bessie? How she would tend and cherish him? How happy she might make his old age?"

"I can; but it wouldn't do, Laurence, it wouldn't do. I have that feeling through all others—it would not do."

"Why would it not do?"

"Surely, Laurence, you are not thinking of it seriously!"

"So far from it that I am going away expressly to try and forget Bessie, and to try and fall in love with some one else. Of two difficult achievements the latter is the one I expect to find the more difficult. But tell me, why would it not do?"

"Though Bessie seems a lady in her present circumstances, being so much above what is ordinary in them, still she is not a lady—not a lady 'born and bred' to the core, and in the grain, as your wife should be,

Laurence. You would feel this more and more if you saw her in such a position as she must take as your wife. She would feel that you felt it. You would be morbidly conscious of the 'little rustic' in her, imagining self-betrayal, even when there was none. The end I should foresee for Bessie would be a broken heart. No, it would not do."

Laurence answered nothing. He stood at the window, looking out over the fair Summer land, and feeling—most foolish fellow!—a sense of Wintry desolation at his heart.

From an open window above sounded Bessie's self-sung lullaby, and he was aware of her feet pacing to and fro. Laurence suddenly turned, extended his hand.

"Good night and good-bye, dear cousin," he said. "Explain everything for me to your husband. I shall send over for news of the little ones before I start in the morning."

"Good night, Laurence, and good-bye, and God bless you!"

Directly he was gone Mrs. Dovedale's fleet feet carried her upstairs to her nursery; but while she took the baby from tired Bessie, and sat with it beside little Annie's cot, making Bessie herself go out into the garden, she found time to think of Laurence Maynard.

"The only thing for him is to fall seriously in love with a lady," she thought; "nothing but that will make him understand that Bessie is not a lady. But I'm sure I don't know where he will find the 'lady.' Women say there are no knights, no chivalrous men, no gentlemen, in these degenerate times. Harold Dovedale is one; Laurence Maynard is, in a less perfect way, another. But I do not know where, among young women, I could find two ladies. Which failed first, I wonder—failed to be frequent, I mean—knights or ladies?"

She thought over all the young women

she knew, and in each of them found some vice of manner, of mind, or of opinion, which, in her judgment, made each less fit than little Bessie to be young Maynard's lady and love. And yet she did not waver in her decision that for Laurence to marry Bessie "would not do." Not so much for any one definite reason as for the thousand indescribable differences between Bessie and a lady "to the manner (and Manor) born." She could fancy that Bessie's manner, now so winning in its shy sweetness, might, in so changed a position, lose all its spontaneous grace, its wild-flower charm, and be bashful and unformed, giving an impression of a kind of scared foolishness. The very anxiety to do better than she could, might, Mrs. Dovedale imagined, deprive her of power to do even what otherwise she naturally would have done.

"No, no, no! It would not do!—it would not do!" were the words to which Mrs. Dovedale, by-and-by, rocked the cradle,

while her eyes rested lovingly on Bessie, who had soon come in, and sat working opposite to her.

Bessie, she thought, would cease to be her unconscious sweet self, would not have power to rise above herself; would rather sink below; would either (for all the happier way) die of a broken heart; or would give herself up to self-indulgence, grow coarse and common (only a woman could have looked at Bessie and realized the possibility of her growing "coarse and common"), and develop into such a woman as, in after-years, might make people ask if Mr. Maynard had married his dairy-maid, adding, "With those dark eyes she may have been pretty, in a blowsy way, when she was young."

CHAPTER X.

IN THE BEECHWOOD.

LAURENCE had gone to Beechams, wishing both to fall out of love and into love. When he had been there two or three weeks he had done neither. He still thought often and much of Bessie, and there was at his heart the sort of feeling about her that a gentle-hearted child would have about some bird it had wounded in capturing.

At Beechams there were many young ladies—sisters and cousins of his host. There could not have been a more desirable scene for love-making, in the hot, sultry July weather, than the purple black shadow

of its beeches, in which the wind always seemed to keep up a cool rustle. Nor did Laurence want for encouragement. But he was fastidious.

One young lady was so much at home in the stables and kennels that Laurence had a fancy that a perfume of the stables lingered in her hair, and that her hands had always been recently licked by the dogs she had been caressing. Another had a rough, hoarse voice, more like a boy's than a woman's; and was mannish in her attitudes and gestures, evidently priding herself on being so. Another was always trying to convert him to "sound views" on the woman question, and was so free of speech on topics delicate, doubtful, and difficult, that he was afraid of being put to the blush if he talked with her. Another was very gushing, always laughing, and finding everything "so absurd." Another, who was the prettiest woman there, made such desperate use of her fine eyes, was so

clever, and so fast a flirt, that Laurence felt a secret alarm when she approached him, lest she should be about to make such open love to him as must extract from his latent chivalry some compromising response. Another, who had pretty feet and ankles, and was an enthusiast at croquet, bored him so with the game, and so freely displayed those her most striking charms, that Laurence did not think she would be a nice wife for a modest man, nor for one who couldn't stand croquet at all seasons, and regard it as the serious and sufficient business of the four and twenty hours.

"You are suffering from an unrequited attachment, I fear, Mr. Maynard," said old Miss Woodford, Liston's aunt, who kept house for him, "or you couldn't be such a cynic."

"At all events, I can honestly say this, Miss Woodford, that if I had been a young man when you were a young woman, I would have tried my very hardest that

you should not be Miss Woodford now."

"It's very nice and kind of you to say so, my dear—Mr. Maynard, I mean; and you're very like what your father was." That she could pay him no higher compliment, Laurence guessed by the blush that rose to her soft old cheek. She went on, "If there's not a young lady here whom you can fancy, it's the more likely you will take to my favourite, Agnes Norman, who is like none of them."

That was the first time he heard her name—Agnes Norman; but in the next few days it was always being buzzed about. They were all to go to a picnic given by Agnes Norman. Agnes Norman was coming to stay a few days at Beechams. There was a slight hostility in the tone in which some of the ladies spoke of Agnes Norman. When Laurence asked these about her, they answered that they did not know her, and yet were tired of her.

"She's a distant cousin of Liston Woodford's, and, probably, he will marry her," one of them added.

Laurence asked Liston if this was true, and was answered,

"I tried my chance with her once; but she wouldn't have me. I didn't care about it, and she knew I didn't. For one thing she's far too young for me. You would be much more likely to suit her. In a certain way I was in love with her; but I didn't, and don't, want to marry. To have had an earnest-minded wife like Agnes, whose very atmosphere makes a man ashamed of his sloth and worthlessness, would soon have killed me!"

The picnic was to be given in a beech-wood on Miss Norman's property, which lay on the hills above the Woodfords' place. Laurence had some slight curiosity about Agnes Norman; besides, he had not been particularly enjoying himself at Beechams,

and a change in the order of his days would be welcome.

Liston Woodford was a book-worm, and a dabbler in literature; he spent most of his days in his study, confident that "the ladies" were most competent and willing to entertain his young friend.

The weather on the day fixed for the picnic was magnificent—an ideal July day; great heat, grand clouds, intense sunlight, intense depth of shadow, and a wind that sounded crisp and cool rustling through the beeches.

They started early, in various wagonettes and other carriages. Laurence, fancying the horses he drove were rather overweighted, gave the reins to one of his companions, and walked up a long hill.

He was directed to take a certain by-path, as a short cut to the proposed camping-ground. He did this, and soon afterwards lost himself among the intricate intersection of sheep-walks and woodmen's

paths in the outskirts of the great wood.

This did not much concern him. He would, quite time enough, be able to find his party again; he thought the voices of foolish youths and merry maidens would soon proclaim their whereabouts. So he rather gave himself up to the enjoyment of his solitude among those magnificent trees.

By-and-by he, quite suddenly, before he was aware of the neighbourhood of any human habitation, came upon a cottage, not exactly a workman's cottage, nor yet a "cottage of gentility," but a pretty rustic place, adorned with wood-carving and embowered in clematis and wood-bine. A wood-yard close by, with a saw-pit, felled trunks lying about, great store of planks, and piles of new-made gates and hurdles, showed the occupation of the owner of the cottage.

The place seemed to be deserted, only guarded by a chained dog, which barked as

Laurence approached. At the bark of the dog a man stepped out of a shed and looked after Laurence, but of this he was unaware. He walked on, and was soon out of sight of the cottage, going, as he supposed, towards the spot appointed for the camping-ground.

About a quarter of a mile beyond the cottage, he paused and considered which way he should take, and thought he might have been wise to have called at the cottage to see if there were anyone there of whom to inquire his road. When he had decided to take a path that bent towards the right, he went, nevertheless, a few yards towards the left—why, he would have been puzzled to tell; and there, curled up at the root of a great tree, her hat lying near, her head pillowed on her arm, he came upon a young girl asleep.

Flowers and an open book lay close by her; the flowers, wild thyme, sweet-scented wood-ruffe, rock-roses, hare-bells, fruit and blos-

som of wild strawberries, and a few buds of the white wild harvest-rose, tied into a dainty nosegay with some stalks of grass. The book was Tennyson's "In Memoriam." These things he noticed before he had seen the face, which was half-averted. The shell-like little ear, the delicate line of cheek and throat, the rich dark hair, were all familiar to his tender admiration. Bessie! By what wonderful chance dropped right in his path here?

He could not pass on and leave her there asleep and unprotected, to be found, perhaps, by-and-by, by some roystering, champagne-elated straggler from the pic-nic party; yet, with that beating of his heart at sight of her, was it safe to risk an interview?

Even as he hesitated, and stood looking at her, the rustling of a squirrel in the branches of the tree under which she lay sent some dried leaves fluttering upon her cheek.

CHAPTER XI.

UNDER A BEECH-TREE.

BESSIE'S lashes stirred, her eyes opened. Then, presently, she sat up. Fear, incredulity, delight, by turns looked out of her soft eyes as they met Laurence's. The colour went and came with dangerous rapidity; he thought she was thinner, he was sure she was paler, when her complexion settled, than when he saw her last, and she had been evidently crying recently. Her lovely eyes looked all the larger, darker, and more lustrous.

"What strangest of all happy chances has brought you here, Bessie?" Laurence said, impulsively, and, as he spoke, threw himself on the turf at her feet.

"I stopped to rest, I was so hot and tired, and I fell asleep, sir, before I knew I was going to do so."

"But where do you come from, little fairy? Do you, for instance, at present inhabit one of these beech-trees, and feed upon whatever food the squirrels are so polite as to provide for you?"

"Oh, no," she said, smiling, but not gaily. "I am staying with my uncle, at the wood cottage, for a little while."

"The pretty cottage I passed, then, I suppose. Why were you sent up here, Bessie? Had you been ill? You don't look well, my child."

She flushed, and her eyes filled.

"They said I was not well, and that change would do me good, but that if I staid down there I should have the fever. It died, you know, Mr. Laurence; I suppose you've heard—Mrs. Dovedale's darling little baby. It is the first time, since I have been old enough to remember, that anyone I

have loved has died, and, oh, I felt so sorry! And it seemed so sad and strange to put the lovely little thing into a dark hole in the damp ground!"

"I am very grieved. I did not know. I have not had much news from Elmhurst, and none from Brockweir, since I left. From the news I had the morning I left, I thought all cause for anxiety was over. And little Annie?"

"She was very ill, but she is getting well again. It seemed so hard that I couldn't help Mrs. Dovedale in all her trouble; she wouldn't let me. Father says I haven't had the fever, and so, when it broke out in the village, he sent me up here."

"Do you like being up here?"

"It is very beautiful," Bessie said, looking round, "but I feel so sad and lonely, away from everybody. Sometimes I feel as if I must run home to father."

"You mustn't do that, Bessie. You have had a great escape, for, I remember,

you were nursing the poor little baby last time I saw you."

"Yes, and two days after—only two days!—it died."

"Thank heaven that you did not take the fever!"

Bessie sighed.

"Why do you sigh, Bessie? Are you not glad to live? Doesn't everything seem beautiful and happy?"

"Just now it does," answered Bessie, softly. "But often since I have been up here it has seemed to me as if the very beauty of everything made it all the sadder. I think it must be because I have so little to do that I am not happy. I read and work and wander about all day. And I do so miss Mrs. Dovedale."

"Poor little Bessie!"

There was silence, then Bessie said,

"I must go back now, sir; it will be dinner-time, and they will be wondering what has become of me."

Laurence got up, and gave her his hand to help her to do so.

"You don't ask what brought me here, Bessie."

"I should like to know," she answered, smiling shyly.

He explained, then added,

"By-the-by, Bessie, don't go so far from the cottage as this again to-day. I would rather you were not seen by the wild young fellows who may be at this picnic."

"I will keep in the garden, or in the house, if you wish, Mr. Laurence."

He was still holding the hand he had taken to lift her up, meaning to bid her good-bye.

"It is no use," he suddenly cried, "Fate is against me. Bessie, is it not strange, I left my home to avoid chances of meeting you, and to try and learn to forgét you. You are sent from yours, at all events in part, to put you out of my reach; and here, by the most extraordinary concurrence of acci-

dents, we meet. This does not look as if we were meant to avoid each other."

Bessie looked wounded, perplexed, inquiring.

"Don't you understand, Bessie, why I wished to avoid you? Because I found myself getting more fond of you than was safe."

On hearing these words, Bessie stretched out her hand to steady herself against the beech-trunk. It seemed to her as if the world whirled round with her. All the pretty colour fled from her lips and cheeks. A fortnight of unconscious fretting had reduced the poor child's strength. For the first time in her life she knew what it was to be near fainting.

Laurence, thinking she would really faint, threw his arm round her, and drew her to lean on him. She tried to free herself, then yielded. For a few seconds she rested against him, hearing his heart beat under her ear, conscious of the fine soft texture of his coat, of the sweetness of his unpolluted

breath, feeling as if she were just now in some dream-world, where such delicious happiness was innocent and possible, and, out of which, presently, cock-crow, or some early chirp of dawn-awakened bird, would make her reluctantly rouse herself. She softly moved her hand over his coat sleeve, to assure herself that, at all events, just now the thing seemed real. He noticed this gesture then, and often afterwards remembered it.

Laurence roused himself to the danger of such a position for her, if, by chance, any prying eyes should be on them.

"Are you better now, Bessie?" And he let her lift herself from his arms, which she did, breaking into one rose of crimson blushes.

"I am quite well now," she said softly, and not daring to lift her eyes.

"I will walk a few yards towards your home with you."

They went side by side, for a few moments silent, then Laurence said,

"Bessie, I think it best to be frank with you. After what I said just now, you will understand why I feel that we must be all or nothing to each other. Already people have been speaking of us in a way to touch your fair name. I ought to be grieved that we met to-day. The world says I must be either your worst enemy, or my own. To love you honestly, little Bessie, and to wish to have you for my own precious little wife, is to be my own worst enemy in this wise world's eyes; while, to love you selfishly, wickedly, is to spoil your life, to be your destroyer. I tell you this, Bessie, out of the feeling that you are very good, and will help me to be good. I want you to understand that if in the future I act in a way that may seem to you cold, unkind, neglectful, it is because I cannot, just a little, like you, but must, unless I avoid you, love you passionately, and run the risk, perhaps, of breaking my father's heart. Do you understand, Bessie?"

"Mr. Laurence," said Bessie, pantingly, and with coming-and-going flushes. "I do understand you. You are very good. You take care for me as I ought to take care for myself, or as my mother would take care for me if she had lived. I am very glad you told me. I will try to be good. I will try to wish never to see you again, or not for ever so many years. I will try to be glad when I hear you are married to some lady it will make your father glad and proud that you should marry."

Only the thought of his father kept this foolish Laurence from thrusting all other considerations aside, and claiming, trying to obtain, rather, this girl's promise to be his wife. It seemed to him that so much loveliness, with so much purity and goodness of heart, was not likely to come in his way again. In sight of the cottage he paused.

"Bessie, give me one promise. Don't let anyone persuade you to marry some one you don't love."

"It is so easy to promise that! I wish you had asked me to promise something difficult," Bessie answered simply.

They clasped hands and parted.

The feeling in Laurence's heart—how long to remain there?—as he parted from Bessie, was—"Sooner or later, please God, I will have you for my wife." Then he thought to himself—"Why, she'd love the very cloth of my coat better than any other woman is ever likely to love me."

Laurence wondered now at his own self-restraint during the interview. His eyes moistened at the thought that already, since he had known her, Bessie had lost something of her perfect bloom and unbroken peace. Something of the damask roundness was gone from her cheeks—something of the stainless serenity from her eyes.

CHAPTER XII.

AGNES NORMAN.

LAURENCE had not walked very far beyond the place where he had found Bessie, before he came upon a Watteau-like scene. Ladies in pretty light Summer dresses, in groups of twos and threes, at the roots of the fine old beeches; silver, glass, and snow-white damask catching the sun-light of the open glades; figures crossing and re-crossing from one island of shadow to another—eating, drinking, talking, and laughing going on with gay rapidity.

Laurence was able, himself unseen, to study this picture. The half-shaded sun-light, escaping at the touch of the wind from between beech-boughs, fell, with a

golden gleam, on here a curl, and there a coil of bright hair, glanced upon a bewilderingly lustrous pair of eyes, or glittered on some snow-white jewelled hand, lay upon some rich-tinted drapery or some cloud-like heap of muslin. It was a pretty scene, but Laurence was, just then, not in harmony with its careless gaiety.

It was only for a few moments that he remained undiscovered; then he was clamorously greeted as a truant, a recreant, and a torrent of laughing abuse of his idleness, and of laughing speculation as to the nature of the adventures which had detained him, was poured out upon him. His friend, Liston Woodford, pushed him by the shoulders into the sort of centre aisle, and introduced him to the unknown to him members of the "assembly" *en masse*. Laurence stood bare-headed, executed a comprehensive bow, and showed to the best advantage his sunny chestnut curls and frank, handsome, pleasant face.

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"Glance round, and then tell me to whom I shall specially introduce you—at whose feet you will be placed."

Laurence forbore the glance.

"I won't commit the insolence of selection," he said; "but I own I'm tired—not in high spirits. If I must be specially introduced, please let it be to the quietest and least exacting lady here—some one who will be content to be taken care of, and will not expect loud mirth or furious flirtation."

"This way then," said Liston Woodford, promptly.

Laurence followed him to a completely-shaded fairy bower, rather in the background, where a little lady sat alone. Liston Woodford duly performed the ceremony of introduction, but in a voice that did not enable Laurence to catch the lady's name.

"Am I too late to be of any use? I fear you are already served," were Laurence's first words.

"If such a thing is to be had, I should like a glass of water."

The voice was sweet; the speaker's face Laurence had hardly seen, for she wore a hat that was more useful as a shade, and less coquettish than that of any other lady in the party; and he, standing while she sat, looked chiefly upon its crown.

"I will have the pleasure of procuring it."

A rash promise. There was no water to be had on the ground. Laurence, however, was not to be easily defeated in a lady's service. He took an empty claret-jug in his hand, and set out in search of a spring of which some one told him. In ten minutes he returned to his lady's bower triumphant, his crystal jug full of ice-cold clear water.

"I am afraid I have given you a great deal of trouble," the lady said, as Laurence filled the glass she held to him. As she did this the sunshine fell upon her hand through some interstice of the boughs; this hand immediately attracted Laurence's attention.

"Of pleasure, you mean."

"Of course my very conventional remark must elicit a very conventional answer," she replied.

"Putting aside the pleasure of serving a lady, that spring is in a most exquisite little nook, which it is a pleasure to visit."

"The water is deliciously cold and refreshing."

"I am very glad."

"And now I hope you will be so good as to take care of yourself and to get some lunch."

"Thanks."

He procured some food for himself, and returned to the place allotted him.

"Am I permitted so great a liberty?" he asked, before throwing himself on the turf at the lady's feet. And his conscience reminded him that he had done this at poor Bessie's without asking or receiving permission.

"Certainly."

Laurence seated himself, ate some lunch in a business-like manner, and then, in a pre-occupied way, tried to amuse his companion, whom he imagined to be some little governess or poor relation, supposed not to require much attention; for this reason he exerted himself more than he would otherwise have done in his present mood.

By-and-by she took off her hat.

"Allow me to hang it up for you," said Laurence.

He laughingly hung the dainty little fabric high up out of her reach, saying as he did so,

"You won't be able to recover it without my intervention; therefore you are my prisoner."

Then, resuming his seat, Laurence, for the first time, looked fully at a face which he at once pronounced the very loveliest he had ever looked upon. Instead of the elderly little person with the pleasant voice and pretty hand he had expected to see,

nineteen at the most, he at first thought, must be the age of his companion. But it was the character of this face, more than even its perfect bloom of physical beauty, that spoke to him of unspoiled freshness of girlish innocence, of modest candour and simplicity, of the fearlessness of maidenhood, and yet, withal, of a wise thoughtfulness, an open-eyed contemplation, a quiet nobility.

If this girl's character were what Laurence fancied it, then it was a character rare indeed in these times—especially rare in that characteristic of Una-like fearlessness, so different from the boldness of immodesty, or of lost or perverted instincts, which leads too many of the women of our day to act and talk in a manner that makes "They know not what they do" the most charitable thing to be said of them.

Laurence, forgetting himself in his almost stupid surprise, did not lower his gaze till he had seen a little added colour tinge the

girl's cheek, and an expression of wonder in her beautiful eyes—eyes as soft, as dark, as lustrous as Bessie's, and with more soul in them. Indeed there was something in the whole face that reminded him of Bessie; and yet—this he at once recognized—it belonged to a higher type, or, at least, was more like what Bessie's might be than what Bessie's was.

After he had looked, in that intent way, at this face, that little scene with Bessie seemed to recede into considerable distance, and only the remorse it had left to continue near and keen. It was a folly, a misfortune, a crime, an injury done to Bessie, to himself, and even somehow, in some way he could not explain, to this girl.

Laurence might assure himself that there were few young men who, in his place, would not have done more and worse, but he was not sufficiently ignoble to be able from any such reflection to derive satisfaction. He fell into a somewhat gloomy

reverie. When he roused himself and looked at his companion's face, it wore, he found, a look of amused content to be quiet, and to watch the scene before her. Evidently she did not resent or dislike the quietness of her cavalier, and was not one of those who require or desire to be constantly "entertained."

She puzzled him once by her own look of amazement when he asked if she knew the neighbourhood well, if she had been in the woods before. She answered only, "Oh, yes!" but seemed to meditate perplexedly. There was something, too, of the hostess in the way in which she by-and-by begged him not to feel obliged to remain where Mr. Woodford had put him.

"I feel under no obligation but that of my own inclination," he answered, and began to be anxious to know who this little lady was.

When all eating and drinking was over, the party began to stir, and disperse, and

re-group. A smooth lawny glade was chosen for a croquet-ground, and there was a great unpacking of hoops and mallets, and choosing of sides.

"Well, I suppose one must not be idle any longer," Mr. Maynard's companion said. "Please, my hat, Mr. Maynard."

When she rose Laurence found her taller than he had expected, and not so entirely girlish; instead of nineteen he thought she might be two or three and twenty; she stood and moved with dignity. As he watched the hat put on, just one sweeping aside of the curls, he decided that the way she wore her hair was one of the many charming things about her, and also one of the things which gave her that look of youth and freshness, and that something which reminded him of Bessie.

Many of the ladies present would have trembled to remove their hats from their elaborately-arranged mingling of natural and artificial locks; but this girl could fearlessly

let the wind, if it would, toss her curls, or a branch catch at them, without danger of awkward disclosures. Her whole dress was, Laurence thought, much more simply appropriate than that of any other lady there.

But the truth may as well be said in one word, that for this girl Laurence was feeling what he had fancied he had felt for Bessie—love at first sight. Whatever she had done, or said, or looked, or worn, would have seemed to him right in itself, and more right than any other right.

"I suppose that is Miss Norman, the 'Agnes Norman' I have heard so much of in the last few days?" Laurence said, following the direction of his companion's eyes, which were fixed on a tall and elgant young lady, to whom Liston Woodford, and several other gentlemen, were paying an exaggerated sort of attention, and whose lace-covered train of lilac silk was a source of laughing inconvenience to everyone in her

neighbourhood, till by-and-by, with the assistance of one or two, not of the ladies about her, but of her gentlemen in waiting, she knotted it up in some highly picturesque fashion round her slight waist, displaying a petticoat of such exquisite and elaborate workmanship as certainly had not been intended to remain concealed.

"What queer blunder have I made?" he asked, seeing the laughing surprise of the face to which he turned questioningly.

She paused a moment; then she said,

"That was a temptation hard to resist. I should so like to have asked you what you had heard of Agnes Norman, and why you thought that young lady was Agnes Norman. In fact, I should have liked to earn a little amusement at the cost of your embarrassment."

"You are Miss Norman! What a fool I am! I might have known that."

"I don't see how you should have known it, as you evidently did not catch my

name when Mr. Woodford introduced us."

"I might have known, however, from something dear old Miss Woodford said about you."

"Anything she said about me must have been too partial."

Then they talked about Miss Woodford, agreeing most cordially in their praise of her sweetness, her goodness, her beauty; the mellow, permanent sort of beauty of good and gentle old age. A little while after something separated them, but, repeatedly, in the course of that afternoon and evening, they came together again, and the few sentences exchanged between them were more like bits of the confidential talk of old friends than like the talk of two young people who met that day for the first time.

Liston Woodford, who arranged the order of return, ordained that Laurence should drive Miss Norman home—that is to say, to Beechams, where she and her aunt, to whom

Laurence had been introduced, were to stay a few days.

The evening was splendid. As they got free of the wood, out into the open hill-top country, the last superb sunset light was flooding everything. Their road lay, as it were, along the edge of the upper world. For foreground they had a great swelling billowy slope of corn, just tingeing towards harvest. Below lay the ample stretch of plain, dotted with hill-islands, flooded with hazy light, and bounded, in the very far distance, by the undulating line of lilac-hued mountains.

"How wonderful!" said Agnes Norman, softly.

Receiving no answer, she looked at Laurence. His head was turned in the other direction. She saw him lift his hat, and, looking round, saw an old man she knew, and a young girl she did not know, standing on a hillock above the road, near enough for her to be struck with the girl's loveli-

ness, and with the sad intensity in her eyes.

"Good evening, Mr. Griffith," said Miss Norman, and was saluted by the baring of the grey locks. Then, her clear dark eyes resting a moment on Laurence's, she said, "I didn't know old Mr. Griffith had any grandchildren. Do you know who that lovely girl is?"

Bessie had looked her very loveliest with that enchanted light falling caressingly upon her.

"That is Bessie Hilton. She belongs to Brockweir—to my district. She is the old man's niece."

Laurence looked straight before him, and spoke as if out of a dream.

"She is surely very unusually lovely?"

"She is," unconsciously Laurence sighed.

"She looked very sad, I thought," added Miss Norman.

"She is lonely and dull up here," answered Laurence; and he gave Miss Norman a little

sketch of her history and circumstances. When he had done so, he sighed again. Miss Norman became thoughtful. Laurence was grave and pre-occupied. They had a very silent drive. The leaves rustled in a little hot dry wind; the sun-burnt honeysuckles in the hedges gave out abundant perfume; the high-spirited horses bore them rapidly homeward through the clear translucent air, and hardly one word broke the silence between them.

CHAPTER XIII.

BROKEN OFF.

WHEN she was ready to lie down, after her prayers were said and her Bible laid aside, Miss Norman, the lights put out, sat some time in meditation at her open window. Agnes Norman was older than she looked—several years older than Bessie Hilton—she was five and twenty. She was not one of those who try to go through the world with their eyes closed to the evil in it, and think that to be ignorant is to be innocent; any more than she was one of those who find an attraction in evil, and are drawn, by their inward instincts, towards the world's dirty places. She sighed more than once sitting there, listening to the

sounds and breathing the scents of the Summer night.

"It is one of the dreadful things about these modern days," she thought, "that it is so almost impossible to keep innocent-thoughted and ready to judge charitably. One hears so much about wicked things, and almost everything one reads is so full of them. Oh, it is terrible to find oneself, on such slight ground, suspecting wrong. I will not do it. I will trust my instinctive feeling about young Mr. Maynard, that he is good—that he is true and his life pure."

Yet the intensity of Bessie Hilton's eyes would haunt her; there had been, or so she fancied, such significance in their sad gaze.

"But it does not follow," Agnes said, answering her own thoughts, "that Mr. Maynard is to blame, even if that poor pretty little girl is too fond of him. When I go home, I will get to know her; perhaps I can be of some use to the poor child—brighten her life a little."

And, by-and-by, Miss Norman lay down and soon fell into soft, dreamless sleep, from which she woke in the morning with a pleasant sense of anticipation, of something in store.

This was the first time Agnes had felt in this way when staying at Beechams. Excepting old Miss Woodford, she liked nobody in the house in any special or approving manner. She had come there this time to please her aunt, who said she grew too grave and thoughtful and nun-like, and did not associate with young people sufficiently.

"But I am always happy, auntie," Agnes pleaded.

"As yet, my dear, while you are young and life is fresh; but when all novelty is worn off the old life, and no prospect of a new presents itself, it will be different."

"The fact is, auntie, you are afraid I shall be an old maid."

"That is just it, my dear."

"I am not sure I would not rather be an

old maid, like Miss Woodford, than a wife; certainly rather than the wife of any man I know."

"That is just it. I want you to know some man whose wife you should like to be. It is all very well to look at Miss Woodford now, and think that happy serenity of hers very charming, very enviable; but you don't recognise what she has gone through—of regret, of loneliness, of longing for the sweetness of natural ties, for the touch of a child's hand that should be the hand of her child, and the sound of a voice calling her 'mother': of weariness, too, and emptiness of heart, of seeking the thing to do, and never being sure it was the right thing—before she settled down into the sweet old lady we now know."

"Auntie, you speak so feelingly one would think you were an old maid."

"I had pretty well settled down into one before I met your uncle, dear, and, as you know, I am childless."

"If your Katie had lived, would you, I wonder, have cared so much for me?"

"Who knows? Any way one of my chief cares for you is to wish you a good husband, and children of your own."

"But if these good things are to be mine won't they come to me?"

"I only want that you should not live a life of an unnatural nun-like seclusion, Agnes, and so shut yourself out from the chance of them."

Miss Woodford had been writing the praises of Laurence Maynard to Mrs. Norman; it was Laurence Maynard in particular whom Mrs. Norman wished that Agnes should learn to know, and hoped that Agnes might learn to like, but she had been wisely careful not to speak of him to Agnes.

Agnes was an old-fashioned girl; not a girl who longed to go out and meet her life, but of a still and quiet nature, to whom it seemed fitting and right to wait for things to

come to her; belonging, in this way, not so much to the present restless and transition time as to the past, when maidens sat quietly at home in cottage or castle-bower, and it was the squires and knights who sallied forth in search of adventure.

She had no particular dread of an old maid's life, and no preference of it. She was as yet quiet-hearted. She had read very few novels or romances—hardly any modern ones, the exceptions being in favour of the very best. Now and then she had laid down one of these, or some poem, with a sort of strange, searching feeling, with the questions: "Is this wonderful love a real thing? Do men and women experience these great, overwhelming passions?"—followed by another more intimate question—"Will any such thing ever come into my life?"

Somehow the very beauty and perfectness of the scenes in which she lived her daily life made her incredulous as to this "some-

thing more" being destined to enter into her existence.

The routine of a daily life that might have been called either a beautiful kind of usefulness, or a useful kind of beautifulness, smoothed out wonder and soothed longing. How could she be impatient for change while her days were always full of occupation, full of interest, full of loveliness.

When she had come of age, Mrs. Norman had been anxious that Agnes should be presented at Court, and should have the experience of at least one London season; but Agnes had begged off.

"I am sure, auntie, somehow, that I should never be as happy again. The bloom and the dew would all get rubbed off everything."

For one delightful week at Beechams Laurence and Agnes were, day after day, almost all day together. They had got to feel as if they had always known each

other, also as if they were always to know each other. Then came a sudden break in the happy intercourse.

Laurence was in a very charming part of the Beecham grounds, reading aloud to Agnes, who was making a water-colour drawing of a splendid group of beeches, and to Mrs. Norman, who sat close by knitting, when a note was brought him.

"From Elmhurst, sir; the man who brought it is waiting."

Laurence took the note with a presentiment of ill, founded chiefly on the feeling that things, as they were, were too good, too happy, not to be likely to be interrupted.

"Nothing the matter, I hope, Mr. Maynard?"—from Mrs. Norman.

Agnes had fixed her eyes upon him anxiously.

"It is from my sister. My father is not well; something has annoyed him; he wishes to see me immediately."

"I am very sorry, for the cause and the consequence."

"Thank you. I suppose—at least, I know I should go at once."

"Let us meet again soon, Mr. Maynard," continued Mrs. Norman, "and as real friends."

"You are very good."

"I speak for Agnes as well as for myself. You must come and see us at our own home."

Laurence looked at Agnes hungrily; she had not yet spoken.

"I hope you will," she now said.

Laurence allowed himself to kiss her hand. Then he hurried away, and lost no time in starting for Elmhurst. Agnes resumed her sketching, but her hand trembled a little. Mrs. Norman went on with her knitting, and the rooks cawed just as before. Very soon Agnes said,

"The light has changed so, auntie, it's

not much use trying to do any more to it this morning."

"I think, too, it must be near luncheon-time."

"I wonder when we shall know if it is anything serious?"

"I don't think it will be long before we hear from Laurence himself."

BOOK V.—August.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT HAD HAPPENED AT ELMHURST.

OLD Mr. Maynard had not been well for two or three days; he seemed to pine for Laurence, but he would not allow him to be recalled. Then one evening, as he sat alone in the dining-room in the Summer twilight, he was told that old Hilton wanted to speak with him.

"Bring him in, bring him in," the old gentleman said with alacrity, almost as if glad to have his solitude broken. His daughters, of course, were occupied elsewhere.

Old Hilton was bidden to sit down, and a bumper of wine was poured out for him. But he stood stiff and straight as his infirmities would allow, hat and stick in hand, and, with a wave of his unoccupied hand, declined the civilities offered to him.

"Neither bite nor sup in this house," he declared.

"Eh?—what? At this time of day you and I going to quarrel, Hilton? We're old enough to know better, both of us. What's the matter? Speak, man!"

"Speak I certainly will, Squire; what else am I here for?" Old Hilton went to the door, opened it, looked down the passage, re-closed it, and then came up close to the Squire. "I'm come on purpose to tell you that either you or me is being wronged by that son of yourn."

"Eh?"

"That's it, Squire—I've said it. Either you or me is being wronged by that son of yourn, in spite of his fine honest face and

his eyes that have got a look of his mother's in 'em."

"What folly is this you're talking, man?" the Squire asked angrily. "Explain yourself. It's some confounded gossip you've been listening to. Quite right to come to me. But there's no need to speak loud and angry. Just quietly explain yourself."

It was Mr. Maynard's own tone that had been loud and angry.

"I'll speak low and quietly enough, Squire," said the old fellow brokenly. "He's after my girl, Squire—that's the long and short of it. Now, if he means fair by her, it's you that's being cheated and wronged, and it's but my duty to warn you. If he means foul by her, why, then he's foul indeed; and, by God, as I stand here, I'd think no more of shooting him dead if I had a chance than of shooting a mad dog—that I wouldn't!"

Careful not to raise his voice, he showed the earnestness of his anger by his working

features, and by the energy with which his stick was brought down upon the ground. The Squire's delicate, large-veined hand went feebly up to his head; he rubbed his forehead and his eyes.

"Be calm, Hilton; we'll go to the bottom of this. You've been giving over-quick hearing to some evil-disposed person. We'll go to the bottom of this, and punish the slanderer. Just tell me what you have heard. By-the-by, where is Bessie?"

"I sent her to her uncle's in Cranmoor Wood. As I said, to be out of the way of the fever as was running through the village; but in truth to be out of the way of the young Squire, sir. I've been young myself, and I could fancy it might be a temptation to a young man to be over-civil to a girl like my Bessie, if she was always just at his hand. That he'd go after her I never thought."

"Who says he has? Depend upon it it's a vile lie."

"I wish I could anyways think so; for, don't you see, Squire, it tells against my girl too? How was he to know where she was if she'd acted right? Yet he's been after her—curse him! There, I can't help it. But I never thought I'd live to curse his mother's son."

"You are too quick with your curses. My son is not my son if he deserves them."

"But there's the fact, Squire, as one I can trust to tell me the truth—one as followed him, unbeknown, when he went to meet her, saw him take her in his arms, and kiss her, there in the wood. When that happens between a young man in his station and a young girl in hers, don't we know well enough, Squire, that most things worth keeping is likely soon to be past praying for between 'em?"

"These are lies you've been told, Hilton."

"They're the devil's own truth, sir."

Poor old Mr. Maynard leant his head on his hand, and sat staring at the table. The

other was touched by his attitude, by his quietness.

"If it were any girl but Bessie, there mightn't be so much harm in it," he said. "As for the meeting, there's the possibility it was accident; and as for the kiss—if my Bessie hadn't been the girl she is—a girl that would never let any man be light with her—there mightn't have been so much in that! Why, Squire, take all the world over, and I don't believe, not for a moment, you'd find anywhere, high or low, a truer girl, or a more modest girl, than my Bessie was. I used to think to myself as she was a regular little lady, as ladies used to be when your lady was alive, Squire."

"Hilton, as to that meeting, it's more than likely it was accident. If not, and if the rest is not a lie, knowing as I know that all you say of Bessie, and more, was true, and that there wasn't a more innocent-hearted little maiden than your girl when my boy first knew her, I tell you what, if he's

wronged her he shall make her his wife, or he shall never have my blessing."

"Squire, I know you're of the right sort, I'm sure of that. But so far as to make that needful I'll pledge my word it hasn't gone. I'd be sorry indeed that his mother's son should have such a girl to wife as I'd then think my Bessie; or should have to wife any girl, were she ever so good, as wasn't a lady."

"We must ferret out the whole truth, Hilton."

"Have the lad home and talk to him, Squire. I don't believe he's one as can look you in the face and tell you a lie, even about a girl."

"I know he's not."

Old Mr. Maynard kept rubbing his forehead with his hand; his feeble, broken look again appealed to the other, who spoke more in the tone of comforter than accuser, as he said,

"Have him home. He'll tell you the

rights and wrongs, and then we'll know what to be at."

"Meet him here, Hilton, at this time the day after to-morrow, and we'll both hear what he has to say for himself. Now, drink your wine. Whatever happens, you and I are not enemies, but good old friends."

They parted with a cordial hand-shake.

The Squire was taken ill that night—it was the "worry" of this affair, coming upon him when he was in a feeble state of health—and Laurence was summoned next day. The sight of Laurence seemed to revive him, but he did not say a word to him about Bessie till the appointed time, and in old Hilton's presence. Nor could Laurence learn from his sisters what it was that had troubled and disturbed his father. He found him very calm, and perfectly sensible, but excessively feeble, and he was indescribably shocked to find that the physician gave little hope of his complete recovery. Laurence was utterly in the dark as to the

reason of Hilton's visit, when the old man came, and was, by his father's desire, brought into the sick-room.

"If it is any matter of business, father, cannot I arrange it for you at another time? I am strictly enjoined to keep you quiet, and to prevent you from fatiguing yourself."

"Till this is off my mind there is no quiet for me, Laurie. Now, Hilton, tell my son what business it is has brought you here."

A few blunt words explained the matter. Laurence was smitten hard with grief and remorse. To the two old men he told the exact truth, concealing nothing. He spoke of Bessie with respectful tenderness, and yet an entire absence of all that enthusiasm with which, ten days ago, he would have spoken of her. He frankly confessed that, till he had met, on that same day of his meeting Bessie in the wood, Miss Norman, he had believed himself to love Bessie with the love of his life, and had believed her to be the

woman he should desire to make his wife.

When he had spoken, there was a pause. After a little he began again, trying to express something of his grief and concern for the injury done to Bessie by his want of self-restraint.

"What's done can't be undone," was old Hilton's somewhat gruff comment. "Anyways, I'm thankful to know that my Bessie's a good girl."

"She's far more than only that," from Laurence.

"She's that, and that's enough for me."

Again a pause. Then Laurence said,

"Hilton, if time prove that your daughter's peace is seriously wounded, that—" Laurence hesitated.

"That she's too fond of you to be able to forget you, and marry some decent young man in her own station. That's the worst as I'm afraid of, Squire, now as I knows all the truth."

"Well, if this prove so, and if it also

seems as if gossip and malice had seriously compromised her, sullied the fair good name she has as great a right to as any woman in the world, then, with my father's consent—and I know that if this prove so I shall have more than his consent—I will be ready to ask your daughter to be my wife. I hope I need not say that if she so honour me as to become my wife, I will do my best that she shall have a life as happy as she deserves."

Poor Laurence! His voice trembled, and he could not but blush for himself, remembering how few days since that which he now contemplated as an act of expiatory self-sacrifice, a life-long penance, had been his heart's desire—before he had seen Agnes Norman.

Old Hilton drew the back of his hand across his eyes. A sudden and alarming attack of faintness in the invalid ended this scene inconclusively. Old Hilton's last words as he left were to bid them not

trouble, as he had little doubt he'd be able to set things straight, as far as evil-speaking went.

"But not to mend my girl's heart, may be," he muttered, as he went away.

CHAPTER XV.

SQUIRE MAYNARD SENDS FOR BESSIE.

THE Squire did not rally, and anxiety about him engrossed the household. Even the Miss Maynards toned down for the time into women, anxious and affectionate, if not very serviceable. The chief of the nursing devolved upon Laurence, who, for everything he could find to do for his beloved father, was thankful.

"If I had known how few days more he was to be spared to me!—if I had known!" he inwardly mourned, grudging all those idle days of empty absence that had preceded the eventful day of meeting Agnes Norman, believing he would even have sacrificed that day, and the happy week that

followed, to have devoted himself for that time to his father, if only he had known; grudging all the years spent away from his father, whose gentle, undemonstrative, unexacting nature had suffered, and made no sign. "If I had known!—if I had only known!" He was not the first, nor will he be the last for whom those common words are full of a great pathos of remorseful regret.

One day the old man, who had not spoken to Laurence about Bessie, but had much pondered the whole matter, expressed a wish that Bessie should be sent for to see him. This was done, and when he was told, the day after, that she was in the house, in the housekeeper's room, waiting till he should choose to speak to her, he said he would like to see her at once, adding, "Alone, Laurence—I would like to talk with her alone. You had better keep quite out of the way, my boy. Why don't you go for a ride? You have not been out of the house since you came back to me."

"I would rather keep close by, father, where you can send for me directly you want me."

"Well, well, it won't be for long—as you like best, dear boy."

There was nothing very extraordinary, or provocative of gossiping speculation from the world in general, in this wish of the old Squire's to say good-bye to a girl who, as a little child, had been at one time much about the house, and always a favourite. All that passed between the dying man and Bessie no one knew; but much of it was told by Bessie afterwards to Mrs. Dovedale.

Bessie had entered the room very timidly; she did not know but that she might be about to receive reproof. She was full of awe, too. The darkened room, the immense old bed, of carved oak with rich heavy hangings, impressed her mysteriously. She stood, hesitating, just inside the door, till a hand pulled aside one of the curtains, and the feeblest of voices said,

"Come here to me, close to me, my child."

Bessie approached, put her hand into the hand stretched out for hers, and looked wistfully for an instant into the eyes that studied her face.

"No need to be afraid, Bessie. I have heard all about it from my son. I know that you are a good girl."

Bessie's eyes drooped, and fixed themselves on the thin large-veined hand which held hers; the blush that had mantled to her cheeks left them of an unusual pallor.

"Sit down, dear child, you have been walking, and are tired," he said, and released her hand; adding, "Sit where I can see you."

"It's no wonder," he presently said to himself.

"Did you speak to me, Mr. Maynard, sir?"

"Not exactly, child, not exactly."

There was a silence; then the old gentleman said, suddenly,

"Bessie, I want to hear all about it from your side. Don't be frightened. I'm not angry. I want to know what you are thinking and expecting. I am a dying man. If you have any secret to tell, I will promise you to take it with me. Speak freely, child. There, I will turn away; I won't even look at you. You love my son, Laurence, very dearly, and you are hoping and expecting to be his wife—is that it?" He spoke with averted head.

There was silence—then stifled sobbing; then Bessie found voice to say,

"I love your son, Mr. Laurence, very dearly; but I do not hope, or expect, or even wish to be his wife."

"Eh?" The dim old eyes turned to Bessie.

She went on, managing to speak more clearly and calmly as she went on—

"I have thought a deal about it, sir. What else have I had to think about? I think I began to love Mr. Laurence—if

you'll please excuse my saying so, I'm trying to tell you the whole truth—I think I began to love him the first time ever I saw him. And, then, when he always spoke so pleasant to me, when he looked so glad to meet me—when he treated me so as, somehow, to make me feel as if he thought I was a lady, and brought me those roses, perhaps, then, I began to have foolish thoughts of his being fond of me. But then—the other day when he found me in the wood—" a pause—"when I felt as if he was very fond of me, when I thought I knew he was very fond of me, that roused me up to think what could come of it. But it was a mistake of his, sir; he only thought of me till he had seen Miss Norman. I understood it directly I saw them together—that very same evening. It seemed cruel that it should be so soon after, but I tried not to be sorry, for his sake. I hope I could never have dreamed of letting Mr. Laurence make me his wife, for don't I know he

could never be happy with a wife who was not a born lady? But it's difficult to tell what a weak girl will do when she's tempted; and I ought to thank God that He has put me out of temptation. Surely I should have shown that I didn't love Mr. Laurence, but myself, if I'd let him spoil his life for me. And oh! sir, I do love him! I love him dearly! My heart aches with loving him!"

Bessie dropped on her knees, and buried her face and sobbed heart-brokenly, till it suddenly occurred to her that she might be harming Mr. Maynard, who she had heard them say was to be kept quiet. Then she looked up—controlling herself, she asked,

"Are you angry, sir? I know I have no right to love him; I know it is foolish and bold and wrong, but how could I help it? And, indeed, as far as I know myself, I would never have let him spoil his life for me, and, now he will not wish to do so, I

shall not be tried, for he has met the lady who will love him, and whom he'll love."

"My poor, dear, good child," said the old Squire, with moist eyes, and his hand was laid caressingly on Bessie's head.

They were a good while together after that; he said many things to her, among others, "It won't be many days, perhaps not many hours, before, as I trust, I shall meet your mother and his mother, Bessie. I shall tell them about you, if indeed they don't already know. We shall rejoice together over you, my good child."

One of the last things he said to her before bidding her good-bye—this was when a sort of ecstasy of quiet exaltation, a mood in which all suffering seemed nothing, and the only thing worth caring about was "to be good," had come over Bessie—was, "Bessie, my child, you are too good to be, for long, really unhappy. The battle of your life has begun for you very early, my poor little one, but the days of peace will

come the earlier, and will be the holier."

He blessed her with solemn words, exhorting her to keep fast to the good she had hold of; and then she kissed his hand, and went home, weeping as if her heart would break, and yet not unhappy.

Contrary to the expectations of either of them, they met again. The old man lingered longer than had been expected, and sent for Bessie two or three times. If Bessie's little feet, when she was not under the influence of such overpowering emotion as during that first interview, lingered on the soft carpets lovingly, if she looked, with something of longing in her admiration, into noble rooms whose open doors she passed, and had a gentle pride in feeling what might be if she chose, and if, when she met the Miss Maynards in their carriage, and courtesied to them, there was a curious little consciousness at her heart, that it lay in her power to have the right to sit with them instead of trudging along the dusty highway,—

if these things were, they show that Bessie was a little mortal maiden, with passions to subdue, and tendencies to discipline, and not already a sublimated soul.

But when Bessie was with the sick man, there had been many longings as natural, and yet all beautiful. With the quick instincts with which some quite inexperienced women are in such ways gifted, she had seen that many little things that might have added to the comfort of the patient invalid were not done, that many of those done were ill done, and she had longed that it were possible for her to establish herself as nurse.

"Kind, clever little hands," the old Squire had called hers once, when it had seemed to him that his uneasy pillows fell, as if by magic, into restful comfort under their touch.

CHAPTER XVI.

DESPONDENCY.

"WHAT is there to live for? Why not lie down and die?"

Something like this, everything, during the next few weeks, seemed to say to Bessie. As if this were the song the reapers reaped to, the streams ran to, the birds sang to, the winds blew to, and the trees waved to.

Poor little Bessie had had no notion, till the awakening crisis had come, how completely she had let her life, and every thought, be engrossed by, or, in some way, twined round, the idea of Laurence Maynard, ever since that April evening when he had first come to the gate, and had spoken to her so kindly,

as if she had been an equal, making her feel "like a lady."

It was now that she tried not to think of him that she first found this out—found out that exactly what he had said, in what tone it had been said, how he had looked while he said it the last time she saw him, had been the food of all her meditations till the next time of seeing him. And now, after such a "last time" there was to be no "next time!" And now, when she tried to put the thought of him out of her life, what remained to her?

Mrs. Dovedale was still away at the seaside with the children. Even her father sent her away from him. There was nothing—there was nobody left to her, Bessie felt.

"What is there to live for? Why not lie down and die?" So it ran on and on in Bessie's head.

The days were empty and dreary in the sultry, heavy August woods. Her father

had thought it better she should return to Cranmoor. And when, as she sat at her window in the evening, a little wind rustled in the beeches, and made them wave their hands, and the birds sang a sunset song as the sun went down, and it was so beautiful everywhere—so terribly beautiful, and so utterly solitary—poor Bessie's heart swelled to bursting with she knew not what of unrest, of longing, of regret, with the uncomprehended sense of wasted fairness and of unused life, till it almost seemed to her that she must go mad if there followed on many more of these monotonous days, these sleepless nights.

"Oh! Mr. Laurence, Mr. Laurence, how I love you, love you, love you!" sobbed the poor lonely child, stretching her arms into the moonlight, that, streaming in at her window, fell, so fair and white and cold, on her fair, white, warm breast. "If only you'd write me a little letter, give me some little sign that you haven't forgotten me al-

together, all at once, but think kindly of me sometimes! If only I could touch his dear hand once more—could look once more into his dear face, I shouldn't feel so hungry then! Oh! what's the use of trying to be good, if it makes me so unhappy, and if he doesn't know or care anything about it!" A pause in her thinking, then she added softly, "That's very wicked. It is God I should wish to know and care." But then the tempter began again—"Oh! will anybody love him as I should love him?—would any lady be such a slave to him, ready to kiss the dust from his feet, or the ground they have trodden on? And wouldn't my love make him forget that I am not a lady, and be happy? And oh! how good I would be, if only God would let me be happy! And why should I not be happy? Why is she to have everything, and why is there to be nothing for me? She was very beautiful—they say she is very good—but will she love him as I

should?—she who has everything in the world almost, and all the world to choose from? Why should she have just my Mr. Laurence? Oh! for shame that I should call him that!—he is not that—he never will be that—he never could be that!" Then, turning from the white moonlight, and the black trees and shadows, Bessie threw herself on her knees by her bed, and lifted her clasped hands, and said, with child-like simplicity and woman's fervour, "Oh! please God help me!"

One afternoon—it was the afternoon of the very last day of August—feeling desperate with the sense of the monotony of her uneventful days, afraid to be always there alone with her own heart, her own thoughts, Bessie told her uncle she should go down home for a few hours—for a day or so, if her father would let her stay. She had got to have a sort of morbid horror of the always-sounding woods—a feeling that she could not tell if the noises she was al-

ways hearing, and the words, were in her own head, or in the outside world. The poor girl was not well; she had grown thin and weak, feeding chiefly on sad thoughts.

She sped away down the hill towards the elm-dotted hedge-rows, and the meadows and the orchards of the plain. She had a fancy to go and rest by old Mr. Maynard's grave, to pray there, before she went home; she hoped from this for help towards feeling as she had felt when she knelt by his bedside. She did not wish to get to the churchyard till dusk. She lingered on the road, and made a lovely garland of late lingering sunburnt honeysuckles, of the downy plumes of the seeding clematis, of early-ripened berries, and of ears of wheat, and took it on her arm to lay upon the old Squire's grave.

She found the little churchyard as solitary as she could wish: all silent, save for the cawing of homeward-flying rooks. Under its great yew, overshadowed by its ancient elms,

she knelt upon the fresh sod and tried to pray. The shadows deepened; the afternoon had been grey and heavy, and it was now after sunset.

Poor Bessie had lost consciousness of time, almost of place—she was exhausted to faintness; but presently the click of the latch of the gate roused her. She did not wish to be seen, and she drew back and hid herself behind the great yew.

It was Laurence Maynard who came and stood where Bessie had been kneeling. She could see him; she saw him stoop and lift her garland, look at it, and lay it gently down; then glance round, as if seeking the giver. Bessie could see by the fading light that he looked grave and sad and care-worn; by the love-light in her heart she saw him even more sad and grave and careworn than he looked in reality.

It was as if her heart would leap out of her breast as she gazed at him. Just to touch him, or something of his, if only

his coat, was her humble longing. And then Bessie's cheeks flamed with sudden heat as she remembered, recalled, how once, for that brief moment of ecstasy, she had rested against him, and his arm had been round her. No maidenly self-respect or proper pride would, just then, have hindered Bessie from creeping to his feet, as a dog might to the feet of a beloved master. If she had thought that her love was a good thing for him, and could comfort him, it would have been freely given, poured out without stint, from a heart that ached with a sense that he suffered and was sad. It was the very purity of her love that helped her to be wise and self-restrained. She knew that her love could be to him only an embarrassment, a grief the more. She knew that all her longing for his love was selfish longing. She had seen, herself unseen, the lady of Cranmoor—the rich and good and beautiful young lady—Agnes Norman—more than once in the last two or

three weeks. She recognized that this was the heroine for her hero—Miss Norman, and not poor little Bessie Hilton. Still, if she could have lain at his feet like a dog, and known that it was any comfort to him to have her there, there was no self-respecting virtue in Bessie strong enough, just then, to have held her back.

Bessie never stirred; she honestly believed she was well hidden, and safe from discovery. And then, all at once, a large dog Laurence had shut outside bounded over the wall, and found out Bessie's hiding-place, with a baying and barking that called Laurence's attention to the little shrinking figure. Bessie stepped towards the dog's master for protection. The dog was told to lie down, and obeyed.

"That was pleased recognition, not anger, Bessie; but I am afraid it, nevertheless, alarmed you."

"Only a very little, sir, thank you."

"I felt sure you had brought that wreath,

Bessie, but I did not know you were so near. I won't thank you; it was done for him, and I feel sure the thought that brought it was pleasant to him."

"Are you quite well, sir?" Bessie managed to ask; "and the Miss Maynards?"

"Thank you, Bessie, we are all well, but sad. I miss my father, even beyond what I had expected, and grudge having given so little time to him. If I had known! But, I suppose, when it is too late, we always feel like that." And he sighed deeply.

"Good night, sir," whispered Bessie.

"One moment. Are you with your father chiefly now, or are you still at Cranmoor?"

"I am still stopping at Cranmoor, but I want to persuade father to let me stop with him now."

"I shall learn where you are. I am coming to see you soon, to bring you a gift my father wished you should have, and to talk with you of important things. Good

night now, Bessie, and God bless you!"

"Good night, sir."

Bessie's voice was hardly audible. This was the first meeting after that parting in the wood, and, oh the change! He was kind, respectful, even tender, but, oh the change! Bessie felt chilled to the heart! She crept broken-heartedly to her father's door. Those few moments had taught her more than anything else could have done, had made her realize what she thought she knew before, but now felt she knew for the first time—the distance between them, the one-sidedness of any love between them—many inexplicably hard things.

BOOK VI.—September.

CHAPTER XVII.

FOUND AND LOST.

OTHER feelings than those of the love-sick maiden were roused in good little Bessie's heart when she pushed open the cottage door and looked in. There her father sat, alone, by the fire, his elbow on his knee, his head on his hand. Somehow he looked so very lonely and sad; she had never before realized his loneliness—and when he turned, she thought his face looked suffering and haggard.

"Don't be startled, father, it's me," she said.

"I was thinking of you, child—may be wishing for you."

"You'll let me stay with you, father? I'm so tired of being away from you."

"Stay and welcome, my little maid. I was making up my mind I'd fetch you home to-morrow."

"Were you, father? Oh, I'm glad I came!"

"Now you just sit down, Bessie. I know you're tired. Sit in my chair; and I shall make you a cup of tea."

"Oh! father, no need to trouble."

"You just sit still there, my lassie," pushing her into his cushioned seat, "and let me do my own way."

Bessie resigned herself. Old Hilton said, as he watched for the boiling of the kettle he had put on the fire, "I was thinking, Bessie, that I've not long to outlast the good old Squire, and that 'twas a pity as you and me shouldn't be together while we can. When I'm gone——"

"Father! father! please don't speak of that to-night! I'm so full of sorrow, I don't feel as I could bear any more."

He gave a side-long glance at her; the firelight and the candle he had lighted fell full on her face. "Too like her mother!" he muttered, and drew his hand across his eyes. He did not speak again till the tea was ready; then he brought her a cup, asking, "Is it to your liking, Bessie? Try it and say."

She looked up into his face—there was something in her eyes he could not bear; he turned aside, set down the cup; and then Bessie threw herself, weeping and sobbing, into his arms. He held her close with one hand, and with the other smoothed her hair, with wonderfully delicate touches, and said never a word. By-and-by she sobbed out, "Oh! father, why did you never let me know how you loved me! May be if I'd known, I'd never have loved any one else."

"That wouldn't be in nature, my girl. What was to be has been, and we'll bear it bravely."

Bessie, looking up into his face, saw a quiver pass over it; at the same time his arm dropped from round her.

"It's the spasms again, father. You've been having them bad again lately, and have never told me."

Bessie made him sit in his own chair; she got him the remedies he was ordered to use, and hung about him lovingly.

"There, you see, father, it's me must take care of you after all."

After a little he said, "I'm all right now, dearie; don't let your tea get cold."

"Who'd have thought of your making tea for me, father?" said Bessie, with a smile she meant should be cheerful, and she sat down and drank it. Then she began to put the room neat. "Oh! father, it is nice to be at home!" she said. "You won't send me away any more?"

thought, for my good. Poor dear father!"

With such thoughts struggling for mastery over those which concerned Laurence Maynard and herself, and Miss Norman, Bessie fell asleep.

When she woke the sun was streaming on her from a little high-up casement in the side of the room. The flicker of the vine-leaves in the morning wind had roused her. She felt sure it must be late. But at first she lay still, wondering where she was, what had happened. Her sleep had been deep, and on first waking she felt faint and ill, and it puzzled her to find herself dressed in all her day-clothes. Where was her father, she wondered, noticing the intense quiet of the house, in which the ticking clock seemed over-loud. Had he come down and gone out without waking her? She lifted herself on her elbow, and looked towards the cottage-door. Everything was exactly as it had been the night before. The chain up at the door, as her father had put it before he went

upstairs. She got up and went from the room in which she had slept into the kitchen.

"Why, father! Why didn't you wake me?" she asked.

For, in the chair where he had sat last night, she found her father sitting now. He did not notice her. He was fully dressed, just as he had been last night, save that he had on an old pair of list slippers instead of his boots. She paused to wonder. Had he come down again after she had fallen asleep, for the warmth of the fire, or for hot water, or to watch over her, and had he himself fallen asleep there, and not awakened? If so, why did he not wake now?

"Father," she said it tremulously, in a tone of awe. Still he did not notice her. "Father!" She went nearer, but still he did not notice her. She went to the window, and drew up its blind. Still he took no notice. Outside all was the flutter and stir of jubilant morning and life; leaves blowing, sun shining, birds singing. In-

side such absolute stillness. A sense of utter loneliness came over Bessie. Greater loneliness than of being alone. A loneliness concentrating itself in that motionless figure which took no notice. He sat in the cushioned wooden chair; one hand hung down by his side, the other supported his head, which also leant against the wall.

"Father!" This time the word was almost a scream, and she went up to him. In doing this she stumbled, fell against the chair, disturbed his attitude. The grey old head fell heavily against her breast. She closed her arms round him, sealing her lips upon his forehead. How cold he was, and how absolutely irresponsive! She stood there stiffening with horror, hearing the ticking of the clock, conscious of a train of wild inappropriate fancies sweeping through her.

"It can't be!" she presently said. "Oh! if I could wake! It can't be! He wouldn't be taken from me now—not just now!"

Then she tried again to rouse him, with words and with kisses.

How long it was she stood thus, how soon she lost consciousness and sank senseless on the ground, Bessie had no means of knowing. The last thought she remembered was a wish and longing that the deadly sickness overmastering her might be sickness unto death.

Meanwhile, in the sunshine outside, in the stir and life of the morning, two young people met.

Miss Norman, driving her aunt in her pretty low carriage—they were going on a shopping expedition to the chief town of the district, and wished to take the long drive before the full heat of the day—was overtaken, as it chanced, just where the lane forked off to Bessie's cottage, by Laurence Maynard, on horseback. Miss Norman had not seen him since his father's death. She stopped her ponies; her face was full of soft

sweet sympathy as she stretched out her hand. Sympathy so soft and sweet that it occupied Laurence almost to the exclusion of any comprehension of Mrs. Norman's most cordial, almost motherly-kind words. They talked a few minutes. Mrs. Norman said,

"I hope we shall soon see you at our place. I know Agnes will be so pleased to show you some of her favourite haunts. You will be quite quiet with us—when will you come?"

"I am starting for London—on business. I am now going to meet the express. You are most kind, I shall be most happy. How long I shall be detained, I have, as yet, no idea; not many days, I hope. You have not heard, perhaps, of the death of my elder brother, abroad. This is not a grief like my other loss, but gives me a great deal to do, to think of, to arrange."

"Naturally," Mrs. Norman answered.

And then the attention of all three was

drawn by a frightened-looking child, who was standing on the path above them, and kept crying,

"Please come, please come, please come!" Each time with an accent of more shrill distress.

"What is it?" Laurence asked.

"Please come to Bessie—oh, please come!"

"What is the matter?"

"She's dead—Bessie's dead. Please come to Bessie."

"Good heavens!" That exclamation, the way his face paled to the lips, the way he spurred his horse to the orchard-gate, tying it there, sprang over, and disappeared—these things were painfully eloquent.

Mrs. Norman looked at Agnes; but Agnes, with a heightened colour, looked straight in front of her. There was an awkward pause; then Mrs. Norman said,

"Had you not better drive on, Agnes?"

But Miss Norman, after that minute of hesitation, turned clear eyes on her aunt's face, and answered,

"No, auntie, we will see whether we can be of any use."

The reins were taken by the old groom, and the two ladies went towards the cottage. The child who had given the alarm was a little favourite of Bessie's, who had seen Bessie go home last night, and this morning had played truant from school to go and find her. Not being able to get in, she had looked through the window, and seen Bessie on the floor.

Agnes managed to open the orchard-gate for her aunt; they went through the garden and into the cottage, the door of which Laurence had forced with a violent blow. It was a strange scene for Agnes. The old man, dead in his chair, and, on the floor at his feet, Laurence Maynard, supporting in his arms a lovely girl, whose fallen mouth and the black lividness under whose eyes

gave her, also, the look of death. Agnes recoiled a little, and Mrs. Norman stretched out an arm to support her. But Laurence, looking round, said, helplessly,

"Tell me what to do with her." And then both the ladies went to him.

"Has she poisoned herself?" asked Mrs. Norman.

"God forbid!" from Laurence.

"What then is the meaning of it?" Mrs. Norman asked.

"The old man is dead," said Laurence. "It was known that his death would be sudden. No doubt she found him dead, and the shock was more than she could stand. But she is not dead, is she? Tell me what I should do with her?"

Agnes had looked round to see where Bessie could be put.

"It would be well, auntie, to carry her out of sight of her father, wouldn't it? If Mr. Maynard can bring her into this room, there is a little couch here."

Laurence took her up in his arms, and carried her, with the ease he might have carried a child, into the next room, and laid her most tenderly upon the couch.

"What can I do now?" he asked the ladies.

Bessie had not shown the slightest sign of consciousness; and yet she would not have believed that she could be in those arms, against that heart, and remain insensible.

"Open this window, please, and bring us some water. I wonder if there is any kind of strong essence in the house."

"There is likely to be sal-volatile, because I know the old man used it."

He sought about till he found a bottle of it in old Hilton's room.

"I suppose there is no doubt of the old man's death?" Mrs. Norman asked, while Agnes held the spirit to Bessie's nostrils.

"None whatever," Laurence answered. "It must have happened early in the night. He is perfectly cold."

"What friends has this poor child?" asked Mrs. Norman. Her heart was softened by poor Bessie's unconscious loveliness.

"Not any in Brockweir. Old Griffiths, of Cranmoor, is her uncle. If Mrs. Dovedale were at home, she would take charge of Bessie; but she is still at the sea-side with her children."

"How lovely she is!" sighed Agnes Norman to herself. "Poor, poor child! I think she is reviving. She is not so deadly pale," she said to her companions.

Agnes was kneeling by her. Mrs. Norman said her head and shoulders should be a little more raised. Laurence lifted her, and, at that moment, Bessie's eyes opened—they opened on Laurence's pitying, anxious face close above her. A soft flush tinged Bessie's face and throat; sudden sweet surprise dawned in her look; with a sort of dim sense of waking in Heaven from a sleep of long sorrow, she stretched out her arms to him, innocently, as a child to its mother.

"You are better now, Bessie?" he asked her, in the gentlest voice, and taking her hands in his.

Then it all came back to her. "Father! father!" she moaned; and, turning, buried her face in the pillow, and shook the little couch with her convulsive sobbing.

"What can we—what can we do with her?" said Agnes.

"We will do anything we can, indeed, most gladly. It is impossible to leave her here."

"You are very good," said Laurence, looking acutely distressed.

Then soon the doctor, for whom Laurence had sent the child, came. He confirmed Laurence's judgment, that the old man had died quite early in the night. After much discussion, in which Bessie took no part, beyond answering "Anything you please," "I will do anything you wish," when questioned as to what should be done with her, it was arranged that Miss Norman should

take Bessie back to the Wood Cottage for the present, at all events, and at once.

Laurence postponed his journey to London till the next day, in order to see all proper arrangements made for poor old Hilton's funeral. Mrs. Norman stayed in Brockweir till a carriage should be sent from Elmhurst to take her home. As Laurence was putting Bessie into the carriage, he said to Agnes,

"I won't attempt to thank you—I know —I feel—"

He stammered and paused, and Agnes said, rather coldly,

"I don't see how anyone could do less than all they could in such a case."

"If only Mrs. Dovedale had been at home—she is Bessie's best friend—she could have taken entire charge of her. There would have been no need to trouble you."

"Bessie shall come to me instead of staying at the cottage, if she will," said

Miss Norman. "I shall not think it any 'trouble.'"

"I think at present she would be better at the cottage."

"As you please. Good-bye, Mr. Maynard."

Agnes was preparing to let the ponies start; her face was grave, and her tone sad, and her hands were occupied. Laurence looked wistful and troubled; then, meeting poor Bessie's sad eyes, he said, forgetting his own embarrassments,

"You know you may trust to me, Bessie, that all shall be done you would like done for your father."

"I may see him once more?" Bessie asked Laurence.

"If you are well enough I will bring you to-morrow," said Agnes.

They started. Bessie leant back and closed her lids tight, to keep the tears behind them. Agnes drove rapidly and silently. She was kind to Bessie, but, without know-

ing it, her kindness was cold. Two pictures —of Bessie in Laurence's arms, and of Bessie's first look when she wakened to consciousness of Laurence's presence—were constantly before Agnes's eyes, and there was a pain at her heart.

Miss Norman withheld judgment. She would think no evil, if she could help it, either of Laurence Maynard or of this most lovely little maiden beside her; but evidently there was something to be explained, some mystery. Agnes Norman had a great distaste for mystery.

CHAPTER XVIII.

UNA.

LAURENCE came back from London on purpose to be present at old Hilton's funeral, and returned there the same night. Agnes Norman brought Bessie, and stood beside her through all the sadness of the scene, "As if she had been her sister," people said. Agnes was in every possible way thoughtful for Bessie, and "very kind," and yet Bessie felt chilled by her kindness. Agnes wanted her to come to the house, but Bessie begged to stay at the cottage. Agnes would not insist, remembering that Laurence had said Bessie would be better at the cottage. That Bessie was a good and pure-

minded girl Agnes was certain. Was it possible that she was betrothed, nay, even married to Laurence? was a question that would suggest itself.

There was very little anyone could do for Bessie that Agnes had not done. She had chosen all her mourning for her, and had had it made, simply, and yet so as not to be unsuitable, if, indeed, Bessie were Laurence's betrothed. She supplied her with books, brought her flowers and fruit, she drove her out; and yet Bessie, acknowledging all this great kindness, felt some chill run through it. Thinking she knew the cause, she watched for any opportunity of removing it; but Miss Norman gave her no such opportunity. Laurence's name was not mentioned between them. Agnes even seemed to evade any chance of its being mentioned, to shun any subject which would be likely to lead to its being mentioned.

Through the greater part of September Bessie rustled about the browning woods

like a restless little squirrel, growing thinner and thinner and larger-eyed. She had talked to her uncle about seeking some service. The old man had told her not to think of that—that there was a tidy bit of money saved up for her by her father, and that her father would not lie easy in his grave if she turned to that.

She wrote to Mrs. Dovedale, asking for advice; and even Mrs. Dovedale only begged her to wait, to do nothing at present, hinting that, in all probability, she should soon have great need of her. Mr. Dovedale's health had suddenly and alarmingly failed, another baby was likely to come before the Spring, and she herself was very worn-out.

"I can't do without my apple-blossom Bessie much longer," she said. "But even yet the doctor is not certain that our house is free of infection."

This letter of Mrs. Dovedale's, sad as it was, did more than anything else about her

to reconcile Bessie to life—it opened out a path for her. Nevertheless, as she rustled about the woods, which were, but for her rustling, holding themselves so silent in the sublime Autumn stillness that comes before Autumn storms, she had a feeling as if her life, too, were holding itself still before some final storm that would devastate the youth of her beauty. She felt to be always waiting, without knowing for what; without knowing for what till, towards the end of the month, she had a letter stamped with a London post-mark.

"DEAR BESSIE,—I write you a brief line, that you may not think I have forgotten that I said I should come and see you, and should bring you a little memorial of my father. I am kept here in London much longer than I expected to be kept. I hope you take care of yourself, and try to get strong again. I should feel anxious about you, did

I not know that Miss Norman is sure to have you in her kind care.

"Always sincerely your friend,

"LAURENCE MAYNARD."

After getting that letter, Bessie knew what it was her life was waiting for before it could settle itself.

"I wish it were over. I wish he would come. I want it over," she was always saying and sighing.

The day she had that letter, it chanced that Mrs. Norman, in her presence, expressed some wonder if Laurence were yet at home. Bessie answered, "Oh! no; Mr. Laurence is kept in London longer than he expected." And then, because Mrs. Norman looked strangely at her, she blushed rosy red, and would gladly have hidden herself.

About this time the monotony of her life was apt to be broken in upon in a most un-

pleasant manner. The young blacksmith from Brockweir took to dressing himself in his Sunday best and coming up to Cranmoor, trying to do a little courting.

"I knows as it's early to speak to you of such-like things, Miss Bessie," he said; "but one as had your father's good-will and word shouldn't be unwelcome to you now he's gone."

It would be difficult to find any words to express the sickening disgust with which poor little Bessie's soul was filled by his presence. If she had known how much the report that she had had a "tidy bit of money" left her had to do with his quickness and persistency in plaguing her, her morbid disgust of him would have been lessened. For that he should dare to love her, who loved Mr. Laurence, and had—at least for a brief while—been loved by him, was the head and front of young Hudson's offending. That he should want her money, and so be ready to take herself, would have

seemed to her a far lighter offence. As it was, the sound of his clumsy feet, the smell hanging about his clothes and his profusely-oiled hair, the touch of his hand—if, by chance, driven to bay, she was forced to touch it—more than all, perhaps, the sheepish, and yet outraging, as she felt it, admiration of his eyes, were simply intolerable.

Bessie would fly at his approach, whenever she had the chance of escape, and lock herself into her room till he was gone. Incensed at this, the young fellow inwardly vowed revenge. He was considered the handsome giant of the village, and had been pretty well spoilt by the admiration he had received from the village girls.

That he should walk all the way from Brockweir to Cranmoor to see any girl, he considered an immense condescension; that it should be to see a girl who had made herself talked about with the young Squire, and that he should be then snubbed in so uncompromising a manner, made him angry

and indignant. He was a bad-tempered fellow, and when this had happened some half-dozen times, he grew very dangerously savage: he would have his revenge the first chance, he determined. It cowed him a little to know that Bessie was so much noticed by Miss Norman, and he also found it easier to form audacious resolves in Bessie's absence than to attempt any audacity in her presence; but, nevertheless, he was simply biding his time.

One evening it chanced that Bessie was alone in the cottage when young Hudson came. She had heard him approach, but had taken for granted that the step was her uncle's, whom she was every moment expecting home. She had set the table ready for supper, and was at the sitting-room window busy with her needle. The deaf old body who did the rough work of the house—all the work when Bessie was not there—had gone home. It was just about sunset.

When young Hudson pushed open the door and came in, Bessie, her eyes dazzled by the brilliant western light into which she had been looking, did not at once recognise him. When she did, her heart gave a sort of quake, and then seemed to die down to extra quietness; but she tried to comfort herself, believing that any moment might bring her uncle. She gave no outward sign of her disgust and alarm, but, after returning his salutation, went on with her work, as if it especially interested her.

"Perhaps you'll be so good as just to step into the yard and tell uncle that supper's ready," Bessie presently suggested; "he's late of coming in to-night."

"There's no hurry for him, miss, it's you as I'm come to see. Your uncle's not at home, nor likely to be for this hour or more; but that's no odds, you won't be dull, as I'm here to keep you company."

"I don't believe he's not at home," said Bessie. "I shall go myself and call him."

What she meant to do, if once she could get safely from the room, was to fly up the stairs, and lock, and bolt, and barricade herself into her own room. The loneliness of her position, those solitary woods shutting her in all around, appalled her—if indeed what he said about her uncle was true.

"Nay, now," said young Hudson, getting between her and the door, "you've tricked me often enough for me to be up to you; you're not going to give me the slip this time. I'll tell you plain what I mean; that is, to have a good kiss of you, now I've the chance, and pay you out for all your sly dodging of me. You'd better let me take it quiet, or it'll, maybe, be the worse for you. You were none so careful of yourself with the young Squire, if all accounts is true, or half of 'em, that you should set yourself above the head of an honest young fellow that means nothing but what's right by you. So come now."

"Take care," said Bessie, "one step

nearer, and——" She had caught up the great bread-knife from the table. The flash of her excited eyes finished her sentence most eloquently, and made the young giant pause in his advance, convinced that she was capable of using the weapon.

"Oh, you wild cat!—you little fury!" he muttered; "sooner or later I'll have the taming of you!"

And Bessie would have used it rather than submit herself to his touch. The quiet little maiden was fully roused; the gentle heart was no longer beating with alarm, but with hatred, and disgust, and rage. Young Hudson retreated a little, but did not waver in his determination, either by force or fraud, to get what he wanted.

"Come now, Miss Bessie," he said, in a coaxing tone, "put that ugly thing down, lest I should be forced to hurt you in snatching it from you. I'm not a-going to hurt ye, if you'll be quiet. I'd do nothing against your will, if you'd only be civil. It

makes a young fellow mad to be treated like a dog, as you've treated me—makes him want to prove himself master."

Bessie's eyes continued to gleam with that dangerous light. She held the knife as firmly as she knew how, and never relaxed her wary watch of him.

"Don't you never mean to give me a kind word or a friendly look?"

"Never. After your insolence to-day, I hate you!"

"Come, come, you'd better drop that, and be civil, or it'll be the worse for you," he said, in a menacing tone. "Insolence, indeed! Where's the insolence of a young fellow offering to kiss a girl like you? It's not every honest fellow would think of you in the way of marriage, after all that's come and gone, I can tell you that, my fine young lady. I'll stand no more nonsense, so there——"

He made a sudden movement, expecting to grasp her waist, and to disarm her knife-

holding-hand. She was too quick for him, and sprang aside. He knocked over the little supper-table, and fell with it, one great crash. Then came the barking and baying of a large dog; and, afterwards, a clear commanding woman's voice, demanding,

"What is going on here? Who dares to be here in the master's absence, and to frighten Bessie?"

Hudson picked himself up as quickly as possible, the great dog baying and bounding about him showing every disposition to seize him. He looked a very cowed and abject giant, in fear both of the dog and of the lady, and having an ugly cut, given by some bit of broken crockery, across one cheek.

Bessie, now that she was safe, swooned at Miss Norman's feet.

"Now what is the meaning of this?" demanded Miss Norman.

And the clear eyes and brow and voice,

still further abashed the young savage.

"Are you not ashamed of yourself, you great strong brute, to be engaged in a struggle with a delicate young girl like Bessie—with any girl?"

Miss Norman's dog, which kept steadily watching Hudson, here growled dangerously, conscious that the anger of his mistress was directed against the object of his watch.

"The whole row is about no more than this, ma'am. I was just going to take a kiss of that savage young cat, when she snatches up a knife and offers to stab me."

"And quite right too," pronounced Miss Norman, her heart beating with indignant heat, and a sense that she would have done the same herself.

"She's not a girl as has any right to be so set up," growled Hudson, "seeing as all Brockweir knows that she's let the young Squire kiss and cuddle her."

"Hold your tongue, and leave the house,

or I'll set the dog upon you!" said Agnes, colouring violently, almost choked with passion and loathing.

As is always the case when a woman enters into combat with a man, if she is a woman who retains a woman's sensitive delicacies, Miss Norman had got worse than she gave, in the way of pain.

"I will go soon enough, if that dog will let me."

"You can pass," said Agnes; "but you will hear more of this, unless you remember that Bessie Hilton is under my special protection; and show that you remember this, by not attempting to cross her path."

"I'll keep out of her way, and welcome, the little devil!" muttered the young savage, and slouched out, keeping an alarmed watch of the dog as he moved past him.

When he was fairly gone, Agnes turned her attention to Bessie. The girl had gone through a severe nervous strain and shock, and was some time in recovering conscious-

ness. Agnes, not able to lift her, put some pillows under her head, and sat down beside her. When she came to herself, she broke into violent, hysterical crying.

"I will not leave you till there is some one to take care of you. Don't be frightened, Bessie," Agnes said, soothingly.

When Bessie, in a burst of gratitude, tried to kiss her hand, Agnes withdrew it.

"Not my hand, Bessie," she said, stooping over her. "If you are the good girl I think you must be, in spite of what that brute said, kiss my cheek."

"I try to be good," said Bessie; "but, oh! I wish I were dead! What is to become of me!" And again she broke into suffocating sobbing—sobbing that seemed as if it would really suffocate her.

Agnes knelt beside her, loosened the body of her dress, bathed her temples with water, kept talking to her soothingly and re-assuringly. Her woman's eye noted approvingly and admiringly the dainty fineness

and whiteness of Bessie's linen, the spotless fairness of her skin; but, also, Agnes presently noted that a letter which, in one of her convulsive movements, fell to the ground from her bosom, was in the writing of Laurence Maynard. Bessie, coming a little to herself, sat up, said, "I am ashamed to give you so much trouble and distress, Miss Norman," rose from the ground, with Agnes's help, and began, instinctively, to rearrange her dress and hair. She missed the letter. She flushed crimson over neck and cheek and brow, as Miss Norman, picking it up, said gravely,

"This is what you are looking for."

Agnes flushed almost as hotly as she touched that letter, which she knew to be from Laurence Maynard, and found it still warm from the beating against it of another woman's heart.

Poor little Bessie roused herself. It was now getting dusk. She lighted a candle, and then she said,

"Please, Miss Norman, read the letter. I have been in this—I mean in putting the letter where it fell from—and in many things, foolish and wrong. But please read the letter. You will see the foolishness is all mine; and then, when you have read it, I will burn it."

Miss Norman's first impulse was proudly to refuse to do what Bessie asked of her; but some better and softer feelings prevailed. She took the letter and read it, and then she turned and kissed Bessie with cordial warmth.

"I don't know and I don't want to know what it means," said Agnes; "but I feel sure you are a good girl, Bessie, and will be a noble woman. I trust, too, you may be a happy one." Adding this, Miss Norman's voice slightly trembled.

"All it means is," Bessie said quietly, "that Mr. Laurence Maynard was very kind to a little girl who was very foolish. It is all over now, and she is growing wiser.

Please believe this," added Bessie, earnestly. "You, of all people, must please believe this, that Mr. Laurence is very good."

Miss Norman, after a moment in which she seemed about to speak, got up and stood a long time by the window, looking out. Then she came and sat down by Bessie, and they talked, but Laurence's name was not again mentioned. Miss Norman asked Bessie about her father and mother, about Mrs. Dovedale, about her life altogether. Agnes thought to herself,

"It is in the solitude of these great lonely woods, with no one to speak to, and nothing to distract her thoughts, that this poor good young girl is trying to cure herself of what she thinks to be a hopeless passion! What chance for her but to go mad as Ophelia?"

"Bessie, we must try to be real friends," said Agnes; but as she said it she felt the difficulty of the position. Besides, what did that note mean? It was certainly not a lover's note; but neither was it the note of

one who felt, as Bessie felt, that all was ended, and there was only to forget. Bessie answered,

"I shall always, all my life, remember your goodness to me; but soon I hope to go away from here—to go to Mrs. Dovedale."

Miss Norman had been two hours with Bessie, when old Griffiths came home. She left, saying that she should come in the morning to take Bessie for a drive, and that some way must be devised to avoid Bessie's ever being left alone in this way again.

Bessie was scolded by her uncle for her stiff-neckedness, which had got an honest young fellow into such a row, but she took little heed. Her heart and mind were full of Agnes Norman, of a sort of pride in her as so good, so beautiful, so grand, so fit to be the wife of Laurence Maynard.

"It's not fair of you, Bessie, to have got a young fellow as only wants to marry you into trouble for trying to kiss you! It's

enough to make one believe you're fool enough to go hankering after the young Squire—that you'd rather be his mistress than young Hudson's honest wedded wife."

"That I would," thought Bessie, "for I've loved the one, and I hate the other. But I'd die before I'd be either."

She was wise enough, poor child, with worldly wisdom, to say no such thing as that thought, but just simply,

"You'd best leave me alone, uncle."

Yet even this was said with an excited glitter in the eyes that used to be so entirely quiet in their soft darkness.

There was no sleep for Bessie that night. Directly she closed her eyes the scene of the evening re-acted itself, or she was picturing what might have been but for Miss Norman's intervention. She would not, she knew, feel safe at the Wood Cottage any more.

BOOK VII.—October.

CHAPTER XIX.

COUNSEL ASKED AND GIVEN.

IT was long after dark when Miss Norman got home. She was accustomed to range her own woods pretty fearlessly, protected by deer-hounds and mastiffs. This evening she had, of course, insisted that old Griffiths should remain with Bessie. She walked straight into the drawing-room, flushed and excited by all that had passed, seeking Mrs. Norman. The blaze of lamplight dazzled her after the outside darkness. When Laurence Maynard rose from a seat close beside Mrs. Norman to greet her, she

was confused by the unexpectedness of the meeting, and showed an unusual amount of embarrassment.

"You should not be here, Mr. Maynard," was her feeling—so strongly her feeling that the words almost seemed as if they would be uttered. Yet she spoke to him gently; her embarrassment did not seem to be that of displeasure. Indeed, she was sorry for him. She thought she now understood his position, and this was her interpretation of it. She believed that he had lightly and thoughtlessly flirted with Bessie Hilton till he had made her love him, and had himself, almost unawares, become very fond of her—indeed, how could he help becoming fond of a creature so lovely, so gentle, so loving?—had become fond of her, and yet knew that he did not love her with the engrossing love that could alone reconcile him to so unsatisfactory a thing as a marriage with a girl who was not by birth or education a lady; and, nevertheless, having won all her

love, felt bound in honour to ask her to be his wife.

This is what Agnes fancied was Laurence's position. How could she do otherwise than pity him, even while she felt so strongly, "You should not be here, Mr. Maynard."

"My dear Agnes, you don't mean that you are only just home?" said Mrs. Norman. "I thought you came home hours ago. I should have been most anxious if I had known you were out till now."

"I am glad, therefore, you did not know, auntie, as it was unavoidable. I had Lion, so I was safe."

"Lady Una's is hardly a safe *rôle* in these days," suggested Laurence.

"Lion, at least, played his part admirably," said Agnes. "I had quite an adventure."

She related what had happened. She saw Laurence flush angrily, and clench his fists. He was himself unconscious that he did so.

"Insolent scoundrel!—he requires a lesson," he muttered.

"After all," said Mrs. Norman, "perhaps he is hardly so much to be blamed as poor little Bessie is to be pitied for being so unfit as she is to mix with the class to which she, by birth, belongs. She is one of those exceptional beings for whom it is difficult to foresee happiness."

Agnes could not refrain from a glance at Laurence. He looked more than grave, profoundly sad, deeply troubled.

"Agnes, my dear, had you not better dress for dinner? It is past dinner-time. Mr. Maynard dines with us, and stays the night."

At that announcement Agnes bent her brow; she only answered by saying,

"I will not be more than ten minutes, auntie."

She left the room, and an interrupted conversation was resumed by Mrs. Norman.

"I can only advise you to lay the whole

[illegible]

[illegible] assumed [illegible]

observance of Laurence's deep mourning.

The evening was very pleasant. The elastic natures of the two young people made it impossible for them to help being happy in finding themselves together, in spite of the doubt standing between, and the great overshadowing of what, possibly, was to come after. Agnes sang and played, and Laurence listened, criticised, admired, asked for more, watching the lovely hands, the graceful figure, the high-bred head, set on the softest, whitest, roundest of throats.

Laurence was struck afresh with some likeness to Bessie—poor little Bessie!—a likeness with just the difference that made of Agnes a cultured lady, and left Bessie a sweet and charming cottage girl, of whom one said, with the patronage of praise, that really she was "almost a lady."

Agnes was different from anything he had before known her. Her manner was uncertain, and not, as usual, wholly natural. He found her looking at him at times judi-

cially, as it seemed to him, and at times pityingly.

It seemed, too, as if she tried not to be as affectionately friendly as she had been during the later part of the last time they were together; and yet she gave him very gentle looks and words. He went to bed determined in the morning to take Mrs. Norman's advice, and speak frankly to Agnes of the whole state of his mind and heart—at all events, as regarded Bessie.

After breakfast Mrs. Norman left them together—she, as usual, intent upon her household duties. Agnes sat in a window, a morning paper in her hand; she was inwardly hesitating whether she would also leave him, when he spoke. He spoke with some hesitation, and he looked, she thought, as she glanced up at him, worn and worried, as if he had passed a sleepless night.

"Shall you be at leisure this morning, Miss Norman? I want your advice—I want to make a confession, and to be told what I

should do. Is there any hour this morning you could give me, in some place where we should not be interrupted?"

"I can be at leisure for you at any hour, Mr. Maynard; but," she added, with cold gentleness, "as to receiving a confession and giving advice, would not my aunt, Mrs. Norman, be more able and more fit to do that?"

"She referred me to you. I have, I know, no right to trouble you, but, relying on your goodness, I thought—" He paused.

"I will be of any use to you I can, Mr. Maynard."

"A thousand thanks."

"Shall we walk in my morning garden, as I call it?" she said, trying to lessen the formality of the interview; as she spoke, stepping out of the window.

He followed her. "Will you be warm enough?" he asked. "May I have the pleasure of fetching a hat or shawl?"

"I do quite well, thanks. This garden

gets the morning sun, and is quite sheltered from any cold wind."

"How charming it is!" he stopped to look round and say. Then there was silence. They walked to the end of a long walk, and at the end paused to look—through a clearance in the shrubberies, and down a series of terraces laid out in lawns and walks and still-gay flower-beds—over a landscape of ideal loveliness. All was clear and lustrous, with gem-like lustre, in the wonder of the Autumn air. She was waiting for him to speak. She found this waiting tried her. Also, when she glanced at her companion, she saw that it tried him, too. In spite of the crisp freshness of the Autumn morning at that height, he was wiping the moisture from his forehead, and there was such a harassed look of mental pain in his whole expression that Agnes was moved to help him.

"Mr. Maynard," she said, looking straight before her, "perhaps it will make it easier

for you if I mention that I know, or think that I know, that it is about Bessie Hilton you wish to speak."

Laurence gave her a most grateful look.

"Yes, it is about Bessie," he said. "I want a counsellor—one who is wise with better than worldly wisdom, who is pure and good, and, therefore, not incredulous of purity and goodness in others. In fact, it is from you, Miss Norman, that I want counsel."

"I promise to hold any little wisdom I have at your service, Mr. Maynard. I have the most earnest wish to do anything in my power to help you—for your own sake and for Bessie's."

Agnes spoke with almost unnatural calmness, but her colour went and came—rich carnation flushes following on lily-like pallor, in a manner that betrayed how much something in the subject moved her.

"You are very good. I will try and lay my whole case before you in an unprejudiced manner."

They stood where they had first paused, leaning on a stone balustrade, looking past a sea of tree-tops, glowing in the morning Autumn sunlight, under a stainless sapphire sky, over an expansive upland. He told her, with boyish frankness, all that had passed between himself and Bessie, from the very beginning; much that he had felt and thought—about the charm of her soft, simple girlhood, contrasting with the hardness that seemed almost effrontery of so many young ladies he knew, and about the sweetness of possessing such a loving little creature for his wife.

It was only when he came to speak of that interview in the wood that he hesitated a little, and felt speech somewhat difficult, and, while speaking, flushed. There was some bitterness, too, in his intonation as he added,

"And that bit of folly took place the very day on which I saw you first, Miss Norman! I don't think a mistake was ever

more quickly repented of, or——" he did not finish his sentence.

Agnes had listened most intently. She had sighed heavily more than once, without knowing it. It was "the pity of it" that made her sigh. The pure, simple, chivalrous nature of the man who spoke,—the man who was, she could not help knowing, her lover—had revealed itself to her more clearly than ever before. She found it difficult to believe that Bessie had been so utterly blameless as his narrative carefully showed her, and as, indeed, she had been. Then Laurence turned upon her with the question,

"What do you think I ought to do, Miss Norman?"

"Of one thing there is no doubt," said Agnes, ponderingly, "that Bessie loves you profoundly. How could she help it? I mean," hastily, and blushing vividly, "situated as she has been, and is, how could she help it? It seems to me even doubtful if

she could unlearn that love and live. I can see no future for her if she has to do so. I can't see anything that can become of her. She is quite sure never to love or marry in her own class. She could not do it without self-degradation. What is to become of her?"

"That is it. That is the load that lies so heavily on my conscience."

"And she is so thoroughly good and innocent, so soft and gentle, so very lovely, and, therefore, so unfit to be alone; she is, certainly, almost a lady."

"Almost a lady!" Laurence echoed, meaning only to assent, but there was again bitterness in his tone, and Agnes felt and understood it.

"Far more a lady," said Agnes, less hesitatingly, "than many women I know who are by birth and position ladies."

"That is quite true," he agreed, cordially. Then added, "I almost feel as if I needed to put in a word of selfish pleading. Must

you think only of Bessie in this matter?"

He read the look she gave him as one of reproach, and hastened to say,

"Let me recall those words; please forget they were spoken."

"Mr. Maynard," Agnes said, and she looked as if with difficulty she kept back a burst of strong emotion, "You ask too much of me, asking my counsel on such a matter."

After a silence of some moments, she went on—

"There is another, and a very important consideration, besides Bessie's love for you. It seems, from things that young savage said last evening, that Bessie's good name is in jeopardy, that innocent actions have been misconstrued and coarsely exaggerated." Agnes flushed hotly again.

"Unfortunately this is too true," assented Laurence.

"It seems to me," said Agnes, speaking more firmly, "that Bessie has no future be-

fore her apart from you; that she has given her life to you. I am only a girl, without much experience of life, perhaps quite unfit to give advice on such matters. But it seems to me that Bessie has a right to be asked to be your wife. And, oh! Mr. Maynard, she is so good, so sweet, so beautiful, so quick to learn, and loves you so devotedly; surely you will not be unhappy with Bessie for your wife."

"That is not the question in point," he said, almost harshly. "I am, then, to consider that I have heard my sentence?"

She looked up at him. There was something more than she could bear in his face, added to what she was bearing of more selfish suffering. Her composure gave way.

"You should not have consulted me," she said, agitatedly. "It was cruel to ask me." She burst into sudden weeping; stopped herself to say, "I have spoken what seemed to me right," and then hur-

ried from him, into the house, to her own room.

"God bless you!" he said, looking after her. "You have not said what I wished you to say, but what my heart told me you, or any true woman, would say. It is bitter, but I must bear it."

CHAPTER XX.

WHAT AGNES FELT ABOUT IT.

IF Agnes had had no self-consciousness in the matter, she might, perhaps, have judged differently and more wisely. She might then, perhaps, have thought it better that poor little Bessie should suffer a long heart-ache, or should have her life shipwrecked alone, rather than that the life of Laurence Maynard should be spoiled, and in the end Bessie's heart broken with remorse for having spoiled it, and with the suffering of believing she had not her husband's love—not such love as he would have given to a wife who was his equal.

Agnes, thinking it all over again later in

the day—too late—saw this side of the case more clearly. She could even fancy Bessie, in the years to come, crying to her with reproachful appeal,

"Oh! why did you let me do it? You knew I could not make him happy—you knew it was not me he loved the better—why did you let me marry him? How was I to know, in such a daze of happiness, that he would be unhappy? Why did no one tell me? How was I to know?"

From the window of her room, Agnes could see that Laurence remained at least an hour leaning on the balustrade, where she had left him. Then he turned his head towards the house and lifted his hat. After that gesture of farewell, as she interpreted it, he went down the steps, from terrace to terrace, entered the wood, and was lost sight of.

"Agnes Norman, then, for always." She smiled a little bitterly; added, "But that is very different from Bessie Hilton for always.

Good-bye—good-bye, Laurence Maynard. I trust I have counselled right. God bring it right! God make you happy! Good-bye—good-bye!"

To her own surprise, she burst out weeping again, and she wept long and heartily. It was not that Agnes Norman was passionately "in love" with Mr. Maynard—not even that she thought herself so. She was not a girl to love easily, and she knew she was not. When she loved, it would be quietly, perhaps, but once for all. She had a creed that the world holds for each woman only one man between whom and her can be the love of love. She had had a feeling about Laurence Maynard that he had been the one man whom she could love, if she loved at all; that his eyes, if any man's, would be the light of life for her; that his was the hand to be dearer than all others, his the voice to be dearest among dear voices.

It was, therefore, with great sadness that

she took her farewell of him out of her life. She had no fancy that her heart was broken, neither that anything she had felt had been a mistake. It was more that some sweetness of light and of hope seemed to have passed for ever out of her possible horizon, and to require to be bidden a weeping farewell. She was sad for him, too—pitied him with loving pity, pitied Bessie, pitied herself, but did not see that anything could be different.

Being of a practical nature, Agnes set herself to try to think and plan for the future—for Bessie's future, now that she was Laurence Maynard's promised wife. What could be done for her, for the best, till the marriage? She knew that Bessie must not come to her, as, if she and Laurence had been indifferent to each other, would have seemed so natural and right. She could foresee a thousand dangers, difficulties, and complications for all three of them, if they were, under these new and

strange conditions, together. Of course Bessie could not continue where she was, and she knew Laurence could not trust her to the tender mercies of his sisters. And Mrs. Dovedale's household was not yet safe from all infection. Poor little Bessie!—poor little friendless thing!

Agnes resolved to think and think, till she found something to advise, if Laurence further consulted her. Perhaps they would be married almost directly; and perhaps this, indeed, would be the safest solution of the difficulty.

By lunch-time Agnes could meet her aunt, looking very much herself, only, perhaps, a little more pale and grave than usual.

"Isn't Mr. Maynard coming to lunch, Agnes?"

"I have not seen him for an hour or two, auntie. He is gone to the Wood Cottage."

A groan of disapprobation from Mrs. Norman.

"He will explain to Bessie why I don't fulfil my promise of calling to take her for a drive this morning. I think, however, Bessie may not remember my promise."

She tried to smile.

Mrs. Norman was disappointed, deeply disappointed. Feeling sure that Agnes was more interested in Laurence Maynard than in any man she had ever met, she had hoped that the explanation, and confession, and consultation between them would have had a very different result from any that it had had. She had known that Agnes would be likely to consider Bessie before herself; but she had trusted to her being wise enough to know that even for Bessie no happiness could result from so unequal a marriage, and that to Laurence it would be destruction.

CHAPTER XXI.

WHAT BESSIE DID ABOUT IT.

IT was about eleven o'clock when Laurence reached the cottage. Old Griffiths saw him from the wood-yard, and came to meet him.

"I wish to speak to Miss Hilton. I have a message from Miss Norman for her. Where shall I find her?"

"Miss Norman don't make a good choice of a messenger, seems to me, Squire," grumbled the old man. "Leastways, not so good as I'd have expected from a lady like her."

"I have, also, something of importance to

say to Miss Hilton on my own account," added Laurence, not choosing to notice what Griffiths had said.

The two men looked at each other steadily. The old man's manner changed. There was some serious matter on hand, no light gallivanting—of that, at least, he could feel sure.

"Be pleased to step in. I'll send the old woman to see if Bessie is up. She wasn't well this morning. Had a bit of a fright last night."

"We must take better care of her in future," said Laurence gravely. "I should have thought you would have done so, Griffiths, but in future it won't be your care she will depend upon."

"Your care is worse than no care, Squire. Best thing for the girl is to persuade her to be an honest man's wife. When you and Miss Norman——"

Laurence interrupted him.

"I intend to ask Miss Hilton to do me the honour to be my wife," he said; adding,

with a grim smile, "I hope you will number me among 'honest men.'"

The old man gazed at him in silence.

"You never mean, Squire, as that has happened atween you and Bessie to make it as bad a business as needs that to mend it?" he said, when he could speak.

Laurence reddened angrily with disgust and dismay. Everything he said or did, it seemed to him, re-acted injuriously on poor Bessie.

"Nothing has happened that makes Miss Hilton unfit to be the wife of the noblest man in the land. She is as pure and as innocent as—as Miss Norman herself," he replied, hotly.

"I don't understand it," said old Griffiths. "Gentlemen like you don't marry girls like Bessie, unless——"

"Your niece is a girl whom any gentleman might love, for her beauty, her sweetness, her goodness."

"I don't see as she's prettier than many

another. As to sweet—her temper's spoilt."

"I wish to see her, Griffiths, not to hear you talk about her."

"No offence meant."

"None will be taken, if you'll hold your tongue."

"My wife's uncle," thought poor Laurence to himself. And his fancied future rapidly passed through his mind. The first few years of his married life must not, for Bessie's sake, and his own through Bessie, be passed at Elmhurst, or in England, he thought. A few years abroad, and he might hope that Bessie's few relatives would be dead; and that they, he and she, might then begin the life of cares, and duties, and responsibilities which was the life he ought to lead, without annoyance from incongruous complications.

Laurence walked into the little parlour, the door of which Griffiths opened. Griffiths sent the deaf old woman to tell Bessie she was wanted. Laurence took up one of

Bessie's books, and feigned to be absorbed in reading it; seeing which the old man went back to his work in the yard.

Bessie was dressed in that "best frock," expecting to go out with Miss Norman. She had recognised Laurence's voice, but had not heard what was spoken.

"At last!" she said; adding, very softly, very humbly, "God help me!—please God help me!"

After a few moments she was called, and made haste to go down. In spite of all her efforts at self-control, her knees trembled so that she could hardly stand.

At the rustle of her silk dress Laurence went to the door, with an unconscious expectation of seeing, not Bessie, but Miss Norman. He closed the door after Bessie, and made haste to put her into a chair.

"Did I startle you, Bessie?"

"Oh! no, sir, I knew your voice."

"You don't look well, Bessie. You have not been doing as I told you to do—getting

strong." He was holding her hand. He was shocked at the change in her—so shocked that his eyes moistened.

"There is not much the matter, thank you, sir. I shall soon get strong when I go to Mrs. Dovedale, by the sea. I have had a good deal to try me. You see, I do miss father."

She had, most gently, withdrawn her hand.

"And last night that brute frightened you! I heard all about that from Miss Norman. I am not pleased with Griffiths. I should have thought he'd have taken better care of you. I shall well ensure that nothing of the kind can ever happen to you again, Bessie."

Laurence drew a little packet from his pocket, and tore off the outside papers. From a morocco case he took a mourning ring—fine diamonds set in black enamel.

"Let me see if this fits you, Bessie. It was made for you, in memory of my father. This is his hair at the back."

Bessie held out her hand. The ring was too large.

"That is because you have been getting so thin. I won't have it altered till I see if the poor little hand won't grow plump again."

Bessie lifted the ring to her lips. She flushed, and her eyes filled; she raised them to Laurence's face.

"I can't thank you; but it will be very precious to me always." Then she added, simply and timidly, "I don't think you, sir, look very well."

"I, too, have had a good deal to try me, Bessie—work and worry, as well as sorrow."

"You hardly knew the brother who died, did you, sir?"

"No. His death brought the work and worry, but not sorrow."

There was a pause. Laurence stood in front of Bessie. Bessie looked down on her ring.

"Bessie," he began firmly, "that ring,

you say, will be precious to you. I hope it will, for two reasons—in memory of my father, and in memory of something touching us—you and me—more nearly."

Bessie caught her breath; a quiver passed over all her face. She clenched her hands till it seemed as if she would drive them one into the other; she shut her under-lip down with her teeth. She kept inwardly saying, "Please God help me!—please God help me!"

"Bessie, I am not mistaken, am I, dear, in thinking that you are so good as to love me?"

She felt as if he must hear her heart beat, felt ashamed that he should see how it throbbed, longed to push him away from her. He was so suffocatingly, so deliciously, so bewilderingly near. He did not wait for an answer, but went on.

"Bessie, you have suffered where you have been blameless. I must take care of you for all the future. I must set you high

above the reach of evil tongues and thoughts —not higher than you deserve, you dear, sweet, good, patient girl."

It was no effort to feel tenderly towards the sad, soft, sweet little creature who so plainly showed how much she had gone through.

"Do you understand me, Bessie?" he asked, finding she did not speak or look up. "You have suffered through me, through my folly, my carelessness, it must be my care to try and make you happy—you must be my little wife; if indeed I am not mistaken, and you love me, Bessie."

Bessie now looked up—now he got a glimpse of the storm of tender passion raging in the gentle breast.

"Love you!" she said, and the glow and intensity of her eyes almost startled him—"oh! yes, I love you! love you! love you! But you must not tempt me, Mr. Laurence. You are so strong, I am so weak. You must not tempt me!"

"Tempt you, dear. What do you mean, Bessie? Indeed I do not understand."

She slipped to the ground, to his feet; she wound her arms round him, and laid her head against his knee. She broke into the most passionate sobbing. She felt as if she must, for this once, let her love and her sorrow have way; as if she must satisfy, in some sort, the hunger that had been in the past, the longer hunger that was to be in the future. And he did not in the least understand, was possibly a little shocked at this unrestrained demonstrativeness, which did not accord with his idea of Bessie.

He lifted her from the ground with tenderness, the tenderness of a brother for a sorrowing little sister; he put her on the little couch and sat down by her, his arm round her. Bessie's tears stayed, her sobs were stilled. One does not look to weep and sob in heaven. And to this poor little girl the very touch and scent of the cloth of the coat against which she rested——. But it

is folly to write of these infatuations. Bessie loved him with her whole being. And Bessie, though he did not know it, during those seconds in which she held herself still, to be conscious of the bliss of being in his arms, was bidding him farewell for ever.

After those few moments, Bessie lifted herself up, withdrew herself a little; while she struggled to speak, she brushed from his coat the marks of her tears, with light fondling touches of her little hand. As she did this many strange thoughts, or phantoms of thoughts, passed through her consciousness.

It was strange beyond any words to think that he who was now so close to her, whom she touched, by whose atmosphere she was, as it were, penetrated, must henceforth be more her own than anything else in the world, or must be nothing to her. Slower and softer grew the movements of her fingers on his coat, till, for one second more, and with the cry, "God help me!" this

time audibly outspoken, she drooped her head till her forehead rested against him.

"What is it, Bessie? What is in your mind? What troubles and shakes you so deeply? Speak, dear. For the future you must fearlessly tell me everything." He stooped over her, and touched with his lips her drooped neck.

Bessie now gathered her poor little forces together; she lifted herself up, mind and body, as it were; she stood in front of him, and said,

"It is because I love you, Mr. Laurence, that I pray God to help me not to let you do this thing. It is because I love you that I hope to find strength to keep from harming you. It is because I love you that I will not let you have for your wife a girl who is not a lady."

"But, Bessie, if I love you?"

"But you do not, sir," she said, with a soft, sorrowful smile. "You did once, just for a little while, before you had seen the lady

who is the one fit to have your love and to be your wife, but now you know you do not love me. It is for my sake only you wish to make me your wife. Don't you think I know the difference, Mr. Laurence? But I'm proud that you should think well enough of me to ask me. And, oh, I'm prouder that you should be so good!"

"But, Bessie," he persisted, "I do love you. Who could help loving you? You are so sweet, so lovely, so good, so brave, so gentle. I know, Bessie, that I may safely promise you a husband who will be kind and loving, if you marry me."

"I know you could not be unkind, but as to loving, oh! Mr. Laurence, I know the difference. If you love me a little, it is out of your generosity and gentleness, and your pity, because you know I love you, and think my love of you will make me unhappy."

"I, at least, love you too well, Bessie, to be happy while I know you are unhappy."

She paused a little on that; then she said,

"But, after a time, I shall not be unhappy, sir. When I can get to Mrs. Dovedale, and have plenty to do."

Meeting his eyes, which expressed, no doubt, a good deal of various emotion, she clasped her hands, and again pleaded,

"Oh, Mr. Laurence, Mr. Laurence, don't tempt me! Don't tempt me to be selfish and wicked, and to do what I know would, after a time, make us both most miserable. What could make me more miserable, if I had any love for you left, sir, than to know I had spoilt your life, made you looked down upon? Nothing could so much show how unfit I was to be your wife, how selfish my love for you was, as my letting you marry me."

"Bessie, you exaggerate all the disadvantages of such a marriage, and, in your sweet humility, see none of its advantages."

"You are not quite honest with me, Mr. Laurence. You know there's a lady you

love, and who's ready to love you. You know that, but for the wicked words idle tongues have spoken about me, you'd not have dreamt of asking me for your wife."

"I had dreamt of you for my wife—longed to have such a sweet little wife long before any gossip had touched us, Bessie."

"Yes, sir, and before you'd seen Miss Norman."

"That is very true, you most good and wise little woman."

"Now you've owned that, sir, the matter is ended between us. I'm going away soon, to Mrs. Dovedale. Some day, Mr. Laurence, perhaps the time may come when I'll be able to serve you—to serve you, or your wife, or your children; if the time comes, you'll not forget me."

"Forget you, Bessie!—shall I ever forget, do you think, the very sweetest, purest, truest, bravest little friend a man ever had?"

His voice shook as he said this, grasping her hands. He stood there, holding them,

struggling to find more words. His agitation was too much for Bessie. All that passion of love and of grief came surging up again, as if to efface all that she had done. She managed to plead, "Go now, Mr. Laurence—please go now!" and to release her hands.

"God bless you, Bessie!" he said, with a broken voice—"God will bless you!"

He seized his hat and hurried away, much in the fashion of a rejected lover. He had not done with Bessie; he was not going so to lose sight of her, and to let her out of his guardianship; but all else would be best done between them by Mrs. Norman.

Laurence felt as if the name of Bessie would be a perpetual heartache—as if he must feel a life-long sorrow about her, as a little gentle thing, he had wounded and left out in the cold. But that was not all his feeling about her. There was also the feeling that she was of the women who give

to womanhood its sacredness—that in that slight, soft, tender girlish form was somewhere hidden the stuff, the nerve, and the sinew of martyrdom. Most truly he could have told her that, now he knew her for what she was, only the accident that he also knew Agnes Norman could have kept him from every effort to win her for his, to be loved first and best, as his wife.

And Bessie? She threw herself on her knees, threw her arms out in front of her, and buried her face in them, and wished that the ground would open for her, and the earth cover her, and the darkness close round her, and that there might be silence and oblivion for ever. Instead, the sun was shining brilliantly on all the gaudy-coloured world; and just outside a robin was singing joyously, as if it sang its Spring, and not its Autumn song. Nothing cared, and it all went on!

BOOK VIII.—November and December.

CHAPTER XXII.

FAREWELLS.

LAURENCE saw Mrs. Norman, but not Agnes, before he left Beechholt. He went back to London on the evening after his interview with Bessie. He did not feel inclined to try his fortune with Agnes while his heart still ached for Bessie, nor did he wish to be at Beechholt again while Bessie was at the Wood Cottage. He knew he might now rely upon Mrs. Norman's most warmly-approving care of Bessie, and he intended to arrange with Mrs. Dovedale for Bessie's future.

Both Mrs. Norman and Agnes now insisted upon taking Bessie home to them, till things were arranged for her joining Mrs. Dovedale.

Bessie was ill for a few weeks, the last part of October and the first half of November. The doctor called it "a chill," and told Agnes that her "interesting little *protégée*" was not of a robust constitution. Agnes nursed her indefatigably.

At times Bessie did not find it easy to be content to receive so much from Agnes Norman. At other times her greatest delight was to lie quiet and watch her, with a sort of proud proprietorship, a feeling that, in a fashion, this beautiful creature was her present to Laurence.

"How happy they will be!—how happy they will be!" thought Bessie. For Bessie a change of interest, and a less emotional life, were much needed. She felt this herself, she said to Agnes. "Everybody is so much too good to me. It is not being taken

care of and petted so that will make me strong and well, Miss Norman. You won't think I am ungrateful?" kissing Agnes's hand. "If I had some one to take care of, a great deal to do for other people, if I had to knock about and harden myself, you'd be surprised to find how soon I should be strong and well."

"No doubt that's quite true," Mrs. Norman said, when Agnes repeated Bessie's words. "What surprises me is where the dear little thing gets all her wisdom."

"It was born with her, I should say," answered Agnes.

Towards the end of November, things arranged themselves, as everybody concerned seemed to see and feel, for the very best, as regarded Bessie. Bessie was to join the Dovedales at the coast, and to go abroad with them. Mr. Dovedale had been consulting a London physician, who pronounced him unfit for working through an English Winter; and he had been fortunate enough

to secure a chaplaincy at one of the loveliest and healthiest of the English-frequented watering-places on the Mediterranean; and Mrs. Dovedale had written to Bessie, "It is *impossible* I can do without you, Bessie." What could be better for Bessie? Physically and metaphysically. Nothing else that would have been half so good could have been planned for her.

"If only I could have seen you a little stronger first," Agnes said.

"But I should not get so here," said Bessie, flushing, and then paling. "Something is always wearing me away."

Agnes turned and kissed her.

"Bessie, you will be happy. You are so good, it will be impossible you should not be happy." But, as she spoke, a chill of fear that Bessie's happiness would not be in this world crossed Miss Norman. Yet why should such a thought have brought a chill of fear? She could not tell—except that she felt sure that, if poor Bessie died, Lau-

rence would be haunted with an uneasy remorse about her all his life—a feeling, or so she fancied, something like that which is felt by a tender-hearted child when the young bird taken from a nest dies under its attempts to rear it; and the child regrets, with a regret that is its first experience of remorse, that it did not leave the nestling to the wiser care of the parent-birds.

For the next ten days—it was a dry and wonderfully fine November—Miss Norman drove Bessie out every day—chiefly along the brown-carpeted glades of the beechwoods. Bessie gained strength more rapidly now that she felt a prospect of needing and of using it. On the last drive they were to have together, Agnes said to Bessie, after there had been a long silence between them, and Agnes spoke almost timidly,

"Bessie, I have been thinking a great deal about you and your friends the Dovedales. I can fancy how invaluable you will be to them; still, you see, Bessie, you will

be an 'expense.' Mrs. Dovedale is not strong, Mr. Dovedale may be always an invalid, there are little children, and I know they are not rich." A pause. "Bessie, you know I am rich—very rich in proportion to my wants. For the sake of your friend, Mrs. Dovedale, you must let me manage so that you will be no cost to them."

"Thank you with all my heart, dear Miss Norman. I love you so, I take so much from you, a little more or less will make no difference—I mean——"

"I know what you mean." And Agnes stopped her with a kiss.

Miss Norman felt as if she could not do enough for Bessie. With the most thoughtful care she had provided for her a complete and suitable outfit; suitable to the position of Mrs. Dovedale's helpful little lady-friend, which was to be Bessie's. Things that Bessie had never dreamed of possessing; travelling dressing-cases, work-cases, writing-cases, new and most neat and convenient trunks

to hold them all. Nothing was forgotten, and Bessie was child enough to be pleased by so many new toys.

Bessie looked a most neatly and completely-equipped little lady when she started on her journey. Mrs. Norman herself chose to take charge of Bessie as far as Folkestone, where she was to join the Dovedales.

And how did it feel in poor little Bessie's heart when the last day in England came? Everybody was petting her, and loading her with presents, telling her she was so good she could not be unhappy, doing unthought-of things, supposed to be for her pleasure or comfort. And Bessie longed desperately to be alone, to have leisure and space to come to an understanding with herself; to take leave of her past, and prepare herself for her future. She would have liked to take a little bundle in her hand, and to trudge on foot, alone, to the Dovedales, thinking to her footsteps all the way. She fancied this is what she would have liked. Yet, doubt-

less, if she had been at liberty to do this, she would have felt most heart-breakingly forlorn.

On the last afternoon she was to be at Beechholt, she asked leave to go alone to the Wood Cottage, to say "Good-bye."

They let her, on condition she would take Lion with her, and would not be late in coming home.

Bessie, with guilty-feeling speed, ran through the brown bleak woods, to visit, in farewell, to kiss the turf of that spot where Laurence had that day found her. There rose in Bessie's heart unutterable longing to see him once again—just once again! She did not linger long, but went on to the cottage, to make her farewells there, and give the munificent presents with which Miss Norman had provided her; that done, home to Beech-holt.

Next morning Agnes and Bessie parted, with close embraces and many tears. "Sweet sister Bessie! Bessie, I shall always think of

you, and love you as my sister." And Agnes kissed her quickly, and warmly, and closely, and seemed as if she couldn't let her go.

"I can find no words to speak," said Bessie. "But it is so dear to know you are so good!"

Mrs. Norman parted them, saying it was time they—she and Bessie—got into the carriage. As they travelled all day, all day there was in poor Bessie's heart a slight bitterness.

"No one thinks how I want to say good-bye to him," she thought. "They smother me with cares and kindness, and no one thinks of that."

How she reproached herself when, on their arrival at Folkestone, Laurence met them, and she saw, from Mrs. Norman's manner, that she had known he would. Her self-reproaches were so keen and true that they braced her up to be extraly brave.

He did not, like the others, load her with presents; but he gave her one thing—a gold

locket of exquisite workmanship, which enclosed a very lovely portrait of Agnes Norman; underneath an inscription, "In Memoriam," and the date of the day on which Bessie had refused to marry him. This, and the chain by which it was to be fastened.

She and Laurence stood at the hotel window overlooking the sea when he gave her this.

"Have I rightly understood, Bessie? Is not this what you would prefer to anything else?"

She hesitated a moment; then looked up at him, clear-eyed, and said, "Yes." She added, hurriedly, "Thank you so much for coming—for everything. It feels so much better to have seen you once again. Please make haste to be as happy as you can."

Then came all the bustle of getting on board. As long as she could distinguish them, Mrs. Norman and Laurence remained looking after the vessel. Laurence was to see Mrs. Norman home to Beech-holt. Then,

of course, Bessie knew what would happen. "How happy they will be!—how happy they will be!" the wind and waves and the creaking and the puffing of the ship seemed to say. And Bessie crept close to Mrs. Dovedale, and took the youngest child upon her knee. Then came a squall, and rain and storm and sickness.

That night when they were housed for the first time in a strange land, Mrs. Dovedale dropped her head on Bessie's shoulder, and cried, "Oh! Bessie, sweet little comforter, but for you it would be altogether more than I could bear."

The invalid husband, the delicate little children, the prospect of the baby to be born in a strange land, combined to overwhelm for the moment the high-spirited little woman, and to make her lean on Bessie. And Bessie, as she kissed her poor friend's hand, inwardly dedicated her every faculty to her service.

When they reached their destination the

gay loveliness of the place cheered and brightened them all. The golden sunshine of the short winter days, their stainless blue skies, and the subtle glories of their wonderful sunsets, the changing hues of the Mediterranean, the novel beauty of everything, and the vivid, exhilarating air had a most wholesome and toning effect upon Bessie, combined with "plenty to do." And Mr. Dovedale said to Bessie,

"I think my poor wife must have broken down entirely, Bessie, if you had not come to the rescue."

And Mrs. Dovedale said to Bessie,

"He looks marvellously better already, Bessie. I really don't think we should ever all have got here but for you, my darling. I shall always feel as if you had helped to save me my husband; for, indeed, Bessie, I had got to feel both as if he were dying away from me, and as if I were so entirely 'done' that I must just lie down and let happen what would."

Bessie was happy.

They all lived some years abroad—in Switzerland chiefly during the Summers, the South of France or North Italy in the Winters. During these years Bessie dedeloped, matured, and cultured greatly. She studied diligently, and learned languages with ease. She was, after two or three years, quite equal to charging herself with the education of the little girls; but she preferred nursing the sick, or managing household matters, to teaching. At times she did all these. That Bessie should ever leave them, unless for a home and a husband of her own, did not occur to the Dovedales as a possibility.

"What a noble-looking woman my apple-blossom Bessie has developed into!" Mrs. Dovedale observed one day to her husband. They were sitting on the terrace of their little Winter villa. Bessie, standing at some little distance, was watching the quivering olive-woods in the sunset light. "She has

had a 'liberal education,' of loving, suffering, subduing self. I wonder if she will ever marry."

Whether Bessie will ever marry, it is yet too soon to say. She herself believes "never," and has her views of what she will do with her life when her hands are empty. And she takes every opportunity of fitting herself to carry out those views.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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