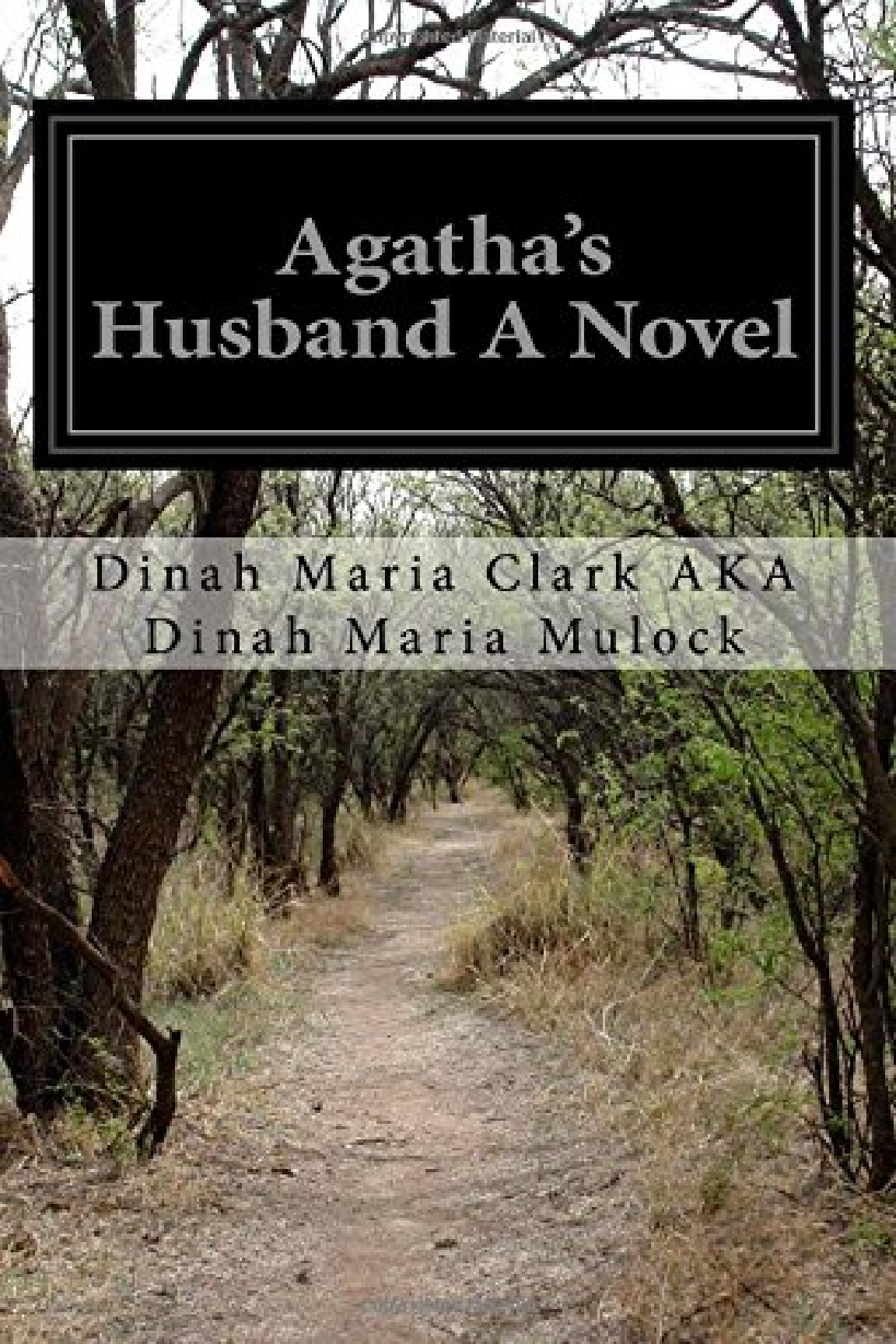

Agatha's
Husband A Novel
Dinah Maria Clark AKA
Dinah Maria Mulock

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# AGATHA'S HUSBAND

**A NOVEL**

**BY THE AUTHOR OF**
**'JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN'**

## DINAH MARIA CRAIK

**AKA: Dinah Maria Mulock**

**With Illustrations By Walter Crane**

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# AGATHA'S HUSBAND.

## CHAPTER I.

—If there ever was a woman thoroughly like her name, it was Agatha Bowen. She was good, in the first place—right good at heart, though with a slight external roughness (like the sound of the g in her name), which took away all sentimentalism. Then the vowels—the three broad rich a's—which no one can pronounce with nimini-pimini closed lips—how thoroughly they answered to her character!—a character in the which was nothing small, mean, cramped, or crooked.

But if we go on unfolding her in this way, there will not be the slightest use in writing her history, or that of one in whom her life is beautifully involved and enclosed—as every married woman's should be —

He was still in clouded mystery—an individual yet to be; and two other individuals had been “talking him over,” feminine-fashion, in Miss Agatha Bowen's drawing-room, much to that lady's

amusement and edification. For, being moderately rich, she had her own suite of rooms in the house where she boarded; and having no mother—sorrowful lot for a girl of nineteen!—she sometimes filled her drawing-room with very useless and unprofitable acquaintances. These two married ladies—one young, the other old—Mrs. Hill and Mrs. Thornycroft—had been for the last half-hour vexing their very hearts out to find Agatha a husband—a weakness which, it must be confessed, lurks in the heart of almost every married lady.

Agatha had been laughing at it, alternately flushing up or looking scornful, as her mouth had a natural propensity for looking; balancing herself occasionally on the arm of the sofa, which, being rather small and of a light figure, she could do with both impunity and grace; or else rushing to the open window, ostensibly to let her black kitten investigate street-sights from its mistress's shoulder. Agatha was very much of a child still, or could be when she chose.

Mrs. Hill had been regretting some two or three “excellent matches” of which she felt sure Miss Bowen had thrown away her chance; and young Mrs. Thornycroft had tried hard to persuade her dearest Agatha how very much happier she would be in a house of her own, than as a boarder even in this excellent physician's family. But Agatha only laughed on, and devoted herself more than ever to the black kitten.

She was, I fear, a damsel who rather neglected the *bienséances* of life. Only, in her excuse, it must be allowed that her friends were doing what they had no earthly business to do; since; if there is one subject above all upon which a young woman has a right to keep her thoughts, feelings, and intentions to

herself, and to exact from others the respect of silence, it is that of marriage. Possibly, Agatha Bowen was of this opinion.

“Mrs. Hill, you are a very kind, good soul: and Emma Thornycroft, I like you very much; but if—(Oh! be quiet, Tittens!)—if you could manage to let me and 'my Husband' alone.”

These were the only serious words she said—and they were but half serious; she evidently felt such an irresistible propensity to laugh.

“Now,” continued she, turning the conversation, and putting on a dignified aspect, which occasionally she took it into her head to assume, though more in playfulness than earnest—“now let me tell you who you will meet here at dinner to-day.”

“Major Harper, of course.”

“I do not see the 'of course' Mrs. Thornycroft,” returned Agatha, rather sharply; then, melting into a smile, she added: “Well, 'of course,' as you say; what more likely visitor could I have than my guardian?”

“Trustee, my dear; guardians belong to romances, where young ladies are always expected to hate, or fall in love with them.”

Agatha flushed slightly. Now, unlike most girls, Miss Bowen did not look pretty when she blushed; her skin being very dark, and not over clear, the red blood coursing under it dyed her cheek, not “celestial, rosy red,” but a warm mahogany colour. Perhaps a consciousness of this deepened the unpleasant blushing fit, to which, like most sensitive people at her age, she was always rather prone.

“Not,” continued Mrs. Thornycroft, watching her,—“not that I think any love affair is likely to happen in your case; Major Harper is far too much of a settled-down bachelor, and at the same time too

old.”

Agatha pulled a comical face, and made a few solemn allusions to Methuselah. She had a peculiarly quick, even abrupt manner of speaking, saying a dozen words in the time most young ladies would take to drawl out three; and possessing, likewise, the rare feminine quality of never saying a word more than was necessary.

“Agatha, how funny you are!” laughed her easily-amused friend. “But, dear, tell me who else is coming?” And she glanced doubtfully down on a gown that looked like a marriage-silk “dyed and renovated.”

“Oh, no ladies—and gentlemen never see whether one is dressed in brocade or sackcloth,” returned Agatha, rather maliciously;—“only, 'old Major Harper' as you are pleased to call him, and ——”

“Nay, I didn't call him very old—just forty, or thereabouts—though he does not look anything like it. Then he is so handsome, and, I must say, Agatha, pays you such extreme attention.”

Agatha laughed again—the quick, light-hearted laugh of nineteen—and her brown eyes brightened with innocent pleasure.

Young Mrs. Thornycroft again looked down uneasily at her dress—not from overmuch vanity, but because her hounded mind recurred instinctively from extraneous or large interests to individual and lesser ones.

“Is there really any one particular coming, my dear? Of course, *you* have no trouble about evening dress; mourning is such easy comfortable wear.” (Agatha turned her head quickly aside.) “That handsome silk of yours looks quite well still; and

mamma there," glancing at the contentedly knitting Mrs. Hill—"old ladies never require much dress; but if you had only told me to prepare for company——"

"Pretty company! Merely our own circle—Dr. Ianson, Mrs. Ianson, and Miss Ianson—you need not mind outshining her now——"

"No, indeed! I am married."

"Then the 'company' dwindles down to two besides yourselves; Major Harper and his brother."

"Oh! What sort of a person is the brother?"

"I really don't know; I have never seen him. He is just come home from Canada; the youngest of the family—and I hate boys," replied Agatha, running the sentences one upon the other in her quick fashion.

"The youngest of the family—how many are there in all?" inquired the elder lady, her friendly anxiety being probably once more on matrimonial thoughts intent.

"I am sure, Mrs. Hill, I cannot tell. I have never seen any of them but Major Harper, and I never saw him till my poor father died; all which circumstances you know quite well, and Emma too; so there is no need to talk a thing twice over."

From her occasional mode of speech, some people might say, and did say, that Agatha Bowen "had a temper of her own." It is very true, she was not one of those mild, amiable heroines who never can give a sharp word to any one. And now and then, probably from the morbid restlessness of unsatisfied youth—a youth, too, that fate had deprived of those home-ties, duties, and sacrifices, which are at once so arduous and so wholesome—she had a habit of carrying, not only the real black kitten, but the imaginary and allegorical "little black

dog," on her shoulder.

It was grinning there invisibly now; shaking her curls with short quick motion, swelling her rich full lips—those sort of lips which are glorious in smiles, but which in repose are apt to settle into a gravity not unlike crossness.

She was looking thus—not her best, it must be allowed—when a servant, opening the drawing-room door, announced "Visitors for Miss Bowen."

The first who entered, very much in advance of the other, appeared with that easy, agreeable air which at once marks the gentleman, and one long accustomed to the world in all its phases, especially to the feminine phase; for he bowed over Agatha's hand, and smiled in Agatha's now brightening face, with a sort of tender manliness, that implied his being used to pleasing women, and having an agreeable though not an ungenerous consciousness of the fact.

"Are you better—really better? Are you quite sure you have no cold left? Nothing to make your friends anxious about you?" (Agatha shook her head smilingly.) "That's right; I am so glad."

And no doubt Major Harper was; for a true kind-heartedness, softened even to tender-heartedness, was visible in his handsome face. Which face had been for twenty years the admiration of nearly every woman in every drawing-room he entered: a considerable trial for any man. Now and then some independent young lady, who had reasons of her own for preferring rosy complexions, turn-up noses, and "runaway" chins, might quarrel with the Major's fine Roman profile and jet-black moustache and hair; but—there was no denying it—he was, even at forty, a remarkably handsome man; one of the old school

of Chesterfield perfection, which is fast dying out.

Everybody liked him, more or less; and some people—a few men and not a few women, had either in friendship or in warmer fashion—deeply loved him. Society in general was quite aware of this; nor, it must be confessed, did Major Harper at all attempt to disprove or ignore the fact. He wore his honours—as he did a cross won, no one quite knew how, during a brief service in the Peninsula—neither pompously nor boastingly, but with the mild indifference of conscious desert.

All this could be at once discerned in his face, voice, and manner; from which likewise a keen observer might draw the safe conclusion that, though a decided man of fashion, and something of a dandy, he was above either puppyism or immorality. And Agatha's rich Anglo-Indian father had not judged foolishly when he put his only child and her property in the trust of, as he believed, that rare personage, an honest man.

If the girl Agatha, who took honesty as a matter of course in every gentleman, endowed this particular one with a few qualities more than he really possessed, it was an amiable weakness on her part, for which, as Major Harper would doubtless have said with a seriously troubled countenance, “no one could possibly blame *him.*”

In speaking of the Major we have taken little notice—as little, indeed, as Agatha did—of the younger Mr. Harper.

“My brother, Miss Bowen. He came home when my sister Emily died.” The brief introduction terminated in a slight fall of voice, which made the young lady look sympathisingly at the handsome face that took shades of sadness as easily as shades of

mirth. In her interest for the Major she merely bowed to his brother; just noticed that the stranger was a tall, fair “boy,” not at all resembling her own friend; and after a polite speech or two of welcome, to which Mr. Harper answered very briefly, she hardly looked at him again until she and her guests adjourned to the family drawing-room of Dr. Ianson.

There, the Major happening to be engrossed by doing earnest politeness to Mrs. Thornycroft and her mother, Agatha had to enter side by side with the younger brother, and likewise to introduce him to the worthy family whose inmate she was.

She did so, making the whole circuit of the room towards Miss Jane Ianson, in the hope that he would cast anchor, or else be grappled by that young lady, and so she should get rid of him. However, fate was adverse; the young gentleman showed no inclination to be thus put aside, and Miss Bowen, driven to despair, was just going to extinguish him altogether with some specimen of the unceremonious manner which she occasionally showed to “boys,” when, observing him more closely, she discovered that he could not exactly come under this category.

His fair face, fair hair, and thin, stripling-like figure, had deceived her. Investigating deeper, there was a something in his grave eye and firmly-set mouth which bespoke the man, not the boy. Agatha, who, treating him with a careless womanly superiority that girls of nineteen use, had asked “how long he had been in Canada?” and been answered “Fifteen years,”—hesitated at her next intended question—the very rude and malicious one—“How old he was when he left home?”

“I was, as you say, very young when I quitted England,” he answered, to a less pointed remark of

Miss Ianson's. “I must have been a lad of nine or ten —little more.”

Agatha quite started to think of the disrespectful way in which she had treated a gentleman twenty-five years old! It made her shy and uncomfortable for some minutes, and she rather repented of her habit of patronising “boys.”

However, what was even twenty-five? A raw, uncouth age. No man was really good for anything until he was thirty. And, as quickly as courtesy and good feeling allowed her, she glided from the uninteresting younger brother to the charmed circle where the elder was talking away, as only Major Harper could talk, using all the weapons of conversation by turns, to a degree that never can be truly described. Like Taglioni's *entrechats*, or Grisi's melodious notes, such extrinsic talent dies on the senses of the listener, who cannot prove, scarcely even explain, but only say that it was so. Nevertheless, with all his power of amusing, a keen observer might have discerned in Major Harper a want of depth—of reading—of thought; a something that marked out the man of society in contradiction to the man of intellect or of letters. Had he been an author—which he was once heard to thank Heaven he was not—he would probably have been one of those shallow, fashionable sentimentalists who hang like Mahomed's coffin between earth and heaven, an eyesore unto both. As it was, his modicum of talent made him a most pleasant man in his own sphere—the drawing-room.

“Really,” whispered the good, corpulent Dr. Ianson, who had been laughing so much that he quite forgot dinner was behind time, “my dear Miss Bowen, your friend is the most amusing, witty, delightful person. It is quite a pleasure to have such a

man at one's table."

"Quite a pleasure, indeed," echoed Mrs. Ianson, deeply thankful to anything or anybody that stood in the breach between herself, her husband, and the dilatory cook.

Agatha looked gratified and proud. Casting a shy glance towards where her friend was talking to Emma Thornycroft and Miss Ianson, she met the eye of the younger brother. It expressed such keen, though grave observance of her, that she felt her cheeks warm into the old, unbecoming, uncomfortable blush.

It was rather a satisfaction that, just then, they were summoned to dinner; Major Harper, in his half tender, half paternal manner, advancing to take her downstairs; which was his custom, when, as frequently happened, Agatha Bowen was the woman he liked best in the room. This was indeed his usual way in all societies, except when out of kindliness of heart he now and then made a temporary sacrifice in favour of some woman who he thought liked *him* best. Though even in this case, perhaps, he would not have erred, or felt that he erred, in offering his arm to Agatha.

She looked happy, as any young girl would, in receiving the attentions of a man whom all admired; and was quite contented to sit next to him, listening while he talked cheerfully and brilliantly, less for her personal entertainment than that of the table in general. Which she thought, considering the dulness of the Ianson circle, and that even her own kind-hearted, long-known friend, Emma Thornycroft, was not the most intellectual woman in the world,—showed great good nature on the part of Major Harper.

Perhaps the most silent person at table was the younger brother, whose Christian name Agatha did not know. However, hearing the Major call him once or twice by an odd-sounding word, something like “Beynell” or “Ennell,” she had the curiosity to inquire.

“Oh, it is N. L.—his initials; which I call him by, instead of the very ugly name his cruel godfathers and godmothers imposed upon him as a life-long martyrdom.”

“What name is that?” asked Agatha, looking across at the luckless victim of nomenclature, who seemed to endure his woes with great equanimity.

He met her eye, and answered for himself, showing he had been listening to her all the time. “I am called Nathanael—it is an old family name—Nathanael Locke Harper.”

“You don't look very like a Nathanael,” observed his neighbour, Mrs. Thornycroft, doubtless wishing to be complimentary.

“I think he does,” said Agatha, kindly, for she was struck by the infinitely sweet and “good” expression which the young man's face just then wore. “He looks like the Nathanael of Scripture, 'in whom there was no guile.'”

A pause—for the Iansons were those sort of religious people who think any Biblical allusions irreverent. But Major Harper said, heartily, “That's true!” and cordially, nay affectionately, pressed Agatha's hand. Nathanael slightly coloured, as if with pleasure, though he made no answer of any kind. He was evidently unused to bandy either jests or compliments.

If anything could be objected to in a young man so retiring and unobtrusive as he, it was a certain

something the very opposite of his brother's cheerful frankness. His features, regular, delicate, and perfectly colourless; his hair long, straight, and of the palest brown, without any shadow of what painters would call a “warm tint,” auburn or gold, running through it; his slow, quiet movements, rare speech, and a certain passive composure of aspect, altogether conveyed the impression of a nature which, if not positively repellant, was decidedly cold.

Agatha felt it, and though from the rule of opposites, this species of character awoke in her a spice of interest, yet was the interest of too faint and negative a kind to attract her more than momentarily.

In her own mind she set down Nathanael Harper as “a very odd sort of youth”—(*a youth* she still persisted in calling him)—and turned again to his brother.

They had dined late,—and the brief evening bade fair to pass as after-dinner evenings do. Arrived in the drawing-room, old Mrs. Hill went to sleep; Miss Ianson, a pale young woman, in delicate health, disappeared; Mrs. Ianson and Mrs. Thornycroft commenced a low-toned, harmless conversation, which was probably about “servants” and “babies.” Agatha being at that age when domestic affairs are very uninteresting, and girlish romance has not yet ripened into the sweet and solemn instincts of motherhood, stole quietly aside, and did the very rude thing of taking up a book and beginning to read “in company.” But, as before stated, Miss Agatha had a will of her own, which she usually followed out, even when it ran a little contrary to the ultra-refined laws of propriety.

The book not being sufficiently interesting, she

was beginning, like many another clever girl of nineteen, to think the society of married ladies a great bore, and to wonder when the gentlemen would come up-stairs. Her wish was shortly gratified by the door's opening—but only to admit the “youth” Nathanael.

However, partly for civility, and partly through lack of entertainment, Agatha smiled upon even him, and tried to make him talk.

This was not an easy matter, since in all qualities he seemed to be his elder brother's opposite. Indeed, his reserve and brevity of speech emulated Agatha's own; so they got on together ill enough, until by some happy chance they lighted on the subject of Canada and the Backwoods. Where is there boy or girl of romantic imagination who did not, at some juvenile period of existence, revel in descriptions of American forest-life? Agatha had scarcely passed this, the latest of her various manias; and on the strength of it, she and Mr. Harper became more sociable. She even condescended to declare “that it was a pleasure to meet with one who had absolutely seen, nay, lived among red Indians.'”

“Ay, and nearly died among them too,” added Major Harper, coming up so unexpectedly that Agatha had not noticed him. “Tell Miss Bowen how you were captured, tied to the stake, half-tomahawked, etc.—how you lived Indian fashion for a whole year, when you were sixteen. Wonderful lad! A second Nathaniel Bumppo!” added he, tapping his brother's shoulder.

The young man drew back, merely answered “that the story would not interest Miss Bowen,” and retired, whether out of pride or shyness it was impossible to say.

The conversation, taken up and led, as usual, by Major Harper, became a general disquisition on the race of North American Indians. Accidentally, or not, the elder brother drew from the younger many facts, indicating a degree of both information and experience which made every one glance with surprise, respect, and a little awe, on the delicate, boyish-looking Nathanael.

Once, too, Agatha took her turn as an object of interest to the rest. They were all talking of the distinctive personal features of that strange race, which some writers have held to be the ten lost tribes of Israel. Agatha asked what were the characteristics of an Indian face, often stated to be so fine?

"Look in the mirror, Miss Bowen," said Nathanael, joining in the conversation.

"What do you mean?"

I mean, that were you not an Englishwoman, I should have thought you descended from a Pawnee Indian—all except the hair. The features are exact—long, almond-shaped eyes, aquiline nose, mouth and chin of the rare classic mould, which these children of nature keep, long after it has almost vanished out of civilised Europe. Then your complexion, of such a dark ruddy brown—your——"

"Stop—stop!" cried the Major, heartily laughing. "Miss Bowen will think you have learnt every one of her physical peculiarities off by heart already. I had not the least idea you were gifted with so much observation."

"Nay, do let him go on; it amuses me," cried the young girl, laughing, though she could not help blushing a little also.

But Nathanael had "shrunk into his shell," as his

brother humorously whispered to Agatha, and was not to be drawn out for the remainder of the evening.

The Harpers left early, thus affording great opportunity for their characters being discussed afterwards. Every lady in the room had long since declared herself “in love” with the elder brother; the fact was now repeated for the thousandth time, together with one or two remarks about the younger Harper, who they agreed was rather nice-looking, but so eccentric!

Miss Bowen scarcely thought about Nathanael at all; except that, after she was in bed, a comical recollection floated through other more serious ones, and she laughed outright at the notion of being considered like a Pawnee Indian!

## CHAPTER II.

Of all the misfortunes incidental to youth (falling in love included), there are few greater than that of having nothing to do. From this trial, Agatha Bowen, being unhappily a young lady of independent property, suffered martyrdom every day. She had no natural ties, duties, or interests, and was not sufficiently selfish to create the like in and about her own personality. She did not think herself handsome enough to be vain, so had not that sweet refuge of feminine idleness—dress. Nor, it must be dolefully confessed, was she of so loving a nature as to love

anybody or everybody, as some women can.

Kind to all, and liking many, she was apparently one of those characters who only really *love* two or three people in the whole course of their existence. To such, life is a serious, perilous, and often terrible journey.

“Well, Tittens, I don't know, really, what we are to do with ourselves this morning,” said Agatha, talking aloud to her Familiar, the black kitten, who shared the solitude of her little drawing-room. “You'd like to go and play downstairs, I dare say? It's all very nice for you to be running after Mrs. Ianson's wools, but I can't see anything amusing in fancy-work. And as for dawdling round this square and Russell Square with Jane Ianson and Fido—pah! I'd quite as soon be changed into a lapdog, and led along by a string. How stupid London is! Oh, Tittens, to think that you and I have never lived in the country since we were born. Wouldn't you like to go? Only, then we should never see anybody——”

The foolish girl paused, and laughed, as if she did not like to soliloquise too confidentially, even to a kitten.

“Which of them did you like the best last night, Tittens? One was not over civil to you; but Nathanael—yes, certainly you and that juvenile are great friends, considering you have met but four evenings. All in one week, too. Our house is getting quite gay, Miss Tittens; only it is so much the duller in the mornings. Heigho!

> “Life's a weary, weary, weary,
> Life's a weary coble o' care.”

“What's the other verse? And she began humming:

"Man's a steerer, steerer, steerer,
Man's a steerer—life is a pool."

"I wonder, Tittens, how you and I shall steer through it? and whether the pool will be muddy or clear?"

Twisting her fingers in and about her pet's jetty fur, Agatha sat silent, until slowly there grew a thoughtful shadow in her eyes, a forewarning of the gradual passing away of that childishness, which in her, from accidental circumstances, had lasted strangely long.

"Come, we won't be foolish, Tittens," cried she, suddenly starting up. "We'll put on our bonnets, and go out—that is, one of us will, and the other may take to Berlin wool and Mrs. Ianson."

The bonnet was popped on quickly and independently—Miss Bowen scorned to indulge in the convenience or annoyance of a lady's-maid. Crossing the hall, the customary question, "Whether she would be home to dinner?" stopped her.

"I don't know—I am not quite sure. Tell Mrs. Ianson not to wait for me."

And she passed out, feeling keener than usual the consciousness that nobody would wait for her, or look for her, or miss her; that her comings in and goings out were perfectly indifferent to every human being in the house, called by courtesy her "home." Perhaps this was her own fault, but she could not help it. It was out of her nature to get up an interest among ordinary people, where interests there were none.

Little more had she in the house whither she was going to pay one of her extempore visits; but then there was the habit of old affection, begun before

characters develop themselves into the infinite variety from which mental sympathy is evolved. She could not help liking Emma Thornycroft, her sole childish acquaintance, whose elder sister had been Agatha's daily governess, until she died.

“I know Emma will be glad to see me, which is something; and if she does tire me with talk about the babies, why, children are better than Berlin wool. And there is always the piano. Besides, I must walk out, or I shall rust to death in this horrible Bedford Square.”

She walked on, rather in a misanthropic mood, a circumstance to her not rare. But she had never known mother, sister, or brother; and the name of father was to her little more than an empty sound. It had occasionally come mistily over the Indian Ocean, in the shape of formal letters—the only letters that ever visited the dull London house where she spent her shut-up childhood, and acquired the accomplishments of her teens. Mr. Bowen died on the high seas: and when his daughter met the ship at Southampton, a closed black coffin was all that remained to her of the name of father. That bond, like all others, was destined to be to her a mere shadow. Poor Agatha!

Quick exercise always brings cheerfulness when one is young, strong, and free from any real cares; Agatha's imaginary ones, together with the vague sentimentalisms into which she was on the verge of falling, yet had not fallen, vanished under the influence of a cheerful walk on a sunny summer's day. She arrived at Mrs. Thornycroft's time enough to find that admirable young matron busied in teaching to her eldest boy the grand mystery of dining; that is, dining like a Christian, seated at a real table with a real silver knife and fork. These latter Master James

evidently preferred poking into his eyes and nose, rather than his mouth, and evinced far greater anxiety to sit on the table than on the chair.

“Agatha, dear—so glad to see you!” and Emma's look convinced even Agatha that this was true. “You will stay, of course! Just in time to see James eat his first dinner, like a man! Now Jemmie, wipe his pretty mouth, and then give Auntie Agatha a sweet kiss.”

Agatha submitted to the kiss, though she did not quite believe in the adjective; and felt a certain satisfaction in knowing that the title of “Auntie” was a mere compliment. She did not positively dislike children, else she would have been only half a woman, or a woman so detestable as to be an anomaly in creation; but her philoprogenitiveness was, to say the least, dormant at present; and her sense of infantile beauty being founded on Sir Joshua's and Murillo's cherubs, she had no great fancy for the ugly little James.

She laid aside her bonnet, and smoothing her curls in the nursery mirror, looked for one minute at her Pawnee-Indian face, the sight of which now often made her smile. Then she sat down to lunch with Emma and the children; being allowed, as a great favour, to be placed next Master James, and drink with him out of his silver mug. Miss Bowen accepted the offered honour calmly, made no remark, but—went thirsty.

For an hour or two she sat patiently listening to what had gone on in the house since she was there —-how baby had cut two more teeth, and James had had a new braided frock—(which was sent for that she might look at it)—how Missy had been to her first children's party, and was to learn dancing at

Midsummer, if papa could be coaxed to agree.

“How is Mr. Thornycroft?” asked Agatha.

“Oh, very well—papa is always well. I only wish the little ones took after him in that respect.”

Agatha, who was old enough to remember Emma engaged, and Emma newly married, smiled to think how entirely the lover beloved and the all-important young husband had dwindled into a mere “Papa;” liked and obeyed in a certain fashion, for Emma was a good wife, but evidently made a very secondary consideration to “the children.”

The young girl—as yet neither married, nor in love—wondered if this were always so. She often had such wonderings and speculation when she came to Emma's house.

She was growing rather tired of so much domestic information, and had secretly taken out her watch to see how many hours it would be to dinner and to Mr. Thornycroft, a sensible, intelligent man, who from love to his wife had been always very kind to his wife's friends—when there came the not unwelcome sound of a knock at the hall-door.

“Bless me; that is surely the Harpers. I had quite forgotten Major Harper and the bears.”

“An odd conjunction,” observed Agatha, smiling.

“Major Harper, who yesterday, for the fifth time, promised to take Missy to the Zoological Gardens to see the bears. He has remembered it at last.”

No, he had not remembered it; it would have been a very remarkable circumstance if he had; being a person so constantly full of engagements, for himself and others. The visitor was only his younger brother, who had often daundered in at Mrs. Thornycroft's house, possibly from a liking to Emma's

friendly manner, or because, cast astray for a fortnight on the wide desert of London, he had, like Agatha, “nothing to do.”

If Nathanael had other reasons, they, of course, never came near the surface, but lay buried under the silent waters of his quiet mind.

Agatha was half pleased, half disappointed at seeing him. Mrs. Thornycroft, good soul, was always charmed to have a visitor, for her society did not attract many. Only betraying, as usual, what was uppermost in her simple thoughts, she could not long conceal her regret concerning little Missy and the bears.

To Agatha's great surprise, Mr. Harper, who she thought, in his dignified gravity, would never have condescended to such a thing, volunteered to assume his brother's duty.

“For,” said he, with a slight smile, “I have had too many perilous encounters with wild bears in America, not to feel some curiosity in seeing a few captured ones in England.”

“That will be charming,” cried Mrs. Thornycroft, looking at him with a mixture of respect and maternal benignity. “Then you can tell Missy all those wonderful stories, only don't frighten her.”

“Perhaps I might She seems rather shy of me.” And the adventurous young gentleman eyed askance a small be-ribboned child, who was creeping about the room and staring at him. “Would it not be better if——”

“If mamma went?”

“There, Missy, don't cry; mamma will go, and Agatha, too, if she would like it?”

“Certainly,” Miss Bowen answered, with a

mischievous glance at Nathanael. “I ought to investigate bears, if only to prove myself descended from a Pawnee Indian.”

So, once more, the heavy nut-brown curls were netted up into the crown of her black bonnet, and her shawl pinned on carelessly—rather too carelessly for a young woman; since that gracious adornment, neatness, rarely increases with years. Agatha was quickly ready. In the ten minutes she had to wait for Mrs. Thornycroft, she felt, more than once, how much merrier they would have been with the elder than the younger brother. Also—for Agatha was a conscientious girl—she thought, seriously, what a pity it was that so pleasant and kind a man as Major Harper had such an unfortunate habit of forgetting his promises.

Yet she regretted him—regretted his flow of witty sayings that attracted the humorous half of her temperament, and his touches of seriousness or sentiment which hovered like pleasant music round the yet-closed portals of her girlish heart. Until suddenly—conscientiousness again!—she began to be aware she was thinking a deal too much of Major Harper; so, with a strong effort, turned her attention to his brother and the bears.

She had leant on Mr. Harper's offered arm all the way to the Regent's Park, yet he had scarcely spoken to her. No wonder, therefore, that she had had time for meditation, or that her comparison between the two brothers should be rather to Nathanael's disadvantage. The balance of favour, however, began to right itself a little when she saw how kind he was to Emma Thornycroft, who alternately screamed at the beasts, and made foolish remarks concerning them; also, how carefully he watched over little Missy and James, the latter of whom, with infantile

pertinacity, would poke his small self into every possible danger.

At the sunken den, where the big brown bear performs gymnastic exercises on a centre tree, Master Jemmie was quite in his glory. He emulated Bruin by climbing from his feet into nurse's arms—thence into mamma's, and lastly, much to her discomfiture, into Miss Bowen's. The attraction being that she happened to stand close to the railing and next to Mr. Harper, who, with a bun stuck on the end of his long stick, had coaxed Bruin up to the very top of the tree.

There the creature swayed awkwardly, his four unwieldy paws planted together, and his great mouth silently snapping at the cakes. Agatha could hardly help laughing; she, as well as the children, was so much amused at the monster.

“Mr. Harper, give Missy your cane. Missy would like to feed bear,” cried the mamma, now very bold, going with her eldest pet to the other side of the den, and attracting the animal thither.

At which little James, who could not yet speak, setting up a scream of vexation, tried to stretch after the creature; and whether from his own impetuosity or her careless hold, sprang—oh, horror!—right out of Agatha's arms. A moment the little muslin frock caught on the railing—caught—ripped; then the sash, with its long knotted ends, which some one snatched at—nothing but the sash held up the shrieking child, who hung suspended half way over the pit, in reach of the beast's very jaws.

The bear did not at once see it, till startled by the mother's frightful cries. Then he opened his teeth—it looked almost like a grin—and began slowly to descend his tree, while, as slowly, the poor child's

sash was unloosing with its weight.

A murmur of horror ran through the people near; but not a man among them offered help. They all slid back, except Nathanael Harper.

Agatha felt his sudden gripe. “Hold my hand firm. Keep me in my balance,” he whispered, and throwing himself over to the whole extent of his body, and long right arm, managed to catch hold of James, who struggled violently.

“Hold me tight—tighter still, or we are lost,” said he, trying to writhe back again; his hand—such a little delicate hand it seemed for a man—quivering with the weight of the child.

She grasped him frantically—his wrist—his shoulder—nay,—stretching over, linked her arms round his neck. Something in her touch seemed to impart strength to him. He whispered, half gasping, —

“Hold me firm, and I'll do it yet, Agatha.” She did not then notice, or recollect till long afterwards, how he had called her by her Christian name, nor the tone in which he had said it.

The moment afterwards, he had lifted the child out of the den, and poor Jemmie was screaming out his now harmless terror safe in the maternal arms.

Then, and not till then, Agatha burst into tears. Tears which no one saw, for the mother, hugging her baby, was the very centre of a sympathising crowd. Mr. Harper, paler than ordinary, leaned against the stone-work of the den.

“Oh, from what have you saved me?” cried Agatha, as after her thankfulness for the rescued life, came another thought, personal yet excusable. “Had Emma lost the child, I should have felt like a murderess to the day of my death.”

Nathanael shook his head, trying to smile; but seemed unable to speak.

“You have not hurt yourself?”

“Oh no. Very little. Only a strain,” said he as he removed his hand from his side. “Go to your friend: I will come presently.”

He did come—though not for a good while; and Miss Bowen fancied from his looks that he had been more injured than he acknowledged; but she did not like to inquire. Nevertheless he rose greatly in her estimation, less for his courage than for the presence of mind and common sense which made it Valuable, and for the self-restraint and indifference which caused him afterwards to treat the whole adventure as such a trifling thing.

It was, after all, nothing very romantic or extraordinary, and happened in such a brief space of time, that probably the circumstance is not noted in the traditionary chronicles of the Zoological Gardens, which contain the frightful legend carefully related that day by several keepers to Mrs. Thornycroft—how a bear had actually eaten up a child, falling in the same manner into the same den.

But the adventure, slight as it may appear, made a very great and sudden difference in the slender tie of acquaintanceship, hitherto subsisting between Agatha and Major Harper's brother. She began to treat Nathanael more like a friend, and ceased to think of him exactly as a “boy.”

Master James's mamma, when she at last turned her attention from his beloved small self, was full of thanks to his preserver. Mr. Harper assured her that his feat was merely a little exertion of muscular strength, and at last grew evidently uncomfortable at being made so much of. Returning home with them,

he would fain have crept away from the scene of his honours; but the good-natured, motherly-hearted Emma implored him to stay.

“We will nurse you if you are hurt, which I am afraid you must be—it was such a dreadful strain! Oh, Jemmie, Jemmie!” and the poor mother shuddered.

“Indeed you must come in,” added Miss Bowen kindly, seeing that Emma's thoughts were floating away, as appeared this time natural enough, to her own concerns. “You shall rest all the evening, and we will talk to you, and be very, very agreeable. Pray yield!”

Nathanael argued no more, but went in “quite lamb-like,” as Mrs. Thornycroft afterwards declared.

This acquiescence in him was little rewarded, Agatha thought—for the evening happened to be duller even than evenings usually passed at the Thornycrofts'. The head of the household, being detained in the City, did not appear; and Mrs. Thornycroft's tongue, unchecked by her husband's presence, and excited by the event of the afternoon, galloped on at a fearful rapidity. She poured out upon the luckless young man all the baby biography of her family, from Missy's christening down to the infant Selina's cutting of her first tooth. To all of which he listened with a praiseworthy attention, giving at least silence, which was doubtless all the answer Emma required.

But Agatha, whose sympathy in these things was, as before said, at present small, grew half ashamed, half vexed, and finally rather angry—especially when she saw the pale weariness that gradually overspread Mr. Harper's face. More than once she hinted that he should have the armchair, or

lie down, or rest in some way; but he took not the least notice; sitting immovably in his place, which happened to be next herself, and vaguely looking across the table towards Mrs. Thornycroft.

At nine o'clock, becoming paler than ever, he bestirred himself, and talked of leaving.

“I ought to be going too. It is not far, and as our roads agree, I will walk with you,” said Agatha, simply.

He seemed surprised—so much so, that she almost blushed, and would have retracted, save for the consciousness of her own frank and kindly purpose. She had watched him closely, and felt convinced that he had been more injured than he confessed; so in her generous straightforward fashion, she wanted to “take care of him,” until he was safe at his brother's door, which she could see from her own. And her solitary education had been conducted on such unworldly principles, that she never thought there was anything remarkable or improper in her proposing to walk home with a young man, whom she knew she could trust in every way, and who was besides Major Harper's brother.

Nor did even the matronly Mrs. Thornycroft object to the plan—save that it took her visitors away so early. “Surely,” she added, “you can't be tired out already.”

Agatha had an ironical answer on the very tip of her tongue: but something in the clear, “good” eye of Nathanael repressed her little wickedness. So she only whispered to Emma that for various reasons she had wished to return early.

“Very well, dear, since you must go, I am sure Mr. Harper will be most happy to escort you.”

“If not, I hope he will just say so,” added

Agatha, very plainly.

He smiled; and his full, soft grey eye, fixed on hers, had an earnestness which haunted her for many a day. She began heartily to like Major Harper's brother, though only as his brother, with a sort of reflected regard, springing from that she felt for her guardian and friend.

This consciousness made her manner perfectly easy, cheerful, and kind, even though they were in the perilously sentimental position of two young people strolling home together in the soft twilight of a Midsummer evening: likewise occasionally stopping to look westward at a new moon, which peered at them round street-corners and through the open spaces of darkening squares. But nothing could make these two at all romantic or interesting; their talk on the road was on the most ordinary topics—chiefly bears.

“You seem quite familiar with wild beast life,” Agatha observed. “Were you a very great hunter?”

“Not exactly, for I never could muster up the courage, or the cowardice, wantonly to take away life. I don't remember ever shooting anything, except in self-defence, which was occasionally necessary during the journeys that I used to make from Montreal to the Indian settlements with Uncle Brian.”

“Uncle Brian,” repeated Agatha, wondering whether Major Harper had ever mentioned such a personage, during the two years of their acquaintance. She thought not, since her memory had always kept tenacious record of what he said about his relatives—which was at best but little. It was one of the few things in him which jarred upon Agatha's feelings—Agatha, to whose isolation the

idea of a family and a home was so pathetically sweet—his seeming so totally indifferent to his own. All she knew of Major Harper's kith and kin was, that he was the eldest brother of a large family, settled somewhere down in Dorsetshire.

These thoughts swept through her mind, as Agatha, repeated interrogatively “Uncle Brian?”

“The same who fifteen years since took me out with him to America; my father's youngest brother. Has Frederick never told you of him? They two were great companions once.”

“Oh, indeed!” And Agatha, seeing that Nathanael at least showed no dislike, but rather pleasure, in speaking of his family, thought she might harmlessly indulge her curiosity about the Harpers of Dorsetshire. “And you went away with Mr. Brian Harper, at ten years old. How could your mother part with you?”

“She was dead—she died when I was born. But I ought to apologise for thus talking of family matters, which cannot interest you.”

“On the contrary, they do—very much!” cried Agatha; and then blushed at her own earnestness, at which Nathanael brightened up into positive warmth.

“How kind you are! how I wish you knew my sisters! It is so pleasant to me to know them at last, after writing to them and thinking about them for these many years. How you would like our home—I call it home, forgetting that I have been only a visitor, and in a short time must go back to my real home, Montreal.”

“Must you indeed!” And Agatha felt sorry. She had been at once surprised and gratified by the confidential way in which this usually reserved

young man talked to her, and her alone. “Why do you live in America? I hate Americans.”

“Do you?” said he, smiling, as if he read her thoughts. “But I have neither Yankee blood nor education. I was English born; brought up in British Canada, and by Uncle Brian.”

He spoke the latter words with a certain proud affection, as if his uncle's mere name were sufficient guarantee for himself. Agatha secretly wondered what could possibly be the reason that Major Harper had never even mentioned this personage, whom Nathanael seemed to hold in such honour.

“Of course,” he continued, “though I dearly like England, though”—and he sunk his voice a little —“though now it will be doubly hard to go away, I could never think of leaving Uncle Brian to spend his old age alone in the country of his adoption.”

“No, no,” returned Agatha, absently, her thoughts still running on this new Mr. Harper. “What profession is he?”

“Nothing now. He has led an unsettled life—always poor. But he took care to settle me in a situation under the Canadian Government. We both think ourselves well to do now.”

Agatha's sense of womanly decorum could hardly keep her from pressing her companion's arm, in instinctive acknowledgment of his goodness. She thought his face looked absolutely beautiful.

However, restraining her quick impulses within the bounds of propriety, she walked on. “And so you will again cross that fearful Atlantic Ocean?” she said at length, with a slight shudder. The young man saw her gesture, and looked surprised—nay, gladdened. But nevertheless he remained silent.

Agatha did the same, for the mention of the sea

brought back to her the one only noteworthy incident of her life, which had given her this strange antipathy to the sea and to the thought of traversing it. But this subject—the horrible bugbear of her childhood—she rarely liked to recur to, even now; so it did not mingle in her conversation with Mr. Harper.

At last Nathanael said: “I would it were possible—indeed I have often vainly tried—to persuade Uncle Brian to come back to England. But since he will not, it is clearly right for me to return to Canada. Anne Valery says so.”

“Anne Valery!” again repeated Agatha, catching at this second strange name with which she was supposed to be familiar.

“What, did you never hear of her—my father's ward, my sister's chief friend—quite one of the family? Is it possible that my brother never spoke to you of Anne Valery?”

No, certainly not. Agatha was quite sure of that. The circumstance of Major Harper's having a friend who bore the very suspicious and romantically-interesting name of Anne Valery could never have slipped Miss Bowen's memory. She answered Nathanael's question in an abrupt negative; but all the way through Russell Square she silently pondered as to who, or what like, Anne Valery could be? finally sketching a fancy portrait of a bewitching young creature, with blue eyes and golden hair—the style of beauty which Agatha most envied, because it was most unlike herself.

Ere reaching Dr. Ianson's door, her attention was called to Mr. Harper, whose feet dragged so wearily along, that Agatha was convinced that, in spite of his efforts to conceal it, he was seriously ill. Her

womanly sympathy rose—she earnestly pressed him to come in and consult Dr. Ianson.

“No—no. Uncle Brian and I always cure ourselves. As he often says, 'A man after forty is either a doctor or a fool.'”

“But you are only twenty-five.”

“Ay, but I have seen enough to make me often feel like a man of forty,” said he, smiling. “Do not mind me. That strain was rather too much; but I shall be all right in a day or two.”

“I hope so,” cried Agatha, anxiously; “since, did you suffer, I should feel as if it were all of my causing, and for me.

“Do you think I should regret that?” said the young man, in a tone so low, that its meaning scarcely reached her. Then, as if alarmed at his own words, he shook hands with her hastily, and walked down the square.

Agatha thought how different was the abrupt, singular manner of Nathanael from Major Harper's tender, lingering, courteous adieu. Nevertheless, she fulfilled her kind purpose towards the young man; and running to her own window, watched his retreating figure, till her mind was relieved by seeing him safely enter his brother's door.

## CHAPTER III.

A week—nay, more than a week slipped by in

the customary monotony of that large, placidly genteel, Bedford Square house, and Agatha heard nothing of the house round the corner, which constituted one of the faint few interests of her existence. Sometimes she felt vexed at the lengthened absence of her friend and "guardian," as she persisted in considering him; sometimes the thought of young Nathanael's pale face crossed her fancy, awakening both sincere compassion and an uncomfortable doubt that all might not be going on quite right within the half-drawn window-blinds, at which she now and then darted a curious glance.

At last her curiosity or interest rose to such a pitch, that it is to be feared that Agatha in her independent spirit, and ignorance of, or indifference to the world, might have committed the terrific impropriety of making a good-natured inquiry at the door of this bachelor-establishment. She certainly would, had it consisted only of the harmless youth Nathanael; but then Major Harper, at the mention of whose name Mrs. Ianson now began to smile aside, and the invalid Jane to dart towards Agatha quick, inquisitive looks—No; she felt an invincible repugnance to knocking, on any pretence, at Major Harper's door.

However, having nothing to do and little to think of, and, moreover, being under the unwholesome necessity of keeping all her thoughts to herself, her conjectures grew into such a mountain of discomfort—partly selfish, partly generous, out of the hearty gratitude which had been awakened in her towards the younger brother since the adventure with the bear—that Miss Bowen set off one fine morning, hoping to gain intelligence of her neighbours by the round-about medium of Emma Thornycroft.

But that excellent matron had had two of her children ill with some infantine disease, and had in consequence not a thought to spare for any one out of her own household. The name of Harper never crossed her lips until Agatha, using a safe plural, boldly asked the question, “Had Emma seen anything of them?”

Mrs. Thornycroft could not remember.—Yes, she fancied some one had called—Mr. Harper, perhaps; or no, it must have been the Major, for somebody had said something about Mr. Nathanael's being ill or out of town. But the very day after that the measles came out on James, and poor little Missy had just been moved out of the night-nursery into the spare bed-room, etc. etc. etc.

The rest of Emma's information concerning her babies was, as they say in the advertisements of lost property, “of no value to anybody but the original owner.”

Agatha bestowed a passing regret on young Nathanael, whether he were ill or out of town; she would have liked to have seen more of him. But that Major Harper should contrive to saunter up to the Regent's Park to visit the Thornycrofts, and never find time to turn a street-corner to say “How d'ye do” to *her*! she thought neither courteous nor kind.

There was little inducement to spend the day with Emma, who, in her present mood and the state of her household, was a mere conversational Dr. Buchan—a walking epitome of domestic medicine. So Miss Bowen extended her progress; took an early dinner with Mrs. Hill, and stayed all the afternoon at that good old lady's silent and quiet lodgings, where there was neither piano nor books, save one, which Agatha patiently read aloud for two whole hours

—“The life of Elizabeth Fry.” A volume uninteresting enough to a young creature like herself, yet sometimes smiting her with involuntary reflections, as she contrasted her own aimless, useless existence with the life of that worthy Quakeress—the prison-angel.

Having tired herself out, first with reading and then with singing—very prosy and lengthy ballads of the old school, which were the ditties Mrs. Hill always chose—Agatha departed much more cheerful than she came. So great strength and comfort is there in having something to do, especially if that something happens to be, according to the old nursery-rhyme—

Not for ourself, but our neighbour.

Another day passed—which being rainy, made the Doctor's dull house seem more inane than ever to the girl's restless humour. In the evening, at his old-accustomed hour, Major Harper “dropped in,” and Agatha forgot his sins of omission in her cordial welcome. Very cordial it was, and unaffected, such as a young girl of nineteen may give to a man of forty, without her meaning being ill-construed. But under it Major Harper looked pathetically sentimental and uncomfortable. Very soon he moved away and became absorbed in delicate attentions towards the sick and suffering Jane Ianson.

Agatha thought his behaviour rather odd, but generously put upon it the best construction possible —viz. his known kind-heartedness. So she herself went to the other side of the invalid couch, and tried to make mirth likewise.

Asking after Mr. Harper, she learnt that her friend had been acting as sick-nurse, to his brother for some days.

“Poor fellow—he will not confess that he is ill, or what made him so. But I hope he will be about again soon, for they are anxiously expecting him in Dorsetshire. Nathanael is the 'good boy' of our family, and as worthy a creature as ever breathed.”

Agatha smiled with pleasure to see the elder brother waxing so generously warm; but when she smiled, Major Harper sighed, and cast his handsome eyes another way. All the evening he scarcely talked to her at all, but to Mrs. and Miss Ianson. Agatha was quite puzzled by this pointed avoidance, not to say incivility, and had some thoughts of plainly asking him if he were vexed with her; but womanly pride conquered girlish frankness, and she was silent.

After tea their quartett was broken by a visitor, whom all seemed astonished to see, and none more so than Major Harper.

“Why, Nathanael, I thought you were safely disposed of with your sofa and book. What madness makes you come out to-night?”

“Inclination, and weariness,” returned the other, indifferently, as, without making more excuses or apologies, he dragged himself to the arm-chair, which Miss Bowen good-naturedly drew out for him, and slipped into the circle, quite naturally.

“Well, wilful lads must have their way,” cried his brother, “and I am only too glad to see you so much better.”

With that the flow of the Major's winning conversation recommenced; in which current all the rest of the company lay like silent pebbles, only too happy to be bubbled round by such a pleasant and refreshing stream.

The younger Harper sat in his arm-chair, leaning his forehead on his hand, and from under that curve

now and then looking at them all, especially Agatha.

At a late hour the brothers went away, leaving Mrs. and Miss Ianson in a state of extreme delight, and Miss Bowen in a mood that, to say the least, was thoughtful—more thoughtful than usual.

After that lively evening followed three dull days, consisting of a solitary forenoon, an afternoon walk through the squares, dinner, backgammon, and bed; the next morning, *de capo al fine*, and so on; a dance of existence as monotonous as that of the spheres, and not half so musical. On the fourth day, while Miss Bowen was out walking, Nathanael Harper called to take leave before his journey to Dorsetshire. He stayed some time, waiting Agatha's return, Mrs. Ianson thought; but finally changed his mind, and made an abrupt departure, for which that young lady was rather sorry than otherwise.

The fifth day, Emma Thornycroft appeared, and, strange to say, without any of her little ones; still stranger, without many references to them on her lips, except the general information that they were all getting well now.

The busy woman evidently had something on her mind, and plunged at once *in médias res*.

“Agatha, dear, I came to have a little talk with you.”

“Very well,” said Agatha smiling; calmly and prepared to give up her morning to the discussion of some knotty point in dress or infantile education. But she soon perceived that Emma's pretty face was too ominously important for anything short of that gravest interest of feminine life—matrimony; or more properly in this case—match-making.

“Agatha, love,” repeated Emma, with the affectionate accent that was always quite real, but

which now deepened under the circumstances of the case, “do you know that young Northen has been speaking to Mr. Thornycroft about you again.”

“I am very sorry for it,” was the short answer.

“But, my dear, isn't it a great pity that you could not like the young man? Such a good young man too, and with such a nice establishment already. If you could only see his house in Cumberland Terrace—the real Turkey carpets, inlaid tables, and damask chairs.”

“But I can't marry carpets, tables, and chairs.”

“Agatha, you are *so* funny! Certainly not, without the poor man himself. But there is no harm in him, and I am sure he would make an excellent husband.”

“I sincerely hope so, provided he is not mine. Come, Tittens, tell Mrs. Thornycroft what *you* think on the matter,” cried the wilful girl, trying to turn the question off by catching her little favourite. But Emma would not thus be set aside. She was evidently well primed with a stronger and steadier motive than what usually occupied and sufficed her easy mind.

“Ah, how can you be so childish! But when you come to my age”—-

“I shall, in a few more years. I wonder if I shall be as young-looking as you, Emma?” This was a very adroit thrust on the part of Miss Agatha, but for once it failed.

“I hope and trust so, dear. That is, if you have as good a husband as I have. Only, be he what he may, he cannot be such another as my dear James.”

Agatha internally hoped he might not; for, much as she liked and respected Emma's good spouse, her ideal of a husband was certainly not Mr. James

Thornycroft.

“Tell me,” continued the anxious matron, keeping up the charge—“tell me, Agatha, do you ever intend to marry at all?

“Perhaps so; I can't say. Ask Tittens!”

“Did you ever think in earnest of marrying? And”—here with an air of real concern Emma stole her arm round her friend's waist—“did you ever see anybody whom you fancied you could like, if he asked you?”

Agatha laughed, but the colour was rising in her brown cheek. “Tut, tut, what nonsense!”

“Look at me, dear, and answer seriously.”

Agatha, thus hemmed in, turned her face full round, and said, with some dignity, “I do not know, Emma, what right you have to ask me that question.”

“Ah, it is so; I feared it was,” sighed Emma, not in the least offended. “I often thought so, even before he hinted——”—

“Who hinted—and what?”

“I can't tell you; I promised not. And of course you ought not to know. Oh, dear, what am I letting out!” added poor Mrs. Thornycroft, in much discomfiture.

“Emma, you will make me angry. What ridiculous notion have you got into your head? What on earth do you mean?” cried Miss Bowen, speaking quicker than her usual quick fashion, and dashing the kitten off her knee as she rose.

“Don't be vexed with me, my poor dear girl. It may not be so—I hope not; and even if it were, he is so handsome, so agreeable, and talks so beautifully—I am sure you are not the first woman by many a dozen that has been in love with him.”

“With whom?” was the sharp question, as Agatha grew quite pale.

“I must not say.—Ah, yes—I must. It may be a mere supposition. I wish you would only tell me so, and set my mind at rest, and his too. He is quite unhappy about it, poor man, as I see. Though, to be sure, he could not help it, even if you did care for him.”

“Him—what 'him?'”

“Major Harper.”

Agatha's storm of passion sank to a dead calm. She sat down again composedly, turning her flushed cheeks from the light.

“This is a new and very entertaining story. You will be kind enough, Emma, to tell me the whole, from beginning to end.”

“It all lies in a nutshell, my dear. Oh, how glad I am that you take it so quietly. Then, perhaps it is all a mistake, arising from your hearty manner to every one. I told him so, and said that he need not scruple visiting you, or be in the least afraid that——”

“That I was in love with him? He *was* afraid, then? He informed you so? Very kind of him! I am very much obliged to Major Harper.”

“There now—off you go again. Oh, if you would but be patient”

“Patient—when the only friend I had insults me! —when I have neither father, nor brother,—nobody —nobody——”

She stopped, and her throat choked; but the struggle was in vain; she burst into uncontrollable tears.

“You have me, Agatha, always me, and James!” cried Emma, hanging about her neck, and weeping

for company; until, very soon, the proud girl shut down the floodgates of her passion, and became herself again. Herself—as she could not have been, were there a mightier power dwelling in her heart than pride.

“Now, Emma, since you have seen how the thing has vexed me, though not”—and she laughed—“not as being one of the many dozens of fools in love with Major Harper—will you tell me how this amusing circumstance arose?”

“I really cannot, my dear. The whole thing was so hurried and confused. We were talking together, very friendly and sociably, as the Major and I always do, about you; and how much I wished you to be settled in life, as he must wish likewise, being the trustee of your little fortune, and standing in a sort of fatherly relation towards you. He did not seem to like the word; looked very grave and very”—

“Compassionate, doubtless! Said 'he had reason to believe, that is to fear, I did not regard him quite as a father!' That was it, Emma, I suppose?”

“Well, my dear, I am glad to see you laughing at it I don't remember his precise words.”

“Probably these: 'My dear Mrs. Thornycroft, I am greatly afraid poor Agatha Bowen is dying for love of me.' Very candid—and like a gentleman!”

“Now you are too sarcastic; for he is a gentleman, and most kind-hearted too. If you had only seen how grieved he was at the bare idea of your being made unhappy on his account!”

“How considerate!—and how very confidential he must have been to you!”

“Nay, he hardly said anything plainly; I assure you he did not. Only somehow he gave me the impression that he was afraid of—what I had feared

for a long time. For as I always told you, Agatha, Major Harper is a settled bachelor—too old to change. Besides, he has had so many women in love with him."

"Does he count their names, one by one, on his fingers, and hang their locks of hair on his paletot, after the Indian fashion Nathanael Harper told us of? —Poor Nathanael!" And on her excited mood that pale "good" face rose up like a vision of serenity. She ceased to mock so bitterly at Nathanael's brother and her own once-honoured friend.

"I don't like your abusing Major Harper in this way," said Emma, gravely; "we all know his little weaknesses, but he is an excellent man, and my husband likes him. And it is nothing so very wonderful if he has been rather confidential with a steady married woman like me—just the right person, in short. It was for your good too, my dear. I am sure I asked him plainly if he ever could think of marrying you. But he shook his head, and answered, 'No, that was quite impossible.'"

"Quite impossible, indeed," said Agatha, her proud lips quivering. "And should he favour you with any more confidences, you may tell him that Agatha Bowen never knew what it was to be 'in love' with any man. Likewise, that were he the only man on earth, she would not condescend to fall in love with or marry Major Frederick Harper.—Now, Emma, let us go down to lunch."

They would have done so, after Mrs. Thornycroft had kissed and embraced her friend, in sincere delight that Agatha was quite heart-whole, and ready to make what she called "a sensible marriage," but they were stopped on the stairs by a letter that came by post.

"A strange hand," Miss Bowen observed, carelessly. "Will you go down-stairs, Emma, and I will come when I have read it."

But Agatha did not read it. She threw it on the floor, and turning the bolt of the door, paced her little drawing-room in extreme agitation.

"I am glad I did not love him—I thank God I did not love him," she muttered by fits. "But I might have done so, so good and kind as he was, and I so young, with no one to care for. And no one cares for me—no one—no one!"

"Young Northen" darted through her mind, but she laughed to scorn the possibility. What love could there be in an empty-headed fool?

"Never any but fools have ever made love to me! Oh, if an honest, noble man did but love me, and I could marry, and get out of this friendless desolation, this contemptible, scheming, match-making set, where I and my feelings are talked of, speculated on, bandied about from house to house. It is horrible—horrible! But I'll not cry! No!"

She dried the tears that were scorching her eyes, and mechanically took up her letter; until, remembering how long she had been upstairs, and how all that time Emma's transparent disposition and love of talk might have laid her and her whole affairs open before the Iansons, she quickly put the epistle in her pocket unread, and went down into the dining-room.

It was not till night, when she sat idly brushing out her long curls, and looking at her Pawnee face in the mirror—alas! the poor face now seemed browner and uglier than ever!—that Agatha recollected this same letter.

"It may give me something to think about,

which will be well," sighed she; and carelessly pushing her hair behind her ears, she drew the candle nearer, and began leisurely to read.



*Agatha.* "She began leisurely to read." Page 36.

The commencement was slightly abrupt:

"A month ago—had any one told me I should write this letter, I could not have believed it possible. But strange things happen in our lives—things over which we seem to have no control; we are swept on by an impulse and a power which most often guide us for our good. I hope it may be so now.

"I came to England with no intention save that of seeing my family, and no affection in my heart stronger than for them. Living the solitary life that Uncle Brian leads, I have met with few women, and have never loved any woman—until now.

"You may think me a 'boy;' indeed, I overheard you say so once; but I am a man—with a heart full of all a man's emotions, passionate and strong. Into that heart I took *you*, from the first moment I ever saw your face. This is just three weeks ago, but it might have been three years—I know you so well. I have watched you continually; every trait of your character—every thought of your mind. From other people I have found out every portion of your history—every daily action of your life. I know you wholly and completely, faults and all, and—I love you. No man will ever love you more than I.

"That you should have the least interest in me now, is, I am aware, unlikely; indeed, almost impossible; therefore I shall not expect or desire any answer to this letter, sent just before I leave for Dorsetshire.

"On my return, a week hence, I shall come and see you, should you not forbid it. I shall come merely as a *friend*, so that you need have no scruple in my visiting you, once at least. If afterwards, when you know me better, you should suffer me to ask for another title, giving to you the dearest and closest that man can give to woman—then—oh! little you think how I would love you, Agatha!

"Nathanael Locke Harper."

Agatha read this letter all through with a kind of fascination. Her first emotion was that of most utter astonishment. It had never crossed her mind that Nathanael Harper was the sort of being very likely to

fall in love with anybody—and for him to love her! With such a love, too, that despite its suddenness carried with it the impression of quiet depth, strength, and endurance irresistible. It was beyond belief.

She read over again fragments of his own words. “I took you into my heart from the first moment I ever saw you;”—“I love you—no man will ever love you more than I.” “Little you think how I would love you, Agatha!”

Agatha—who a minute before had been pondering mournfully that no one cared for her—that she was of no use to any one—and that no living soul would miss her, were her existence blotted out from the face of earth that very night!

She began to tremble; ay, even though she felt that Nathanael had judged correctly—that she did not now love him, and probably never might—still, overwhelmed with the sudden sense of *his* great love, she trembled. A strange softness crept over her; and for the second time that day she yielded to a weakness only drawn from her proud heart by rare emotions—Agatha wept.

## CHAPTER IV.

To say that Agatha Bowen slept but ill that night would be unnecessary; since there is probably no girl who did not do so after receiving a first love-letter.

And this was indeed her first; for the commonplace and business-like episode of young Northen had not been beautified by any such compositions. A second harmless adventure of like kind had furnished her with a little amusement and some vexation,—but never till now had her girlish heart been approached by any wooing which she could instinctively feel was that of real love. It touched her very much; for a time absorbing all distinct resolutions or intentions in a maze of pleasant, tender pity, and wonderment not unmixed with fear.

Half the night she lay awake, planning what she should do and say in the future; writing in her head a dozen imaginary answers to Mr. Harper's letter, until she recollected that he had expressly stated it required none. Nevertheless, she thought she must write, if only to tell him that she did not love him, and that there was not the slightest use in his hoping to be anything more to her than a friend.

"A friend!" She recoiled at the word, remembering how sorely her pride and feelings had been wounded by him she once held to be the best friend she had. She never could hold him as such any more. Her impulsive anger exaggerated even to wickedness the vanity of a man who fancied every woman was in love with him. She forgot all Major Harper's good qualities, his high sense of honour, his unselfish kindheartedness, his generous, gay spirit She set him down at once as unworthy the name of friend. Then—what friend had she? Not one—not one in the world.

In this strait, strangely, temptingly sweet seemed to come the words, "*I love you; no man will ever love you better than I.*"

To one whose heart is altogether free, the

knowledge of being deeply loved, and by a man whose attachment would do honour to any woman, is a thought so soothing, so alluring, that from it spring half the marriages—not strictly love-marriages—which take place in the world; sometimes, though not always, ending in real happiness.

Agatha began to consider that it would seem very odd if she wrote to Mr. Harper, in his home, among his family. Perhaps his sisters might notice her handwriting—a useless fear, since they had never seen it; and at all events it would be a pity to trouble his happiness in that pleasant visit, by conveying prematurely the news of his rejection. She would wait, and give him no answer for at least a day or two; it was such a bitter thing to inflict pain on any human being, especially on one so gentle and good as Nathanael Harper.

With this determination she went to sleep. She woke next morning, having a confused sense that something had happened, that some one had grieved and offended her; and—strange consciousness, softly dawning!—that some one loved her—deeply, dearly, as in all the days since she was born she had never been loved before. That even now some one might be thinking of her—of her alone, as his first object in the world. The sensation was new, inexplicable, but pleasant nevertheless. It made her feel—what the desolate orphan girl rarely had felt—a sort of tenderness for, and honouring of, herself. As she dressed, she once looked wistfully, even pensively, in the looking-glass.

“It is certainly a queer, brown, Pawnee face! I wonder what he could see in it to admire. He is very good, very! I wish I could have cared for him!”

Her heart trembled; all the woman in her was

touched. But Agatha was resolved not to be sentimental, so she fastened her morning-dress rather more tastefully than usual, and descended to breakfast.

Beside her plate lay a letter, which was pretty closely eyed by the Ianson family, as their inmate's correspondence had always been remarkably small.

“A black edge and seal. No bad news, I hope, my dear Miss Bowen?” said the doctor's wife, sympathetically.

Agatha did not fear. Alas! in the whole wide world she had not a relative to lose! And, glancing at the rather peculiar hand, she recognised it at once. She remembered likewise, to account for the black seal, that one of the Miss Harpers had died within the year. So, whether from the spice of malice in her composition she wished to disappoint the polite inquisitiveness of the Iansons, or whether from more generous reasons of her own, Miss Bowen left her letter unopened until the meal was done; when, carelessly taking it up, she adjourned to her own sitting-room.

There was not the slightest necessity for any such precaution, as the missive contained merely these lines:—

“In my letter of yesterday—which I doubt not you have received, since I posted it myself—I omitted to say that not even my brother is aware of it, or of its purport; as I rarely inform any one of my own private affairs. Though, of course, I presume not to lay the same restriction on you. God bless you!”

The “God bless you!” was added hastily in less neat writing, as if the letter had been broken open to do it. The signature was merely his initials, “N. L. H.,” and the date “Kingcombe Holm,” which Agatha

supposed was his father's house in Dorsetshire.

Then, even there, amidst his dear home circle, he had thought of her! Agatha was more moved by that trifling circumstance, and by the self-restraint and silence that accompanied it, than she would have been by a whole quire of ordinary love-letters.

He did not write again during seven entire days, and while this pause lasted she had time to think much and deeply. She ceased to play and talk confidentially with Tittens, and felt herself growing into a woman fast. Great mental changes may at times be wrought in one week, especially when it happens to be one of those not infrequent July weeks, which seem as if the sky were bent upon raining out at once the tears of the whole summer.

On the Friday evening, when Miss Bowen, heartily tired of her weather-bound imprisonment, stood at the dining-room window, looking out on a hazy, yellow glow that began to appear in the west, sparkled on the drenched trees of the square, and made little bright reflections on the rain-pools of the pavement,—there appeared a gentleman from the house round the corner, carefully picking his steps by the crossing, and finally landing at Doctor Ianson's door. It was Major Harper.

Agatha instinctively quitted the window, but on second thoughts returned thither, and when he chanced to look up, composedly bowed.

He was come to spend the evening as usual, and she must meet him as usual too, otherwise he might think—supposing he had not yet seen Emma Thornycroft, or even if he had,—might think—what made Agatha's cheek burn like fire. But she controlled herself. The first vehemence of her pride and anger was over now. She had discovered that the

dawning inclination on which she had bestowed a few dreamings and sighings, trying, in foolish girlish fashion, to fan a chance tinder-spark into the holy altar-fire of a woman's first love—had gone out in darkness, and that her free heart lay quiet, in a sort of twilight shade, waiting for its destiny; nor for the last few days had she even thought of Nathanael. His silence had as yet no power to grieve or surprise her; if it struck her at all, it was with the hope that perhaps his wooing might die out of itself, and save her the trouble of a painful refusal. She had begun to think—what girls of nineteen are very slow to comprehend—that there might be other things in the world besides love and its ideal dreams. She had read more than usual—some sensible prose, some lofty-hearted poetry; and was, possibly, “a sadder and a wiser” girl than she had been that day week.

In this changed mood, after a little burst of well-controlled temper, a scornful pang, and a slight trepidation of the heart, Miss Agatha Bowen walked up-stairs to the drawing-room to meet Major Harper.

Her manner in so doing was most commendable, and a worthy example to those young ladies who have to extinguish the tiny embers of a month or two's idle fancy, created by an impressible nature, by girlhood's frantic longing after unseen mysteries, and by the terrible misfortune of having nothing to do. But Miss Bowen's demeanour, so highly creditable, cannot be set forward in words, as it consisted in the very simplest, mildest, and politest “How d'ye do?”

Major Harper met her with his accustomed pleasantly tender air, until gradually he recollected himself, looked pensive, and subsided into coldness. It was evident to Agatha that he could not have had any communication from Mrs. Thornycroft. She was growing vexed again, alternating from womanly

wrath to childish pettishness—for in her heart of hearts she had a deep and friendly regard for the noble half of her guardian's character—when suddenly she decided that it was wisest to leave the room and take refuge in indifference and her piano. There she stayed for certainly an hour.

At length, Major Harper came softly into her sitting-room.

“Don't let me disturb you—but, when you have quite finished playing, I should like to say a word to you.—Merely on business,” he added, with a slightly confused manner, unusual to the perfect self-possession of Major Harper.

Agatha sat down and faced him, so frigidly, that he seemed to withdraw from the range of her eyes. “You do not often converse with me on business.”

He drew back. “That is true. But I considered that with so young a lady as yourself it was needless. —And I hate all business,” he added, imperatively.

“Then I regret that my father burdened you with mine.

“No burden; it is a pleasure—if by any means I can be of use to you. Believe me, my dear Miss Bowen, your advantage, your security, is my chief aim. And therefore in this investment, of which I think it right to inform you——”

“Investment?” she repeated, turning round a childish puzzled face. “Oh, Major Harper, you know I am quite ignorant of these things. Do let us talk of something else.”

“With all my heart,” he responded, evidently much relieved, and turned the somewhat awkward conversation to the first available topic, which chanced to be his brother Nathanael.

“You cannot think how much I miss him in my rooms, even though he was such a short time with me. An excellent lad is N. L., and I hear they are making so much of him in Dorsetshire. They tell me he will certainly stay there the whole three months of his leave.”

“Oh, indeed!” observed Agatha, briefly. She hardly knew whether to be pleased or sorry at this news, or by doubting it to take a feminine pride in being so much better informed on the subject than the Harper family.

“No wonder he is so happy,” continued the Major, with one of his occasional looks of momentary, though real sadness. “Fifteen years is a long time to be away. Though I fear, I myself have been almost as long without seeing the whole family together.”

“Are they all together now?”—Agatha felt an irresistible desire to ask questions.

“I believe so; at least my father and my three unmarried sisters. Old bachelors and old maids are plentiful in the Harper family. We are all stiff-necked animals; we eschew even gilded harness.”

Agatha's cheek glowed with anger at this supposed benevolent warning to herself.

“I dare say your sisters are very happy, nevertheless; marriage is not always a 'holy estate,'” said she carelessly. “But there was some other Dorsetshire lady whom Mr. Harper told me of. Who is Anne Valery?”

Major Frederick Harper actually started, and the deep sensitive colour, which not even his forty years and his long worldly experience could quite keep down, rose in his handsome face.

“So N. L. spoke to you of her. No wonder. She is

an—an excellent person."

"An excellent person," repeated Agatha mischievously. "Then she is rather elderly, I conclude?"

"Elderly—Anne Valery elderly! By Heavens, no!" (And the excited Major used the solitary asseveration which clung to him, the last trace of his brief military experience.) "Anne Valery old! Not a day older than myself! We were companions as boy and girl, young man and young woman, until—stay—ten—fifteen years ago. Fifteen years!—ah, yes—I suppose she would be considered elderly now."

After this burst, Major Harper sank into one of his cloudy moods. At last he said, in a confidential and rather sentimental tone, "Miss Valery is an excellent lady—an old friend of our family; but she and I have not met for many years. Circumstances necessitated our parting."

"Circumstances?"

Agatha guessed the truth—or fancied she did; and her wrathful pride was up again. More trophies of the illustrious Frederick's unwilling slaughters—more heart's blood dyeing the wheels of this unconscious Juggernaut of female devotees! Yet there he sat, looking so pathetically regretful, as if he felt himself the blameless, helpless instrument of fate to work the sentimental woe of all womankind! Agatha was absolutely dumb with indignation.

She was a little unjust, even were he erring. It is often a great misfortune, but it is no blame to a good man that good women—more than one—have loved him; if, as all noble men do, he hides the humiliation or sorrow of their love sacredly in his own heart, and makes no boast of it. Of this nobility of character—rare indeed, yet not unknown or impossible—

Frederick Harper just fell short. Kind, clever, and amusing, he might be, but he was a man not sufficiently great to be humble.

No more was said on the mysterious topic of Miss Anne Valery. Agatha was too angry; and the subject seemed painful to Major Harper. Though he did what was not his habit—especially with female friends—he endeavoured, instead of encouraging, to throw off his momentary sentimentality, and become his usual witty, cheerful, agreeable self.

Miss Bowen, even in her tenderest inclinings towards her guardian, had at times thought him a little too talkative—a little too much of the brilliant man of the world. Now, in her bitterness against him, his gaiety was positively offensive to her. She rose, and proposed that they should quit her own private room for the general drawing-room of the family.

The Iansons were all there, even the Doctor being prone to linger in his dull home for the pleasure of Major Harper's delightful company. There was another, too, the unexpected sight of whom made both Agatha and her companion start.

As she and the Major entered, there arose, almost like an apparition from his seat in the window-recess, the tall, slight figure of Nathanael.

“N. L.! Where on earth have you dropped from? What a *very* extraordinary fellow you are!” cried the elder brother.

“Perhaps unwelcome also,” said the quiet voice.

“Unwelcome—never, my dear boy! Only next time, do be a little more confidential. Here have I been telling a whole string of apparent fibs about your movements—have I not Miss Bowen? Do you not consider this brother of mine the most eccentric creature in the world?”

Agatha looked up, and met the young man's eyes. Their expression could not be mistaken; they were *lover's eyes*—such as never in her life she had met before. They seemed constraining her to do what out of pity or mechanical impulse she at once did—silently to hold out her hand.

Nathanael took it with his usual manner. There was no other greeting on his part or hers. Immediately afterwards he slipped away to the very farthest corner of the room.

It would be hard to say whether Agatha felt relieved or disappointed at his behaviour; but surprised she most certainly was. This was not the sort of “lover's meeting” of girlish imaginings; nor was he the sort of lover, so perfectly unobtrusive, self-restrained, and coldly calm. She was glad she had not been at the pains to write the romantically pitiful, tender refusal, which she had concocted sentence by sentence in her deeply-touched heart, during that first wakeful night. He did not seem half miserable enough to need such wondrous compassion.

Freed in a measure from constraint, she became her own natural self, as women rarely, indeed never, are in the presence of those they love, or of those by whom they believe themselves loved. Neither unpleasant consciousness rested heavily on Agatha now; her demeanour was therefore very sweet, candid, and altogether pleasing.

Major Harper even forgot his benevolent precautions on Miss Bowen's account, and tried to render himself as agreeable as heretofore, talking away at a tremendous rate, and with most admirable eloquence, while his brother sat silent in a corner. The contrast between them was never so strong. But

once or twice Agatha, wearied out with laughing and listening, stole a look towards the figure that she felt was sitting there; and encountered the only sign Nathanael gave,—the unmistakeable “lover's eyes.” They seemed to pierce into her heart and make it quiver—not exactly with tenderness, but with the strange controlling sense by which the love of a strong nature, reticent, and self-possessed even in its utmost passion—at times appears to enfold a woman—and any true affection, whether of lover or friend, to those who have never known it, and are unconsciously pining for lack of it, comes at first like water in a thirsty land.

Miss Bowen's frank gaiety died slowly away, and she fell into more than one long reverie, which did not escape the benign notice of her guardian. He grew serious, and made an attempt to remove from her his own dangerous proximity.

“Come, N. L., it is time we vanished. You have never told me the least fragment of news from home—that is, from Kingcombe.”

“You were too much engaged, brother. But we have plenty of time.”

“Kingcombe; is that the place your father lives at?” said Mrs. Ianson, who took a patronising interest in the young man. “What a pretty name! Were you aware of it, Miss Bowen?”

Agatha, for her life, could not help changing colour as she answered “Yes,” knowing perfectly well who was watching her the while, and that he and she were thinking of the same thing, namely, the brief note whose date was her only information as to the family residence of the Harpers.

“Kingcombe is as pretty as its name,” observed the elder brother,—“a name more peculiar than at

first seems. It was given by a loyal Harper during the Protectorate. It had been St. Mary's Abbey, but he, with pretended sanctimoniousness, changed the name, and called it *Kingcombe Holm*; as a gentle hint from the Dorsetshire coast to Prince Charles over the water. Ah! a clever fellow was my great-great-grandfather, Geoffrey Harper!"

All laughed at the anecdote, and the Iansons looked with additional respect on the man who thus carelessly counted his grandfathers up to the Commonwealth. But Mrs. Ianson's curiosity penetrated even to the Harpers of Queen Victoria's day.

"Indeed we can't let you two gentlemen away so early. If you have family matters to talk over, suppose we send you for half-an-hour to Miss Bowen's drawing-room! or, if they are not secrets, pray discuss them here. I am sure we are all greatly interested; are we not, Miss Bowen?"

Agatha made some unintelligible answer. She thought Nathanael's quick eyes darted from her to Mrs. Ianson and back again, as if to judge whether, young-lady-like, she had told his secret to all her female friends. But there was something in Agatha's countenance which marked her out as that rare character, a woman who can hold her tongue—even in a love affair.

After a minute she looked at Mr. Harper gravely, kindly, as if to say, "You need not fear—I have not betrayed you;" and meeting her candid eyes, his suspicions vanished. He drew nearer to the circle, and began to talk.

"Mrs. Ianson is very kind, but we need not hold any such solemn conclave, Frederick," said he, smiling. "All the news that I did not unfold in my

letter of yesterday, I can tell you now. I would like every one here to be interested in our good sisters and in all at home."

"Yes—oh, yes," responded the other, mechanically. "Any messages for me?"

"My father says he hopes to see you this autumn at Kingcombe. He is growing an old man now."

"Ah, indeed!—An admirable man is my father, Miss Bowen. Quite a gentleman of the old school; but peculiar—rather peculiar. Well, what else, Nathanael?"

"Elizabeth, since Emily's death, seems to have longed after you very much.—You were the next eldest, you know, and she fancies you were always very like Emily. She says it is so long since you have been to Kingcombe."

"It is such a dull place. Besides I have seen them all elsewhere occasionally."

"All but Elizabeth; and, you know, unless you go to Kingcombe, you never can see Elizabeth," said the younger brother, gently.

"That is true!—Poor dear soul!" Frederick answered, looking grave. "Well, I will go ere long."

"Perhaps at Eulalie's wedding, which I told you of?"

"True—true. Eulalie is the youngest Miss Harper, as we should explain to our kind friends here —whom I hope we are not boring very much with our family reminiscences. And Eulalie, contrary to the usual custom of the Harpers, is actually going to be married. To a clergyman, is he not, N. L.?—late Curate of Kingcombe parish?"

"No—of Anne Valery's parish. By the way, you have not yet asked a single question about Anne

Valery."

The Major's aspect visibly changed. In all the years of his acquaintance with the world he had not yet learnt the convenient art of being a physiognomical hypocrite. "Well, never mind—I ask a dozen questions now. How could I forget so excellent a friend of the family?"

"She is indeed," said Nathanael, earnestly, while a glow of pleasure or enthusiasm dyed his pale features, and he even ceased his close watch over Agatha. "Though I was such a boy when I left, I find I have kept a true memory of Anne Valery. She is just the woman I always pictured her, from my own remembrance, and from Uncle Brian's chance allusions; though, in general, it was little enough he said of England or home. I was quite surprised to hear from Elizabeth what a strong friendship used to exist between Uncle Brian, yourself, and Anne Valery."

Major Harper's restlessness increased. "Really, we are indulging our friends with our whole genealogy—uncles, aunts, and collateral branches included—which cannot be very interesting to Mrs. and Miss Ianson, or even to Miss Bowen, however kindly she may be disposed towards the Harper family."

The Iansons here made polite disclaimers, but Agatha said nothing. Immediately afterwards, Nathanael's conversation likewise ebbed away into silence.

The next time Agatha heard him speak was in answer to a sudden question of his brother's as to what had made him return to London so unexpectedly. "I thought you would have stayed at least three months."

"No," he said in a low tone; "by that time I shall be far enough away."

"Why so?"

"From circumstances which have lately arisen"—he did not look at Agatha, but she felt his meaning—"I fear I must return to America at once."

He said no more, for his brother asked no more questions. But the tidings jarred painfully on Agatha's mind.

He was then going away, this man of so gentle, true and noble nature—this, the only man who loved her, and whom, while she thought of rejecting, she had still hoped to retain as an honoured and dear friend. He was going away, and she might never see him more. She felt grieved, and her lonely, unloved position rose up before her in more bitterness and more fear than it was wont to do. She became as thoughtful and silent as Nathanael himself.

Mr. Harper never attempted to address her or attract her attention during all that strange, long evening, which comprised in itself so many slight circumstances, so many conflicting states of feeling. Almost the only word this very eccentric lover said to her was in a whisper, just as his hand touched hers in bidding good-bye.

"As I am leaving England so soon, may I come here again to-morrow?"

"No, not to-morrow;" and then, her kind heart repenting of the evident pain she gave, she added, "Well, the day after to-morrow, if you like. But——"

Whatever that forbidding "but" was meant to hint, Nathanael did not stay to hear. He was gone in a moment.

However, that night a chance word of Mrs.

Ianson's did more for the suit of the unloved, or only half-loved lover, than he himself ever dreamed of.

“Well,” said that lady, with sly, matronly smile, as, showing more attention than usual, she lighted Agatha's candle for bed—“Well, my dear Miss Bowen, is the wedding to be at my house?”

“What wedding?”

“Oh, you know; you know! I have guessed it a long while, but to-night—surely, I may congratulate you? Never was there a more charming man than Major Harper.”

Agatha looked furious. “Has he then”—“told you the lie he told to Emma”—she was about to say, but luckily checked herself. “Has he then been so premature as to give you this information?”

“No! oh, of course not. But the thing is as plain as light.”

“You are mistaken, Mrs. Ianson. He is one of my very kindest friends; but I have never had the slightest intention of marrying Major Harper.”

With that she took her candle, and walked slowly to her own room. There, with her door locked, though that was needless, since there was no welcome or unwelcome friendship likely to intrude on her utter solitude,—she gave way to a woman's wounded pride. Added to this, was the terror that seizes a helpless young creature, who, all supports taken away, is at last set face to face with the cruel world, without even the steadfastness given by a strong sorrow. If she had really loved Frederick Harper, perhaps her condition would have been more endurable than now.

At length, above the storm of passion there seemed floating an audible voice, just as if the mind of him who she knew was always thinking of her,

then spoke to her mind, with the wondrous communication that has often happened in dreams, or waking, between two who deeply loved. A communication which appears both possible and credible to those who have felt any strong human attachment, especially that one which for the sake of its object seems able to cross the bounds of distance, time, life, or eternity.

It was a thing that neither then or afterwards could she ever account for, and years elapsed before she mentioned the circumstance to any one. But while she lay weeping across her bed, Agatha seemed to hear distinctly, just as if it had been a voice gliding past the window, half-mixing with the wind that was then rising, the words:

"*I love you! No man will ever love you like me.*"

That night, before she slept, her determination was taken.

## CHAPTER V.

Next morning Miss Bowen astonished every one, and excited once more Mrs. Ianson's incredulous smile, by openly desiring the servant who waited to take a message for her to Major Harper's. It was to the effect that she wished immediately to see that gentleman, could he make it convenient to visit her.

The message was given by her very distinctly, and with most creditable calmness, considering that

the destinies of her whole life hung on the sentence.

Major Harper appeared, and was shown into Miss Bowen's drawing-room. She was not there, and the Major waited rather uneasily for several minutes, unaware that half of that time she had been standing without, her hand on the lock of the door. But her tremulousness was that of natural emotion, not of fluctuating purpose. No physiognomist studying Agatha's mouth and chin would doubt the fact, that though rather slow to will—when she had once willed, scarcely anything had power to shake her resolution.

She went in at last, and bade Major Harper good morning. “I have sent for you,” she said, “to talk over a little business.”

“Business!”—And the hesitation and discomfort which seemed to arise in him at the mere mention of the word again were visible in Major Harper.

“Not trust business—something quite different,” said Agatha, scarcely able to help smiling at the alarm of her guardian.

“Then anything you like, my dear Miss Bowen! I have nothing in the world to do to-day. That stupid brother of mine is worse company than none at all. He said he had letters to write to Kingcombe, and vanished up-stairs! The rude fellow! But he is an excellent fellow too.”

“So you have always said. He appears to love his home, and be much beloved there. Is it so?”

“Most certainly. Already they know him better than they do me, and care for him more; though he has been away for fifteen years. But then he has kept up a constant correspondence with them; while I, tossing about in the world—ah! I have had a hard life, Miss Bowen!”

He looked so sad, that Agatha felt sorry for him. But his melancholy moods had less power to touch her than of old. His gaiety so quickly and invariably returned, that her belief in the reality of his grief was somewhat shaken.

She paused a little, and then recurred again, indifferently as it were, to Nathanael—the one person in his family of whom Major Harper always spoke gladly and warmly.

“You seem to have a great love for your younger brother. Is he then so noble a character?”

“What do you call a noble character, my dear young lady?”

The half-jesting, half-patronising manner irritated Agatha; but she answered boldly:

“A man honest in his principles, faithful to his word; just, generous, and honourable.”

“What a category of qualities! How interested young ladies are in a pale, thin boy! Well then”—seeing that Agatha looked serious—“well then, I declare to Heaven that, even according to your high-flown definitions, he is as noble a lad as ever breathed. I can find no fault in him, except that, as I said, he is such a mere boy. Are you satisfied? Did you want to try if I were indeed a heartless, unbrotherly, good-for-nothing fellow, as you appear to think me sometimes?”

“No,” said Agatha briefly, noticing with something like scorn the Major's instinctive assumption that her questions must have some near or remote reference to himself, while he never once guessed their real motive. That answered, she changed the conversation.

After half-an-hour's chat, Major Harper delicately alluded to the supposed business on which

she had wished to see him, though in a tone that showed him to be rather doubtful whether it existed at all.

Agatha coloured, and her heart quailed a little, as any girl's would, in having to speak so openly of things which usually reach young maidens softly murmured amidst the confessions of first love, or revealed by tender parents with blessings and tears. Life's earliest and best romance came to her with all its bloom worn away—all its sacredness and mystery set aside. For a moment she felt this hard.

“I wished to inform you of something nearly concerning me, which, as the guardian appointed by my father, it is right you should know. I have had”—here she tried to make her lips say the words without faltering—“I have had an offer of marriage.”

“God bless my soul!” stammered out Major Harper, completely thrown off his guard by surprise. A very awkward pause ensued, until, his natural good feeling conquering any other, he said, not without emotion, “The fact of your consulting me shows that this offer is—is not without interest to you. May I ask—is it likely—that I shall have to congratulate you?”

“Yes.”

He rose up slowly, and walked to the window. Whether his sensations were merely those of wounded vanity, or whether he had liked her better than he himself acknowledged, certain it was that Major Frederick Harper was a good deal moved—so much so, that he succeeded in concealing it. He came back, very kind, subdued, and tender, sat down by her side and took her hand.

“You will not wonder that I am somewhat surprised—nay, affected—by these sudden tidings,

viewing you as I have always done in the light of a—younger sister—or—or a daughter. Your happiness must naturally be very dear to me."

"Thank you," murmured Agatha; and the tears came into her eyes. She felt that she had been somewhat harsh to him; but she felt, too, with great thankfulness, that, despite this softening compunction, her heart was free and firm. She had great liking, but not a particle of love, for Major Harper.

"I trust the—the gentleman you allude to is of a character likely to make you happy?"

"Yes," returned Agatha, for she could only speak in monosyllables.

"Is he—as your friend and guardian I may ask that question—is he of good standing in the world, and in a position to maintain you comfortably?"

"I do not know—I have never thought about that," she cried, restlessly. "All I know is that he—loves me—that I honour him—that he would take me"—"out of this misery," she was about to say, but stopped, feeling that both the thought and the expression were unworthy Nathanael's future wife, and unfit to be heard by Nathanael's brother.

"That he would take me," repeated she firmly, "into a contented and happy home, where I should be made a better woman than I am, and live a life more worthy of myself and of him."

"You must then esteem him very highly?"

"I do—more than any man I ever knew."

The Major winced slightly, but quickly recovered himself. "That is, I believe, the feeling with which every woman ought to marry. He who wins and deserves such an attachment is"—and he

sighed—“is a happy man!—Happier, perhaps, than those who have remained single.”

Again there ensued a pause, until Major Harper broke it by saying:

“There is one more question—the last of all—which, after the confidence you have shown me, I may venture to ask: do I know this gentleman?”

Agatha replied by putting into his hands his brother's letter.

The moment she had done so she felt remorse for having betrayed her lover's confidence by letting any eyes save her own rest on his tender words. Had she loved him as he loved her, she could not possibly have done so; and even now a painful sensation smote her. She would have snatched the letter back, but it was too late.

Major Harper's eyes had merely skimmed down the page to the signature, when he threw it from him, crying out vehemently:

“Impossible! Agatha marry Nathanael—Nathanael marry Agatha!—He is a boy, a very child! What can he be thinking of? Send his letter back—tell him it is utter nonsense! Upon my soul it is!”

Major Harper was very shortsighted and inconsiderate when he gave way to this burst of vexation before any woman—still more before such a woman as Agatha.

She let him go on without interruption, but she lifted the letter from the floor, refolded it, and held it tenderly—more tenderly than she had ever until now felt towards it or its writer. Something of the grave sweetness belonging to the tie of an affianced wife began to cast its shadow over her heart.

“Major Harper, when you have quite done

speaking, perhaps you will sit down and hear what I have to say."

Struck by her manner, he obeyed, entreating her pardon likewise, for he was a gentleman, and felt that he had acted very wrongly.

"Yet surely," he began—until, looking at her, something convinced him that his arguments were useless. He stretched out his hand again for the letter, but with a slight gesture which expressed much, Agatha withheld it. After a pause, he said, meekly enough, as if thoroughly overcome by circumstances,—"So, it is quite true? You really love my brother?"

"I honour him, as I said, more than I do any man."

"And love him—are you sure you love him?"

"No one," she answered, deeply blushing—"No one but himself has a right to receive the answer to that question."

"True, true. Pardon me once more. But I am so startled, absolutely amazed. My brother Nathanael—he that was a baby when I was a grown man—he to marry—marrying you too—and I——Well; I suppose I am really growing into a miserable, useless old bachelor. I have thrown away my life: I shall be the last apple left on the tree—and a tolerably withered one too. But no matter. The world shall see the sunny half of me to the last."

He laughed rather tunelessly at his own bitter jest, and after a brief silence, recovered his accustomed manner.

"So so; such things must be, and I, though a bachelor myself, have no right to forbid marriages. Allow me to congratulate you. Of course you have answered this letter? My brother knows his

happiness?"

"He knows nothing; but I wished that he should do so to-day, after I had spoken to you. It was a respect I felt to be your due, to form no engagement of this kind without your knowledge."

"Thank you," he said in a low voice.

"You have been good and kind to me," continued Agatha, a little touched, "and I wished to have your approval in all things—chiefly in this. Is it so?"

He offered his hand, saying, "God bless you!" with a quivering lip. He even muttered "child;" as though he felt how old he was growing, and how he had let all life's happiness slip by, until it was just that he should no longer claim it, but be content to see young people rejoicing in their youth. After a pause, he added, "Now, shall I go and fetch my brother?"

"No," replied Agatha, "send for him, and do you stay here."

"As you please," said Major Harper, a good deal surprised at this very original way of conducting a love affair. After courteously offering to withdraw himself to the dining-room, which Agatha declined, he sat and waited with her during the few minutes that elapsed before his brother appeared.

Nathanael looked much agitated; his boyish face seemed to have grown years older since the preceding night. He paused at the door, and glanced with suspicion on his brother and Miss Bowen.

"You sent for me, Frederick?"

"It was I who sent for you," said Agatha. And then steadfastly regarding him whom she had tacitly accepted as her husband, the guide and ruler of her

whole life—her self-possession failed. A great timidity, almost amounting to terror, came over her. Vaguely she felt the want of something unknown—something which in the whirl of her destiny she could grasp and hold by, sure that she held fast to the right. It was the one emotion, neither regard, liking, honour, or esteem, yet including and surpassing all—the *love*, strong, pure love, without which it is so dangerous, often so fatal, for a woman to marry.

Agatha, never having known this feeling, could scarcely be said to have sacrificed it; at least not consciously. But even while she believed she was doing right in accepting the man who loved her, and whom she could make so happy, she trembled.

Major Harper sat looking out of the window in an uncomfortable silence, which he evidently knew not how to break. It was a very awkward and somewhat ridiculous position for all three.

Nathanael was the first to rise out of it. Slowly his features settled into composure, and his strong, earnest purpose gave him both dignity and calmness, even though all hope had evidently died. He looked steadily at his brother, avoiding Agatha.

“Frederick, I think I understand now. She has been telling you all.”

“It was right she should. Her father left her in my care. She wishes you to learn her decision in my presence,” said Major Harper, unwittingly taking a new and even respectful tone to the younger brother, whom he was wont to call “that boy.”

Nathanael grasped with his slight, long fingers, the chair by which he stood. “As she pleases. I am quite ready. Still—if—yesterday—without telling you or any one—she had said to me—But I am quite

ready to hear what she decides."

Despite his firmness, the words were uttered slowly and with a great struggle.

"Tell him everything, Miss Bowen; it will come better from yourself," said Frederick Harper, rising.

Agatha rose likewise, walked across the room, and laid her hand in that of him who loved her. The only words she said were so low that he alone could hear them:

"I have been very desolate—be kind to me!"

Nathanael made no answer; indeed for the moment his look was that of a man bewildered—but he never forgot those words.

Agatha felt her hand clasped—softly—but with a firm grasp that seemed to bind it to his for ever. This was the only sign of betrothal that passed between them. In another minute or two, unable to bear the scene longer, she crept out of the room and walked up-stairs, feeling with a dizzy sense, half of comfort, half of fear—yet, on the whole, the comfort stronger than the fear—that the struggle was all over, and her fate sealed for life.

When she descended, an hour after, the Harpers had gone; but she found a little note awaiting her, just one line:

"If not forbidden, I may come this evening."

Agatha knew she had no right to forbid, even had she wished it, now. So she waited quietly through the long, dim, misty day—which seemed the strangest day she had ever known; until, in the evening, her lover's knock came to the door.

She was sitting with Jane Ianson, near whom, partly in shy fear, partly from a vague desire for womanly sympathy, she had closely kept for the last

hour. As yet, the Iansons knew nothing. She wondered whether from his manner or hers they would be likely to guess what had passed that morning between herself and Mr. Harper.

It was an infinite relief to her when following, nay preceding, Nathanael, there appeared his elder brother, with the old pleasant smile and bow.

But amidst all his assumed manner, Major Harper took occasion to whisper kindly to Agatha; "My brother made me come—I shall do admirably to talk nonsense to the Iansons."

And so he did, carrying off the restraint of the evening so ingeniously that no one would have suspected any deeper elements of joy or pain beneath the smooth surface of their cheerful group.

Nathanael sat almost as silent as ever; but even his very silence was a beautiful, joyful repose. In his aspect a new soul seemed to have dawned—the new soul, noble and strong, which comes into a man when he feels that his life has another life added to it, to guard, cherish, and keep as his own until death. And though Mr. Harper gave little outward sign of what was in him, it was touching to see how his eyes followed his betrothed everywhere, whether she were moving about the room, or working, or trying to sing. Continually Agatha felt the shining of these quiet, tender eyes, and she began to experience the consciousness—perhaps the sweetest in the world—of being able to make another human being entirely happy.

Only sometimes, when she looked at her future husband—hardly able to believe he was really such—and thought how strangely things had happened; how here she was, no longer a girl, but a woman engaged to be married, sitting calmly by her lover's

side, without any of the tremblingly delicious emotions which she had once believed would constitute the great mystery, Love—a strange pensiveness overtook her. She felt all the solemnity of her position, and, as yet, little of its sweetness. Perhaps that would come in time. She resolved to do her duty towards him whom she so tenderly honoured, and who so deeply loved herself; and all the evening the entire gentleness of her behaviour was enough to charm the very soul of any one who held towards her the relation now borne by Nathanael Harper.

At length even the good-natured elder brother's flow of conversation seemed to fail, and he gave hints about leaving, to which the younger tacitly consented. Agatha bade them both good-night in public, and crept away, as she thought, unobserved, to her own sitting-room.

There she stood before the hearth, which looked cheerful enough this wet July night,—the fire-light shining on her hands, as they hung down listlessly folded together. She was thinking how strange everything seemed about her, and what a change had come in a few days, nay, hours.

Suddenly a light touch was laid on her hand. It startled her, but she did not attempt to shake it off. She knew quite well whose hand it was, and that it had a right to be there.

“Agatha!”

She half turned, and said once more “Good-night.”

“Good-night, *my* Agatha.”

And for a minute he stood, holding her hand by the fire-light, until some one below called out loudly for “Mr. Harper.” Then a kiss, soft and timid as a

woman's, trembled over Agatha's mouth, and he was gone.

This was the first time she had ever been kissed by any man. The feeling it left was very new, tremulous, and strange.

# CHAPTER VI.

The next morning was Sunday. Under one of the dark arches in Bloomsbury Church—with Mrs. Ianson's large feathers tossing on one side, and Jane's sickly unhappy face at the other—Agatha said her prayers in due sabbatical form. “Said her prayers” is the right phrase, for trouble had not yet opened her young heart to pray. Yet she was a good girl, not wilfully undevout; and if during the long missionary-sermon she secretly got her prayer-book and read—what was the most likely portion to attract her—the marriage service, it was with feelings solemnised and not unsacred. Some portions of it made her very thoughtful, so thoughtful that when suddenly startled by the conclusion of the sermon, she prayed—not with the clergyman, for “Jews, Turks, Infidels, and Heretics”—but for two young creatures, herself and another, who perhaps needed Heaven's merciful blessings quite as much.

When she rose up it was with moist eyelashes; and then she perceived what until this minute she had not seen,—that close behind her, sitting where he had probably sat all church-time, was Nathanael Harper.

If anything can touch the heart of a generous woman, when it is still a free heart, it is that quiet, unobtrusive, proudly-silent love which, giving all,

exacts nothing. Agatha's smile had in it something even of shy tenderness when at the church-door she was met by Mr. Harper. And when, after speaking courteously to the Iansons, he came, quite naturally as it were, to her side, and drew her arm in his, she felt a strange sense of calm and rest in knowing that it was her betrothed husband upon whom she leant.

At the door he seemed wishful enough to enter; but Mrs. Ianson invariably looked very coldly upon Sunday visitors.

And something questioning and questionable in the glances of both that lady and her daughter was very painful to Miss Bowen.

“Not to-day,” she whispered, as her lover detained her hand. “To-morrow I shall have made all clear to the Iansons.”

“As you will! Nothing shall trouble you,” said he, with a gentle acquiescence, the value of which, alas! she did not half appreciate. “Only, remember, I have so few to-morrows.”

This speech troubled Agatha for many minutes, bringing various thoughts concerning the dim future which as yet she had scarcely contemplated. It is wonderful how little an unsophisticated girl's mind rests on the common-sense and commonplace of marriage,—household prospects, income, long or short engagements, and the like. When in the course of that drowsy, dark Sunday afternoon, with the rain-drops dripping heavily on the balcony, she took opportunity formally to communicate her secret to the astonished Mrs. Ianson, Agatha was perfectly confounded by the two simple questions: “When are you to be married? And where are you going to live?”

“And oh! my dear,” cried the doctor's wife,

roused into positive sympathy by a confidence which always touches the softest chord in every woman's heart—“oh, my dear, I hope it will not be a long engagement. People change so—at least men do. You don't know what misery comes out of long engagements!” And, lowering her voice, she turned her dull grey eyes, swimming with motherly tears, towards the corner sofa where the pale, fretful, old-maidish Jane lay sleeping.

Agatha understood a little, and guessed more. After that day, however ill-tempered and disagreeable the invalid might be, she was always very patient and kind towards Jane Ianson.

After tea, when her daughter was gone to bed, Mrs. Ianson unfolded all to the Doctor, who nearly broke Miss Bowen's fingers with his congratulatory shake; John the footman, catching fragments of talk, probably put the whole story together for the amusement of the lower regions; and when Agatha retired to rest she was quite sure that the whole house, down to the little maid who waited on herself, was fully aware of the important fact that Miss Bowen was going to be married to Mr. Locke Harper.

This annoyed her—she had not expected it. But she bore it stoically as a necessary evil. Only sometimes she thought how different all things were, seen afar and near; and faintly sighed for that long ago lost picture of wakening fancy—the Arcadian, impossible love-dream.

She sat up till after midnight, writing to Emma Thornycroft, the only near friend to whom she had to write, the news of her engagement—information that for many reasons she preferred giving by pen, not words. Finishing, she put her blind aside to have one freshening look at the trees in the square. It was

quite cloudless now, the moon being just rising—the same moon that Agatha had seen, as a bright slender line appearing at street corners, on the Midsummer night when she and Nathariael Harper walked home together. She felt a deep interest in that especial moon, which seemed between its dawning and waning to have comprised the whole fate of her life.

Quietly opening the window, she leant out gazing at the moonlight, as foolish girls will—yet who does not remember, half pathetically, those dear old follies!

“Heigho! I wonder what will be the end of it all!” said Agatha Bowen; without specifying what the pronoun “it” alluded to.

But she stopped, hearing a footstep rather policeman-like passing up and down the railing under the trees. And as after a while he crossed the street—she saw that the “policeman” had the very unprofessional appearance of a cloak and long fair hair:—Agatha's cheek burned; she shut down the window and blind, and relighted the candle. But her heart beat fast—it was so strange, so new, to be the object of such love. “However, I suppose I shall get used to it—besides—oh, how good he is!”

And the genuine reverence of her heart conquered its touch of feminine vanity; which, perhaps, had he known, Nathanael would have done wiser in going to bed like a Christian, than in wandering like a heathen idolater round his beloved's shrine. But, however her pride may have been flattered, it is certain that Agatha went to sleep with tears, innocent and tender enough to serve as mirrors for watching night-angels, lying on her cheek.

The next morning she waited at home, and for

the first time received her betrothed openly as such. She was sitting alone in her little drawing-room engaged at her work; but put it down when Mr. Harper entered, and held out her hand kindly, though with a slight restraint and confusion. Both were needless: he only touched this lately-won hand with his soft boyish lips—like a *preux chevalier* of the olden time—and sat down by her side. However deep his love might be, its reserve was unquestionable.

After a while he began to talk to her—timidly yet tenderly, as friend with friend—watching her fingers while they moved, until at length the girl grew calmed by the calmness of her young lover. So much so, that she even forgot he was a young man and her lover, and found herself often steadfastly looking up into his face, which was gradually melting into a known likeness, as many faces do when we grow familiar with them. Agatha puzzled herself much as to who it could be that Mr. Harper was like—though she found no nearer resemblance than a head she had once seen of the angel Gabriel.

She told him this—quite innocently, and then, recollecting herself, coloured deeply. But Nathanael looked perfectly happy.

"The likeness is very flattering," said he, smiling. "Yet I would only wish to be—what you called me once, the first evening I saw you. Do you remember?"

"No."

"Ah—well—it was not probable you should," he answered, as if patiently taking upon himself the knowledge which only a strong love can bear—that it is *alone* in its strength. "It was merely when they were talking of my name, and you said I looked like

a Nathanael. Now, do you remember?"

"Yes, and I think so still," she replied, without any false shame. "I never look at you, but I feel there is 'no guile' in you, Mr. Harper."

"Thanks," he said, with much feeling. "Thanks—except for the last word. How soon will you try to say 'Nathanael?'"

A fit of wilfulness or shyness was upon Agatha. She drew away her hand which he had taken. "How soon? Nay, I cannot tell. It is a long name, old-fashioned, and rather ugly."

He made no answer—scarcely even showed that he was hurt; but he never again asked her to call him "Nathanael."

She went on with her work, and he sat quietly looking at her for some little time more. Any Asmodeus peering at them through the roof would have vowed these were the oddest pair of lovers ever seen.

At last, rousing himself, Mr. Harper said: "It is time, Agatha"—he paused, and added—"dear Agatha—quite time that we should talk a little about what concerns our happiness—at least mine."

She looked at him—saw how earnest he was, and put down her work. The softness of her manner soothed him.

"I know, dear Agatha, that it is very wrong in me; but sometimes I can hardly believe this is all true, and that you really promised—what I heard from your own lips two days ago. Will you—out of that good heart of yours—say it again?"

"What must I say?"

"That you love—no, I don't mean that—but that you care for me a little—enough to trust me with

your happiness? Do you?"

For all reply, Agatha held out the hand she had drawn back. Her lover kept it tight in that peculiar grasp of his—very soft and still, but firm as adamant.

"Thank you. You shall never regret your trust. My brother told me all you said to him on Saturday morning. I know you do not quite love me yet."

Agatha started, it was so true.

"Still, as you have loved no one else—you are sure of that?"

She thought a minute, then lifted her candid eyes, and answered:

"Yes, quite sure!"

He, watching her closely, betrayed himself so far as to give an inward thankful sigh.

"Then, Agatha, since I love you, I am not afraid."

"Nor I," she answered, and a tear fell, for she was greatly moved. Her betrothed put his arm round her, softly and timidly, as if unfamiliar with actions of tenderness; but she trembled so much that, still softly, he let her go, only keeping firm hold of her hand, apparently to show that no power on earth, gentle or strong, should wrest that from him.

A few minutes after, he began speaking of his affairs, of which Agatha was in a state of entire ignorance. She said, jestingly—for they had fallen into quite familiar jesting now, and were laughing together like a couple of children—that she had not the least idea whether she were about to marry a prince or a beggar.

"No," answered her lover, smiling at her unworldliness, and thereby betraying that, innocent as he looked, his was not the innocence of ignorance.

"No; but I am not exactly a prince, and as a beggar I should certainly be too proud to marry *you*."

"Indeed! Why?"

"Because I understand you are a very rich young lady (I don't know how rich, for I never thought of the subject or inquired about it till to-day), while I am only able to earn my income year by year. Yet it is a good income, and, I earnestly hope, fully equal to yours."

"I don't know what mine is. But why are you so punctilious?"

"Uncle Brian, impressed upon me, from my boyhood, that one of the greatest horrors of life must be the taunt of having married an heiress for her money."

"Has he ever married?"

"No."

"And is he a very old man?" Miss Bowen asked, less interested in money matters than in this Uncle Brian, whose name so constantly floated across his nephew's conversation.

"Fifteen years in the colonies makes a man old before his time. And he was not very young, probably full thirty, when he went out But I could go on talking of Uncle Brian for ever; you must stop me, Agatha."

"Not I—I like to hear," she answered, beginning to feel how sweet it was to sit talking thus confidentially, and know herself and her words esteemed fair and pleasant in the eyes of one who loved her. But as she looked up and smiled, that same witching smile put an effectual stop to the chronicle of Brian Harper.

"And I have to go back to Canada so soon!"

whispered Nathanael to himself, as his gaze, far less calm than heretofore, fell down like a warm sunshine over his betrothed, “The time of my stay here will soon be over, and what then—Agatha?”

She did not wholly comprehend the question, and so let it pass. She was quite content to keep him talking about things and people in whom her interest was naturally growing; of Kingcombe Holm, the old house on the Dorset coast, where the Harpers had dwelt for centuries; of its present owner, Nathanael Harper, Esquire, of that venerable name so renowned in Dorsetshire pedigrees, that one Harper had refused to merge it even in the blaze of a peerage. Of the five Miss Harpers, of whom one was dead, and another, the all-important “married sister,” Mrs. Dugdale, lived in a town close by. Of Eulalie, the pretty *cadette* who was at some future time going to disappear behind the shadows of matrimony; of busy, housekeeping Mary, whom nobody could possibly do without, and who couldn't be suffered to marry on any account whatever. Last of all, was the eye, ear, and heart of the house, kept tenderly in its inmost nook, from which for twenty years she had never moved, and never would move until softly carried to the house appointed for all living—Elizabeth, the eldest—of whom Nathanael's soft voice grew softer as he spoke. His betrothed hesitated to ask many questions about Elizabeth. The one of whom she had it in her mind always to inquire, and whose name somehow always slipped past, was Miss Anne Valery.

All this conversation—wherein the young lover bore himself much more bravely than in regular “love-making”—a manufacture at which he was not *au fait* at all, caused the morning to pass swiftly by. Agatha thought if all her life were to move so smoothly and pleasantly, she need never repent

trusting its current to the guidance of Nathanael Harper. And when, soon after he departed, Emma Thornycroft came in, all smiles, wonderings, and congratulations, Miss Bowen was in a mood cheerful enough to look the happy *fiancée* to the life; besides womanly and tender enough to hang round her friend's neck, testifying her old regard—until Master James testified his also, and likewise his general sympathy in the scene, by flying at them both with bread-and-buttery fingers.

"Ah, Agatha, there is nothing like being a wife and mother! you see what happiness lies before you," cried the affectionate soul, hugging her unruly son and heir.

Miss Bowen slightly shuddered; being of a rather different opinion; which, however, she had the good taste to keep to herself, since occasionally a slight misgiving arose that either she was unreasonably harsh, or that the true type of infantile loveableness did not exist in the young Thornycrofts.

As a private penance for possible injustice, and also out of the general sunniness of her contented heart, she was particularly kind to Master James that day, and moreover promised to spend the next at the Botanic Gardens—not the terrific Zoological!—with Emma and the babies.

"And," added the young matron, with a gracious satisfaction, "you understand, my dear, we shall—now and always—be most happy to see Mr. Harper in the evening."

# CHAPTER VII.

Whether Mr. Harper, being a rather proud and reserved individual, was not “so happy to be seen in the evening” as an attendant planet openly following his sphered idol, or whether, like all true lovers, he was very jealous over the lightest public betrayal of love's sanctity, most certainly he did not appear until he had been expected for at least two hours. Even then his manner was somewhat constrained. Emma's smiling, half-jesting congratulations were nipped in the bud; she felt as she afterwards declared—“quite frightened at him.”

Agatha, too, met him rather meekly, fearing lest she had led him into a position distasteful to his feelings. She was relieved when, taking little notice of herself, he fell into conversation with Mr. Thornycroft—a serious discussion on political and general topics. Once or twice, glancing at him, and noticing how well he talked, and how manly and self-possessed he looked, Agatha began to feel proud of her betrothed. She could not have endured a lover who—in not unfrequent lover-like fashion—“made a fool of himself” on her account.

While the two gentlemen still talked, Miss Bowen stood secretly listening, but apparently watching the rich twilight that coloured the long sweep of the Regent's Park trees—a pretty sight, even though in the land of Cockayne.

“There's a carriage at our door!” screamed Missy from the balcony, receiving a hurried maternal reproof for ill-behaviour. Mrs. Thornycroft wondered who the inopportune visitor could be.

It was a lady, who gave no name, but wished to know if Mr. Locke Harper were there, and if so,

would he come to the carriage and speak to her a moment?

Nathanael did so, looking not less surprised than the rest of the party. After five minutes had elapsed, he was still absent from the room.

"Very odd!" observed Emma, half in jest, half earnest; "I should inquire into the matter if I were you. Let me see—I fancy the carriage is still at the door. It would be rude to peep, you know, but we can inquire of the maid."

"No," said Agatha, gently removing Mrs. Thornycrofts hand from the bell; "Mr. Harper will doubtless tell me all that is necessary. He is perfectly able to conduct his own affairs."

It was speech implying more indifference than she really felt, for this mysterious interview did not quite please her. She tried vainly to go on talking with Mrs. Thornycroft, and actually started when she heard the carriage drive off, and Nathanael come upstairs.

His countenance was a good deal troubled, but he did not give the slightest explanation—not even when Mrs. Thornycroft joked him about his supposed "business."

"With a lady, too! Not, I hope, a young lady?"

"What did you say?" he asked, absently, his eyes fixed afar off on Agatha.

"I hope your visitor in the carriage was not a young lady?"

"No." The answer was in a tone that put an end to any more jesting.

Nathanael sat down, and tried to take up the thread of politics just dropped with Mr. Thornycroft, but only for a few minutes. Then, stealing round by

Miss Bowen's side, he whispered:

“I want to speak to you: would you mind coming home soon?”

“At once, if you wish it,” she answered, perceiving that something was wrong, and feeling towards him too much of kindness and too little of jealous love, to be in any way displeased at his strange behaviour.

“Will you do it, then, dear Agatha? Do it for me.”

Agatha was ill at contrivance, but she managed somehow to get away; and before it was dark she and her betrothed were out in the broad terrace.

“Now,” said she, taking his arm kindly, “if anything is amiss, you can tell me all as we walk home. Better walk than ride.”

“No, we must ride; I would not lose a minute,” Nathanael answered, as he hurried her into a conveyance, and gave the order to drive to Bedford Square.

Miss Bowen felt a twinge of repugnance at this control so newly exercised over the liberty of her actions; but her good-heartedness still held out, and she waited patiently for her lover to explain. However, he seemed to forget that any explanation was necessary. He leaned back in the corner quite silent, with his hand over his eyes. Had she loved him, or not known that he was her lover, Agatha would soon have essayed the womanly part of comforter, but now timidity restrained her.

At length timidity was verging into distrust, when he suddenly said, just as they were entering the square:

“I have used the dear right you lately gave me,

in taking a strange liberty with you and your house. I have appointed to meet me there to-night one whom I must see, and whom I could not well see in any other way—a lady—a stranger to you. But, stay, she is here!"

And as they stopped at the door, where another carriage had stopped likewise, Nathanael unceremoniously leaped out, and went to this "mysterious stranger."

"Go in, dear Agatha," said he returning; "go to your own sitting-room, and I will bring her to you."

Agatha, half reluctant to be so ordered about, and thoroughly bewildered likewise, mechanically obeyed. Nevertheless, with a sort of pleasure that this humdrum courtship was growing into something interesting at last, she waited for the intruding "lady."

That she was a lady, the first glimpse of her as she entered the room leaning rather heavily on Nathanael's arm, brought sufficient conviction. She was tall, and a certain slow, soft way of moving, cast about her an atmosphere of sweet dignity. Her age was not easily distinguishable, but her voice, in the few words addressed to Mr. Harper, "Is your friend here?" seemed not that of a very young woman.

In her presence, Miss Bowen instinctively rose.

"Yes, she is here," said Nathanael, answering the stranger. "You could not have learnt what I wrote yesterday to my father and to Elizabeth. She is Agatha Bowen, my—my wife that will be. Agatha, this lady is Miss Anne Valery."

It would be hard to say which of the two thus suddenly introduced to each other was most surprised. However, the elder lady recovered herself soonest.

“I was not aware of this; but I am very glad. And I need not now apologise for thus intruding.”

She went up to the young betrothed, and took her by the hand warmly, seeming at once and without further explanation to comprehend all; while on Agatha's side, her look, her voice, her touch, communicated a sudden trust and pleasure. It was one of those instinctive, inexplicable attractions which almost every one has experienced more or less during life. She could not take her eyes off Miss Valery; the face and manner seemed at once familiar and strange. She had never been so impressed by any woman before.

To show all hospitable attentions, to place an arm-chair for her guest, and even, as she appeared weary, to entreat her to put aside her bonnet and mantle—seemed quite natural to Miss Bowen, just as if they had been friends of years. Anne thanked her courteously, let her do what she would—but all the while looked anxiously at Nathanael.

“You know we have much to say. Is she aware of what I told you?”

“Not yet; I could not tell her; it shocked me so. Oh, my poor uncle!”

Agatha, who was unfastening her guest's cloak, turned round.

“What, your Uncle Brian? Has anything happened? You speak almost as if he were dead.”

Anne Valery shivered.

“Dead! God forbid!” cried the young man, more deeply moved than his betrothed had ever seen him. “But we have had ill news. He went as interpreter on a Government mission, as he had often done before; he was so popular among the Indians. But from some treachery shown them, the tribe grew enraged and

carried him off prisoner. Heaven only knows if they have spared his life. But I think—I feel they will. He was so just to the red men always. He is surely safe."

"Yes, he is safe," repeated Miss Valery, as if any alternative but that were utterly incredible and impossible.

Nathanael continued: "The tidings reached Kingcombe yesterday, and our friend here, coming to London, volunteered to bring them, and consult with me. If there is any good deed to be done, it is sure to be done by Anne Valery," added Nathanael, stretching out his hand to hers.

She took it without speaking, being apparently much exhausted. And now that her bonnet was off, and she sitting near the lamp, Agatha discerned that Miss Valery was by no means young or beautiful. At all events, she was at that time in an unmarried woman's life when it ceases to signify whether she is handsome or not. Her hair at first seemed brown, but on looking closer, there appeared on either side the parting broad silvery lines, as if two snow-laden hands laid on the head had smoothed it down, leaving it shining still.

Agatha turned from her passing examination of Miss Valery to the subject in question, evidently so painful to her betrothed.

"You two wish to consult together? Do so. Pray stay here. I am very sorry for your trouble, Mr. Harper. Anything that I can do for you or your friend, you know"—and her voice dropped softly —"it is my duty now."

Nathanael looked at her, as if longing to clasp her to his heart and say how happy he was; but he restrained himself and let his eyes alone declare what he felt. They were very eloquent.

While this passed between the young people, the elder lady arose from her chair; quietness seemed painful to her.

“Nathanael, every minute is precious to anxiety such as you must feel. Have you thought what had better be done, since you are the right person to do it?”

“As yet I have thought of nothing. And, alas! what *can* be done?”

“Sit down, and let us consider,” said she, laying her hand on his, with a force soft yet steady as that of her words.

Agatha was gliding out of the room, but her lover's quick movement and Miss Valery's look stopped her.

“Do not go, Miss Bowen; you are not so unknown to me as I am to you. I had much rather you stayed.”

So she took up her position a little distance off, and listened while the two friends consulted; pondering the while on what a rare kind of man Mr. Brian Harper must be to win such regard.

“You say the news came accidentally?” Mr. Harper observed. “It may not be true, then.”

“It is. I had it confirmed to-day.”

“How?”

“I went to the Colonial Office myself.” (“Kind Anne Valery!” murmured the young man.) “It was best to do so before I told you anything. You, knowing the whole facts, would then decide more readily.”

“You are right and wise as ever. Now, tell me exactly what you heard.”

“While a treaty was going forward for the

Government purchase of Indian lands, there arose a quarrel, and two red men were upon slight grounds punished cruelly. Then the whole tribe went off in the night, carrying as prisoners two Englishmen—one by force. The other is believed to have offered himself willingly as a hostage, until the reparation of what he considered an injustice shown by his countrymen to the Indians. You may guess who he was."

"Uncle Brian, of course," cried Nathanael, pacing the room. "Just like him! He would do the maddest things for the sake of honour."

Anne Valery's eyes flashed in the dark a momentary brightness, as if they were growing young again.

"But his life is surely safe: all over the Indian country they respect the very name of Brian Harper. No harm can touch him—it is quite impossible!"

"I think so too." And Miss Valery drew a long breath. "Still, such danger is very terrible—is it not?" And she turned slightly, to include Agatha in their conversation.

"Oh, terrible!" the girl cried, deeply interested. "But could he not be sought for—rescued? Could not a party be despatched after him? If I were a man I would head one immediately."

Miss Valery, faintly smiling, patted Agatha's hand. It was easy to see that this good heart opened itself at once to Nathanael's young betrothed.

"That is what I had in my own mind, and should have spoken of to his nephew here—a party of search which the Canadian Government, if urged, would no doubt consent to. Nathanael could propose it—plan it. He is both ingenious and wise."

"Ah, he is; he seems to know everything!" cried

Agatha warmly. “Surely, Mr. Harper, you could think of something—do something?”

“I could,” said the nephew, slowly waking from a long interval of thought. “I could do—what perhaps I ought, and will—for him who has been more than a father to me.”

“What is that?” Agatha asked, while Miss Valery regarded him silently.

“To go back to America—head a search; or, if that is refused me, search for him myself alone, and never give up until I find him—living or dead.”

“Ah, do so! that will be right, generous, noble—you could not fail.”

“There is no saying, Agatha; only, if done, it must be done without delay. I must start at once—in a week—nay a day—leaving England, home, you, everything. That is hard!”

He uttered the last words inaudibly, and his left hand was suddenly clenched, as he turned and walked once up the room and down again.

Agatha knew not what to say. Only a great love conscious of the extent of its own sacrifice, would have had boldness to urge the like sacrifice upon him.

Miss Valery's voice broke the troubled pause:

“You cannot start yet, Nathanael; you would have to apply to the Government here. It would be impossible for you to leave under at least a fortnight.”

“Ah!” he sighed, momentarily relieved, which was but natural “Yet, how wrong I am! for my poor uncle's sake I ought not to lose a day. Surely there would be some way of hastening the time, if inquiries were to be set on foot.”

"I have made all that could be made; still, try yourself, though I fear it is useless. The suspense is bitter, but what is inevitable must be borne," said Anne, with the smile of one long used to the practice of that doctrine. "And in a fortnight—a fortnight is a long time, Miss Bowen?"

The smile, flitting to Agatha, took a cheerfulness which hitherto in the sad subject of her talk Miss Valery had not displayed. A certain benevolent meaning, which Agatha rather guessed at than discerned, was likewise visible there.

"Come," said she, "for this night we can do nothing; but having settled what we shall do, or rather what Mr. Harper will do, let us make ourselves at rest. Be content, my dear Nathanael. Heaven will take care of him for whom we fear."

Her voice trembled, Agatha fancied; and the young girl thought how full and generous was this kind woman's sympathy! likewise how good Nathanael must be to have awakened so deep a regard in such an one as Miss Anne Valery.

The clock struck ten. "We are early folk in Dorsetshire; but as my old servant Andrews has secured my lodgings close by (I am a very independent woman, you see, Miss Bowen), if you will allow me, I should like to sit another half-hour, and become a little better acquainted with you."

Agatha gave her a delighted welcome, and astonished the Ianson family by ordering all sorts of hospitalities. The three began to converse upon various matters, the only remarkable fact being that no one inquired for or alluded to a person, doubtless familiar to all—Frederick Harper. On Agatha's part this omission was involuntary; he had quietly slipped out of her thoughts hour by hour and day by day, as

her interest in him became absorbed in others more akin to her true nature.

But though every one tried to maintain the conversation on indifferent topics, the feelings of at least two out of the three necessarily drew it back to one channel. There they sat, running over the slight nothings, probable and improbable, which in hard suspense people count up; though still the worst Nathanael seemed to fear was the temporary hardship to which his uncle would be exposed.

"And he is not so young as he used to be. How often have I urged him to be content with his poverty and come home. He *shall* come home now. If once I get him out of these red fellows' hands, he shall turn his face from their wild settlements for ever. He can easily do it, even if I must stay in Canada."

The young man looked at his newly-betrothed wife, and looked away again. It was more than he could bear.

"Agatha," said Miss Valery, after a pause, during which she had closely observed both the young people—"I may call you *Agatha*, for the sake of my friend here, may I not?"

"Yes," was the low answer.

"Well then, Agatha, shall you and I have a little talk? We need not mind that foolish boy; he was a boy, just so high, when I first knew him. Let him walk up and down the room a little, it will do him good."

She moved to the sofa, and took Agatha by her side.

"My dear"—(there was a rare sweetness in the way Miss Valery said the usually unsweet words *my dear*)—"I need not say, what, of course, we two both

think, that she will be a happy woman who marries Nathanael Harper."

Agatha, with her eyes cast down, looked everything a young girl could be expected to look under the circumstances.

"Your happiness, as well as your history, is to me not like that of an entire stranger. I once knew your father."

"Ah, that accounts for all!" cried Agatha, delighted to gain this confirmation of her strange impression in favour of Miss Valery. "When was this, and where was I?"

"Neither born nor thought of."

Agatha's countenance fell. "Then of course it was impossible—yet I felt certain—I could even believe so now—that I have seen you before."

While the girl looked, a quick shadow passed over Anne Valery's still features, for the moment entirely changing their expression. But soon returned their ordinary settled calm.

"We often fancy that strangers' faces are familiar. It is usually held to be an omen of future affection. Let me hope that it will prove so now. I have long wished, and am truly glad, heart-glad to see you, my dear child."

She bent Agatha's forehead towards her, and kissed it. Gradually her lips recovered their colour, and she began to talk again, showing herself surprisingly familiar with the monotonous past life of the young girl, and likewise with her present circumstances.

"How kind of you to take such an interest in me!" cried Agatha, her wonder absorbed in pleasure.

"It was natural," Anne said, rather hastily. "A

woman left orphan from the cradle as I was, can feel for another orphan. And though my acquaintance with your father was too slender to warrant my intruding upon you—still I never lost sight of you. Poor child, yours has been a desolate position for so young a girl."

"Ay, very desolate," said Agatha; and suddenly the recollection crossed her mind of how doubly she should feel that desolation when her betrothed husband was gone, for how long, no one could tell! A regret arose, half tenderness, half selfishness; but she deemed it wholly the latter, and so crushed it down.

"How long have you been engaged to Nathanael?" asked Miss Valery, in a manner so sweet as entirely to soften the abruptness of the question, and win the unhesitating answer.

"A very short time—only a few days. Yet I seem to have known him for years. Oh, how good he is! how it grieves me to see him so unhappy!" whispered Agatha, watching his restless movements up and down.

"It will be a hard trial for him, this parting with you. Men like Nathanael never love lightly; even sudden passions—and his must have been rather sudden—in them take root as with the strength of years. I am very sorry for the boy."

And Miss Valery's eyes glistened as they rested on him whom probably from old habit she thus called.

"Well, have you done your little mysteries?" said he, coming up to the sofa, with an effort to be gay. "Have you taken my character to pieces, Anne Valery? Remember, if so, I have little enough time to recover it. A fortnight will be gone directly."

No one answered.

"Come, make room; I *will* have my place. I *will* sit beside you, Agatha."

There was a sort of desperation in his "I will" that indicated a great change in the reserved, timid youth. Agatha yielded as to an irresistible influence, and he placed himself by her side, putting his arm firmly round her waist, quite regardless of the presence of a third person—though about Anne there was an abiding spirit of love which seemed to take under its shadow all lovers, ay, even though she herself were an old maid. But perhaps that was the very reason.

"I was doing you no harm, Nathanael," said she, smiling. "And I was thinking, like you, how soon a fortnight will be gone, and how hard it is for you to part from this little girl that loves you."

The inference, so natural, so holy, which Miss Valery had unconsciously drawn, Agatha had not the heart to deny. She knew it was but right that she should love, and be supposed to love, her betrothed husband. And looking at him, his suffering, his strong self-denial, she almost felt that she did really love him, as a wife ought.

"If," said the soft voice of the good angel—"if you had not known each other so short a time, and been so newly betrothed, I should have said—judging such things by what they were when I was young,"—here she momentarily paused—"I should have said, Nathanael, that there was only one course which, as regarded both her and yourself, was wisest, kindest, best."

"What is that?" cried he, eagerly.

"To do a little sooner what must necessarily have been done soon—to take one another's hands—thus."

Agatha felt strong, wild fingers grasping her own; a dizziness came over her—she shrank back, crying, “No, no!” and hid her face on Miss Valery's shoulder. Nathanael rose up and walked away.

When he returned, it was with his “good” aspect, tender and calm.

“No, Anne, I was wrong even to think of such a thing. Assure her I will never urge it. She is quite right in saying 'No'—What man could expect such a sacrifice?”

“And what woman would deem it such?” whispered Miss Valery. “But I know I am a very foolish, romantic old maid, and view these things in a different light to most people. So, my dear, be quite at rest,” she continued, soothing the young creature, who still clung to her. “No one will urge you in any way; *he* will not, he is too generous; and I had no right even to say what I did, except from my affection for him.”

She looked fondly at the young man, as if he had been still a little child, and she saw him in the light of ancient days. These impelled her to speak on earnestly.

“Another reason I had; because I am old, and you two are young. Often, it seems as if the whole world—fate, trial, circumstance—were set against all lovers to make them part. It is a bitter thing when they part of their own free will. Accidents of all kinds—change, sorrow, even death—may come between, and they may never meet again. Agatha, Nathanael—believe one who has seen more of life than you—rarely do those that truly love ever attain the happiness of marrying one another. One half the world—the best and noblest half—thirst all their lives for that bliss which you throw away. What,

Agatha, crying?"

And she tried to lift up the drooping head, but could not.

"Nay, dear, I was wrong to grieve you so. Please God, you two may meet again, and marry and be happy, even in this world. Come, Nathanael, you can say all this much better than I. Tell her you will be quite content, and wait any number of years. And, as to this parting, it is a right and noble sacrifice of yours; let her see how nobly you will bear it."

"Ay, Agatha, I will," said the young lover firmly, as he stood before her, half stooping, half kneeling—though not quite kneeling, even then. But his whole manner showed the crumbling away of that clear but icy surface with which nature or habit had enveloped the whole man.

Agatha lifted her head, and looked at him long and earnestly.

"I will," he repeated; "I promise you I will. Only be content—and in token that you are so, give me your hand."

She gave him both, and then leaned back again on Miss Valery's shoulder.

"Tell him—I will go with him—anywhere—at any time—if it will only make him happy."

The same night, when Nathanael and Anne Valery had left her, Agatha sat thinking, almost in a dream, yet without either sorrow or dread—that all uncertainty was now over—that this day week would be her wedding-day.

# CHAPTER VIII.

“I wish, as I stated yesterday, that Miss Bowen's property should be settled entirely upon herself. This is the only course which to my thinking can reconcile a man to the humiliation of receiving a large fortune with his wife.”

“An odd doctrine, truly! Where did you learn it?” laughed Major Harper, who was pacing the Bedford Square drawing-room with quick, uneasy steps; while his brother stood very quiet, only looking from time to time at the closed door. It was the Saturday before the marriage; and Agatha's trustee had come to execute his last guardianship of her and her property. There was lying on a corner-table, pored over by a lawyer-like individual—that formidable instrument, a marriage-settlement.

“Where did I learn it?” returned Mr. Harper, smiling. “Why, where I learned most of my opinions, and everything that is good in me—with Uncle Brian. Poor Uncle Brian!” and the smile faded into grave anxiety.

“Are you really going on that mad expedition?” said the elder brother, with the air of a man who, being perturbed in his own mind, is ready to take a harsh view of everything.

“I do not think it mad—and anything short of madness I ought to undertake, and shall—for him.”

“Ay,” muttered the other, “there it is, Brian always made everybody love him.”

“But,” continued Nathanael, “as I said last night to Miss Bowen, I shall do nothing foolishly. We must hold ourselves prepared for the worst; still, if better

tidings should come—though that is scarcely possible now—then perhaps——”

“You would not go!” cried Major Harper, eagerly. “Which would of course delay your marriage. How very much better that would be.”

“Why so?” said the bridegroom, with a piercing look.

Frederick appeared confused, but threw it off with a laugh.

“Oh, women like a little longer courtship. They are never caught all in a minute, unless they are quite indifferent as to who catches them. And even then—'marry in haste'—you know the proverb—nay, don't be angry,” he added, as his brother turned abruptly away. “I was only jesting; and a happy fellow like you can afford to be laughed at by a miserable old bachelor like me.”

The momentary annoyance passed. Nathanael was, indeed, too happy to be seriously vexed at anything.

“Still, for some reasons,” continued Major Harper, “I wish my fair ward were not becoming my sister in such a terrible hurry. So much to be done in one week, and by a man like me who hates the very name of business; it is next to impossible but that some things should he slurred and hurried over. For instance, there was no time, Grimes said, to draw up a long deed of settlement, showing precisely where her money was invested.”

“I told you I wanted nothing of the kind. I scarcely understand your English law. But can it not be stated in plain legal form—a dozen lines would surety; do it—that every farthing Agatha has is settled upon herself exclusively from the day she becomes my wife.”

“That is done. I—I—in fact, Mr. Grimes had already advised such a course as being the shortest.”

“Then what is the use of saying any more about it?”

“But, brother,” observed Major Harper, in whose manner was perceptible a certain vague uneasiness, “if—though I assure you Grimes has transacted all these matters, and he is a sharp man of business, while I am none—still, if it would be any satisfaction to you to know particulars concerning where Miss Bowen's money is invested”—

“In the funds; and to remain there by her father's will, to I think you said.”

“Precisely. It *was* invested there,” returned the brother, with an accent so light on the past tense that Nathanael, preoccupied with other things than money matters, did not observe it.

“Well, then, so let it stay. Don't let us talk any more about this matter. I trust entirely to you. To whom should I trust, if not to my own brother?”

At these hearty words Major Harper's face, quick in every mobile expression of feeling, betrayed much discomposure. He walked the room in a mood of agitation, compared to which the bridegroom's own restlessness was nothing. Then he went to the farther end of the apartment, and hurriedly read over the marriage-settlement.

“Faugh, Grimes! what balderdash is this?” he whispered angrily. “Balderdash?—nay, downright lies!”

“Drawn up exactly as you desired, and as we arranged, Major Harper,” answered Mr. Grimes, formally. “Settling upon the lady and her heirs for ever all her property now in the 'Three per Cent. Consols.'”

“Just heavens! and there's not a penny of it there!”

“But there will be by the time the marriage is celebrated, or soon after—since you are determined to sell out those shares.”

“I wish I could—I wish to Heaven I could!” cried the poor Major, in a despair that required all the warnings of his legal adviser to smother it down, so as to keep their conference private. “I've been driven nearly mad going from broker to broker in the City to-day. I might as well attempt to sell out shares in the Elysian Fields as in that confounded Wheal Caroline.”

“Fluctuations, my dear sir; mere fluctuations! 'Tis the same in all Cornish mines. Yet, as I said, both concerning your own little property and Miss Bowen's afterwards, I would wish no better investment. I have the greatest confidence in the Wheal Caroline shares.”

“Confidence!” echoed the Major, ruefully. “But where is my brother's confidence in me, when I tell him?—'Pon my life, I can't tell him!”

“There is not the slightest need; I have accurate information from the mine, which next week will raise the shares to ten per cent, premium, and then, since you are so determined to sell out that most promising investment”—

“I will, as sure as I live. I vow I'll never be trustee to any young lady again, as long as my name is Frederick Harper. However, if this must stand”—and he read from the deed—“'all property now invested in the Three per Cents.'—Oh, oh!” Major Harper shook his head, with a deep-drawn sigh of miserable irresolution.

Yet there lay the parchment, sickening him with

its prevaricating if not lying face; and his invisible good angel kept pulling him on one side—nay, at last pulled him halfway across the room to where, absorbed in a reverie—pardonable under the circumstances—his brother sat.

"Nathanael, pray get out of that brown study, and have five minutes' talk with me. If you only knew the annoyance I have endured all this week concerning Agatha's fortune! How thankful I shall be to transfer it from my hands into yours."

"Oh, yes!" said the lover, rather absently.

"And I hope it will give you less trouble and more reward than it has given me," continued the elder brother, still anxiously beating about the bush, ere he came to a direct confession. "I declare, I have been as anxious for the young lady's benefit as if I had intended marrying her myself."

The bridegroom's quick, fiery glance showed Major Harper that he had gone a little too far, even in privileged jesting.

But happily Nathanael had heard the door open. He hastily went forward and met his bride. With her were Mr. and Mrs. Thornycroft, Dr. and Mrs. Ianson, and another lady. The latter quickly passed out of the immediate circle, and sat down in a retired corner of the room.

Agatha looked pale and worn out, which was no wonder, considering that for several days she had endured, morning, noon, and night, all the wearisome preparations which the kind-hearted Emma deemed indispensable to "a really nice wedding." But her betrothed noticed her paleness with troubled eyes.

"You are not ill, my darling?"

"No," said Agatha, abruptly, blushing lest any

one should hear the tender word, which none had ever used to her before, and blushing still deeper when, meeting Major Harper's anxious looks fixed on them both, she fancied he had heard. A foolish sensitiveness made her turn away from her lover, and talk to the first person who came in her way.

Meanwhile Mr. Thornycroft and Dr. Ianson, with a knowledge that time was precious, had gone at once to the business of the meeting, and were deep in perusal of the marriage-settlement of which they were to be witnesses.

“Why, Miss Bowen, you are a richer girl than I knew,” said Emma's worthy husband, coming forward, with his round pleasant face. “I congratulate you; at this particular crisis, when hundreds are being ruined by last year's mania for railway speculation, it is most fortunate to have safe funded property.”

Major Harper's conscience groaned within, and it was all over. He resigned himself to stern necessity and force of circumstances—hoping everything would turn out for the best.

Then they all gathered round the table, and Mr. Grimes droned out the necessary formalities. The bride-elect listened, half in a dream—the bridegroom rather more attentively.

“Are you quite sure,” said he, pausing, with the pen in his hand, and casting his eyes keenly over the document—“are you quite sure this deed answers the purpose I intended? This is the total amount of property which Mr. Bowen left?”

And he looked from his brother to the lawyer with an anxiety which long afterwards recurred bitterly to Agatha's mind.

Mr. Grimes bowed, and assured him that all was

correct. So the young bridegroom signed with a steady hand, and afterwards watched the rather tremulous signature of his bride. Then an inexpressible content diffused itself over his face. Putting her arm in his, he led her away proudly, as though she were already his own.

Confused by her novel position, Agatha looked instinctively for some womanly encouragement, but Emma Thornycroft was busily engaged in admiring observation of some wedding presents, and Mrs. Ianson was worse than nobody.

“Miss Valery!—what has become of Miss Valery? said the bride, her eyes wandering restlessly around. Other eyes followed hers—Major Harper's. Incredulously these rested on the silent lady in the background, whose whole mien, figure, and attire, in the plain dark dress, and close morning cap, marked her a woman undeniably and fearlessly middle-aged.

“Is it possible!” he exclaimed. “Can that be Anne Valery?”

The lady arose, and met him with extended hand. “It is Anne Valery, and she is very glad to see you, Major Harper.”

They shook hands; his confused manner contrasting strongly with her perfect serenity. After a moment Miss Bowen, who could not help watching, heard him say:

“I, too, am glad we have met at last. I hope it is as friends!”

“I was never otherwise to you,” she answered, gently; and joined the circle.

This rather singular greeting, noticed by none but herself, awakened Agatha's old wrath against Major Harper, lest, as her romantic imagination half suggested, the secret of Anne Valery's always

remaining Anne Valery, was, that his old companion had been first on the illustrious Frederick's long list of broken hearts. If so, never was there a broken heart that made so little outward show, or wore such a cheerful exterior, as Miss Valery's.

But Agatha's own heart was too full of the busy trembling fancies natural to her position to speculate overmuch on the hearts of other people. Very soon Major Harper quitted the house, and the Thornycrofts also. She was left alone with her lover and with Anne—Anne, who ever since her arrival had seemed to keep a steady watch over Nathanael's bride. They had rarely met, and for brief intervals; yet Agatha felt that she was perpetually under this guardianship, gentle, though strong—holding her fluctuating spirit firm, and filling her with all cheerful hopes and tender thoughts of her future husband. She seemed to grow a better woman every time she saw Anne Valery. It was inexpressibly sweet to turn for a few moments each day from the lace and the ribbons, the dresses and the bridecake, and hear Anne talk of what true marriage really was—when two people entirely and worthily loved one another.

Only Agatha had not the courage to confess, what she began to hope was a foolish doubt, that the “love” which Miss Valery seemed to take for granted she felt towards Nathanael, was a something which as yet she herself did not quite understand.

That Saturday afternoon, nevertheless, she was calmer and more at ease. Signing the settlement had removed all doubts from her mind, and made her realise clearly that she would soon be Mr. Harper's wife. And he was so tender over her, so happy. Her marriage with him appeared to make every one happy. That very day he had brought her a heap of

letters from Dorsetshire; her first welcome from his kindred—her own that would be.

They seemed to know all about her—from Anne Valery doubtless—and to be delighted at Nathanael's choice. There was a kind but formal missive from the old father, implying his dignified satisfaction that at last one of his sons would marry to keep up the family name. From the daughters there were letters varying in style and matter, but all cordial except, perhaps, Eulalie's, who had years to wait before *she* married, and was rather cross accordingly. One note, in neat and delicate writing, made Agatha's heart beat; for it was signed, "Your affectionate *sister*, Elizabeth."

She, who had longed for a sister all her life! Heaven was very good to her, to give her all ties through one! It seemed, indeed, right and holy that she should be married to Nathanael.

One only unutterable terror she had, which by a fortunate chance was never alluded to by any one, and she was too much occupied to have it often forced on her mind. This was, the thought of having to cross the seas to Canada.

"Oh!" she sighed, as she sat, with the letters on her lap, listening to what her lover said of his sisters and his family—"oh! that we could do as your father seems to wish, and go and live in Dorsetshire, near Kingcombe Holm."

"I wish it too, if it would please you, dear; but it seems impossible. How could I live in England without a profession?—even supposing Uncle Brian did consent to return and settle at home. Sometimes, but very rarely, he has hinted at such a possibility.—He has indeed, Anne," continued the young man, noticing how keenly Miss Valery's eyes were fixed on

him.

“I am glad to hear it.”

“But he always said he would never return till he was grown either very rich or very old. Alas; the latter chance may come, but the former never! Poor Uncle Brian! If he comes at all, it is sure not to be for many years.”

“Not for many years!” repeated Miss Valery, who was crossing over to Agatha's side with a piece of rich lace she had been unfolding. As she walked, her hand was unconsciously pressed upon her chest, a habit she had after any quick movement. And, leaning over Agatha, she breathed painfully and hard.

“My dear?” The young girl looked up. “Your sisters that are to be desired me to give you from them a wedding-present. It was to be your veil. But I had a whim that I would like to give you your veil myself. Here it is. Will you accept it, with my love?”



*Agatha.* Page 90.

"Will you accept it, with my love?"

So saying, she laid over the bride's head a piece of old point lace, magnificent in texture. Agatha had never seen anything like it.

"Oh, Miss Valery, to think of your giving me this! It is fit for a queen!" And she looked at Mr. Harper, hesitating to accept so costly a gift.

"Nay, take it," said he smiling. "Never scruple at its costliness; it cannot be richer than Anne's heart." And he grasped his old friend's hand warmly.

Miss Valery continued, with a slight colour

rising in her cheek. “This was given me twenty years ago for a wedding-veil. It has been wasted upon me, you see, but I wish some one to wear it, and would like it to be worn by a Mrs. Locke Harper.”

Agatha blushed crimson. Nathanael looked delighted. Neither noticed Anne Valery; who, her passing colour having sunk into a still deeper paleness, quietly returned to her seat, and soon after quitted the house.

## CHAPTER IX.

It was a most unconscionably early hour on the wedding morning when Mrs. Thornycroft, who had insisted on mounting guard overnight in Bedford Square, to see that all things were made ready to go off “merry as a marriage bell,” came into Agatha's room and roused the bride.

“I never knew such a thing in all my life! Well, he is the most extraordinary young man! What is to be done, my dear?”

“What—what?” said Agatha, waking, with a confused notion that something very dreadful had happened, or was going to happen. She recollected that this day on which she so early opened her eyes was some day of great solemnity. It seemed so like that of her father's funeral.

“Don't be frightened, love. Nothing has occurred; only there is Mr. Harper in the parlour below,

wanting to speak with you. I never heard of such a request from a bridegroom. It is contrary to all rules of common sense and decorum."

"Hush!" said Agatha, trying to collect her thoughts. "Tell me exactly his message."

"That he wished to speak with you at once, before you dress for church; and will wait for you in the dining-room. What—you are not going to do as he desires?—I wouldn't! One should never *obey* till after marriage."

Agatha made no answer, but composedly began to dress. In a few minutes she had once more put on the mourning, laid aside as she thought for ever the night before, and had gone down-stairs to her bridegroom.

He was standing in the only available corner of the room not occupied by a chaotic mass of hymeneal preparations, and gazing vacantly out into the square, where the trees cast the long shadows of early morning, while the merry little sparrows kept up a perpetual din.

As the door moved, Mr. Harper turned round. He had a sickly, worn look, as if he had scarcely slept all night, and in his manner was a strange mingling of trouble and of joy.

"Agatha—how kind! I ought to apologise," he began, taking both her hands. "But no! I cannot."

"Nothing is wrong? No misfortune happened?"

"Misfortune? God forbid! Surely I do not look as if it were a misfortune? I am only too glad—too happy. Whatever results from it, I am indeed happy!"

"Then so am I, whatsoever it may be," returned Agatha, softly. "Still, do tell me."

Her bridegroom, as he pressed her to his bosom,

looked as if he had for the moment forgotten all about his tidings; but afterwards, when her second entreaty came, he took out a letter and bade her read, holding her fast the while with a light firm hand on her shoulder. He seemed almost to fear that at the news he brought she would glide out of his grasp like snow.

"It is an odd hand—strange to me," said Agatha. "Is it"—and a sudden thought struck her—"is it——"

"Yes—thank God."

"Oh, then, he is safe—I am so glad—so glad!" cried Agatha, in the true sympathy of her heart. But her very gladness appeared to affect contrariwise the troubled mood of her lover. His hand dropped imperceptibly from her shoulder—he sat down.

"Read the letter, which came late last night. I thought you would be pleased—that was why I thus disturbed you."

Agatha, who had not yet learned the joy or pain of reading momently the changes of a beloved face, immediately perused the letter. It was rather eccentric of its kind:

"Lodge of O-me-not-tua.

"My dear Boy,

"If ever you get into the hands of those red devils, be not alarmed: it isn't so bad as it seems. If you saw me now, in the big buffalo-cloak of a medicine man, after smoking dozens of pipes of peace with every one of the tribe, sitting at the door of my lodge, with miles of high prairie-grass rolling in waves towards the sunset, you would rather envy me than otherwise, and cry out, as I have often done, 'Away with civilisation!'

"I am not scalped—I thought I should not be; the

tribe (it wastes valuable paper to write their long name, but you will have heard it) the tribe know me too well. I make a capital white medicine-man. I might have escaped any day, but, pshaw! honour!—So I choose to see a little of the great western forests, until I know how my two red friends have been treated on Lake Winnipeg shore. But in no case is any harm likely to come to me, except those chances of mortality which are common to all.

"You will receive this (which a worthy psalm-singing missionary conveys to New York) almost as soon as the news of our adventure reaches Europe. I send it to relieve you, dear nephew, and all friends, if I have any left, from further anxiety concerning me, and especially from useless search, as under no circumstances whatever shall I consent to return to Montreal until it seems to me good.

"Therefore, stay in Europe as long as, or longer than, you planned, and God prosper you, Nathanael, my good boy.

"Your affectionate uncle,

"Brian Locke Harper.

"I trust earnestly that this scrawl will reach Kingcombe Holm. Possibly, no more news of me may ever reach there.—Yet I fear not, for He who is everywhere is likewise in the wild western prairies; and life is not so sweet that I should dread its ending. Still, if it does end, remember me to my brother, my nieces, and all old friends, including Anne Valery. If living, I shall reappear sometime, somewhere. B. L. H."

"This is indeed happy news;—so far;" said Agatha, "though he seems in no cheerful mood."

"Melancholy was always his way at times."

"What a strange man he must be!" she

continued, still thinking more of the letter than of anything else. “But”—and she turned to Nathanael —“your mind is now at rest? You will not need to go to America?”

“Not just yet.”

She looked at him a moment in surprise, for there was something peculiar in his manner. She felt half angry with him for sitting so still, and speaking so briefly, while she herself was trembling with delight. “Have you told Miss Valery?” He shook his head. “Ah, then, go at once and tell her, so happy as she will be! Do go.”

“Presently. Come and sit down here. I want to talk to you, Agatha.”

She let him place her by his side. He took her hands, and regarded her earnestly.

“Do you remember what day this was to have been?”

“Was to have been?” she repeated, and instinctively guessed what he had doubtless come to say. Her heart began to beat violently, and her eyes dropped in confusion.

“I say '*was*,' because, if you desire it, it shall not be. I see the very idea is a relief to you. I saw it in your sudden joy.”

Agatha was amazed—she had till this moment never thought of such a thing. Mr. Harper's whole manner of speech and proceeding was so very incomprehensible—like a lover's—that she told the entire truth in simply saying “that she did not understand him.”

“Let me repeat it in plainer words.” But the plainer words would not come; after one or two vain efforts, he sat with averted face, speechless. At last

he said abruptly, “Agatha, do you wish to defer our marriage?”

As he spoke, his grasp of her hand was so fierce that it positively hurt her. “Oh, let me go—you are not kind,” she cried, shrinking from the pain, which he did not even perceive he had inflicted—so strange a mood was upon him. He loosed her hand at once, and stood up before her, speaking vehemently.

“I meant to be kind—very kind—just in the way that I knew would most please you. I meant to tell you that I wish you to hold yourself quite free, both as to this day or any other days: that you have only to say the word, and—What a fool I am making of myself!”

Muttering the last words, he turned and walked quickly to the far end of the room, leaving Agatha to meditate. It was a new thing to see such passion in him; and while half frightened she was interested and touched. She would have been more so, but for a certain something in him which roused her pride, until she could not do as she had at first intended—follow him, and ask why he was angry. The humility of love was not yet hers.

So she sat without moving, her eyes fixed on her hand, where the red mark left by her lover's grasp was slowly disappearing; until a minute after, he approached.

“Was that the mark of my fingers on your wrist? Did I hurt you, my poor Agatha?”

“Yes, a little.”

“Forgive me!” And sitting down beside her, he bent his lips to where his rude grasp had been, kissing the little wrist over and over again, though he did not speak.

His humility in this, the first ripple which had

ever stirred their calmest of all calm courtships, moved Agatha even more than his sudden gust of passion. It is a curious fact, that some women—and they not of the weaker or more foolish kind—like very much to be ruled. A strong nature is instinctively attracted by one still stronger. Most certainly Agatha had never so distinctly felt the cords —not exactly of love, but of some influence akin thereto—which this young man had netted round her, as when he began to draw them with a tight, firm hand, less that of a submissive lover than of a dominant husband. She had never liked him half so well as when, taking her hand once more into his determined hold, he said—gently, indeed, but in a tone that would be answered—

"Now, tell me, what do you wish?"

"What do I wish?" echoed she, feeling as though some hard but firm support were about to relax from her, leaving her trembling and insecure to the world's open blasts. "I do not know—I cannot tell. Talk to me a little; that will help me to judge."

His eye brightened, though faintly. "I will speak, but you shall decide, for all lies in your own hands. I thought this right, and came here determined on telling you so."

"Well?" said Agatha, expectantly.

"You promised me this hand to-day, believing I was to leave England at once. My not leaving frees you from that promise—at least at present. If you would rather wait until you know me better, or love me better, then"—

"What then?"

"We will quite blot out this day—crush it—destroy it, no matter what it was to have been. We will enter upon to-morrow, not as wife and husband,

but mere lovers—friends—acquaintances—anything you like. Nay—I am growing a fool again."

He put his hand to his forehead, sighed heavily, and then continued with less violence.

"If this is what you wish—as from your silence I conclude it is—be assured, Agatha, that I shall consent. I will take no wife against her will. The kisses of her lips would sting me, if there were no love in her heart."

Agatha was still silent.

"Well then, it must be so," said he, in slow, measured speech. "I must go away out of this house, for I am no bridegroom. You may tell the women to put away this white finery till it is wanted—which may be—never!"

She looked up questioningly.

"I repeat—*never*. The currents of life, so many and so fierce, may sweep us asunder at any moment. I may become mercenary, and choose a richer wife even than yourself; or you may turn from me to some one more pleasing, more winning—my brother, perhaps"—

Agatha recoiled, while the angry blood flashed from brow to throat. Her lover saw it, and for the moment a strange intentness was in his gaze. But immediately he smiled, as a man would at some horrible phantom of his own creating, and continued with a softened manner:

"Or, if our own wills hold secure, many things may happen, as Anne Valery forewarned us, to prevent our union. Even ere a month or two—for if you are ever mine it must be as soon as then—but even within that time one or other of us may have gone away where no loving, no regretting, can ever call us back any more."

Terrible was the imagined solitude of a world from which had passed the only being who cherished her—the only being whom she thoroughly honoured. Agatha drew closer to Nathanael.

"Still, for all that," continued he, striving to keep even in his mind the balance of honour and generous tenderness against the arguments of selfish passion, "if for any reason you wish to postpone this day for weeks, months, or years, I will take the chance. All shall be as you deem best for your own happiness. As for mine—I will try to be content."

He paused a little, but it was a pause which no woman could misunderstand. Then, turning back to her, he said in a low tone,

"When am I to go away, Agatha?"

Her brow dropped slowly against his arm, as, much agitated, yet not unhappy, she whispered the one word "*Never*."

For one moment Agatha felt against her own the loud convulsive throbs of the heart that loved her—an embrace which, in its fierce rapture, was like none that came before it, or after. When she learned to count and chronicle such tokens of love, as one begins to count each wave when the sand grows dry, this embrace remained to her as a truth, a reality, which no succeeding doubts could explain away or gainsay.

It lasted, as such moments can but last, a space too brief to be reckoned, dying out of its own intensity. Agatha slid from her lover's arms, and swiftly passing out at the door, met Emma coming in. The unlucky bridegroom was left to make his own explanation to Mrs. Thornycroft, and how he performed that feat remains a mystery to this day.

Solemnly, and much affected, the bride went up-

stairs to put on her wedding-garments.

Anne Valery had just arrived. She sat alone in Miss Bowen's dressing-room, playing with the orange-wreath. Her face wore a thoughtful, sickly, sad look, but the moment she heard some one at the door this expression vanished.

“So, my dear, you have a rather unconscionable bridegroom, Mrs. Thornycroft tells me. He has been here already.”

Suddenly all that had happened recurred to Agatha. She forgot her own agitation in the joy of being the first to bring good news.

“Ah, you little know why he came. Uncle Brian—there is a letter from Uncle Brian.”

And in her warm-heartedness of delight she threw her arms round Miss Valery's neck. She was very much surprised that Anne did not speak a single word, and that the cheek against which her young glowing one was pressed felt as cold as marble.

“Are you not glad, Miss Valery?”

“Yes, very glad. Now will you go down-stairs and fetch me the letter?”

And, gently putting the young girl from her, Anne sat down! As Agatha left the room, she fancied she heard a faint sound—a sigh or gasp; but Miss Valery had not moved. She sat as at first—her hands clasped on her lap, the veil of her bonnet falling over her face. And coming back some minutes after, Agatha found her in precisely the same position.

“Thank you, dear.” She held out her hand for the letter, and then retired with it to a far window. It took a good while to read. All the time that the young bride was being dressed by Emma and the maid, Miss Valery stood in that recess, her back

turned towards them, apparently reading or pondering over that strange scrawl from the Far West.

At last Mrs. Thornycroft gently hinted that there was hardly time for her to return home and dress for the wedding.

“Dress for the wedding,” repeated Anne, absently. “Oh, yes; I remember, it was to be early. No fear! I will be quite ready.”

She crossed the room, walking slowly, but at the door turned to look at the bride, on whose head Emma was already placing the orange-blossoms.

“Doesn't she look pretty?” appealed the gratified matron-ministrant.

“Yes; very pretty.—God bless her!” said Miss Valery, and kissed her on the forehead. Agatha quite started—the lips were so cold.

“Well!” cried Emma Thornycroft, as the door closed, “I do wish, my dear, that little Missy had been grown up enough to be your bridesmaid instead of that very quiet ordinary-looking old maid. But, after all, the contrast will be the greater.”

At nine o'clock the bride's half of the wedding-party were all safely assembled in Doctor Ianson's drawing-room, and everything promised to go off successfully—to which result Emma, now all in her glory, prided herself as having been the main contributor—and no doubt the kind, active, sensible little matron was right.—When, lo!—there came an unlucky *contretemps*.

Major Harper, who of course was to give away the bride, sent word that on account of sudden business he could not possibly be at the church before eleven. At that hour he promised faithfully to meet his brother there. The note which he sent over

was a very hurried and disjointed scrawl. This was all that the vexed bridegroom knew of the matter.

So for two long hours Agatha sat in her wedding-dress, strangely quiet and silent—sometimes playing with the wreath of orange-blossoms which her lover had sent her, and which, being composed of natural flowers, according to a whim of Mr. Harper's, was already beginning to fade. Still she refused to put it aside, though the prudent Emma warned her it would be quite withered before she reached the church; “as was sure to be the case when people were so ridiculous as to wear real flowers.”

The good soul went about, half scolding, half crying; hoping nothing might happen, or consoling herself with looking alternately at her pretty peach-coloured dress, and her “James,” who walked about, indulging in gay reminiscences of his own wedding, and looking the most comfortable specimen imaginable of a worthy middle-aged “family man.” Nevertheless, in spite of Mr. Thornycroft's efforts to cheer up the dreariness of the group, it was a great relief to everybody when, at the earliest reasonable time, the bride's small party started, and were at length assembled under the dark arches of Bloomsbury Church—darker than usual today, for the morning had gloomed over, and become close, hot, and thundery.

Punctually at eleven, but not a minute before, which—Emma whispered—was certainly not quite courteous in a bridegroom, Mr. Harper came in. There was no one with him.

“My brother not here?” he said in anxiety.

Some one hinted that Major Harper was never very punctual.

"He ought to be, this day at least," observed Mr. Thornycroft. "And I am confident I saw him not half-an-hour ago walking homeward round the other side of Bedford Square. Do not be alarmed about him, pray." This last remark was addressed to Agatha, who, overpowered by the closeness of the day, and by these repeated disasters, had begun to turn pale.

Nathanael watched her with a keen anxiety, which only agitated her the more. Every one seemed uneasy and rather dull;—a circumstance not very remarkable, since, in spite of the popular delusion on that subject, very few ever really look happy at a wedding. It makes clearer to each one the silent ghost sitting in every human heart, which may take any form—bliss long desired, lost, or unfulfilled—or, in the fulfilling changed to pain—or, at best, looked back upon with a memory half-pensive if only because it is the past.

For forty interminable minutes did the little party wait in the dreary church aisles, until the clock, and likewise the beadle, warned them it was near the canonical hour.

"What are we to do?" whispered the bridegroom, looking towards Anne Valery. She took his hand, and drawing it towards Agatha's which hung on her arm, said earnestly:

"Wait no longer—life's changes will not wait Marry her *now*—nothing should come between lovers that love one another."

Anne's manner, so faltering, so different from her usual self, irresistibly impressed the hearers. Silently the little group moved to the altar; the clergyman, weary of delay, hurried the service, and in a few minutes the young creatures who eight weeks before had scarcely heard each other's names,

were made “not two, but one flesh.”

It was all like a dream to Agatha Bowen; she never believed in its reality until, signing that name, “Agatha Bowen,” in the register-book, she remembered she was so signing it for the last time. A moment after, Emma's husband, who had assumed the office of father to the bride, cordially shaking her hand, wished all happiness to *Mrs. Harper*.

Agatha started, shivered, and burst into tears. It was a natural thing, after so many hours of overstrained excitement; nor were her tears those of unhappiness, yet they seemed, every drop, to burn on her bridegroom's heart. To crown all, while these unlucky tears were still falling, some one at the vestry door cried out, “There's Major Harper.”

It was indeed himself. He entered the church hurriedly—very pale—with beads of dew standing on his brow.

“Are they married? Am I too late—are they married?” cried he.

Some uncontrollable feeling made Nathanael move to his wife's side, and snatch her hand.

“Yes,” said he, meeting his brother's eye, “we are married.”

Major Harper sank into one of the vestry-chairs, muttering something, inaudible to all ears save those which seemed fatally gifted with preternatural acuteness—the young bridegroom's. Nathanael fancied—nay, was certain—that he heard his brother say, “*Oh, my poor Agatha.*” He looked suddenly at his bride, whose weeping had changed into silent but violent trembling. He dropped her hand, then with a determined air again took possession of it, saying sharply to his brother:

“What is the reason of all this? Is anything

amiss?”

“No, nothing—have I said anything?”

“Then why startle us thus? It is not right, Frederick.”

“Hush—perhaps he is ill,” whispered Anne Valery.

Major Harper looked up, and among the many inquiring eyes, met hers. It seemed to fix him, sting him, rouse him to self-command.

“I am quite well,” he cried, with a hoarse attempt at laughter. “A gay bachelor always feels doubly cheery at a wedding. So it is all over, Nathanael? I beg your pardon for being too late; but I have been running about town on important business, till I am half-dead. Still, let me offer my congratulations to the bride.”

He came forward jauntily, seized Agatha's hand and was about to kiss it, but for a slight shrinking on her part. The colour rushed to her face—his darkened with an expression of uncontrollable pain. At least so it appeared to one who never for a moment relaxed his watch—the younger brother.

“Really,” said Mr. Thornycroft, who, during the few minutes thus occupied, had bustled in and out of the vestry—“really, are we never intending to come home? Somebody must make a diversion here. Major Harper, will you take my wife? Miss Valery, allow me.”

This fortunate interference effected a change. All moved away a little from the bridegroom, who was still standing by his wife's chair.

“Agatha—will you come?”

She mechanically rose; Mr. Harper drew her arm in his, and led her down the aisle. There were a few

stray lookers-on at the church-door, who peered at them curiously. An inexplicable shadow hung over them. Never were a newly-married couple more silent or more grave.

Only, as they stood on the entrance-steps that were wet with a past shower of thunder-rain, and Agatha in her thin white shoes was walking right on, her husband drew her back.

“It will not hurt me. Do let me go,” she said.

“No, you must not; you are mine now,” was the answer, with a look that would have made the tone of control sound in any loving bride's ear the sweetest ever heard.

He left Agatha in the church, and hurried a little in advance. His brother and Mrs. Thornycroft were standing at the porch outside, Emma laughing and whispering. And while waiting for the carriage, it so chanced that Nathanael caught what they were saying.

“Why, Major Harper, you look as dull as if you had been in love with Agatha yourself! And after what you confessed to me, I did positively believe she was in love with you.”

“Agatha in love with me! really you flatter me,” said Major Harper, looking down and tapping his boot, with his own self-complacent, regretful smile.

“I did indeed think it, from her agitation when I hinted at such a thing. And I never was more amazed in my life than when she told me she was going to marry your brother. I do hope, poor dear Agatha”—

“Don't speak of her,” cried Major Harper, in a burst of real emotion. “And she liked me so well, poor child! Oh, I wish to Heaven I had married her, and saved her from”—

Here a voice was heard calling “Mr. Harper—Mr. Harper,” but the bridegroom was nowhere to be seen. Some one—not her husband—put Agatha into the carriage. Several minutes after, Nathanael appeared.

“Where have you been? Your wife is waiting.”

“My wife?” He looked round bewildered, as if the words struck him with the awful irrevocable sense of what was done. Hurriedly he ran down the steps, sprang into the carriage beside Agatha, and they drove away.

Through many streets and squares they passed, for the breakfast was to be at Emma's house. Agatha sat for the first time alone with her husband. The sun just coming out threw a soft crimson light through the closed carriage blinds; the very air felt warm and sweet, like love. Agatha's heart was stirred with a new tenderness towards him into whose keeping she had just given her whole life.

For a little while she sat, her eyes cast down, wondering what he would say or do, whether he would take her hand, or draw her softly to his breast and let her cry her heart out there, as she almost longed to do—poor fatherless, motherless, brotherless, sisterless girl, who in her husband alone must concentrate every earthly tie.

But he never spoke—never moved. He leaned back in the carriage as pale as death, his lips rigidly shut together, his eyes shut too, except that now and then they opened and closed again, to show that he was not in a state of total unconsciousness. But towards his young wife no look ever once wandered.

At length he started as from a trance and saw her sitting there, very quiet, for the pride of her nature was beginning to rise at this strange treatment

from him to whom she had just given herself—her all. She was nervously moving the fingers of her left hand, where the newly placed ring felt heavy and strange.

Nathanael snatched the hand with violence.

“Agatha,—are you not my Agatha? Tell me the truth—the whole truth. I will have it from you!”

“Mr. Harper!” she exclaimed, half frightened, half angry.

His long, searching gaze tried to read her every feature—her pale cheeks—her lips proud, nay, almost sullen—her eyes, from which the softness so lately visible had changed into inquietude and trouble. There was in her all maidenly innocence—no one could doubt that; but nothing could be more unlike the shy tenderness of a bride, loving, and married for love.

Slowly, slowly, the young bridegroom's gaze fell from her, and his thoughts settled into dull conviction. All his violence ceased, leaving an icy composure, which in itself bore the omen of its lasting stay.

“Forgive me,” he said, in a kind but cold voice, while his vehement grasp relaxed into a loose hold. “You are my dear wife now, and I will try to be a good husband to you, Agatha.”

Stooping forward, his lips just touched her cheek —which shrank from him, Agatha scarcely knew why.

“I see!” he muttered to himself “Well, be it so! and God help us both!”

The carriage stopped. Honest Mr. James Thornycroft was at the door, bidding a gay and full-hearted welcome to the bridegroom and bride.

What a marriage-day!

# CHAPTER X.

## "Are you quite warm there, Agatha?"

"Yes, thank you, quite warm," she said, turning round a little, and then turning back. She sat working, or seeming to work, at a large bay window that fronted the sea at Brighton. Already there had come over her the slight but unmistakable change which indicates the wife—the girl no longer. She had been married just one week.

Her husband sat at a table writing, as was his habit during the middle of the day, in order that they might walk out in the evening. He had often been thus busy during the week, even though it was the first week of the honeymoon.

The honeymoon! How different the word now sounded to Agatha! Yet she had nothing to complain of. Mr. Harper was very kind; watchful and tender over her to a degree which she felt even more than she saw. In the mornings he read to her, or talked, chiefly upon subjects higher and withal pleasanter than Agatha had ever heard talked of before; in the evenings they drove out or walked, till far into the starry summer night. They were together constantly, there never passed between them a quick or harsh word, and yet—

Agatha vainly tried to solve the dim, cloudy "yet" which had no tangible form, and only arose now that the first bewilderment of her changed existence was settling into reality, and she was beginning to recognise herself as Agatha Harper, no longer a girl, but a married woman. The sole conclusion she could come to was, that she must be now learning what she supposed every one had to learn—that a honeymoon is not quite the dream of bliss which young people believe in, and that few married couples are quite happy during the first year of their union.

And Mrs. Harper (or Mrs. Locke Harper, as her husband had had printed on the cards, omitting the name which she had once stigmatised as "ugly,") was probably not altogether wide of the truth, though in this case she judged from mistaken because individual evidence. It is next to impossible that two lives, unless assimilated by strong attachment and rare outward circumstances, if suddenly thrown together, should at once mingle and flow harmoniously on. It takes time, and the influence of perfect love, to melt and fuse the two currents into one beautiful whole. Perhaps, did all young lovers believe and prepare for this, there would be fewer disappointed and unhappy marriages.

Though sitting at the open window, with the sharp sea-breeze blowing in upon her—it happened to be a sunless and gloomy day—Agatha had answered that she was "quite warm." Nevertheless her heart felt cold. Not positively sad, yet void. A great deal of passionate devotion is necessary to make two active human beings content with one another's sole company for eight entire days, having nothing to occupy them but each other.

Wanting this—yet scarcely conscious of her need

—the young wife sat, in her secret soul all shivering and a-cold. At last, wearied with the long grey sweep of undulating sea, she closed the window.

"I thought the breeze would be too keen for you," said Mr. Harper, whom her lightest movement always seemed to attract.

"Oh no; but I am tired of watching the waves. How melancholy it must be to live here. I have a perfect terror of the sea."

"Had I known that, I would not have proposed our coming to-day from Leamington to Brighton. But we can leave to-morrow."

"I did not mean that," she answered quickly, dreading lest her husband might have thought her speech ungracious or unkind. "We need not go—unless you wish it."

The bridegroom made no immediate reply: but there was a melancholy tenderness in his eyes, as, without her knowing it, he sat watching his young wife. At length he rose, and putting her arm in his, stood a long time with her at the window.

"I think, dear Agatha, that you are right. The sea is always sad. How dreary it looks now—like a wide-stretched monotonous life whose ending we see not, yet it must be crossed. How shall we cross it?"

Agatha looked inquiringly.

"The sea I mean," he continued, with a sudden change of tone. "Shall we go over to France for a week or two?"

"Oh no"—and she shuddered. "It would kill me to cross the water."

He looked surprised at her unaccountable repugnance, which she had scarcely expressed than she seemed overpowered by confusion. Her husband

forbore to question her further; but the next day told her that he had arranged for their quitting Brighton and making a tour through the west of England, proceeding from thence to London.

“Where—as my brother, or rather my brother's solicitor, writes me word—some business about your fortune will require our return in another fortnight. Are you willing, Agatha?”

“Oh yes—quite willing,” she cried; for now that her changed life was floating her far away from her old ties, she began to have a yearning for them all.

So the honeymoon dwindled to three weeks, at the close of which Mr. and Mrs. Locke Harper were again in London.

It seemed very strange to Agatha to come back to the known places, and roll over the old familiar London stones, and see all things going on as usual; while in herself had come so wide a gap of existence, as if those one-and-twenty days of absence had been one-and-twenty years.

She had become a little more happy lately; a little more used to her new life. And day by day something undefinable began to draw her towards her husband. It was in fact the dawning spirit of love, which should and might have come before marriage, instead of being, as now, an after-growth. Beneath its influence Nathanael's very likeness altered; his face grew more beautiful, his voice softer. Looking at him now, as he sat by her side, Mr. Harper hardly appeared to her the same man who, returning from the church as her bridegroom, had impressed her with such shrinking awe.

He too was more cheerful. All the long railway journey he had tried to amuse her; the humorous half of his disposition—for Nathanael had, like most

good men, a spice of humour about him—coming out as it had never done before. However, as they neared London, he as well as his wife had become rather grave. But when, abruptly turning round, he perceived her earnestly, even tenderly regarding him (at which Agatha was foolish enough to blush, as if it were a crime to be looking admiringly at one's husband), he melted into a smile.

"Here we are in the old quarters, Agatha. The question is, Where shall we go to, since we have no lodgings taken?"

"You should have let me write to Emma, as I wished."

"No," he said, shortly; "it was a pity to trouble her."

"She would not have thought it so, poor dear Emma."

"Were you very intimate with Mrs. Thornycroft? Did you tell her everything in your heart, as women do?"

Agatha was amused by the jealous searching tone and look, so replied carelessly: "Oh yes, all I had to tell, which was not much. I don't deal in mysteries, nor like them. But the chief mystery now seems to be, where are we to go? If Emma may not be troubled, surely Mrs. Ianson, or your brother"—

"My brother is out of town."

"Indeed!" And Agatha looked as she felt, neither glad nor sorry, but purely indifferent. Her husband, observing it, became more cheerful.

"Nay, my dear Agatha, you shall not be inconvenienced. We will go first to some quiet lodgings I know of, where Anne Valery always stays when she is in London—though she has returned

home now, I think. And afterwards, if you find the evening very dull"—

"Ah!" exclaimed the young wife, smiling a beautiful negative.

"We will go and take a sentimental walk through those very squares we strolled through that night—do you remember?"

"Yes!"

How strange seemed that recollection!—how little she had then thought she was walking with her future husband!

Yet, when a few hours after she trod the well-known streets, with her wifely feelings, sweet and grave, and thought that the arm on which she now leaned was her own through life, Agatha Harper was not unhappy, nor would she for one moment have wished to be again Agatha Bowen.

The next day, by the husband's express desire—the declaring of which was a great act of self-denial on his part—word was sent to the Thornycrofts of the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Locke Harper.

Very trembling, shy, and bewitching the bride sat, waiting for the meeting; and when Emma did really come, very tragico-comic, half pleasure, half tears, was the hearty embrace between the two women. Mr. Harper stood and looked on—he played the young husband as composedly as he had done the lover and the bridegroom, except for a slight jealous movement as he saw the clinging, the kisses, the tears, which, with the warmth of a heart thrilled by new emotions and budding out into all manner of new tendernesses, Agatha lavished on her friend.

Yet, whatever he felt, no one could observe but that Nathanael was extremely polite and kind to Mrs. Thornycroft. She on her part admired him extremely

—in whispers.

“How well he looks! Really quite changed! No one would ever think of calling him a 'boy' now. You must be quite proud of your husband, my dear.”

Agatha smiled, and a light thrill at her heart betrayed its answer. Very soon she ceased to be shy and shame-faced, and sat talking quite at ease, as if she had been Mrs. Locke Harper for at least a year.

Emma Thornycroft was a person not likely to waste much time on the sentimentalities of such a meeting; she soon dashed into the common-sense question of what were their plans in London? and when they would come and dine with herself and “James” “Quite friendly. We will ask no one, except of course Major Harper.”

“He is out of town,” said Nathanael.

“What a pity—Yet, no wonder; London is so terribly hot now. Is he quite well?”

“I believe so,” Agatha answered for her husband, who had moved off.

“Because James has met him frequently of late, rushing about the City as pale as a ghost, and looking so miserable. We were afraid something was wrong with him.”

“Oh, I hope not,” exclaimed Agatha, eagerly.

“My brother is quite well,” Mr. Harper again observed, from his outpost by the window; and something in his tone unconsciously checked and changed the conversation.

Whether by Agatha's real inclination, or by some unnoticed influence of Nathanael's, who, gentle as his manners were, through a score of other opposing wills seemed always silently to attain his own, Mrs. Thornycroft's hospitable schemes were overruled. At

least, the *venue* was changed from Regent's Park to the Harpers' own temporary home—where, as if by magic, a multitude of small luxuries had already gathered round the young wife. She took all quite naturally, never pausing to think how they came.

It was with a trepidation which had yet its pleasure, that she arrayed herself for this, the first time of her taking her place at the head of her husband's table. She put on a high white gown, which Mr. Harper had once said he liked—she was beginning to be anxious over her dress and appearance now. Glancing into the mirror, there recurred to her mind a speech she had once heard from some foolish matron—"Oh, it does not signify what I wear, or how I look—I'm married!" Agatha thought what a very wrong doctrine that was! and laughed at herself for never having much cared to seem pleasing until she had some one to please. Nay, now for the first time she grumbled at the Pawnee-face, wishing it had been fairer!

But fair or not, when it came timidly and shone over Nathanael's shoulder, he sitting leaning thoughtfully on his hand, the result was such as materially to relieve any womanly doubts about her personal appearance. He kissed her in unwonted smiling tenderness.

"I like that dress; and your curls—softly touching them—your curls fall so prettily. How well you look, Agatha! Happy, too! Is it really so? Are you getting more used to me and my faults, dear?" There was something inexpressibly tender in the way he said "Dear," the only caressing word he ever used.

"Your faults?" re-echoed she in a merry incredulous tone. But before she could say more, the guests most inopportunely arrived. And Agatha, very

naturally, darted from her husband to the other side of the room like a flash of lightning.

If the Thornycrofts had expected to find a couple of turtle-doves cooing in a cage, they were certainly disappointed. Mr. and Mrs. Locke Harper had apparently settled down into an ordinary husband and wife, resuming serenely their place in society, and behaving towards each other, and the world in general, just like sensible old married people. Their friends, taking the hint, treated them in like manner; and thus, now and for ever, vanished Agatha's honeymoon.

After dinner, Emma, anxious about Agatha's proceedings, and still more anxious to have a hand in the same, for she was never happy unless busy about her own or other people's affairs, made inquiries as to the future plans of the young couple.

Agatha could give no answer, for, to her great thankfulness, her husband had hitherto avoided the subject. She looked at him for a reply.

“I think, Mrs. Thornycroft, it will probably be three months before I”—he smilingly corrected himself, and said “*we* return to Canada.”

“Then what do you intend to do meanwhile? Of course, Agatha dear, you will remain in London?”

“Oh yes,” she replied, accustomed to decide for herself, and forgetting at the moment that there was now another to whose decision she was bound to defer. Blushing, she looked towards her husband, who was talking to Mr. Thornycroft. He turned, as indeed he always did when he heard her speaking; but he made no remark, and the “Yes” passed as their mutual assent to Emma's question.

“I know a place that would just suit you,” pursued the latter; “that is, if you take a furnished

house."

"I should like it much."

"It is but a cottage—rather small, considering your means; by-the-by, Agatha, how close our friend the Major kept all your affairs. No one imagined you were so rich."

"Neither did I, most certainly. But—the cottage."

"The prettiest little place imaginable. Such a love of a drawing-room! I went there to call on young Northen's sister when she married, last year. Poor thing—sad affair that, my dear."

"Indeed," said Agatha, who now felt an interest in all stories of marriages.

"It happened a fortnight ago, soon after your wedding. They quarrelled—she got through a window, and ran away home to her father. It seems she had never cared a straw for her husband, but had married him out of spite, liking some one else better all the time. His own brother, too, they say."

"What a wicked—wicked thing!" cried Agatha warmly. So warmly, that she did not see, close by her chair, her husband—watching her intently, nay wildly. As she ceased, he rose from his stooping attitude. His countenance became wonderfully beautiful, altogether glowing.

"Really you seem to have comprehended the matter at once," said Mr. Thornycroft, startled in the winding-up of a long harangue about the Corn Laws by the exceedingly bright look which his hearer turned towards him.

"Yes, I think I shall soon comprehend everything," was the answer, as Mr. Harper placed himself on the arm of his wife's chair in the gay attitude of a very boy. She, moving a little, made

room for him and smiled. Nay, she even leant silently against his arm, which he had thrown round the back of her chair.

“Come, Agatha, I want to hear about that wonderful house which your friend is persuading you to take. You know, I happen to have a little concern in the matter likewise. Have I not, Mr. Thornycroft?”

“Certainly; since you have turned out to be that no less wonderful personage which my wife has been perpetually boring me about for the last two years—Agatha's Husband,” said Mr. Thornycroft, patiently resigning the Corn Laws to their inevitable doom—oblivion.

But Emma, plunging gladly into her native element, discussed the whole house from attic to kitchen. Mr. Harper listened with a complaisant and amused look. Beginning to discern the sterling good there was in the little woman, he passed over her harmless small-mindedness; knowing well that in the wide-built mansion of human nature there must be always a certain order of beings honourable, useful, and excellent in themselves, to form the basement-story.

The twilight darkened while Emma talked, the faster perhaps that her “James,” whose respected presence always restrained her tongue, was discovered to be undeniably asleep. But the young couple were excellent listeners. Nathanael still sat balancing himself on the arm of his wife's chair; his hand having dropped playfully among her curls. He joined with gaiety in all the discussions. More than once, in talking of the various arrangements of their new household, his voice faltered, and the hearts of the husband and wife seemed trembling towards one another.

The conversation ended in Emma's receiving *carte-blanche* to take the house, if practicable, that the Harpers might settle there for three months certain.

“Come, this is better than I expected,” cried the worthy little woman. “We shall be neighbours, and I can teach Agatha house-keeping. She will have a nice little *ménage*, and can give a proper 'At Home' and charming wedding parties. Shall she not, Mr. Harper?”

“If she wishes.”

But Agatha's whispered “No,” and kind pressure of the hand, brought to him a most blissful conviction that she did *not* wish, and that she would be, as she said, “happier living quietly at home.” *Home*! what a word of promise that sounded in both their ears!

When the lights came, Mr. Thornycroft woke up; with many apologies, poor man; only, as his wife said, “Everybody knew how hard James worked, and how tired he was at night.” The two gentlemen fraternised once more. They began one of those general arguments on the history of the times, which when spoken, are intensely interesting, and being written as intensely prosy. The ladies listened in a most wife-like and pleased submission.

“How well my husband talks—doesn't he?” whispered Emma, with sparkling eyes.

Agatha agreed, and indeed Mr. Thornycroft's strong sense and acute judgment were patent to every one. But when Mr. Harper spoke, his clear views on every point, his trenchant but pleasant wit, by which he rounded off the angularities of argument, and above all his keen, far-seeing intellect, which dived into wondrous depths of knowledge,

and invariably brought something precious to light—these things were to the young wife a positive revelation.

She sat attentive, beginning to learn, what strange to say was no pain—her own ignorance, and her husband's superior wisdom. She had never before felt at once so humble and so proud.

When the Thornycrofts departed, and Mr. Harper returned up-stairs from bidding them good-bye, he found his wife in a thoughtful mood.

“Well, dear, have you had a pleasant evening? Are you content with our plans?”

“Yes—indeed, more so than I deserve. Oh, how good you are!” she whispered; and her shortcomings towards him grew into a great burden of regret.

“Hush!” he answered, smiling; “we will not begin discussing one another's goodness, or you know the subject would be interminable. And I would like us to hold a little serious consultation before to-morrow. You are not sleepy?”

“No.”

“Stretch yourself out on the sofa, and let me sit beside you. There—are you quite comfortable?”

“Ah, yes,” she said, and thought for the hundredth time how sweet it was to have some one to take care of her.

“Now, my wife, listen! You seemed to long for that cottage very much, and you shall have it. Nay, you ought, because at present you are the rich lady; while I, so long as I remain in England, receive none of my salary from Montreal, and am, comparatively speaking, poor. In fact, nothing but that very secondary character, Agatha's Husband.'”

Though he laughed, there was a little jarring

tone in this confession; but Agatha was too simple to notice it. He continued quickly,

“Nevertheless, this question is only temporary; I shall be quite your equal in Canada.”

“In Canada!” she echoed dolefully. “Oh, surely—surely we need not go?”

“Are you in earnest, Agatha?”

“I am indeed,” said she, gathering up courage to speak to him of what ever since her marriage had been growing an inexpressible dread.

“Why so?”

“I—I am afraid to tell.”

“Shall I tell you? You cannot bear to leave your old friends? You fear to go into a new country, entirely among strangers, with only your husband?”

His suddenly suspicious tone stopped the frank denial that was bursting to his wife's lips. She only said a little hurt, “If that were true, I would have told you. I always speak exactly what I think.”

“Is it so? is it indeed so?” he cried, with a lightening of countenance as sudden as its shade. “Oh, Agatha, forgive me,” and his heart seemed melting before her. “I am not good to you—but you do not quite understand me yet.”

“I feel that. Yet what can I do?”

“Nothing! Only wait I will try to cure myself without paining you. But, for the sake of our whole life's happiness, henceforward always be open with me, Agatha! Don't hide from me anything! Set your frank goodness against my wicked suspiciousness, and make me ashamed of myself, as now.”

He had not spoken so freely or with so much emotion since they were married; and his wife was deeply touched. She made no answer, but half

raising herself, crept to his arms, almost as if she loved him. So she truly did, in a measure, though not with the spontaneous, self-existent love, which, once lit in a woman's breast, is like the central fire hidden in the earth's bosom, enduring through all surface variations—through summer and winter, earthquakes, floods, and storms—utterly unchangeable and indestructible. And, however wildly extravagant this simile may sound—however rare the fact it illustrates, nevertheless such Love is a great truth, possible and probable, which has existed and may exist—thank God for it!—to prove that He did not found the poetry of all humanity upon a beautiful deceit.

Something of this mystery was beginning to stir in the wife's heart; the girl-wife, married before her character was half formed—before the perfecting of real love, which, taking, as all feelings must, the impress of individual nature, was in her of slow development.

As Agatha lay, her head hidden on her husband's shoulder, guessing out of her own heart something of what was passing in his, there came to her the first longing after that oneness of spirit, without which marriage is but a false or base union, legal and sanctified before men, but, oh! how unholy in the sight of God!

The young wife felt as if now, and not until now, she could unfold to her husband all the secrets of her heart, all its foolishness, ignorance, and fears.

“If you will listen to me, and not despise me very much, I will tell you something that I have never told to any one until now.”

She could not imagine why, but at this soft whisper he trembled; however, he bade her go on.

“You wonder why it is I am so terrified at leaving England? It is not for any of the reasons you said, but for one so foolish that I am half ashamed to confess it. I dare not cross the sea.”

“Is that all?” Mr. Harper cried, and the unutterable dread which had actually blanched his cheek disappeared instantaneously. He felt himself another man.

“Wait, and I'll tell you why this is,” continued Agatha. “When I was a little child, somewhere about four years old, I was at some seaport town—I don't know where nor ever did, for there was no one with me but my nurse, and she died soon after. One day, I remember being in a little boat going to see a large ship. There were other people with us, especially one lady. Somehow, playing with her, I fell overboard.” Here Agatha shuddered involuntarily. “It may be very ridiculous, but even now, when I am ill or restless in mind, I constantly dream over again that horrible drowning.”

Her husband drew her closer to him, murmuring, “Poor child!”

“Ah, I was indeed a poor child! When, after being brought to life again—for I fancy I must have been nearly dead—my nurse forbade me ever to speak of what had happened, no one can tell into what a terror it grew. I never shall overcome it, never! The very sight of the sea is more than I can bear. To cross it—-to be on it”—

“Hush, dear, quiet yourself,” said her husband, soothingly. “Now, tell me all you can remember about this.”

“Scarcely anything more, except that when I came to myself I was lying on the beach, with the stranger lady by me.”

"Who was she?"

"I have not the slightest idea. Being so young, I recollect little about her—in fact, only one thing: that just as she was leaving me to go on in the little boat, my nurse called out, 'The ship is gone!' and the lady fell flat down—dead, as I thought then. They carried me away, and I never saw or heard of her again."

"How strange!"

"But," continued Agatha, gathering courage as she found her husband did not smile at this story, and beginning to speak with him more freely than she had ever done with any person in her life, "but you have no idea what a vivid impression the circumstance left on my mind. For years I made of this lady—to whom I feel sure I owed in some way or other the saving of my life—a sort of guardian angel I believe I even prayed to her—such a queer, foolish child I was—oh, so foolish!"

"Very likely, dear; we all are," said Mr. Harper, gaily. "And you are quite sure you never saw your angel?"

"No, nor any one like her. The person most like, and yet very unlike, too, in some things, was—don't laugh, please—was Miss Valery. That, I fancy, was the reason why I liked her so from the first, and was ready to do anything she bade me."

"Then when you consented to be married it was not for love of me but of Anne Valery?" And beneath Nathanael's smile lingered a little sad earnest.

His wife did not answer—even yet she was too shy to say the words, "I love you." But she took his hand, and reverently kissed it, whispering,

"I am quite content. I would not have things otherwise than they are. And all I mean by telling

such a long foolish story is this—teach me how to conquer myself and my fears, and I will go with you anywhere—even across the sea."

"My own dear wife!" His voice was quite broken; so sudden, so unexpected was this declaration from her, and by the tremblings which shook her all the while he saw how great her struggle had been.

For many minutes, holding her little head on his arm, the young husband sat silent, buried in deep thought; Agatha never saw the changes, bitter, fierce, sorrowful, that by turns swept over the face under which her own lay so calmly, with sweet shut eyes. Strange difference between the woman and the man!

"Agatha," he said at last, "I have quite decided."

"Decided what?"

"That I will give up my office at Montreal, and we will live in England."

She was so astonished that at first she could not speak; then she burst into joyful tears, and hung about him, murmuring unutterable thanks. For the moment he felt as if this reward made his sacrifice nothing, and yet it had cost him almost everything that his manly pride held dear.

"Then you will not go? You will never cross the terrible Atlantic again?"

"I do not promise that: for I must go, soon or late, if only to persuade Uncle Brian to return with me to England.—Uncle Brian! what will he say when he learns that I have given up my independence, and am living pensioner on a rich wife?"

Agatha looked surprised.

"But," continued he, trying to make a jest of the matter, "though I do renounce my income in the

New World, I am not going to live an idler on your little ladyship's bounty. I intend to work hard at anything that I can find to do. And it will be strange if, in this wide, busy England, I cannot turn to some honourable profession. If not, I'd rather go into the fields and chop wood with this right hand”—

And suddenly dashing it down on the table, he startled Agatha very much; so much that she again clung to him, and innocently begged him not to be angry with her.

Then, once more, Nathanael took his wife in his arms, and became calm in calming her. Thus they sat, until the silence grew heavenly between the two, and it seemed as if, in this new confidence, and in the joy of mutual self-renunciation, were beginning that true marriage, which makes of husband and wife not only “one flesh,” but one soul.

## CHAPTER XI.

It had been arranged with Emma Thornycroft that Mrs. Harper should take the benefit of that lady's superior domestic and worldly experience—for Agatha herself was a perfect child in such matters—and that they two should go over the intended house together. Accordingly, in the course of the following day Mrs. Thornycroft appeared to carry away the young wife, and give her the first lesson in household responsibilities.

From this important business, Mr. Harper was laughingly excluded, as being only a “gentleman,” and required merely to pronounce a final decision upon the niceties of feminine choice.

“In fact,” said Emma, gaily assuming the autocracy of her sex, “husbands ought to have nothing at all to do with house-choosing or house-keeping, except to pay the rent and the bills.”

Agatha could not help laughing at this, until she saw that Mr. Harper was silent.

A few minutes before they started he took his wife aside, and showed her a letter. It was the formal renunciation of the appointment he held at Montreal.

“How kind!” she cried in unfeigned delight. “And how quickly you have fulfilled your promise!”

“When I have once decided I always like to do the thing immediately. This letter shall go to-day.”

“Ah!—let me post it,” whispered Agatha, taking a wilful, childish pleasure in thus demolishing every chance of the future she had so dreaded.

“What! cannot you yet trust me?” returned her husband. “Nay, there is no fear. What is done is done. But you shall have your way.”

And walking with them a little distance, he suffered Agatha with her own hands to post the decisive letter.

After he left them, she told Mrs. Thornycroft the welcome news, enlarging upon Mr. Harper's goodness in resigning so much for her sake.

“Resigning?” said Emma, laughing. “Well, I don't see much noble resignation in a young man's giving up a hardworking situation in the colonies to live at ease on his wife's property in England. My dear, husbands always like to make the most of their little

sacrifices. You mustn't believe half they say."

"My husband never said one word of his," cried Agatha, rather indignantly, and repented herself of her frankness to one whose ideas now more than ever jarred with her own. Three weeks' constant association with a man like Nathanael had lifted her mind above the ordinary standard of womanhood to which Emma belonged. She began to half believe the truth of what she had once with great astonishment heard Anne Valery declare—ay, even Anne Valery—that if the noblest moral type of man and of woman were each placed side by side, the man would be the greater of the two.

But this thought she kept fondly to herself, and suffered Emma to talk on without much attending to her conversation. It was chiefly about some City business with which "her James" had been greatly annoyed of late—having to act for a friend who had been ruined by taking shares in a bubble company formed to work a Cornish mine. Agatha had often been doomed to listen to such historiettes. Mrs. Thornycroft had a great fancy for putting her harmless fingers into her husband's business matters, for which the chief apology in her friend's eyes was the good little wife's great interest in all that concerned "my James." So Agatha had got into a habit of listening with one ear, saying, "Yes," "No," and "Certainly;" while she thought of other things the while. This habit she to-day revived, and, pondered vaguely over many pleasant fancies while hearing mistily of certain atrocities perpetrated by "City scoundrels"—Emma was always warm in her epithets.

"The 'Company,' my dear, is a complete take-in—all sham names, secretaries, treasurers, and even directors. The whole affair was got up among two or

three people in a lawyer's office; and who do you think that lawyer is, Agatha?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Harper, feeling as perfectly indifferent as if he were the man in the moon.

"I am not sure that I ought to tell you, for James only found it out, or rather guessed it, this morning at breakfast-time. And if the thing can only be proved, it will go very suspiciously against the people who have been mixed up in the affair, and especially against this Mr. Grimes.—There, I declare I've let the cat out of the bag at last, for all James cautioned me not!"

"Well, be content," said Agatha, awaking from a reverie as to how many days her husband intended to stay at Kingcombe Holm, whither they were this week going on a formal invitation, and whether the new house would be quite ready on their return —"Be content, Emma; I really did not catch the name."

"I'm glad of it," said the gossiping little woman —though she looked extremely sorry. "Of course, if Major Harper had known—why, you would have heard."

"Heard what" asked Agatha, her curiosity at last attracted by her brother-in-law's name. But now Emma seemed wilfully bent upon maintaining a mysterious silence.

"That's exactly what I can't tell you, my dear, except thus much—that my husband is afraid Major Harper has been losing a good deal of money, since more than two-thirds of the shares in Wheal Caroline were in his name, and now the vein has failed—that is, if ever there was a vein or a mine at all—and the other shareholders declare there has been a great

deal of cheating somewhere—and—you understand."

Agatha did not understand one jot. All she drew from this confused volubility was the fact that Major Harper had somehow lost money, for which she was very sorry. But to her utter ignorance of financial or business matters the term "losing money" bore very little meaning. However, she recurred with satisfaction to her own reputed wealth, and thought if Major Harper were in any need he would of course tell his brother, and she and Nathanael could at once supply what he wanted. She determined to speak to her husband the first opportunity, and so dismissed the subject, as being not half so interesting as that of "the new house."

At the gate of this the two ladies now stood, and Emma, with a matronly importance, introduced the gratified young wife to all its perfections.

If there be one instinct that lurks in a woman's breast, ready to spring up when touched, and bloom into all sorts of beautiful and happy feelings, it is the sense of home—of pleasant domestic sway and domestic comfort—the looking forward to "a house of one's own." Many ordinary girls marry for nothing but this; and in the nobler half of their sex even amidst the strongest and most romantic personal attachment there is a something—a vague, dear hope, that, flying beyond the lover and the bridegroom, nestles itself in the husband and the future home.—The home as well as the husband, since it is given by him, is loved for his sake, and made beautiful for his comfort, while he is the ruler, the guide, and the centre of all.

Mrs. Harper, as she went through the rooms of this, the first house she had ever looked on with an eye of interest, admiring some things, objecting to

others, and beginning to arrange and decide in her own mind,—felt the awakening of that feeling which philosophers call “the domestic instinct”—the instinct which makes of women good wives, fond mothers, and wise mistresses of pleasant households. She wondered that, as Agatha Bowen, she had thought so little of these things.

“Yes,” said she, brightening up as she listened to Emma's long-winded discourse upon furniture and arrangements, and learning for the first time to appreciate the capital good sense of that admirable domestic oracle and young housekeeper's guide —“Yes, I think this will just do. And, as you say, we easily manage to buy it, furniture and all, so as to make what improvements we choose. Oh, how delicious it will be to have a house of one's own!”

And the tears almost came into her eyes at thought of that long vista of future joy—the years which might pass in this same dwelling.

“My husband,” she said to the person who showed them over the place—and her cheeks glowed, and her heart dilated with a tender pride as she used the word—“my husband will come to-morrow and make his decision. I think there is very little doubt but that we shall take the house.”

So anxious was she to conclude the matter and let Mr. Harper share in all her pleasant feelings, that she excused herself from staying at Emma's until he came to fetch her, and determined to walk back to meet him.

“What, with nobody to take care of you?” said Emma.

“The idea of anybody's taking care of me! We never thought of such a thing three months ago. I used to come and go everywhere at my own sweet

will, you know." Nevertheless, it was a sweet thought that there *was* somebody to take care of her. Her high spirit was beginning to learn that there are dearer pleasures in life than even the pleasure of independence.

Pondering on these things—and also on the visit to Kingcombe Holm which her husband had that morning decided—she walked through the well-known squares, her eyes and her veil lowered, her light springy step restrained into matronly dignity. Agatha had a wondrous amount of dignity for such a little woman. Her gait, too, had in it something very peculiar—a mixture of elasticity, decision, and pride. Her small figure seemed to rise up airily between each footpress, as if unaccustomed to creep. There was a trace of wildness in her motions; hers was anything but a dainty tread or a lazy drawing-room glide; it was a bold, free, Indian-like walk—a footstep of the wilderness.

No one who had once known her could ever mistake Agatha, be she seen ever so far off; and as she went on her way, a gentleman, crossing hastily from the opposite side of the square, saw her, started, and seemed inclined to shrink from recognition. But she, attracted by his manner, lifted up her eyes, and soon put an end to his uncertainty. Though a good deal surprised by the suddenness of the *rencontre*, there was no reason on earth why Mrs. Harper should not immediately go up and speak to her husband's brother.

She did so, holding out her hand frankly.

Major Harper's response was hesitating to a painful degree. He looked, in the common but expressive phrase, "as if he had seen a ghost."

"Who would have thought of meeting you here,

Miss Bowen—Mrs. Harper I mean?" he added, seeing her smile at the already strange sound of her maiden name. What could have possessed Major Harper to be guilty of such uncourteous forgetfulness?

"You evidently did not think I was my real self, or you would not have been going to pass me by; I—that is, *we*"—-at the word Nathanael's wife cast off her shyness, and grew bravely dignified—"we came back to London two days ago."

"Indeed!"

"Your brother," she had not yet quite the courage to say "my husband," when speaking of him, especially to Frederick Harper—"your brother thought you were out of town."

"I?—yes—no. No, it was a mistake. But are you not going in? Good morning!"

In his confusion of mind he was handing her up the steps of Dr. Ianson's door, which they were just passing. Agatha drew back; at first surprised, then alarmed. His strange manner, his face, not merely pale but ghastly, the suppressed agitation of his whole aspect, seemed forewarnings of some ill. It was her first consciousness that she was no longer alone, in herself including alike all her pleasure and all her pain.

"Oh, tell me," she cried, catching his arm, "is there anything the matter? Where is my husband?"

The quick fear, darting arrow-like to her heart, betrayed whose image lay there nearest and dearest now. Major Harper looked at her, looked and—sighed!

"Don't be afraid," he said kindly; "all is well with your husband, for aught I know. He is a happy fellow in having some one in the world to be alarmed on his account."

Agatha blushed deeply, but made no reply. She took her brother-in-law's offered arm, offered with a mechanical courtesy that survived the great discomposure of mind under which he evidently laboured, and turned with him towards home. She was at once puzzled and grieved to see the state he was in, which, deny it and disguise it as he would—and he tried hard to do so—was quite clear to her womanly perception. His laugh was hollow, his step hurried, his eyes wandering from side to side as if he were afraid of being seen. How different from his old cheerful lounge, full of a good-natured conceit, apparently content with himself, and willing that the whole street should gaze their fill at Major Frederick Harper.

So old he looked, too; as if the moment his merry mask of smiles was thrown off, the cruel lurking wrinkles appeared. Agatha pitied him, and felt a return of the old liking, warm and kind, such as it was before the innuendoes of foolish friends had first lured her to distrust the nature of her own innocent feelings, and then changed them into positive contempt and aversion.

She said, with an air of gentle matronly freedom, half sisterly, too, and wholly different from the shy manner of Agatha Bowen to Major Harper:

“You must come home with me. I fear you are ill, or in anxiety. Why did you not tell your brother?” And suddenly she thought of Emma's statement of the morning. But Agatha, in her unworldliness, never supposed such a trivial loss as that of money could make any man so miserable as Major Harper seemed.

“I ill? I anxious? I tell my brother?” he repeated, sharply.

“Nay, as you will. Only do come to us. He will

be so glad to see you."

"Glad to see me?" He again repeated her words, as though he had none of his own, or were too bewildered to use them. Nevertheless, through a certain playful influence which Agatha could exert when she liked, making almost everybody yield to her, Major Harper suffered himself to be led along; his companion talking pleasantly to him the while, lest he might think she noticed his discomposure.

Arrived at home, they found that Nathanael had walked to the Regent's Park to fetch his wife, according to agreement.

Mrs. Harper looked sorry. She had already learned one little secret of her husband's character—his dislike to any unpunctuality, any altered plans or broken promises. "Still, you must come in and wait for him."

"Wait for whom?" said Major Harper, absently.

"Your brother."

"My brother!—I, wait to see my brother! Impossible—I—I'll write. Good morning—good morning."

He was leaving the hall—more hurried and agitated than ever—when Mrs. Harper, now really concerned, laid her hand upon his arm.

"I will not let you go. Come in, and tell me what ails you."

The soft whisper, the eyes of genuine compassion—womanly compassion only, without any love—were more than Major Harper could resist.

"I will go," he muttered. "Better tell it to you than to my brother." And he followed her up-stairs.

The cool shadow of the room seemed to quiet his excitement; he drank a glass of water that stood

by, and became more like himself.

“Well, my dear young lady,” he said, with some return of the paternal manner of old times, “when did you come back to London?”

“Two days since, as I told you. And, as you will soon hear, your brother's plans are all changed—we are going to live in London.”

“To live in London?”

“He has given up his appointment at Montreal. We have taken a house, or shall take it to-day, and settle here. He intends entering at the bar, or something of the sort; but you must persuade him not. What is the use of his toiling, when I—that is we—are so rich?”

While Agatha thus talked, chiefly to amuse her brother-in-law and make him feel that she was really his sister, one and the same in family interests—while she talked, she was astonished to see Major Harper's face overspread with blank dismay.

“And—Nathanael has really given up his appointment?”

“He has, and for my sake. Was it not good of him?”

“It was madness! Nay—it is I that have been the madman—it is I that have done it all Agatha, forgive me! But no—you never can!”

As they stood together by the fireplace he snatched her hand, gazing down upon her with unutterable remorse.

“Poor Bowen's daughter that he trusted to me! Such a mere child too! Oh, forgive me, Agatha!”

She thought some extraordinary delusion had come upon him—perhaps the forerunner of some dreadful illness. She tried to take her hand away,

though kindly, for she firmly believed him to be delirious. Nothing could really have happened to herself that Mr. Harper did not know. With him to take care of her, she was quite safe. And in that moment—for all passed in a moment—Nathanael's wife first felt how implicitly she was beginning to put her trust in him.

While she remained thus—her hand still closed tightly in her brother-in-law's grasp, half terrified, yet trying not to show her terror—the door opened, and her husband entered.

At first Mr. Harper seemed petrified with amazement; then he turned deadly white. Crossing the room, he laid a heavy hand on his brother's shoulder:

“Frederick, you forget yourself; this is my wife, —Agatha!”

The searching agony of that one word, as he turned and looked her full in the face, was unutterable. She scarcely perceived it.

“Oh, I am so glad you are come,” was all she said. He drew her to his side—indeed, she had sprung there of her own accord—and wrapped his arms tightly round her, as if to show that she was his possession, his own property.

“Now, brother, whatever you wished to say to my wife, say it to us both.”

Major Harper could not speak.

“He was waiting to see you; he is ill—very ill, I think,” whispered Agatha to her husband. “Shall I leave you together?”

“Yes,” he answered, releasing her, but only to draw her back again, with the same wildly questioning look, the meaning of which was to her

innocence quite inexplicable.—“My wife?”

“My dear husband!”

At that whisper, which burst from her full heart in the comfort of seeing him and of knowing that he would take on himself the burden of all her anxiety, Nathanael let her go. She crept away, most thankful to get out of the room, and leave Major Harper safe in his brother's hands.

But when a quarter of an hour—half-an-hour—passed by, and still the two gentlemen remained shut up together, without sending for her to join their conference, or, as she truly expected, to tell her that poor Major Harper must be taken home in the delirium of brain fever—Agatha began rather to wonder at the circumstance.

She apprehended no evil, for her even course of existence had never been crossed by those sudden tragedies, the impression of which no one ever entirely overcomes, which teach us to walk trembling along the ways of life, lest each moment a gulf should open at our feet. Agatha had read of such misfortunes, but believed them only in books; to her the real world, and her own fate therein, appeared the most monotonous thing imaginable. It never entered her mind to create an adventure or a mystery.

She waited another fifteen minutes—until the clock struck five, and the servant came up to her to announce dinner, and to know whether the same information should be conveyed to the gentlemen in the drawing-room. Servants seem instinctively to guess when there is something extraordinary going on in a house, and the maid—as she found her mistress sitting in her bed-chamber, alone and thoughtful—wore a look of curiosity which made

Mrs. Harper colour.

"Go down and tell your master—no, stay, I will go myself."

She waited until the maid had disappeared, and then went down-stairs, but stopped at the drawing-room door, on hearing within loud voices, at least one voice—Major Harper's. He seemed pleading or protesting vehemently: Agatha might almost have distinguished the words, but—and the fact is much to her credit, since her brother-in-law's apparently sane tones having suppressed her fears, she was now smitten with very natural curiosity—but she stopped her ears, and ran up-stairs again. There she remained, waiting for a lull in the dispute—in which, however, she never caught one tone of Nathanael's.

At last, feeling rather humiliated at being thus obliged to flutter up and down the stairs of her own abode, and crave admittance into her own drawing-room, Mrs. Harper ventured to knock softly, and enter.

Frederick Harper was sitting on the sofa, his head crushed down upon his hands. Nathanael stood at a little distance, by the fireplace. The attitude of the elder brother indicated deep humiliation, that of the younger was freezing in its sternness. Agatha had never seen such an expression on Nathanael face before.

"What did you want?" he said abruptly, thinking it was the servant who entered.

She could not imagine what made him start so, nor what made the two brothers look at her so guiltily. The fact left a very uncomfortable impression on her mind.

"I only came"—she began.

"No matter, dear." Her husband walked up to

her, speaking in a low voice, studiously made kind, she thought “Go away now—we are engaged, you see.”

“But dinner,” she added. “Will not your brother stay and dine with us?”

Major Harper turned with an imploring look to his brother's wife.

“No,” said Mr. Harper emphatically; held the door open for Agatha to retire, and closed it after her. Never in all her life had she been treated so unceremoniously.

The newly-married wife returned to her room, her cheeks burning with no trifling displeasure. She began to feel the tightening pressure of that chain with which her life was now eternally bound.

But, after five minutes of silent reflection, she was too sensible to nourish serious indignation at being sent out of the room like a mere child. There must have been some good reason, which Mr. Harper would surely explain when his brother left. The whole conversation was probably some personal affair of the Major's, with which she had nothing to do. Yet why did her brother-in-law regard her so imploringly? It was, after all, rather extraordinary. So, genuine female curiosity getting the better of her, never did Blue Beard's Fatima watch with greater anxiety for “anybody coming” than did Agatha Harper watch at her window for somebody going—viz., Major Harper. She was too proud to listen, or to keep any other watch, and sat with her chamber-door resolutely closed.

At length her vigil came to an end. She saw her late guardian passing down the street—not hastily or in humiliation, but with his usual measured step and satisfied air. Nay, he even crossed over the way to

speak to an acquaintance, and stood smiling, talking, and swinging his cane. There could not be anything very wrong, then.

Agatha thought, having been once sent out of the room, she would not re-enter it until her husband fetched her—a harmless ebullition of annoyance. So she stood idly before the mirror, ostensibly arranging her curls, though in reality seeing nothing, but listening with all her ears for the one footstep—which did not come. Not, alas! for many, many minutes.

She was still standing motionless, though her brows were knitted in deep thought, and her mouth had assumed the rather cross expression which such rich, rare lips always can, and which only makes their smiling the more lovely—when she saw in the mirror another reflection beside her own.

Her husband had come softly behind her, and put his arms round her waist.

“Did you think I was a long time away from you? I could not help it, dear. Let us go down-stairs now.”

Agatha was surprised that, in spite of all the tenderness of his manner, he did not attempt the slightest explanation. And still more surprised was she to find her own questions, wonderings, reproaches, dying away unuttered in the atmosphere of silentness which always seemed to surround Nathanael Harper. This silentness had from the very beginning of their acquaintance induced in her that faint awe, which is the most ominous yet most delicious feeling that a woman can have towards a man. It seems an instinctive acknowledgment of the much-condemned, much-perverted, yet divine and unalterable law given with the first human marriage

—"*He shall rule over thee*."

After all that Agatha had intended to say, she said—nothing. She only turned her face to her husband, and received his kiss. Very soft it was—even cold—as though he dared not trust himself to the least expression of feeling. He merely whispered, "Now, come down with me;" and she went.

But on the staircase she could not forbear saying, "I thought you two would never have done talking. Is it anything very serious? I trust not, since your brother walked down the street so cheerfully."

"Did he?—and—were you watching him?"

"Yes, indeed," returned Agatha, for she had no notion of doing anything that she would be afterwards ashamed to confess. "But what put him into such a state of mind, and made him behave to me so strangely?"

"How dared he behave?" asked the husband, with quickness, then stopped. "Forgive me. You know, I have never inquired—I never shall inquire about anything."—Again he paused, seeing how his mood alarmed her. "Do not be afraid of me! Poor child—poor little Agatha!"

Waiting for no reply, he led her in to dinner.

While the servants waited, Mr. Harper scarcely spoke, except when necessary. Only in his lightest word addressed to Agatha was a certain tremulousness—in his most careless look a constant tender observance, which soothed her mind, and quite removed from thence the impression of his hasty and incomprehensible words. She laid all to the charge of Major Harper and his unpleasant business.

At dessert, Nathanael sat varying his long silences with a few commonplace remarks which

showed how oblivious he was of all around him, and how sedulously he tried to disguise the fact, and rise to the surface of conversation. Agatha's curiosity returned, not unmingled with a feeling tenderer, more woman-like, more wife-like, which showed itself in stray peeps at him from under the lashes of net brown eyes. At length she took courage to say:

"Now—since we seem to have nothing better to talk about, will you tell me what you and your brother were plotting together, that you kept poor little me out of the room so long?"

"Plotting together? Surely, Agatha, you did not mean to use that word?"

She had used it according to a habit she had of putting a jesting form of phrase upon matters where she was most in earnest. She was amazed to see her husband take it so seriously.

"Well, blot out the offending word, and put in any other you choose; only tell me."

"Why do you wish to know, little Curiosity?" said he, recovering himself, and eagerly catching the tone his wife had adopted.

"Why? Because I am a little Curiosity, and like to know everything."

"That is both presumptuous and impossible, your ladyship! If one-half the world were always bent on knowing all the secrets of the other half, what a very uncomfortable world it would be!"

"I do not see that, even if the first half included the wives, and the second the husbands; which is apparently what you mean to imply."

"I shall not plead guilty to anything by implication."

They went on a few moments longer in this

skirmish of assumed gaiety, when Agatha, pausing, leant her elbows on the table, and looked seriously at her husband,

"Do you know we are two very foolish people?"

"Wherefore?"

"We are pretending to make idle jests, when all the time we are both of us very much in earnest."

"That is true!" And he sighed, though within himself, as though he did not wish her to hear it. "Agatha, come over to me." He held out both his hands; she came, and placed herself beside him, all her jesting subdued. She even trembled, at the expectation of something painful or sorrowful to be told. But her husband said nothing—except to ask if she would like to go anywhere this evening.

Agatha felt annoyed. "Why do you put me off in this manner, when I know you have something on your mind?"

"Have I?" he said, half mournfully.

"Then tell it to me."

"Nay. I always thought it was wisest, kindest, for a man to bear the burden of his own cares."

Nathanael had spoken in his most gentle tone, and slowly, as if impelled to what he said by hard necessity. He was not prepared to see the sudden childish burst of astonishment, anger, and resistance.

"From this, I understand, what you might as well have said plainly, that I am not to inquire what passed between you and your brother?"

He moved his head in assent, and then sunk it on his left hand, holding out the other to his wife, as though talking were impossible to him, and all he wished were silence and peace. Agatha was too angry for either.

"But if I do not choose at nineteen to be treated like a mere child—if I ask, nay, *insist*"—She hesitated, lest the last word might have irritated him too far. Vague fears concerning the full meaning of the word "obey" in the marriage service rushed into her mind.

Nathanael sat motionless, his fingers pressed upon his eyelids. This silence was worse than any words.

"Mr. Harper!"

"I hear." And the grave, sad eyes—and without any displeasure—were turned upon her. Agatha felt a sting of conscience.

"I did not mean to speak rudely to my husband; but I had my own reasons for inquiring about Major Harper, from something Emma said to-day."

"What was that?"

"How eager you look! Nay, I can keep a secret too. But no, I will not." And the generous impulse burst out, even accompanied by a few childish tears and childish blushes. "She told me he had probably lost money. I wished to say that if such a trifle made him unhappy he might take as much as he liked of mine. That was all!"

Her husband regarded her with mingled emotions, which at last all melted into one—deep tenderness. "And you would do this, even for him? Thank God! I never doubted your goodness, Agatha. And I *trusted* you always."

Wondering, yet half-pleased, to see him so moved, Agatha received his offered hand. "Then all is settled. Now tell me everything that passed between you."

"I cannot."

Gentle as the tone was, there was something in it which implied that to strive with Nathanael would be like beating against a marble wall. A great terror came over Agatha—she, who had lived like a wild bird, knowing no stronger will than her own. Then all the combativeness of her nature, hitherto dormant because she had known none worthy to contend against, awoke up, and tempted her to struggle fiercely with her chain.

She unloosed her hands and sprang from him. “Mr. Harper, you are teaching me early how men rule their wives.”

“I only ask my wife to trust me. She would, if she knew how great was the sacrifice.”

“What sacrifice? How many more mysteries am I to be led through blindfold?”

And her crimson cheek, her quick wild step across the room, showed a new picture to the husband's eyes—a picture that all young wives should be slow to let any man see, for it is often a fatal vision.

Nathanael closed his eyes—was it to shut it out?—then spoke, steadily, sorrowfully:

“We have scarcely been married a month. Are we beginning to be angry with one another already?”

She made him no answer.

“Will you listen to me—if for only two minutes?”

She felt his step approaching, his hand fastening on hers, and replacing her in her chair. Resistance was impossible.

“Agatha, had I trusted you less than I do, I might easily have put off your questions, or told you what was false. I shall do neither. I shall tell you truth.”

"That is all I wish."

Nathanael said, with a visible effort, "To-day I learnt from my brother several rather painful circumstances—some which I was ignorant of—one"—his voice grew cold and hard—"one which I already knew, and knew to be irremediable."

His wife looked much alarmed; seeing it, he forced a smile.

"But what is irremediable can and must be borne. I can bear things better, perhaps, than most people. The other cares may be removed by time and —silence. To that end I have promised Frederick to keep his confidence secret from every one, even from my own wife, for a year to come. A sacrifice harder than you think; but it must be made, and I have made it."

Agatha turned away, saying bitterly; "Your wife ought to thank you! She was not aware until now how wondrously well you loved your brother."

There was a heavy silence, and then Mr. Harper said, in a hoarse voice, "Did you ever hear the story of a man who plunged into a river to save the life of an enemy, and when asked why he did it, answered, 'It was because he *was* an enemy?"

"I do not understand you," cried Agatha.

"No"—her husband returned, hastily—"better not. A foolish, meaningless story. What were we talking about?"

He—when her heart was bursting with vexation and wounded feeling—he pretended to treat all so lightly that he did not even remember what they were saying! It was more than Agatha could endure.

Had he been irritated like herself—had he shown annoyance, pain—had they even come to a

positive quarrel—for love will sometimes quarrel, and take comfort therein—it would have been less trying to a girl of her temperament. But that grave superior calm of unvarying kindness—her poor angry spirit beat against it like waves against a shining rock.

"We were talking of what, had I considered the matter a month ago, I might possibly have saved myself the necessity of discussing or practising—a wife's blind obedience to her husband."

"Agatha!"

"When I married," she recklessly pursued, "I did not think what I was doing. It is hard enough blindly to obey even those whom one has known long—trusted long—loved long—but you"—

"I understand. Hush! there needs not another word."

Agatha began to hesitate. She had only wished to make him feel—to shake him from that rigid quietude which to her was so trying. She had not intended to wound him so.

"Are you angry with me?" she asked at length.

"No, not angry. No reproaches of yours can be more bitter than my own."

She was just about to ask him what he meant—nay, she even considered whether her woman's pride might not stoop to draw aside the tight-pressed hands, entreating him to look up and forgive her and love her, when in burst Mrs. Thornycroft.

"Oh—so glad to catch you—have not a minute to spare, for James is waiting. Where is your husband?"

Mr. Harper had risen, and stood in the shadow, where his face was not easily visible. Agatha

wondered to see him so erect and calm, while her own cheeks were burning, and every word she tried to utter she had to gulp down a burst of tears.

“Mr. Harper, it was you I wanted—to ask your decision about the house. A mere formality. But I thought I would just call as we went to grandmamma's, and then I can settle everything for you to-morrow morning.”

“You are very kind, but”—

“Oh, perhaps you would rather see the house yourself! Quite right. Of course you will take it!”

“I fear not.”

Agatha, as well as Mrs. Thornycroft, was so utterly astonished, that neither of them could make any observation. To give up the house, and all her dear home-visions! She was aghast at the idea.

“Bless me, what does your husband mean? Mr. Harper, what possible objection?——”—

“None, except we have changed our plans. It is quite uncertain how long we may stay at Kingcombe Holm, or where we may go from thence.”

“Not to America, surely? You would not break your word to poor dear Agatha?”

“I never break my word.”

“Well, Mr. Harper, I declare I can't understand you,” cried Emma, sharply. “I only hope that Agatha does. Is all this with your knowledge and consent, my poor child?”

She said this, eyeing the husband with doubt and the wife with curiosity, as if disposed to put herself in the breach between the two, if breach there were.

Agatha heard Nathanael's quick breathing—caught her friend's look of patronising compassion.

Something of the dignity of marriage, the shame lest any third party should share or even witness aught that passes between those two who have now become one—awoke in the young girl's spirit. The feeling was partly pride, yet mingled with something far holier.

She put Emma gently aside.

“Whatever my husband's decision may be, I am quite satisfied therewith.”

Mrs. Thornycroft was mute with amazement However, she was too good-natured to be really angry. “Certainly, you are the most extraordinary, incomprehensible young couple! But I can't stay to discuss the matter. Agatha, I shall see you to-morrow?”

“Yes; I will bring her to you to-morrow,” said Mr. Harper, cheerfully, as their visitor departed.

The husband and wife regarded one another in silence. At last he said, taking her hand:

“I owe you thanks, Agatha, for”—

“For doing my duty. I hope I shall never forget that.”

At the word “duty,” so coldly uttered, Mr. Harper had let her hand fall He stood motionless, leaning against the marble chimney-piece, his face as white as the marble itself, and, in Agatha's fancy, as hard.

“Have you, then, quite decided against our taking the house?” she asked at length.

“I find it will be impossible.”

“Why so? But I forget; it is useless to ask *you* questions.”

He made no reply.

“Pardon my inquiry, but do you still keep to

your plan of leaving next week for Dorsetshire?"

"If you are willing."

"I willing?" And she thought how, two hours before, she had rejoiced in the prospect of seeing her husband's ancestral home—her father-in-law—her new sisters. Her heart failed her—the poor girlish heart that as yet knew not either the world or itself. She burst into tears.

Instantly Mr. Harper caught her in his arms.

"Oh, Agatha, forgive me!—Have patience with me, and we may still be happy; at least, you may. Only trust your husband, and love him a little—a very little—as much as you can."

"How can I trust you, whom I do not thoroughly understand? how can I—love"—

Her hesitation—her pride warring with the expression of that feeling which her very anger taught her was there—seemed to pierce her husband to the soul.

"I see," he said, mournfully. "We are both punished, Agatha; I for the selfishness of my love towards you, and you—Alas! how can I make you happier, poor child?" Her tears fell still, but less with anger than emotion. "I know now, we ought never to have been married. Yet, since we are married"—

"Ay, since we are married, let us try to be good to one another, and bear with one another. I will!"

She kissed his hand, which held up her drooping head, and Nathanael pressed his lips on her forehead. So outward peace was made between them; but in sadness and in fear, like a compact sealed tremblingly over a newly-closed grave.

# CHAPTER XII.

“And this is Dorsetshire! What a sharp bleak wind!” said Agatha, shivering.

Her husband, who was driving her in a phaeton which had met them at the railway station, turned to wrap a cloak round her.

“Except in the height of summer it is always cold across these moors. But we shall soon be safe at Kingcombe Holm. Are you very tired?”

She answered “No,” which was hardly the truth. Yet her heart was more weary than her limbs.

During the few days that elapsed between Major Harper's visit and their quitting London, she had scarcely seen her husband. He had been out continually, coming home to dinner tired and exhausted, though afterwards he always tried to talk and be cheerful. To her surprise, Major Harper never again called, nor, except in the brief answer to her question, “that Frederick was gone from home,” did Nathanael ever mention his brother's name.

“This is Kingcombe,” said Mr. Harper, as they drove through a little town, which Agatha, half blinded by the wind, scarcely opened her eyes to look at. “My sister, Mrs. Dugdale, lives here. I thought they might have met us at the station; but the Dugdales are always late. Ah, there he is!”

“Who?”

“My brother-in-law, Marmaduke Dugdale—or 'Duke Dugdale,' as everybody about here calls him. Holloa, Duke!”

And Agatha, through her blue veil, “was ware,” as old chronicles say, of a country-looking gentleman coming down the street in a mild, lazy, dreamy fashion, his hat pushed up at a considerable elevation from his forehead, leaving a mass of light hair straggling out at the back, his eyes bent thoughtfully on the pavement, and his hands crossed behind him.

“Holloa, Duke!” cried Nathanael, for the second time, before he caught the attention of this very abstracted personage.

“Eh—is it you? You don't say so! E—h!”

Agatha was amused by the long, sweet-sounding drawl of the last monosyllable, which seemed formed out of all the five vowels rolled into one. It was said in such a pleasant voice, with such a simple, child-like air of delighted astonishment, that Agatha, conquering her shyness at this first meeting with one of her husband's family, peeped behind Nathanael's shoulder at Mr. Dugdale.

She saw—what to her keen sense of beauty was a considerable shock—the very plainest man she thought she had ever beheld!

“Mr. Dugdale—my wife.”

“Indeed! Very glad to see her.” And Agatha who was intending merely to bow, felt her hand buried in another thrice its size, which gave it a shy, gentle, but thoroughly cordial shake. “And really, now I think of it, I was coming to meet you. The Missus told me to do it.”

“How is 'the Missus?'” asked Mr. Harper.

“Quite well—they're all waiting for you. So make haste—the Squire is very particular as to time, you know!”

Nodding to them both with a smile which diffused such an extraordinary light over the uncomely face that Agatha was quite startled and began to reconsider her first impression regarding it, —“Duke” Dugdale turned to walk on; but just as the horse was starting, came back again.

“Nathanael, you are here just in time—general election coming. You're a Free-trader of course?”

“Why, I never thought much about the matter.”

“Eh!—What a pity! But we'll convert you, and you shall convert your father. Ah, yes—I think we'll get the Squire on our side at last Good-bye.”

“Who is 'the Missus' and who is 'the Squire'” asked Agatha, as they drove off.

“'The Missus' is his wife—my sister Harriet, and 'the Squire' is my father,” said Nathanael, smiling. His face had worn a pleasant look ever since he caught sight of Duke Dugdale's. “When I first came home I was as much amused as yourself at these queer Dorsetshire phrases, but I like them now; they are so simple and patriarchal.”

Agatha agreed; yet she could hardly help laughing. But though this brother-in-law of Mr. Harper's—and she suddenly remembered that he was her own brother-in-law too—used provincial words, and spoke with a slight accent, which she concluded was “Dorset,”—though his dress and appearance had an anti-Stultzified, innocent, country look, still there was something about Marmaduke Dugdale which bespoke him unmistakably the gentleman.

“I am glad we met him,” said Mr. Harper, looking back down the street. “There he is, talking to a knot of people at the market-hall—farmers, no doubt, whom he will try to make Free-traders of, and who would listen to him affectionately, even if he tried to make them Mahometans. The good soul! There isn't a better man in all Dorsetshire.”

It was evident that Nathanael greatly liked “Duke Dugdale.”

Agatha would have asked a score of questions; about his age, which defied all guessing, and might have been anything from thirty to fifty-five—also about his “Missus,” for he looked like a man who never could have made love, or thought of such a thing, in all his life. But her curiosity was restrained, partly by that of the old servant behind, who kept up a close though reverential observance of all the sayings and doings of “Ma-a-ester” Nathanael's wife. She did not like even accidentally to betray how very little of Kingcombe her reserved husband had told her, and how she knew scarcely more of his family than their names.

Having parted from his brother-in-law, and gradually lost the benign influence which Duke Dugdale seemed to impart, Mr. Harper's face re-assumed that gravity, almost sadness, which, except when talking with herself, his wife now continually saw it wear.

They drove on, pushing against a fierce wind, that appeared like an invisible iron barrier to intercept their way. Every now and then, Agatha could not help shivering and creeping closer to her husband; whenever she did so, he always turned round and wrapped her up with most sedulous care.

“It is a dreary day for you to see our county for

the first time, Agatha. If the sun were shining, these wide bleak sweeps of country would look all purple with heather, and that dun-coloured, gloomy range of hills;—we must call them hills out of compliment, though they are so small—would stand out in a clear line against the sky. Beyond them lies the British Channel, with its grand sea-coast."

"The sea—ah! always the sea."

"Nay, dear, don't be afraid, how don't'ee—as we Dorset people would say. Kingcombe Holm lies in a valley. You would never know you were so near the ocean. It is the same at Anne Valery's house."

"Where is that!" said Agatha, brightening up at the mention of the name.

"Why, this animal seems inclined to show me—even if I did not know it of long habit," answered Mr. Harper, bestowing a little less of his attention on his wife, and more on the obstreporous pony, who, in regard to a certain turn of the road, had grown peculiarly wrong-headed.

"Don't'ee give in, sir! T'Squire bought he o' Miss Valery, and she do gi' un their own way, terrible bad," hinted the groom.

"Unfortunately, his own way happens to be a wrong one," said Nathannael, quietly, as he drew the reins tighter, and set himself to do that which it takes a very firm man to do to conquer an obstinate and unruly horse. Agatha remembered what she had heard or read somewhere about such a case being no bad criterion of a man's character, "lose your temper, and you'll lose your beast," ay, and perhaps your own life into the bargain. She was considerably frightened, but she sat quite still, looking from the struggling animal to her husband, in whose fair face the colour had risen, while the boyish lips were set

together with a will, fierce, rigid, and man-like. She could hardly take her eyes from him.

"Agatha, are you afraid? Will you descend?" asked he, suddenly.

"No—I will stay with you."

The struggle between man and brute lasted a minute or two longer, at the end of which, all danger being over, they were speeding on rapidly to Kingcombe Holm. Agatha sat very thoughtful.

"I fear," she said—when he tried to draw her out of her contemplative mood, showing her the wild furzy slopes and the fir-trees, almost the only trees that grow in this region—standing in black clumps on the hill-tops, like sentinel-ghosts of the old Romans, who used to encamp there—"I fear you have made *me* as much in awe of you as you have the pony."

He smiled, and was quoting something about "love casting out fear," when he suddenly corrected himself, and grew silent. In that silence they swept on to the gates of Kingcombe Holm.

It was a place—more like an ancient manorial farm than a gentleman's residence—nestled snugly in one of those fairy valleys which are found here and there among the bleak wastes of Dorsetshire coast scenery—the richer for the barrenness of all around. Before and behind the house rose sudden acclivities, thick with autumn-tinted trees. On another side was a smooth, curving, wavy hill, bare in outline, with white dots of grazing sheep floating about upon its green. The Holm, with its garden and park, lay on a narrow plain of verdurous beauty, at the bottom of the valley. Nothing was visible beyond it, save a long, bare, terraced range of hill, and the sky above all. There was no other habitation in sight, except a

tiny church, planted on one acclivity, and two or three labourers' cottages, in the doors of which a few rolypoly, open-eyed children stood, poking their fingers in their mouths, and staring intensely at Agatha.

"Oh, what a delicious nest," she cried—overcome with excitement at her first view of Kingcombe Holm, where, however, there was not a creature visible but the great dog, that barked a furious welcome from the courtyard, and the peacock, that strutted to and fro before the blank windows, sweeping his draggled tail. "Are they at home, I wonder? Will they all be waiting for us?"

"In the drawing-room, most likely. It is my father's way. He receives there all strangers—new-comers, I mean. We shall see nobody till then."

"Don't be too sure of that, brother Nathanael," said a quick, lively voice. "So, ho! Dunce, hold still, do'ee! You used to be as precise as the Squire himself, bless his heart! Now then, N. L. Jump down!"

The speaker of all this had come flying out of the hall-door—a vision of flounces, gaiety, and heartiness, had given the pony a few pats, or rather slaps, *en passant*, and now stood balancing herself on one of the spokes of the wheel, and leaning over into the carriage.



*Agatha.* ARRIVAL AT KINGCOMBE HOLM. Page 148.

"Is that you, Harrie? Agatha, this is my sister Mrs. Dugdale."

And Agatha found herself face to face (literally speaking, too, for "Harrie" kissed her) with a merry-looking, pretty woman, of a style a little too *prononcée* perhaps, for her features were on a similar mould to Major Harper's. Still, there could be no doubt as to the prettiness, and the airy, youthful aspect—younger, perhaps, than her years. Agatha was perfectly astounded to find in this gay "Harrie"

the wife of the grave and middle-aged Duke Dugdale!

"You see, my dear—ahem! what shall I call you?—that I can't be formal and polite, and it's no use trying. So I just left my father sitting stately in the drawing-room with Mary on one side, as mistress of the household; Eulalie on the other, looking as bewitching and effective as she can, and both dying with curiosity to run out and see you. But I'm not a Miss Harper now; so, while they longed to do it, I—did it. Here I am! Welcome home, Mrs. Locke Harper!"

"Thank you," stammered the young bride, hardly knowing whether to laugh or to cry. Her husband was scarcely less agitated than herself, but showed it only in the nervous trembling of his upper lip, and in the extreme brevity of his words. He lifted his wife down from the carriage, and Mrs. Dugdale, throwing back the blue veil, peered curiously into the face of her new sister.

"E—h!" she said, in that long musical ejaculation just like her husband—the only thing in which she was like him. Never was a pair who so fully exemplified the theory of matrimonial opposites. "E—h, Nathanael!" And her quick glance at her brother indicated undisguised admiration of "the Pawnee-face."

He himself looked restless, uncomfortable, as if his sister slightly fidgeted him; she had indeed, with all her heartiness, a certain quicksilverishness of manner, jumping here, there, and everywhere like mercury on a plate, in a fashion that was very perplexing at first to quiet people.

"Come along, my dear," continued Harrie, tucking the young wife under her arm—"come and beautify a little—the Squire likes it. And run away to

your father, N. L., my boy!" added she to her younger brother—younger—as a closer inspection of her fresh country face showed—possibly by some five or six years.

Mr. Harper assented with as good a grace as he could, and resigned his wife to his sister.

For the next ten minutes Agatha had a confused notion of being taken through many rooms and passages, hovered about by Mrs. Dugdale, her flounces, and her lively talk—of trying to answer a dozen questions per minute, and being so bewildered, that she succeeded in answering none, save that she had met Mr. Dugdale—that she did *not* think him "a beauty," and (she hastily and in terror added this fact) that there was not the least necessity for his being so.

"Not the least, my dear. I always thought the same! You'll love him heartily in a week—I did! Bless him for a dear, good, ugly, beautiful old soul!"

Here Agatha, who stood listening, and nervously arranging the long curls that *would* fall uncurled and untidy, felt a renewal of her old girlish enthusiasm for all true things; her eyes brightened, and her heart warmed towards "Harrie." She would have liked to stay talking longer, but for a vision of Mr. Harper waiting uncomfortably down-stairs.

"So you have finished adorning, and want to go! You can't bear to be ten minutes away from your husband, that's clear! Well, my dear, you'll get wiser when you have been married as long as I have. But I don't know," added Mrs. Dugdale laughing; "I'm always glad enough to get rid of Duke for an hour or two; yet somehow, when he is away, I'm always wanting him. By-the-by, did he happen to say what time he was coming over here—only to see you, you

know? He has quite enough of 'the Missus.'"

Agatha laughingly asked how long "the Missus" had borne that title.

"Couldn't possibly count! Look at Gus and Fred in jacket and trousers, and little Brian learning to ride. Frightful antiquity! And yet when I married I was a girl like you; only ten times wilder—the greatest harum-scarum in the county! I often wonder poor Duke was not afraid to marry me! Heigho! Well, here we are down-stairs, and here—take your wife, most solemn brother Nathanael! If you were but a little more like Frederick! By the way, have you seen Fred lately?"

"He has left town," said Mr. Harper, shortly, as he drew his young wife's arm through his own, and led her to his father's presence.

Agatha was conscious of a tall, thin, white-haired gentleman—not unlike Major Harper frozen into stately age—who rose and came to meet her.

"I am most happy to welcome my son's wife to Kingcombe Holm."

Agatha felt the withered fingers touching her own—the kiss of welcome formally sealed on her forehead. She trembled exceedingly for a moment, but recovered herself, and met old Mr. Harper's keen observant gaze with one as clear and as composed as his own. One glance told her that he was not the sort of man into whose fatherly arms she could throw herself, and indulge the emotion brimming over in her heart. But his examination of her was evidently favourable.

"You are most welcome, believe me. And my daughters"—here he turned to two ladies, of whom Agatha at first distinguished nothing, save that one was very pretty, the other much older, and plain

—“my daughters, receive your new sister.” Here the ladies aforesaid approached and shook hands, the plain one very warmly.—“You also can tell her how truly glad we are to receive—Mrs. Harper.”

He hesitated a little before the latter word, and pronounced it with some tremulousness, as though the old man were thinking how many years had passed since the name “Mrs. Harper” had been unspoken at Kingcombe Holm.

His daughters looked at one another—even Harriet observing a grave respect No one spoke, or took outward notice of the circumstance; but from that time the subject of much secret conjecture was set at rest, and Agatha was called by every one “Mrs. Harper.”

During the somewhat awkward quarter of an hour that followed, in which the chief conversation was sustained by “the Squire,” and occasionally by Nathanael—Mrs. Dugdale having vanished—the young girl observed her two sisters-in-law. Neither struck her fancy particularly, perhaps because there was nothing particular to strike it. The Misses Harper were, like most female branches of “county families,” vegetating on their estates from generation to generation in uninterrupted gentility and uniformity. Of the two, Agatha liked Mary best; for there was great goodnature shining through her fearless plainness—a sort of placid acknowledgment of the fact that she was born for usefulness, not ornament. Eulalie, on the contrary, carried in her every gesture a disagreeable self-consciousness, which testified to her long assumption of one character—the beauty of the family. Despite Agatha's admiration of handsome women in general, she and the youngest Miss Harper eyed one another uncomfortably, as if sure from the first that they shall never like one another.

All this while Nathanael spoke but little to his wife, apparently leaving her to nestle down at her own will among his family. But he kept continually near her, within reach of a word or glance, had she given him either; and she more than once felt his look of grave tenderness reading her very soul. She could not think why, in spite of all his efforts to the contrary, he should be continually so serious, while she was quite ready to be happy and at ease.

There was one thing, however, which gave her keen satisfaction—the great honour in which her husband was evidently held by his family.

Very soon a heterogeneous post-prandial repast was announced for the benefit of the travellers; to which Mr. Harper graciously bade them retire—even leading his daughter-in-law to the dining-room door.

“He'll not come further in,” whispered Mrs. Dugdale, who made herself most active about Agatha. “You arrived at seven, and my father would as soon think of changing his six o'clock dinner hour as he would of changing his politics; for all Duke says to the contrary.”

Agatha was not sorry, since the idea of dining under the elaborate kindness and dignified courtliness of old Mr. Harper was rather alarming. Besides, she was so hungry!

The moment her father-in-law had closed the door, the sisters came gathering like bees round herself and her husband, Mary busy over every possible physical want, Harrie, sitting at, or rather, on the table. She had a wild and not ungraceful way of throwing herself about—rattling on like a very Major Harper in petticoats, and flinging away *bon mots* and witty sayings enough to make the fortune of many a “wonderfully clever woman,”—the very

last character which this light-spirited country-lady would probably have imagined her own. For Eulalie, she had relaxed into a few words, and fewer smiles, the quality of neither being of sufficient value to make one regret the quantity. Nobody minded her much but Mary, who was motherly, kind, and reverential always to the inane beauty.

Such were Agatha's first impressions of her new sisters. With a shyness not unnatural she had taken little notice of her husband. He had chatted among his sisters, with whom he seemed very popular: but always in the intervals of talk the pale, grave, tired look came over him.

In quitting the dining-room—where Agatha, irresistibly led on by Mrs. Dugdale's pleasantness, had begun to feel quite at home, and had laughed till she was fairly tired out—he said, in a half whisper:

“Now, dear, I think we ought to go and see Elizabeth.”

In the confusion of her arrival, Agatha had forgotten that there was another sister—in truth, the Miss Harper of the family—Mary, its head and housekeeper, being properly only “Miss Mary.” She noticed that as Nathanael spoke, the other three looked at him and herself doubtfully, as if to inquire how much she knew—and anxiously, as though there were something painful and uncomfortable in a stranger's first seeing Elizabeth.

Mrs. Harper felt her cheeks tingle nervously, but still she put her arm in her husband's, and said, “I should much like to go.”

Mary sent for lights, and prepared to accompany them herself, the other two moving away into the drawing-room.

Through the same sort of old-fashioned

passages, but, as it seemed, to quite a different part of the house, Agatha went with her husband and his sister. The strangeness and gloom of the place, the doubt as to what sort of person she was going to see —for all she had heard was that from some great physical suffering Elizabeth never quitted her room —made the young girl feel timid, even afraid. Her hand trembled so that her husband perceived it.

"Nay, you need not mind," he whispered. "You will see nothing to pain you. We all dearly love her, and I do believe she is very happy—poor Elizabeth!"

As he spoke Mary opened a door, and they passed from the dark staircase into a large, well-lighted, pleasant room—made scrupulously pleasant, Agatha thought. It was filled with all sorts of pretty things, engravings, statuettes, vases, flowers, books, a piano; even the paper on the walls and the hangings at the window were of most delicate and careful choice. No rich drawing-room could show more taste in its arrangements, or have a more soothing effect on a mind to which the sense of æsthetic fitness is its native element.

At first, Agatha thought the room was empty, until, lying on a sofa—though so muffled in draperies as nearly to disguise all form—she saw what seemed at first the figure of a child. But coming nearer, the face was no child's face. It was that of a woman, already arrived at middle age. Many wrinkles seamed it; and the hair surrounding it in soft, close bands, was quite grey. The only thing notable about the countenance was a remarkable serenity, which in youth might have conveyed that painful impression of premature age often seen in similar cases, but which now in age made it look young. It was as if time and worldly sorrow had alike forgotten this sad victim of Nature's unkindness—had passed by and

left her to keep something of the child's paradise about her still.

This face, and the small, thin, infantile-looking hands, crossed on the silk coverlet, were all that was visible. Agatha wondered she had so shrunk from the simple mystery now revealed.

Nathanael led her to the sofa, and placed her where Elizabeth could see her easily without turning round.

“Here is my wife! Is she like what you expected, sister?”

The head was raised, but with difficulty; and Agatha met the cheerful, smiling, loving eyes of her whom people called “poor Elizabeth.” Such thorough content, such admiring pleasure, as that look testified! It took away all the painful constraint which most people experience on first coming into the presence of those whom Heaven has afflicted thus; and made Agatha feel that in putting such an angelic spirit into that poor distorted body, Heaven had not dealt hardly even with Elizabeth Harper.

“She is just what I thought,” said a voice, thin, but not unmusical. “You described her well. Come here and kiss me, my dear new sister.”

Agatha knelt down and obeyed, with her whole heart in the embrace. Of all greetings in the family, none had been like this. And not the least of its sweetness was that her husband seemed so pleased therewith, looking more like himself than he had done since they entered his father's doors.

They all sat down and talked for a long time, Elizabeth more cheerfully than any. She appeared completely versed in the affairs of the whole family, as though her mind were a hidden gallery in which were clearly daguerreotyped, and faithfully retained,

all impressions of the external world. She seemed to know everybody and everybody's circumstances—to have ranged them and theirs distinctly and in order, in the wide, empty halls of her memory, which could be filled in no other way. For, as Agatha gradually learned, this spinal disease, withering up the form from infancy, had been accompanied with such long intervals of acute physical pain as to prevent all study beyond the commonest acquirements of her sex. It was not with her, as with some, that the intellect alone had proved sufficient to make out of a helpless body a noble and complete human existence; Elizabeth's mind was scarcely above the average order, or if it had been, suffering had stifled its powers. Her only possession was the loving heart.

She asked an infinitude of questions, her bright quick eyes seeming to extort and gain more than the mere verbal answers. She talked a good deal, throwing more light than Agatha had ever before received on the manners, characters, and history of the Harper family, the Dugdales, and Anne Valery. But there was in her speech a certain reticence, as though all the common gossip of life was in her clear spirit received, sifted, purified, and then distributed abroad in chosen portions as goodly and pleasant food. She seemed to receive the secrets of every one's life and to betray none.

Agatha now learnt why there had been such a mystery of regret, reverence, and love hanging over the very mention of the eldest Miss Harper.

When the tumult of this strange day had resolved itself into silence, Agatha, believing her husband fast asleep, lay pondering over it, wondering why he had not asked her what she thought of his family—wondering, above all, what was the strange weight upon him which he tried so

hard to conceal, and to appear just the same to every one, especially to her. Her coming life rose up like a great maze, about which all the characters now apparently mingled therein wandered mistily in and out. Among them, those which had gained most vivid individuality in a fancy not prone to catch quick interests, affecting her alternately with a sense of pensive ideal calm, and cheerful healthy human liking, were Elizabeth Harper, the "Missus," and Duke Dugdale.

Likewise, as an especial pleasure, she had discovered the one to whom she clung as to a well-known friend among all these strangers, lived within eight miles of Kingcombe Holm.

"And"—she kept recurring to a fact spread abroad in the house just before bed-time, and apparently diffusing universal satisfaction—"and Anne Valery is sure to be here to-morrow."

## CHAPTER XIII.

On the morning—her first morning at Kingcombe Holm—Mrs. Harper woke refreshed to a bright day. All the terraced outline of the hills was pencilled distinctly against the bluest of blue skies, which hung like a tent over the shut-up valley. She stood at the window looking at it, while Mary Harper made the breakfast and Eulalie curiously examined Agatha's dress, supposed to be the latest bridal fashion from London. Nathanael sat writing letters

until breakfast was ready, and then took his father's place at the foot of the table.

“Elizabeth bade me ask you,” said Mary, addressing him, “if you had any letters this morning from Frederick? You know she likes to look at all family letters—they amuse her. Shall I take this one?”

Nathanael put his hand upon a heap, among which was plainly distinguishable Major Harper's writing. “No, Mary—not now. If necessary, I will read part of it to Elizabeth myself.”

Agatha, who had before vainly asked the same question, was annoyed by her husband's reserve. His silence in all his affairs, especially those relating to his brother, was impenetrable.

But this was rousing in her, day by day, a strong spirit of opposition. Had not the presence of his sisters restrained her, for her external wifely pride grew as much as her inward antagonism—she would have again boldly put forward her claim to read the letter. As it was, she had self-control enough to sit silent, but her mouth assumed that peculiar expression which at times revealed a few little mysteries of her nature—showing that beneath the quietude and simplicity of the girl lay the strong, desperate will of a resolute woman.

After breakfast, when Mr. Harper, with some slight apology, had gone to his letters again, she rose, intending to stroll about and explore the lawn. She had never been used to ask any one's permission for her out-goings and in-comings, so was departing quite naturally, when Mary stopped her.

“I hope you will not mind it, but we always stay in the house until my father comes down-stairs. He likes to see us before he begins the day.”

Agatha submitted—with a good grace, of course; though she thought the rule absolute was painfully prevalent in the Harper family. But as half-an-hour went by, and the morning air, so fresh and cool, tempted her sorely, she tried to set aside this formal domestic regulation.

Mary looked quite frightened at her overt rebellion.—"My dear Mrs. Harper—indeed we never do it. Do we, Nathanael?" said she, appealingly.

He listened to the discussion a moment.—"My dear wife, since my father would not like it, you will not go, I know."

The tone was gentle, but Agatha would as soon have thought of overleaping a stone wall as of opposing a desire thus expressed. She sat quietly down again—or would have done so, but that she saw Eulalie smile meaningly at her sister. Intercepting the young wife, the smile changed into affected condolence.

"Nathanael will have his way, you see. If you only knew what he was as a little boy," and the Beauty shrugged her shoulders pathetically. "Really, as Harrie says, most men would never get wives at all, did their lady loves know them only half as well as their sisters do."

"Nay," said the good-natured Mary, "but Harrie also says that men, like wine, improve with age, especially if they are kept cool and not too much shaken up. She has no doubt that even her Duke was a very disagreeable boy. So, Mrs. Harper, let me assure you——"—

"There is no need; I am quite satisfied," said Mrs. Harper, with no small dignity; and at this momentous crisis her father-in-law entered the room.

He entered dressed for riding—looking

somewhat younger than the night before, more cheerful and pleasant too, but not a whit less stately. He saluted Agatha first, and then his daughters, with a gracious solemnity, patting their cheeks all round, something after the fashion of a good-humoured Eastern bashaw. The old gentleman evidently took a secret pride in his womenkind. Then he shook hands with "my son Nathanael," and threw abroad generally a few ordinary remarks, to which his two daughters listened with great reverence. But in all he did or said was the same benignant hauteur; he seemed frozen up within a conglomerate of reserve and formal courtesy; he walked, talked, looked perpetually as Nathanael Harper, Esquire, of Kingcombe Holm, who never allowed either his mind or his body to appear *en déshabille*. Agatha wondered how he could ever have been a baby squalling, a boy playing, or a young man wooing; nay, more (the thought irresistibly presented itself as she noticed the extreme feebleness which his dignity but half disguised), how he would ever stoop to the last levelling of all humanity—the grave-clothes and the tomb.

"Any letters, my dear children? Any news to tell me before I ride to Kingcombe?" said he, looking round the circle with a patronising interest, which Agatha would scarcely have believed real, but for the kindly expression of the old man's eye.

"There were plenty of letters for Elizabeth, as usual; one for Eulalie "—here Eulalie looked affectedly conscious—"no others, I think."

"Except one to Nathanael from Frederick," observed the Beauty.

At the name of his eldest son the Squire's mien became a little graver—a little statelier. He said

coldly, “Nathanael, I hope you have pleasant news from your brother. Where is he now?”

“In the British Channel, on his way to the Continent.”

“My son going abroad, and I never heard of it! Some mistake, surely. He is not really gone?”

“Yes, father, for a year, or perhaps more—but certainly a year.”

The old gentleman's fingers nervously clutched the handle of his riding-whip. “If so, Frederick would certainly have shown his father the respect of informing *him* first. Excuse me if I doubt whether my son's plans are quite decided.”

“They are indeed, sir,” said Nathanael gently. “And I was aware of, indeed advised, this journey. He bids me explain to you that when this letter arrives he will be already gone.”

The father started—and broke the whip he was playing with. He stood a minute, the dull red mounting to his temples and lying there like a cloud. Then he took the fragments of the riding-whip from his son's ready hand—thanked him—bade good morning to the womenkind all round, and left them.

“Shall I ride with you, father?” said Nathanael, following him to the hall-door, with a concerned air.

“Not to-day—I thank you! Not to-day.”

Mary and Eulalie looked at one another. “This will be a sad blow to papa,” said the former. “Frederick was always a great anxiety to him.”

Agatha inquired wherefore.

“Because papa abhors a gay 'vagabondising' life, and always wished his eldest son to settle down in the county. I know—though he says nothing—that this has been a sore point between them for nearly

twenty years."

"And I know," added Eulalie, mysteriously, "that papa was going to make a last effort, and have Frederick proposed as member for Kingcombe. A pretty fight there would have been—papa and Frederick against Marmaduke and his pet candidate!"

"'Tis well that is prevented! Everything happens for the best," said Mary, sagely. "But here comes Nathanael. Don't tell him, Mrs. Harper, or he would say we had been gossiping."

Mrs. Harper was standing moralising on the ins and outs of family life, from which her own experience had hitherto been so free. Her eyes were wandering up the road, where her father-in-law had just disappeared, riding slowly, but erect as a young man. While she looked, there came up one of those delicious little country pony-carriages, which a lady can drive, and make herself independent of everybody.

"It is Anne Valery!" was the general cry, as all ran to meet her at the door—Agatha being the first.

"My dear—my dear!" murmured Anne Valery, leaning out of her little carriage to pat the brown curls. "Are you quite well?—quite happy? And your husband?" She glanced from one to the other, with a keen inquiry. "Is all well, Nathanael?"

Nathanael, smiling at his wife, whose look of entire pleasure brought, as usual, the reflection of the same to him also, answered, warmly, "Yes, Anne, all is well!"

She seemed satisfied, and took his hand to dismount from her carriage. Agatha noticed that she walked more feebly, in spite of the bright colour which the wind had brought to her cheeks; and that soon after she came into the house this tint gradually

faded, leaving her scarcely even so healthy-looking as she had appeared a month ago—the last time they had seen her. But her talk was full of cheerfulness.

“I am come to stay the whole day with you, by your father's desire—and my own. May I, Mary?”

“Oh, yes! We shall be so glad, especially Elizabeth, who was wondering and longing after you.”

“I have not been well. London never suits me,” said Anne carelessly. “But come, now I am about again, let me see what is to be done to-day. In the first place, I must have a long talk with Elizabeth. Is she risen yet, Eulalie?”

Eulalie did not know; but Mary added, that she feared this was one of Elizabeth's “hard days,” when she could not talk much to any one till evening.

Anne continued, after a pause—“I want to drive over to Kingcombe about some business. I have had so much on my hands since poor Mr. Wilson's death.”

“Anne's steward,” whispered the Beauty importantly to her sister-in-law. “You know that half Kingcombe belongs to Anne Valery?” And Agatha noticed, with some amusement, what an extreme deference was infused into the usually nonchalant, contemptuous manner of the youngest Miss Harper.

“So poor Wilson is dead! And who have you to manage all your property?” asked Mr. Harper suddenly.

“No one at present I am very particular in my choice. As I am only a woman, my steward has necessarily considerable influence. I would wish him always to be what Mr. Wilson was: if possible a friend, but undoubtedly a gentleman.”

As Miss Valery spoke, Nathanael listened in deep

thought; then, meeting her eyes, he coloured slightly, but quickly recovering himself, said, in a low tone, “Some time to-day, Anne, I would like to have a little talk with you.”

She assented with an inquiring look. But she seemed to understand Nathanael well enough to content herself with that look, asking no further questions.

“And, for the third important business which should be done to-day, and perhaps the sooner the better, I must certainly take Agatha up Holm Hill, and show her the view of the Channel.”

Agatha drew back from the window. “Ah, not the sea!—I cannot bear the sea.” Anne Valery watched her with peculiar earnestness.

“Were you ever on the sea, my dear?”

“Once, long ago.”

“Nay, I must teach you to admire our magnificent coast. On with your bonnet, and come along that great hill-terrace—do you see it?—with Nathanael and me.”

“But you will be tired,” Mrs. Harper said, reluctant still, yet loth to resist Anne Valery.

“Tired? no! The salt breeze gives me strength—health. I hardly live when I am not in sight of the Channel. Make haste, and let us go, Agatha.”

She seemed so eager, that no further objection was possible. So they soon started—they three only, for Mary had occupation in the house, and the Beauty was mightily averse to exercise and sea-air.

They climbed the steep road, overhung with trees, at whose roots grew clusters of large primrose leaves, showing what a lovely walk it must be in spring; then higher, till all this vegetation ceased,

leaving only the short grass cropped by the sheep, the purple thistles, and the furze-bushes, yellow and cheerful all the year round. They then drove along a high ridge for a mile or two, till they got quite out of sight of Kingcombe Holm. Miss Valery talked gaily the whole way; and, as though the sea-breeze truly gave her life, was the very first to propose leaving the carriage and walking on, so as to catch the earliest glimpse of the Channel.

“There!” she said, breathlessly, and quitting Mr. Harper's arm, crossed over to his wife. “There, Agatha!”

It was such a view as in her life the young girl had never beheld. They stood on a high ridge, on one side of which lay a wide champaign of moorland, on the other a valley, bounded by a second ridge, and between the two sloping greenly down, till it terminated in a little bay. Parallel to the valley ran this grand hill-terrace—until it likewise reached the coast, ending abruptly in precipitous gigantic cliffs, against which the tides of centuries might have beat themselves in vain. Beyond all, motionless in the noonday dazzle, and curving itself away in a mist of brightness where the eye failed, was the great, wide, immeasurable sea.

The three stood gazing, but no one spoke. Agatha trembled, less with her former fear than with that awestruck sense of the infinite which is always given by the sight of the ocean—that ocean which One “holdeth in the hollow of his hand.” Gradually this awe grew fainter, and she was able to look round her, and count the white dots scattered here and there on the dazzling sheet of waves.

“There go the ships,” said Nathanael. “See what numbers of them—numbers, yet how few they seem!

—are moving up and down on this highway of all nations. Look, Agatha, at that one, a mere speck, dipping in the horizon.

"Do you remember Tennyson's lines?—they reached Uncle Brian and me even in the wild forests of America:

> *"'Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail Which brings our friends up from the under world; Sad as the last which reddens over one That sinks, with all we love, below the verge.'"*

"There! it is gone now," cried Agatha, almost with a sense of loss. She felt Anne Valery's fingers tighten convulsively over her arm, and saw her with straining eyes and quivering lips watching the vanishing—nay, vanished—ship, as if all her soul were flying with it to the "under world."

The sight was so startling, so moving—especially in a woman of Miss Valery's mature age and composed demeanour—that Nathanael's wife instinctively turned her eyes away and kept silence. In a minute or two Anne had returned to Mr. Harper's arm, and the three were walking on as before; until, ere long, they nestled themselves in a sheltered nook, where the sea-wind could not reach them, and the sun came in, warm as summer.

Nathanael began to show his wife the different points of scenery—especially the rocky island of Portland, beyond which the line of coast sweeps on ruggedly westward to the Land's End.

"But I believe," he said, "that there is nowhere a grander coast than we have here—not even in Cornwall."

"Speaking of Cornwall," Miss Valery said, closely

observing Nathanael, “I lately heard a sad story about some mines there.”

Mr. Harper seemed restless. “The speculation had failed, having been ill-managed, or, as I greatly fear, a cheat from the beginning. As I had property near in the county—what, did you not know that, Nathanael—I was asked to do something for the poor starving miners of Wheal Caroline. Have you heard the name, Agatha?”

“No,” said Agatha, innocently, not paying much attention, except to the lovely view.

“Not heard? That is strange. But you, Nathanael”—

“I know all,” he said hastily. “It is a sad history—too sad to be talked of here. Another time”—

His eye met hers—and both turned upon Agatha, who sat a little apart, enjoying the novel scene, and rejoicing above all that the sea—vague object of nameless terror—could ever appear so beautiful.

“Poor child!” murmured Miss Valery.

“Hush, Anne!” Nathanael whispered, so imploringly—nay, commandingly, that Anne was startled.

“How like you are to”—

“What were you saying?” asked Agatha, turning at last.

“I was saying,” Miss Valery replied hastily—“I was saying how like Nathanael looked just then to his Uncle Brian.”

“Did he indeed? Was that all you were speaking of?”

“Not quite all; but I find your husband knows the story; he will tell you, *as he ought*,” added Anne pointedly.

"Surely I will, one day," said Nathanael. "But in this case, as in many others, where there has been misfortune or wrong, I consider the best, wisest, most charitable course is not to spread it abroad until the wrong has had a chance of being remedied. Do you not think so, Anne?"

"Yes," she answered, her eyes fixed upon the resolute young face that seemed compelling her to silence almost against her will. It was marvellous to see the influence Nathanael had, even over Anne Valery.

"And now," continued Mr. Harper, "while I am alone with you and my wife"—here he drew Agatha within the circle of talk, and made her lean against his knee, his arm shielding her from the wind—"I wanted to talk with you, Anne, about some plans I have."

"Say on."

"I have given up—as Agatha wrote you word—all idea of our settling at Montreal. It is necessary that I should at once find some employment in England."

"Not yet—not just yet," said his wife.

"I must, dear. It is right—it is necessary. Anne herself would say so."

Miss Valery assented, much to Agatha's surprise.

"The only question then is—what can I do? Nothing in the professions—for I have acquired none; nothing in literature—for I am not a genius; but anything in the clear, straightforward, man-of-business line—Uncle Brian used to accuse me of being so very practical.—Anne," he added, smiling, "I wish, instead of having to puff off myself thus, Uncle Brian were here to advertise my qualifications."

"Qualifications for what?" inquired Agatha, Miss Valery being silent

"For obtaining from my friend here what I would at once have applied for to any stranger; poor Wilson's vacant post as her overseer, land-agent, steward, or whatever the name may be."

"Steward!" cried Mrs. Harper. "Surely you would never dream of being a steward?"

"Why not? Because I am unworthy of the situation, or—as I fear my proud little wife thinks—because the situation is not worthy of me? Nay, a man never loses honour by earning his bread in honourable fashion; and Miss Valery herself said that for this office she required both a gentleman and a friend. Will she accept me?"

And he extended, proudly as his father might—yet with a frank independence nobler than the pride of all the Harpers—his honest right hand. Anne Valery took it, the tears rising in her eyes.

"I could never have offered you this, Nathanael; but since you are so steadfast, so wise——Yes! it is indeed, considering all things, the wisest course you can pursue. Only, I will agree to nothing unless your wife consents."

"I will not consent," said Agatha, determinedly.

There was an uncomfortable pause.

"I see in your plan no reason—no right," continued she, forgetting in her annoyance even the outward deference with which her sense of conjugal dignity led her invariably to treat her husband. "Why was I never told this before?"

"Because I never thought of it myself until this morning."

The exceeding gentleness of his tone surprised

her, and restrained many more words, not over-sweet, which were issuing from her angry lips.

“The fact is, Agatha—I may speak before Anne Valery whom we both love”—

“And who loves you both as if you had been her own kindred.”

These words, so tremulously said, swept away a little bitterness that was rising up in Agatha's heart against Miss Valery.

“It is necessary,” Mr. Harper went on —“imperatively so, for my comfort—that I should at once do something. And in choosing one's work, it always seemed to me there was great wisdom in the rule—'Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.' Many things I could not do; this I can, well and faithfully, as Anne will find. Nor need I feel ashamed of being steward to Miss Valery.”

Agatha felt her spirit of opposition quaking on its throne. “But your father—your sisters. What will they all say at Kingcombe Holm?”

“Nothing that I cannot combat. My father will be glad of our settling near him in Dorsetshire.”

“In Dorsetshire!” echoed Mrs. Harper dolefully; and thereupon fled her last visions of a gay London home. Yet she already liked her husband's county and people well enough to bear the sacrifice with tolerable equanimity.

“And whatever he says, whatever any one else says, I have no fear, if my wife will only stand by me, and trust that I do everything for the best.”

His wife listened, not without agitation, for she remembered their first dispute, only a few days ago. Here was rising another storm. Yet either she felt weaker to contend, or something in Nathanael's

manner lured her to believe him in the right. She listened—only half-convinced, yet still she listened.

Anne Valery did the same, though she took no part in the argument Only continually her eyes wandered to Nathanael, less with smiling heart-warm affection than with the pensive tenderness with which one watches a dead likeness revived in a living face.

At last, when he had expressed all he could—everything except entreaty or complaint—Mr. Harper paused. “Now, Agatha, speak.”

She felt that she must yield, yet tried to struggle a little longer. She had been so unused to control.

“You should have consulted with me—have explained more of your reasons, which as yet I do not comprehend. Why should you be so wondrously anxious to begin work? It is unreasonable, unkind.”

“Am I unkind to you, my poor Agatha?” His accent was that of unutterable pain.

“No! no! that you never are! Only—I suppose because I am young and lately married—I do not half understand you. What must I do, Miss Valery?”

Anne looked from one to the other—Nathanael, who, as was his habit in all moments of great trial, assumed an aspect unnaturally hard—and Agatha whose young fierce spirit was just bursting out, wrathful, yet half repentant all the while. “What must you do? You must try to learn the lesson that every woman has to learn from and for the man she loves—to have faith in him.”

“We women,” she continued softly, “the very best and wisest of us, cannot enter thoroughly into the nature of the man we love. We can only love him. That is, when we once believe him worthy of affection. Firmly knowing that, we must bear with all

the rest; and where we do not quite understand, we must, as I said, *have faith in him*. I have heard of some women whose faith has lasted all their life."

Anne's serious smile, and the beautiful steadfastness of her eyes, which vaguely turned seaward—though apparently looking at nothing—made a deep impression on the young wife.

She answered, thoughtfully, "I believe in my husband too, otherwise I would not have married him. Therefore, since our two wills seem to clash, and he is the older and the wiser—let him decide as he thinks best—I will try to 'have faith in him.'"

Nathanael grasped her hand, but did not speak—it seemed impossible to him. Soon after, they all rose and turned homeward, leaving the breezy terrace and the bright sunshiny sea. None turned to look back at either, excepting only—for one lingering, parting glance—Anne Valery.

## CHAPTER XIV.

The same afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Harper and Miss Valery drove to Kingcombe, to see if in that quaint little town there was a house suitable for the young couple. They had not said a word to either of the Miss Harpers concerning this sudden arrangement, agreeing that the father of the household ought to be shown the respect of receiving the first information.

“And then,” said Nathanael, “I trust mainly to Anne Valery to overcome his scruples. Anne can do anything she likes with my father. Don't you remember,” he continued, leaning over to the front seat where the two ladies were, and looking quite cheerful, as though a great load had been taken off his mind—“don't you remember—I do, though I was such a little boy—how there was one day a grand family tumult because Frederick wanted his commission, and my father refused it—how you walked up and down the garden, first with one and then with the other, persuading everybody to be friends, while Uncle Brian and I”—

“There, that will do,” said Miss Valery. “Never mind old times, but let us look forward to the future. Here we are at Kingcombe. Agatha, how do you like the place?”

And Agatha, on this glowing autumn afternoon, eagerly examined her future home.

It was a rather noteworthy country town; small, clean, with an air of sober preservation, reminding one of a well-kept, dignified, healthy old age. It wore its antiquity with a sort of pride, as if its quaint streets, intersecting one another in cruciform shape, still kept the impress of mediaeval feet, baron's or priest's, in the days when Kingcombe had sixteen churches and a castle to boot—as if the Roman walls which enclosed it lay solemnly conscious that, at night, ghosts of old Latin warriors glided over the smooth turf of those great earthen mounds where the town's-children played. Even the very river, which came up to the town narrow and slow, with perhaps one sailing-barge on it visible far across the flat country, and looking like a boat taking an insane pedestrian excursion over the meadows—even the river seemed to run silently, as if remembering the

time when it had floated up Danish ships with their fierce barbarian freight, and landed them just under that red sand-cliff, where the lazy cows now stood, and the innocent blackberry-bushes grew.

It was a curious place Kingcombe, or so Agatha thought.

“How strange it is,” Mr. Harper observed. “All these old spots seem to me like places beheld in a dream. Uncle Brian often used to talk about them. I think to this day he remembers everything and everybody about Kingcombe.”

“Does he?”

“And that some day or other he will come back again I do most firmly believe. Do not you, Anne?”

“Yes.” As she spoke, her hand involuntarily was pressed upon her side. Agatha wondered she responded so coldly and with so melancholy a look, to such a joyous prospect as Uncle Brian's return would surely be to all the family.

But here they were in Kingcombe streets—very quiet, sleepy streets, which seemed to have taken an undisturbed doze for a few centuries, to atone for the terrible excitements there created successively by Danish, Roman, Saxon, and baronial ruffians. The poor little town seemed determined to spend its old age in peace and solitude, for you might have planted a cannonade at the market-place, and swept down East Street, West Street, North Street, and South Street, without laying more than a dozen official murders on your soul. There was indeed great reason for Mrs. Harper's innocent inquiry—“Where are all the people gone to?”

“Except on market-days, we rarely see more street passengers than now in Kingcombe,” Aline Valery answered, smiling. “You will get accustomed

to that and many other things when you are a country lady. Now, shall we drive to the Dugdales, or look first at the two houses I told you of?"

Mr. Harper preferred the latter course, under fear, his wife merrily declared, of being circumvented by Mrs. Dugdale. The brother and sister, she had already discovered, seemed on as pleasant terms as fire and water, since, as Harrie punningly averred, one invariably "put out" the other. They did not squabble—Nathanael Harper never squabbled—but they always met with a gentle hissing, like water sprinkled on coals. Agatha, who was quite new to these harmless fraternalities, always occurring in large families, was mightily amused thereat.

The first house the little party looked over was, as Emma Thornycroft would have phrased it, "a love of a place!" Dining-room, drawing-rooms, conservatory, gardens—quite a gentleman's mansion. Agatha set her heart upon it at once, and it blotted out even her lingering regret over the lost home in the Regent's Park. She ran over the rooms with the glee of a child, and only came back to her husband to urge him to take it, giving her this thing and that thing necessary to its beautification.

He patted her cheek with a pleased yet sad look.

"Dear, I will give you all I can; be quite sure of that. But"—

"Nay, no buts; I must have this house. Besides, Miss Valery says it is the only house to let in Kingcombe."

"Except the one I showed you as we passed."

"Oh, that mean little cottage—impossible. We could never think of living there."

"Nevertheless, let us look at it. You know we are

but just beginning the world, and 'small beginnings make great endings' as Uncle Brian would sagely observe. Come along, my little wife."

She tried to slip from his hand and appeal to Miss Valery, but Anne had moved forward, and left them alone. There was no resource; and even while Agatha's spirit was rather restive under the coercion, she could not but acknowledge the pleasantness with which it was enforced.

"Well, I'll go with you, but I hereby declare rebellion. I will not have that miserable nutshell of a house," said she, laughing.

Yet it was a pretty nutshell—quite after the "love in a cottage" fashion—though adorned and perfected by the late Mr. Wilson, an old bachelor.

"Did he die here?" asked Agatha.

"No; in Cornwall," Anne answered. "He had gone over to look at some property I have lately bought there. The people on it, miners thrown out of work, gave him more anxiety than he could bear, for he was not strong. He said their misery broke his heart."

Miss Valery spoke softly, but the words caught Nathanael's ear. He looked greatly shocked—and said, in a low tone, "Anne, don't talk of this. If I live, the wrong shall be atoned for."

Agatha wondered for the moment what wrong there was which made her husband look so pained and humbled. But she forbore to ask questions, and again turned her attention to the house.

"It must have been a charming nest for an old bachelor, and I would have liked it very much myself had I been an old maid. But it would never do for *us*, you know."

Nathanael smiled, so loth to contradict her, or thwart her pretty ways.

“Don't you see, Miss Valery;” Agatha continued, gathering apprehensions from his silence, smiling though it was—“Don't you see how different the cases are? This little house might do very well for Mr. Wilson, but then if my husband takes his place as your steward, it is only for amusement. We are rich people, you know.”

“My poor child!” began Anne Valery, looking regretfully, nay, reproachfully at Mr. Harper. But he whispered as he passed:

“Not yet, Anne—for my father's sake—the whole family's—nay, her own. Not just yet!”

Such was his earnestness, such his air of command, that, for the second time, Anne, looking in his face and reading the old likeness there—obeyed him.

Agatha, wondering, uncomfortable, recommenced what she jestingly called “her little rebellion.” “I see, Mr. Harper, your heart is inclining to this place, though why or wherefore I cannot tell. But do incline it back again! We must have the other house—that delicious Honeywood.”

“My dear little wife! Nobody could live at Honeywood under a thousand a year.”

“Well, and have we not that? I am sure I thought I had more money than ever I could do with. How much have I?”

He hesitated—she fancied it was at the thoughtless “I,” and generously changed the expression.

“How much have *we?*”

“Enough—I will make it enough—to keep you

from wanting anything, and give you all the luxuries to which you were born. But not enough to warrant us in living at Honeywood. I cannot do it—not even for your sake, Agatha."

"I do not see the matter as you do."

"You cannot, dear! I know that. But in this one thing—when, on various accounts, I can judge better than she can—will not my wife trust me?"

And Anne Valery's glance seemed to echo, "Trust him."

Agatha, tried to the utmost of her small stock of patience, grew more bitter than she could have believed it possible to be with her husband and Anne Valery.

"You expect too much," she said, sharply. "I cannot trust, even though I may be compelled to obey."

Mr. Harper turned round anxiously. "Agatha, what must—what can I do? No," he muttered to himself, "I can do nothing." He walked to the window, and stood looking out mutely on the little garden—tiny, but so pretty, with its green verandah, its semicircle of arbutus trees serving as a frame to the hilly landscape beyond, its one wavy acacia, woodbine-clasped, at the foot of which a robin-redbreast was hopping and singing over the few fallen leaves.

While they all thus stood, there came a light foot and a flutter of draperies to the door.

"My patience! what are you all doing here? So, Agatha—Anne! How d'ye do, my worthy brother? Why didn't you all come to our house?"

"We were coming directly," Agatha said. "But how did you find out we were at Kingcombe?"

“You little London-lady! As if anybody, especially the much-beloved Anne Valery (saving her presence) and the much-wondered-at Mr. and Mrs. Locke Harper, could drive through Kingcombe without the fact being speedily circulated throughout the whole town? Why, my dear, if you must know, the grocer told Mrs. Edwards' nursemaid, and Mrs. Edwards' nursemaid told it to Mrs. Jones at the Library, and Mrs. Jones told Miss Trenchard, who was coming to call on me; so I asked Duke to give the children their dinner, and off I started, tracking you as cleverly as one of Nathanael's Red Indians. And here I am.”

She stopped, breathless, her flounces, veil, and shawl flying abroad in all directions. But she looked so hearty, natural, and good-humoured, that her entrance was quite a relief to Agatha—more especially as, for a great wonder, she asked no questions.

“So, I hear you have been showing Honeywood to Mrs. Harper. Pretty place, isn't it! A pity it's not on your property, Anne, or you would not let it go to ruin unlet. And here is poor Mr. Wilson's old house, with all the furniture just as it was. How melancholy!”

She said “How melancholy!” just in the tone that she would have said “How entertaining!” From circumstances, or from natural peculiarity—that light easy temper which dances like a feather over the troubled waters of life—she had evidently never learnt the meaning of the word sorrow.

“But now,” Harriet continued, “what I come for, is to carry you all off to lunch—the children's dinner. My dear, you must see my boys, your nephews.”

Agatha stood aghast at the idea of having

nephews!

“And such boys!” Miss Valery added, interposing. “'The Missus' has good right to be proud of them. If there is one thing in which Harrie succeeds better than another, it is in the management of her children.”

“Bah! they manage themselves; I just leave them to nature,” cried Mrs. Dugdale; but her eye—the mother's eye—twinkled with pleasure all the time, which greatly improved its expression, Agatha thought. She walked off gaily with her sister-in-law, Nathanael following. Anne stayed behind, conversing with the old woman who showed the house. She and Mr. Harper had pointedly avoided any private speech with one another.

“I declare there is Duke!” cried Mrs. Dugdale suddenly. “Just look at him, meandering up and down the town.” (Agatha laughed at the word; “meandering” seemed so perfectly expressive of Duke Dugdale.) “But my husband always turns up everywhere, except where he's wanted. Does yours? I beg your pardon—since you are watching him as if you thought he were running away. Nonsense, Agatha—(I always call everybody by their Christian names)—Nonsense! He's only shaking hands with his brother-in-law, both looking as pleased as ever they can look.”

The next moment Harrie and Agatha came up with the two gentlemen at the door of Mr. Dugdale's house. They were talking politically and earnestly, as men will do—Nathanael having apparently forgotten the bitter cloud of a few minutes since, which yet lay heavy on his wife's heart. At least it seemed so, and his indifference made her angry.

Neither spoke to their wives—being busy laying

their heads together over a newspaper—until Harrie very unceremoniously began to pull at her husband's coat, which he bore for a time in perfect obliviousness. At last he turned and patted her with his great hand, just as some sage, mild Newfoundland dog would coax into peace the attacks of a wild young kitten.

“Nay, now, Missus—don't'ee, love; I'm busy.—And you see, Nathanael, as your brother is sure not to canvass or try for the town, and as Mr. Trenchard is such a fine fellow, your father's friend too, don't you think we could coax him round? By conviction, of course: Trenchard wouldn't take any man's votes except upon conviction.”

“Wouldn't he?” said Nathanael, smiling at the simple-minded politician, who believed that everybody's politics were as honest as his own. At which unpropitious moment a number of half-drunken men, with “Vote for Trenchard!” stuck round their broken hats, came round the corner shouting:

“Hurrah for Free-trade! Duke Dugdale for ever! Bravo!—and give us a shilling! Amen!”

“You see now what comes of your politics,” cried his wife, trying to pull him into the hall. But the good man still stood, bareheaded, a perplexed expression troubling his face.

“It's very odd, now: I made Trenchard promise not to give them a penny for drink. Poor fellows! if they only knew better! But I'll tell'ee what it is, Nathanael,” and he used the slight Dorset accent, which always broadened when he was very earnest, “those lads drink because they are starving—drink drowns care. If they had Free-trade they wouldn't be starving: if they were not starving they wouldn't

drink. Therefore, hurrah for Free-trade, and, my poor fellows, here's your shilling! Only don't'ee let it go for more drink'; and, hark'ee, remember it's no bribery money o' Mr. Trenchard's, its *mine*.

"Thank'ee, zir, thank'ee; hurrah for Duke Dugdale and Free-trade!" shouted the men as they staggered off.

Mr. Dugdale stood looking after them with that mild benevolent smile which made his ugly face quite beautiful—at least Agatha thought so;—which was very generous in her, seeing he had not taken the least notice of her all this while; when he did, it was in the most passing way.

"Eh—what, Missus? did you say Mrs. Harper was here?" He shook hands with her, looking in another direction;—then again turned to Nathanael.

"Utterly useless!" cried Harrie, laughing. "He's more misty than usual to-day. Let us leave the men alone, stupid bears as they are! and come up-stairs to the children."

All this time no one asked or looked for Miss Valery, who had lingered behind, bidding them go forward. It seemed the habit of the family that she should be left to go about in her own fashion, interfered with by nobody, and attended by nobody, save when she came among them to do them good. It was not wonderful; since, having passed that time of youth when a pleasant woman is everybody's petted darling, she had lived to feel herself alone in the world—wife, sister, and child to no one. It always takes a certain amount of moral courage to meet that destiny.

Aided by the beneficial influence of dinner, which in the Dugdales' house seemed to have the mysterious property of extending over an indefinite

time, Agatha had succeeded in making friends with her “nephews” to say nothing of a lovely little niece, who would persist in putting chubby arms round “Pa's” neck, and dividing his attention sorely between Free-trade and rice-pudding. Mr. Harper had taken another child on his knee, and was cutting oranges and doing “Uncle Nathanael” to perfection. His wife stole beside him with affection. Why would he not be always as now? Why was he so good, so gentle to others, yet so hard to be understood by her? Was it her own fault? She almost believed so.

On this group, all happy, all united together by those lovely links in the chain of happiness—little children—Anne Valery entered. She passed round the table, having a word, or smile, or kiss for all. Then she went to an arm-chair, looking tired, though joining all the while in the conversation, particularly with Mr. Dugdale, who seemed to have a great regard for her.

“Ah, Miss Valery, I wish you were a man, and could vote for us!” said he, peering from underneath the baby-hands which made a pointed Norman arch over “Pa's” eyes. “You'd be sure to vote on the right side. Didn't we make a convert of you, Brian and I, years before people talked of Free-trade; long before he went out, and I got married to mamma there? Eh, Brian, my lad”—and he patted his youngest boy, throned on Mr. Harper's knee—“if you only grow up such a wise man as your grand-uncle!”

Agatha was amused to see how the idea and recollection of Uncle Brian had permeated through every branch of the Harper family. Almost every family has some such personage, mythical, sublime, exciting the wonder and hero-worship of all the young people. Little Brian opened wide his large grey eyes at the mention of his honoured namesake.

But while he gazed, his papa's pudding-laden spoon stopped half-way on its journey to the baby-mouth that was waiting for it—Duke Dugdale was in a reverie. He did not even hear the little clamourer on his knee.

“Really, now, that's very odd, very odd indeed.” And he felt anxiously in his pocket. “No, I had another coat on that day—mamma, where's my grey overcoat?”

“Duke—what on earth are you talking about? Now, Agatha, confess—isn't my husband the very vaguest, mistiest man you ever knew? Oh, you dear old visionary, what do you want with grey overcoats at dinner-time?”

He smiled patiently—perhaps he did not even hear—put down his little girl, and walked out of the room, his wife anxiously jumping up and following with some pathetic exclamation about “Duke's being so cross!” Which seemed to Agatha the most amusing exaggeration possible.

In a minute or two this most opposite couple—opposite, but fitting like a dovetailed joint—came in merrily together, Harrie holding a letter.

“Would you believe, he got it last week, has been carrying it about ever since, and never thought of it! There, Nathanael, it's yours! Devour it!”

“From Uncle Brian!” cried the young man. At which name there ran a great sensation throughout the family, in all but Miss Valery, who still kept her chair.

“News! news!” cried Harrie, Agatha and the boys gathering round. Mr. Dugdale walked up and down the room—his hands behind him—smiling in benevolent content at everybody and at nobody. Brian and his tiny sister consoled themselves for the

little attention they got by slily climbing on the table and embedding their fingers in the rice-pudding.

Nathanael read the letter aloud, as seemed to be the family custom with Uncle Brian's correspondence.

“My dear Boy,” I find the Western solitudes are no nearer heaven than civilisation. My two red friends having escaped and got back, which they did on purpose to tomahawk me—I gave the tribe the slip, and am here in New York. There I accidentally received your letter.

“You are a foolish boy. When I was young, I think I would rather have died than have married a rich woman, even if she loved me, which no woman ever did. Nevertheless, I hope you will fare better than you deserve.

“Shall you ever come back to America? Not on my account, I pray, though I miss you, and am getting old and lonely. Perhaps it is as well that you left me, and have married and settled. That seems to me now the happier, worthier life for a man to lead. I should like to come and see you, if I could come not quite the beggar I am now. Therefore, I often think I shall go to California.”

There was a light movement among the listening group, as Miss Valery was found quietly to have joined them, and to be leaning over Nathanael's shoulder. He pointed his finger to the letter that she might read it with him. She moved her head in thanks, and he continued:

“If in this or any other form of the mad gold-fever I can heap up a little of that cursed—I mean blessed dust, you may possibly see me in England. Till then—or till death—which seems equally likely, I remain,

"Your affectionate Uncle,

"Brian Locke Harper.

"P.S.—I send this through Marmaduke Dugdale's late agent in New York. Tell my old friend Duke that I congratulate him on having given up merchandising, so that my brother at Kingcombe Holm can no longer reproach him with being the only one of the Harper connection who *earns* a livelihood."

This letter, which was trying to read, being sharp and stinging on many points to more than one person present, Nathanael went steadily through, though several times his colour changed. No one made any comment except Agatha, who observed "that Uncle Brian must be rather bitter and sarcastic at heart."

"No—not bitter," Anne Valery said,—"only sorrowful. It is often so, when after a hard life men feel themselves growing old. What shall you do, Nathanael?"

"About what? His going to California? Nay, I cannot prevent that. What use in my writing when he gives me such lectures about my marriage?"

"He would not if he knew Agatha. Besides, in this doctrine he is a little wrong. It is of small moment on which side lies the wealth;—love makes all things even."

Mr. Harper turned away with one of those uneasy looks which Agatha had already begun to notice and speculate over. She made up her mind that at the first possible opportunity she would muster up courage, and claim her right as a wife to know her husband's whole heart.

The epistle produced a considerable change on the family group. The boys were clamorous to know

all about California, and whether Uncle Brian would not come home in a gold ship with silver sails; on which subject Nathanael was too full of his own thoughts to give much satisfactory information. Mr. Dugdale had walked out of the window into the garden behind, where Miss Valery followed him, and they two were seen strolling up and down in close conversation. As they passed the window, Agatha noticed that. Anne Valery's cheeks were slightly flushed, and that Mr. Dugdale's "mistiness" of manner had assumed an unusual clearness. He was shaking his companion warmly by the hand.

"Anne, what a wise woman you are! Such a plan would have been years in coming into *my* head. And it's just the very thing. It will give him occupation and independence without hurting his pride. Moreover"—and a sudden thought dilated his whole countenance with pleasure—"I shouldn't wonder if it brought him home."

"Hush!"

"Oh yes, I'll remember, we must be very particular. By-the-by, Anne"—here a bright idea seemed to strike the worthy man—"what a help he would be to us against the Protectionists! Wouldn't *he* see the blessing of Free-trade?"

Anne smiled, with her finger on her lip to stop the conversation; and they stepped in at the window; —Mrs. Harper taking care to glide away, lest they should suspect what she had so unintentionally heard. It was doubtless one of Miss Valery's numerous anonymous charities, which fell as abundant and unnoticed as rain.

"Now"—and Anne startled her godchild Brian by turning up his little rosy chin and kissing him —"now, who will come back with us to that grand

family-dinner which the Squire has set his heart upon, and Aunt Mary is so busy-about to-day at Kingcombe Holm?"

All soon started; Agatha being kidnapped, not much against her will, by her gay sister-in-law, and driven across the moors at such a helter-skelter pace that Nathanael, who had insisted upon following them on horseback, received his wife at the door with an evident thanksgiving that she had reached home alive.

Miss Valery's little equipage came leisurely on behind. Nobody asked what she and Duke Dugdale had conversed about; but Harrie shrewdly suspected he had been talking poor dear Anne to death about the votes of her Kingcombe tenantry, and the probable chances of Mr. Trenchard and Free-trade.

## CHAPTER XV.

To see the elder Mr. Harper sitting at the head of his own dinner-table was a real pleasure. He never looked so well at any other time. His grandiose air was then so mixed with genuine kindliness that it only enriched his courtesies, like the "body" in mellow old wine. He leaned graciously back in the arm-chair peculiarly his own, surveying the long table shone over by soft wax-lights, and circled by smiling faces, most of them women, as the old gentleman liked best. Even the plain Mary, taking the foot of the table, looked well and mistress-like in

her black velvet dress: Eulalie and Mrs. Dugdale kept up the good appearance of the family; while Miss Valery and the young Mrs. Harper took either side of the host, and were duly honoured by him.

Agatha wore her wedding-dress, of white silk, rich and plain, She looked very pretty, her girlish *abandon* of manner softened by a certain wifely dignity, which grew upon her day by day. She filled her position well, though often with secret trembling, and shy glances over to her husband to see if he were satisfied with her—a fact which no one but herself could doubt.

“Now, my children,” said the Squire, when the servants had withdrawn, and dessert and wines foretold the chatty hour after dinner of which he was so fond—“now, my children—I may call you all so?” and he smiled at Anne Valery—“let me tell you how glad I am to see you, and especially the youngest of you”—here he softly patted Agatha's hand, on the table. “And since we always drink healths here—a good old fashion that I should be loth to renounce—let me give you the first toast—Mr. and Mrs. Nathanael Locke Harper!”

“Hear, hear!” said Mr. Dugdale vaguely from the bottom of the table, at which indecorum—probably occasioned by a county meeting that was running in his head—his father-in-law looked extremely severe. But the severity was soon drowned in the nods and smiles that circled round. After which Nathanael said briefly but with feeling:

“Father, my brother and sisters, and Anne—my wife and I thank you all”

“What do you think of this our old-fashioned custom?'” said the Squire, turning to his daughter-in-law. “A remnant of my young days, when every lady

used to be called upon to give the health of a gentleman, and every gentleman of a lady. It was always so at your grandfather's table, Anne, where many a time when you were a baby in long-clothes I had the pleasure of giving yours."

"Thank you," said Anne, smiling. She was evidently a great favourite with the old gentleman.

"You should know, my dear daughter-in-law, that my acquaintance with this lady dates almost from her birth. And for nineteen years I held over her the right which I understand my eldest son"—he paused a moment—"which Major Harper had the honour to hold over you. Her grandfather left me his executor and sole guardian of his infant heiress. I was a young man then, but I tried to deserve his trust. Did I, Anne?"

Again she smiled—most affectionately.

"And I had the pleasure of seeing my ward at twenty-one the richest heiress and the truest gentlewoman in the west of England. She did me infinite credit, and I had fulfilled to my friend one of the most sacred trusts a man can receive. Your excellent grandfather Anne—let us drink his memory."

Reverently and in silence the old Squire raised the glass to his lips—a glass filled with only water—he never took wine.

"You see, my dear young lady, how this old custom brings back all lost or absent friends. We never forget them, and like to talk of them and of old times. Thus, always at this hour, we gather round us innumerable pleasant recollections, and remember all who are dear to us or to our guests at Kingcombe Holm.—Now, Mrs. Harper, we wait your toast."

Agatha coloured, felt nervous and ashamed,

glanced at her husband, but met nothing except an encouraging smile. She thought—remembering her own few ties—that she would gratify Nathanael by naming some one nearest to him. So she looked up timidly, and gave “Uncle Brian.”

Every one applauded—the Squire graciously acknowledging the compliment to his brother.

“The youngest and only surviving brother of many, and as such, much regarded by me,” he explained to his daughter-in-law. “In spite of the great difference in our ages, and some trifling opposition in our characters, I cherish the highest esteem for my brother Brian.” And hereupon he asked for the letter received that day; which was duly read aloud by his son—saving the wise omission of the postscript.

“Go to California?” said old Mr. Harper, knitting his brows. “I do not like that—it is unbecoming a gentleman. Though he was wild and daring enough, Brian never yet forgot he was a gentleman. Was it not so, Anne?”

Anne assented.

“He was a fine generous fellow, too. Do you remember how a week before he left us so suddenly he rode fifty miles across the country to get some ice for you in your fever? You were very ill then, my poor girl.” It was touching to hear him call Miss Valery a “girl”—she whom the young Agatha regarded as quite an elderly woman.

“And though he did leave us so abruptly—wherefore, remains to this day a mystery, unless it was a young man's whim and love of change—still I have the greatest dependence on Brian Harper,” continued the Squire, who seemed as a parental right to monopolise all the talk at table.

"Brian Harper!" exclaimed Mr. Dugdale, waking from a trance. "Yes—Brian would surely be able to furnish those statistics on Canadian wheat. His judgment was always as sound as his politics."

"What was your remark, Marmaduke" said the old Squire, testily.

"O, nothing—nothing, father!" Harrie quickly answered, with a half merry, half warning frown at her lord. Mr. Dugdale folded himself up again into silence, with the quiet consciousness of one who has a pearl in his keeping—the undoubted value of which there is no need either to put forward or to defend.

Miss Valery here came to the rescue, and turned the conversation into a merry channel Agatha was surprised to find what a wondrous power of unfeigned home-cheerfulness there was in this woman, who had lived to be called even by those that loved her, "an old maid." And when at last the Squire gracefully allowed the departure of his women-kind, who floated away like a flock of released birds, they all clustered around Anne, as though she were in the constant habit of knowing everybody's business, and of thinking and judging for everybody.

Agatha sat a little way off, watching her, and wondering what could be the strange influence which always made her take delight in watching Anne Valery.

There is something very peculiar in this admiration which one woman occasionally conceives for another, generally much older than herself. It is not exactly friendship, but partakes more of the character of love—in its idealisation, its shyness, its enthusiastic reverence, its hopeless doubt of requital,

and, above all, its jealousies. For this reason, it generally comes previous to, or for want of, the real love, the drawing of the feminine soul towards its masculine half, which makes—according to the Platonic doctrine—a perfect being. Of course, this theory would be almost universally considered "sentimentalism"—Agatha's little infatuation being included therein; but the frequency of such infatuations existing in the world around us argues some truth at their origin.

To the young girl—still so girlish, though she was married—there was an inexplicable attraction in all Anne Valery said or did. The very sweep of her dress across the floor—her slow soft motions, which might have been haughty when she was young, but now were only gracious and self-possessed; the way she had of folding her hands on one another, and looking straight forward with a kind observant smile, free alike from sentiment, crossness, or melancholy; her tone and manner, neither showy nor sharp; her habit of saying the wisest things in the most simple way, so that nobody recognised them as wisdom till afterwards—all filled Agatha with a sense of satisfied admiration. She wished either that she had been a man, to have adored and married Anne years ago—or that her own marriage had been delayed for a little, until she had grown wiser and more fit for life's destiny by learning from and loving such a woman as Miss Valery.

Moreover, with the dawning jealousy that all strong likings bring, she wished to appropriate her—and was quite annoyed that Anne sat so long discussing winter mantles with Eulalie and Mary, afterwards diverging to a Christmas clothing fund to be started at Kingcombe under Mrs. Dugdale's eye; finally listening to a whispered communication on

the part of the Beauty—which had reference to a certain "Edward"—about whose position in the family there could be no mistake. At last, to Agatha's great satisfaction, Miss Valery rose, and proposed that they two—Mrs. Harper and herself—should go and visit Elizabeth.

Passing through the galleries, Anne seemed tired, and walked slowly, stopping one minute at a window to show her companion the moonlight over the hills.

"Is it not a beautiful world? If we could but look at it always as we do when we are young!" The half sigh, the momentary shadow sweeping over her quiet face like a cloud over the moon—surprised and touched Agatha.

"Do you know I have stood and looked out of this same window ever since I was the height of its first pane. No wonder I have a weakness for stopping here and looking out for a minute at my dear old moon. But let us pass on."

She took up her candle again, and led Agatha by the hand, like a pet-child, to Elizabeth's door.

Miss Harper was lying as usual, but had a writing-case before her, and it was astonishing what neat caligraphy those weak childish-looking fingers could execute. It resembled the writer's own mind—clear, delicate, well-arranged, exact.

"We are not come to stay very long; but do we interrupt you, Elizabeth?"

"Never, Anne, dear! I was only writing to Frederick. He is gone abroad, you are aware?"

"Yes."

"I want to know why he went? Has Nathanael told either of you?" said Elizabeth, fixing her quick

eyes on both her visitors.

Both answered in the negative—Miss Valery saying, with attempted gaiety, “You know, one might as well question a stone wall as Nathanael. He can be both deaf and dumb.”

“Not to me. Everybody tells me everything, or I find it out. I found out that this little lady had a chance of being my sister-in-law before ever she herself was certain of the fact. Ah, Agatha, you should have seen Nathanael when he came down to us that week.”

“What did he do?” the young wife asked, not without some painful curiosity—for sometimes, in the moments when she could not “make out” her husband's rather peculiar character, a wicked demon had whispered that perhaps Mr. Harper had never truly loved her, or that his devotion was too sudden to be a lasting reality.

“What did he do?—Oh, nothing. He was very quiet, very self-possessed. You could hardly tell he was in love at all. Nobody ever guessed it but I—not even Anne. But in love or not, I saw that he was determined to have you; and when Nathanael determines on a thing—Oh, I knew you would be married to him! You could not help it!”

“Nor did she wish—nor need she,” said Anne, gently, as she saw Agatha's confusion. “But we shall soon cease teasing our young couple. I hear that at Christmas we shall have another marriage in the family. Edward Thorpe has got the living—the richest one.”

“So, of course, Eulalie will marry him.” The deduction reached Agatha as rather sarcastic, though perhaps more through the interpretation of her own feeling than that of the speaker. She asked, with one

of her usual plain speeches:

"Does Eulalie love Mr. Thorpe very much?"

The remark was addressed to both; but after a pause Elizabeth said, "Answer that question, Anne."

"What sort of an answer do you want, my dear?"

"One perfectly plain. I like simplicity. Is Eulalie much attached to the man she is to marry?"

"Women marry with many forms of love; Eulalie's will do exceedingly well for Mr. Thorpe. He is a very worthy young clergyman, who takes a wife as a matter of necessity. As for love—have you noticed, Agatha, how many women one sees, wives and mothers, who live creditably through a long life, and go down to their graves without ever having known the real meaning of the word?"

Anne was talking more than usual to-night, and Agatha liked to listen. The subject came home to her. "Will Eulalie be one of these?"

"I think so. She may make a very good, attentive wife, but she will never know what is real love."

"Tell me, what is that sort of love—the right love—which one ought to bring to one's husband?"

Miss Valery looked surprised at the young girl's eager manner. "Are you seriously asking that question? and of me, who never had a husband?"

"Oh, one likes to hear various opinions. What do you call 'loving?'"

"Almost every human being loves in a different way."

"Well, then, your way I mean." But noticing the momentary reticence which Anne's manner showed, she added, "I mean the kind of love you have most sympathy with in other people."

"I have sympathy in all. My neighbours will tell

you hereabouts that Anne Valery is the universal confidante, and the greatest marriage-maker (not match-maker) in all Dorset. I don't repudiate the character. It is pleasant to see young people loving one another."

"Still, you have not told me what *you* call loving."

"Do you really wish to hear?" said Anne, seriously. Then speaking in a low voice, she added: "I would have every woman marry, not merely liking a man well enough to accept him as a husband, but loving him so wholly, that, wedded or not, she feels she is at heart his wife and none other's, to the end of her life. So faithful, that she can see all his little faults (though she takes care no one else shall see them), yet would as soon think of loving him the less for these, as of ceasing to look up to heaven because there are a few clouds in the sky. So true, and so fond, that she needs neither to vex him with her constancy, nor burden him with her love, since both are self-existent, and entirely independent of anything he gives or takes away. Thus she will marry neither from liking, esteem, nor gratitude for his love, but from the fulness of her own. If they never marry, as sometimes happens"—and Anne's voice slightly faltered—"God will cause them to meet in the next existence. They cannot be parted—they belong to one another."

All were silent—these three women—one to whom love must have been only a name; the other who spoke of it quietly, seriously, as we talk of things belonging to the world to come; and the third, who sat thoughtful, wondering, doubting, afraid to believe in a truth which brought with it her own condemnation.

"You talk, Miss Valery, as people do in books. Some would call it romance."

"Would they? And do you?"

"Not quite. I used to think the same sometimes; but perfect love, like perfect beauty, is a thing one never meets with in real life."

"Yet one does not the less believe in it, and desire to find approximations thereto. No, my child, I do not talk romance, I am too old for that, and have seen too much of the world. Nevertheless, despite all I have seen—the false, foolish, weak attachments—the unholy marriages—the after-life of marriage made unholier still by struggling against what was inevitable—still I believe in the one true love which binds a woman's heart faithfully to one man in this life and, God grant it! in the next. But you have no need to hear all this—little wife? You do not wish to be taught how to love Nathanael?"

Agatha tried to smile—to conceal the pain rising in her heart.

"Come then, I will teach you how to love him—in better words than mine, and from a woman who, though writing out of the deep truth of her poet-heart, would scorn to write mere 'romance.'"

"Any woman would," answered Agatha, running her eyes over a book which Miss Valery had lifted from the silk coverlid, and which "poor Elizabeth" looked after fondly, as sick people do after the face of a friend.

"Listen, with your heart open. It is sure to find entrance there," said Anne, merrily, until, turning over the pages, she grew serious. She was not quite too old to be insensible to the glamour of poetry. Her voice was hardly like itself—at least, not like what Agatha had ever heard it—when she began to read:

“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth, and breadth, and height My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight For the ends of Being and Ideal Grace. I love thee to the level of every day's Most quiet need; by sun and candle-light. I love thee freely, as men strive for right: I love thee purely, as they turn from praise: I love thee with the passion put to use In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith: I love thee with a love I seemed to lose With my lost saints; I love thee with the breath, Smiles, tears, of all my life! and, if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death.”

There was a pause of full-hearted silence, and then Agatha heard a sigh behind her.

Her husband had come to the door, and, hearing reading, had stolen in, no one noticing him but his sister. Agatha saw nothing; her eyelids were closely, fiercely shut, over the tears that rose at this vision of a lost or impossible paradise.

“Agatha!” She looked up, and saw him stand, wearing his palest, coldest aspect—that which always seemed to freeze up every young feeling within her. The pang it gave found vent in but one expression—scarcely meant to pass her lips—and inaudible to all save him:

“Oh, why—why did I marry!”

The moment after, she felt how wrong it was, and would have atoned; but Mr. Harper had moved quickly from her side. Elizabeth called him; he seemed not to hear; Anne, closing her book, addressed him:

“Are you come to talk with us, or to fetch your wife away?”

“Neither,” he said, bitterly. But recovering himself—“Nay, Anne, I came for you. My father

wishes to see you. He will hear nothing I can urge. You must come down and talk with him, or I do not know what will be done."

Agatha had until now forgotten that her husband had intended after dinner to tell his father his plans concerning the stewardship. It had been apparently a harder task than he thought, to strive with the old Squire's prejudices. Seeing his extreme perturbation, Agatha repented herself deeply of any unkindness towards him.

She went to his side. "What is the matter? Tell me! Let me help you."

"You!" he echoed; then added, with an accent studiously kind, "Thank you, Agatha. You are very good always."

He let her take his arm and stand talking with himself and Miss Valery.

"I feared it would be so," the latter said. "Your father has a strong will; still he can be persuaded. We must try."

"But only persuasion—no reasons. Understand me, Anne—no reasons!"

Miss Valery looked at the young man very earnestly.

"Nathanael, if I did not know you well, and know too whose guidance formed your character, it would be hard to trust you."

"Anne!" Again the peculiar manner which sometimes appeared in him, making him seem much older than his years, had its strange influence with Miss Valery, guiding her by an under-current deeper even than her judgment.

"Ay," she said in a whisper, "I will trust you. Let us go down." And she turned with him to say good-

bye to Miss Harper.

The excitement of talking had been too much for “poor Elizabeth.” One of her “dark hours” was upon her. The eyes were closed, and the face sharpened under keen physical pain. Agatha could hardly bear to see her; but Nathanael bent over his sister with that soothing kindness which in a man is so beautiful.

“Shall we stay with you? at least, shall I?”

Elizabeth motioned a decided negative.

“I know,” Miss Valery said, apart, “she had rather be alone. No one can do her good, and it is too much for this child, who is not used to it as we are.”

Calling Elizabeth's maid from the inner room, Anne hurried Agatha away. She, clinging to her husband's arm, heard him say, half to himself:

“And yet we think life hard, and murmur at that we have, and grieve for that we have not! We are very wicked, all of us. Poor Elizabeth!”

The three went very silently down-stairs.

At the dining-room door Mrs. Harper let go her husband's arm.

“Why are you leaving me, Agatha?”

“Because I thought—I imagined, perhaps you wished”—

“I wish to have you with me always. Anne knows,” and he looked pointedly at Miss Valery, “that I shall never respond to, and most certainly never volunteer, any confidence to either her or my father that I do not share with my wife. She has the first claim, and what is not hers no other person shall obtain.”

Anne looked puzzled. At last she said, in an

under tone, “I think I understand, and you are quite right. I shall remember.”

The old Squire was sitting in his arm-chair, the dessert and wine still before him. The cheerfulness of the dinner-circle over, he looked very aged now—aged and lonely too, being the only occupant of that large room. He raised his head when Miss Valery entered, but seemed annoyed at the entrance of his daughter-in-law.

“Mrs. Harper! I did not mean to encroach on *your* leisure.”

“No, father; it was I who wished her to come. Forgive me, but I could not bring Miss Valery into our family councils and exclude my own wife. She is not a stranger now.”

Saying this, Nathanael placed Agatha in a chair and stood beside her, taking her cold hand, for with all her power she could not keep herself from trembling. She had never known anything of those formidable affairs which are called “family quarrels.”

“Now, father,” he continued in a straightforward but respectful manner, “Anne will answer any question to prove what I have already told you—that it is at my own request she takes me for her steward.”

“Her friend and adviser,” Anne interposed.

“I never doubted, Nathanael, that it was at your own request. Otherwise it were impossible that Miss Valery would so far have insulted my family.”

At these words Anne coloured, and moved a step or two with something of the pride of her young days. “I did not think, Mr. Harper, that it would have been either an insult to offer, or a disgrace to accept, the position which your son desires to hold. Far be it from me in any way to wrong any member of your

family, especially the son whom your wife left in my arms—and Brian's—when she died."

Agatha had never before heard Miss Valery say "Brian." She was evidently speaking as people do when much moved, using a form of phrase and alluding to things not commonly referred to.

The old Squire sat silent a minute, and then stretched out his hand. "I know your goodness, Anne! But I cannot renounce all my rights. Even a younger son must not throw discredit on his family. Except in one brief instance, for centuries there has never been a Harper who worked for his living."

"Then, father, let me be the first to commence that act of inconceivable boldness and energy," said Nathanael, with a good-humoured persuasive smile. "Let me, being likewise a younger son, take a leaf out of Uncle Brian's book, and try to labour, as he once did, in my own county, with the honour of my own race about me."

"And what did he effect? Was he not looked down upon, humiliated, cheated? I never ride past his old deserted clay-pits without being thankful that he went to Canada, rather than have disgraced us by what his folly must have come to at last. He would have lost the little he had—have been bankrupt, perhaps dishonoured."

"Mr. Harper!"—Anne rose from her chair—"I think you speak rather hardly of your brother. It never could be said, or will be said, that Brian Harper was *dishonoured.*"

At these words, spoken with unusual warmth, Nathanael gratefully clasped her hand. The Squire observed, with added dignity, that no one could be more sensible than himself of his brother's merit, and that he thanked Miss Valery for extending her kind

interests to every branch of the Harper family.

"And now," he continued, "we will cease this conversation. My son knows my sentiments, and will doubtless act upon them. I never maintain arguments with my children." And the sentence implied that what "I never do," was consequently a thing unnecessary and impossible to be done. The old gentleman leant on each arm of his chair, and feebly tried to rise.

"Father," cried Nathanael, detaining him, "I would do much rather than try you thus; but it cannot be helped. I must work."

"I do not see the necessity."

"But if there be a necessity; if my own feelings, my conscience—other reasons, which here I cannot urge"—and involuntarily his eye glanced towards his wife.

An instinct of delicacy brightened the old man's perceptions. He bowed to Agatha. "We need not apologise for these discussions before a lady who has done my son the honour of uniting her fortune to his ancient family." (And he evidently thought the honour bestowed was quite as much on the Harper side.) "She, I am sure, will agree with me that this proceeding is not necessary."

Agatha hesitated. Much as she longed to do it, a sense of right prevented her from openly siding against her husband. She kept silence; Nathanael answered with the tone of one who sets a strong guard upon his lips, almost stronger than he can bear:

"I have already told my wife all the reasons I have just given you, that, since I am resolved to be independent, there is no way but this. I have been brought up abroad, and have learnt no profession;

my health is not robust enough for a town life, or for hard study. Many, almost all the usual modes in which a man, born a gentleman, can earn his living are thus shut out from me. What Anne Valery offers me I *can* do, and should be content in doing. Father, do not stand in the way of my winning for myself a little comfort—a little peace."

Through his entreaty, earnest and manly as it was, there ran a sort of melancholy which surprised and grieved Agatha. Could this be the lover on whom, in giving him herself, she believed she had bestowed entire felicity? Had he too, like herself, found a something wanting in marriage, a something to fill up which he must needs resort to an active career of worldly toil? Would she never be able to make either him or herself truly happy? and if so, what was the cause?

The Squire keenly regarded his son, who stood before him in an attitude so respectful yet so firm. Something seemed to strike him in the pale, delicate, womanish features; perhaps he saw therein the wife who had died when Nathanael was born, and whose death, people said, had chilled the father's heart strangely against the poor babe.

"My son," he said, "you have been away from me nearly all your life—and where I have given little, I can require little. But I am an old man. Do not let me feel that you too are setting yourself against my grey hairs."

"God knows, father, I would not for worlds! But what can I do? Anne, what can I do?"

Anne rose, and leant over Mr. Harper's chair, like a privileged eldest daughter who secretly strengthened with her judgment the wisdom that was growing feeble through old age; doing it reverently,

as we all would wish our children to do when our own light grows dim. For, alas! the wisest and firmest of us may come one day to mutter in the ears of a younger generation the senile cry, “I am old and foolish—old and foolish.”

“Dear friend—if Nathanael follows out this plan, it will be for the comfort and not the disquiet of your grey hairs. Think how pleasant always to have a son at hand, and a young, pretty Mrs. Harper to brighten Kingcombe Holm.”

This was a wise thrust—the old gentleman looked in his daughter-in-law's fair face, and bowed complacently.

“Then, too, your son will live in the country, lead the life that he loves, and that you love—the very life which all these years you have been vainly planning for his brother.”

The Squire turned sharply round. “On that subject, if you please, we will be silent. Anne, Anne,” he added, “do you want again to turn my plans aside? Would you take from me my other son also?”

She drew back, much wounded.

“No, no, my dear, I did not mean that. It was not your fault—you two were not suited for each other. Nevertheless, in spite of your wilfulness, in nothing but the name did I lose a daughter. Forgive me, Anne!”

“My dear old friend,” she whispered, and stole her fingers into the withered palm of the Squire. He kissed them with the grace of an old courtier: the tenderness of a father. She, though moved at his kindness, betrayed no stronger emotion; and Agatha, who had watched intently this little episode, confirmatory of an old suspicion of her own, was considerably puzzled thereby. If Anne Valery's life

contained any sad secret, it was evidently not this. She had not remained an old maid for love of Major Harper.

“Nathanael,” said the old man, returning with dignity to the former conversation, “I would not be harsh or unjust. There is but one way to reconcile our opposing wills, since you are determined on this scheme of independence. You have told me your plan —will you accept mine?”

“Let me hear it, father,” answered Nathanael respectfully.

“You have hitherto had nothing from me—your Uncle Brian insisted on that—nor will you ever have much; I must keep my property intact for the next heir of Kingcombe Holm. Nothing shall alienate the rights of my eldest son, with whom rests the honour of our family and name.”

Agatha noticing the determined pride with which her father-in-law said this, wondered that her husband listened with a lowered aspect and made no response. She thought it unbrotherly, unkind.

“But,” continued Mr. Harper, “though the chief of all I possess must remain secure for Frederick, I have a little besides, saved for my daughters' portions. If, with their consent, I lend you this, and you will embark in some profession”—

“No, father, no! I will never take one farthing from you or my sisters! I will not again be burdened with other people's property! Oh for the days when I earned my own solitary bread from hand to mouth, and was free and at rest!”

He spoke excitedly, and was only conscious of the extent of what he had said by feeling his wife's hand drop slowly from his own.

“Nay, Agatha, I did not mean”—and he tried to

draw it back again. “Forgive me.”

“Perhaps we have both need to forgive one another.”

No one heard this mournful whisper between the young husband and wife; they stood as if it had not been uttered—for both their consciences felt duty to be a bond as strong as love.

And then, on the painful silence which sank over all four, smote ten heavy strokes of the hall-clock, warning the swift passage of time—too swift to be wasted in struggle, regret, and contention. Anne rose, her pale face seeming to have that very thought written thereon.

“My dear friends, listen to me a minute. Here is one who all this time has not spoken a word, and yet the question concerns her more than any of us. Let Agatha decide.”

The old man hesitated. Perhaps in his heart he was desirous of a compromise. Or else he judged from ordinary human nature, that the pride of the young wife would ally her on his side, and so win over a will which any father looking into Nathanael's face could see was not to be threatened into concession.

“*Pas aux dames,*” said Mr. Harper, with a pleasantly chivalric air. Then more seriously: “My daughter-in-law, choose. But remember that you stand between your husband and his father.”

Agatha, thrust into so new and important a position, felt a rush of temptations to follow her own impulse. She turned appealingly to Miss Valery, but Anne's eyes were fixed on the floor. She looked at her husband, and met a gaze of doubt, anxiety, mingled with a certain desperation.

“He knows my feeling about this matter; perhaps

he thinks me a wilful child, ready to take advantage of the liberty given me. He is sure of what I shall say."

And she had half a mind to say it, as a condemnation for his so unkindly judging her; but the girlish pettishness and recklessness went away, and a better spirit came. She sat, her right hand nervously pushing backward and forward the still unfamiliar wedding-ring, until in accidentally feeling the symbol, she suddenly remembered the reality.

"I am a wife," she thought. "Under *all* circumstances I will do a wife's duty." And with that determination all the pleasant little follies and temptations buzzing round her heart flew away, and left her—as one always is, having resolved to consider the right and nothing else—resolute and at ease.

She said very simply—almost childishly—taking her father-in-law's hand the while, "If you please, and if you would not be angry, I would rather do exactly as my husband likes. He knows best."

In these words she had exhausted all her boldness; and for a few minutes after had a very indistinct notion of everything, save that the Squire had walked off, not angrily, but in perfect silence, leaning on Miss Valery's arm, and that she was left in the dining-room alone with Nathanael.

## CHAPTER XVI.

“So here is the result of family dinner-parties, and family-talks kept up till midnight!” said Mary Harper, with a little natural acerbity. “It is provoking for the mistress of a precise household to sit waiting breakfast for a whole hour.”

“Mary, be charitable! We did not know you were ready, and we were so busy in my room. No laziness, was it, Agatha?”

“No, indeed: I think Miss Valery is the very busiest woman I ever knew. How can she get through it all?”

“Only by first making up my mind, and then acting upon it. Your husband's plan, too, I see. He and I shall get on as if we had worked together all our lives. Shall we not, my 'right-hand' Nathanael?”

He answered pleasantly; he looked quite a new man this morning. “Yes: I seem to understand your ways already. My first half-hour's business in the memorable 'Anne's room' at Kingcombe Holm has been like a return of old times. What a woman you are! You might have been brought up as I was by Uncle Brian. You have just his ways.”

Anne smiled: and with a jest about the treble compliment he had contrived to pay, let the conversation slip past to other things.

Mary and Eulalie talked excessively. They were both much scandalised by their brother's new position and intended course of life, to be put in practice immediately.

Both the Miss Harpers were that sort of feminine minds which are like some kinds of flower-bells—the less fair the wider they open. Agatha wondered to see how very patient Miss Valery was over Mary's mild platitudes and Eulalie's follies. But Anne's good heart seemed to cast a shield of tenderness over

everybody that bore the name of Harper. At length the young wife got tired of the after-breakfast discussion, which consisted of about a dozen different plans for the day—severally put up and knocked down again—each contradicting the other. The mild *laissez-faire* of country life in a large family was quite too much for her patience; she longed to get up and shake everybody into common-sense and decision. But her husband and Miss Valery took everything easily—they were used to the ways at Kingcombe Holm.

"Oh, if your sister Harriet would but come in, or Mr. Dugdale!" she whispered to her husband, "surely they would settle something."

"Not at all; they would only make matters worse. And, look!—'speaking of angels, one often sees their wings.'—Is that you, Marmaduke?"

"Ay."

Mr. Dugdale walked in composedly through the sash-window, beaming around him a sort of general smile. He never attempted any individual greeting, and Agatha offering her hand, was met by his surprised but benevolent "Eh!" However, when required, he gave her a hearty grasp. After which, peering dreamily round the room, he pounced upon a queer-looking folio, and buried himself therein, making occasional remarks highly interesting of their kind, but slightly irrelevant to the conversation in general. Agatha amused herself with peeping at the title of the book—some abstruse work on mechanical science—and then watched the reader, thinking what great intellectual power there was in the head, and what acuteness in the eye. Also, he wore at times a wonderfully spiritual expression, strangely contrasting with the materiality of his daily

existence. No one could see that look without feeling convinced that there were beautiful depths open only to Divinest vision, in the silent and abstracted nature of Marmaduke Dugdale. Nevertheless, he could be eminently practical now and then, especially in mechanics.

“Nathanael, Nathanael! just look here. This is the very contrivance that would have suited Brian in his old clay-pits. See!”

And he began talking in a style that was Greek itself to Agatha, but to which Nathanael, leaning over his chair-back, listened intelligently. It was very nice to see the liking between the two brothers-in-law—the young man so tender over the oddities of the elder one, who seemed such a strange mixture of the philosopher and the child. These were the sort of traits which continually turned Agatha's heart towards her husband.

“Talking of clay-pits,” said Duke, with a gleam of recollection, “I've something for you here!” He drew out of the voluminous mass of papers that stuffed his pockets one more carelessly scrawled than the rest. “It's a plan of my own, for giving a little help to our own clay-cutters and to the stone-cutters in the Isle of Portland, who are shockingly off in the winter sometimes. Here's Trenchard's name down for a good sum—it will make him and Free-trade popular, you know.”

And Mr. Dugdale smiled with the most amiable and innocent Machiavellianism.

Nathanael shook his head mischievously, greatly to the amusement of his wife, who had stolen up to see what was going on, and stood hanging on his arm and peeping over at the illegible paper.

“Excellent plan, Marmaduke—very long-headed.

You give them Christmas dinners, and they give you —votes."

"Bless you, no! That would be bribery. We"—he reflected a minute—"Oh, we will only help those who have got no votes."

"Then the voters will all be against you."

Mr. Dugdale, much puzzled, pushed up his hair until it stood right aloft on his forehead. Soon a dawn of satisfaction reappeared. "All against us? Dear me, no! They would be pleased to see their poor neighbours helped on in the world, as you or I would, you know. They'd side at once with Trenchard and Free-trade. Come now, Nathanael, you'll assist? By the way, somebody told me you were very rich—or at least that your wife was an heiress. She looks a kind little soul She'll put her name down under Anne Valery's here?"

And he turned to Agatha with that air of frank goodness by which Marmaduke Dugdale could coax everybody round to his own ends.

"Ay, that we will, though I suppose I am not so rich as Miss Valery. Still, we have enough to help poor people—have we not?"

She appealed gaily to Mr. Harper, but he replied nothing. She persisted:

"We need not give much, since Mr. Trenchard and Miss Valery are both on the list before us. We'll give—let me see—fifty pounds. Ah, now, just go up-stairs and fetch me down fifty pounds!" said she, hanging caressingly on her husband's arm.

He looked down on her, and looked away. He had become very grave. "We will talk of this some other time, dear."

"But another time will not do. I want it now. I

fear," she whispered, blushing—"I fear, before I married, I was very thoughtless and selfish. I would like to cure myself, and spend my money usefully, as Anne Valery does. Charity is such a luxury."

"Too dear a luxury for every one," said Nathanael sighing.

She looked up, scarcely believing him to be in earnest. Her open-hearted, open-handed nature was much hurt. She said, with a bitter meaning:

"I did not know I had such a very prudent husband."

He took no notice, but addressed himself to Mr. Dugdale. "Nay, Duke, you and your benevolences are too hard upon us young married people. We must tighten our purse-strings against you this time."

Agatha's cheek flamed. "But if *I* wish it"—

"Dear, it cannot be, we cannot afford it."

Agatha moved angrily from his side, and soon after, though not so soon as to attract notice to him or herself, she quitted the room. Scarcely had she reached her own when she heard a step behind her.

"Are you angry with me, my wife, and for such a little thing?"

Nathanael stood there, holding both her hands, and looking down upon her with a face so kind, so regretful, so grave, that she felt ashamed of the quick storm which had ruffled her own spirit The cause of this did seem now a very "little thing." She hung her head, child-like, and made no answer.

"Why is it," said Mr. Harper, putting his arm round her—"why is it that we are always having these 'little things' rising up to trouble us? Why cannot we bear with one another, and take the chance-happiness that falls to our lot? It is not much,

I fear”—

She looked uneasy.

“Nay, perhaps that is chiefly my fault. I often wish Heaven had given you a better husband, Agatha.”

And his countenance was so softened, mournful, and tender, that Agatha's affection returned. There was something childish and foolish in these small wranglings. They wore her patience away. For the twentieth time she vowed not to make herself unhappy, or restless, or cross, but to take Nathanael's goodness as she saw it, believing in it and him. Since according to that wise speech of Harriet—which even Anne Valery smiled at and did not deny—the best of men were very disagreeable at times, and no man's good qualities ever came out thoroughly until he had been married for at least a year.

With a tear in her eye and a quiver on her lip, Agatha held up her young face to her husband. He kissed her, and there was peace.

But though he had made this concession, and made many others in the course of the next hour, to remove from her mind every thought of pain, still he showed not the slightest change of will regarding the cause of dispute. And perhaps in her secret heart this only caused his wife to respect him the more. It is usually the weak and erring who vacillate. Firmness of purpose, mildly carried out, implies a true motive at the root. Agatha began to think whether her husband might not have some reason for his conduct; probably the very simple one of disliking to see his name or her own paraded in a subscription-list, or mixed up with a political clique.

Nevertheless, he puzzled her. She could not think why, with all his tenderness, he so often put

his will in opposition to her own, and prevented her pleasure; why he was so slow in giving her his confidence; why he more than once plainly stated that there was “a reason” for various disagreeable whims, yet had not told her what that reason was. All these were trivial things—yet in the early sunrise of married life the least molehill throws a long black shadow.

“I will be a wise woman. I will not disquiet myself in vain,” said the little wife to herself, as her husband left her, in answer to repeated calls from some feminine voice which had just entered the house, and was immediately audible half over it. Harriet Dugdale's, of course. To her—sharp-sighted and merry-tongued woman that she was—Agatha would not for worlds have betrayed anything; so, dashing cold water on her forehead to hide the very near approach to tears, she quickly descended.

Harrie was in a state of considerable indignation, mixed with laughter. “I never knew such people as you are! and certainly never was there the like of my Duke there. He set off to fetch you all to Corfe Castle—his own proposition. I waited an hour and a half—then I took the pony to see after you—and lo!—there he is, sitting quite at his ease. Oh, Duke—Duke!”

She shook her riding-whip at him twice before she disturbed him from his book.

“Eh, Missus—what do'ee want, my child?”

“Want? Don't you see what a passion we're all in? Abuse him, Anne—Agatha—Nathanael! Do! I've no patience with him. Didn't he say himself that he would take us all to Corfe Castle? Oh, you—you——” And Harrie looked unutterable things.

Mr. Dugdale gazed round placidly. “Really, now,

that's a pity! Never mind, Missus! I only forgot." And patting her hand with ineffable gentleness and good-humour, he opened his book again.

"Oh, you—you"—here she put on a melodramatic scowl—"you inconceivably provoking, misty, oblivious, incomprehensible old darling!"

And springing upon the back of his chair, Harrie hugged him to a degree that compelled the unfortunate philosopher to renounce his book. He took the caresses very patiently, and smiled with superior love upon his merry wife.

"That'll do, Missus! Eh—and before folk, too! Now don't'ee, my child!"

And shaking himself, hair and all, into something like order, he picked up the folio, tucked it under his arm, and wended his way through the window slowly down the lawn.

Agatha glanced at her husband, who stood talking to Miss Valery. She wondered what Nathanael would say if *she* were to take a leaf out of his sister's book, and treat her own liege lord after the unceremonious fashion of Harrie Dugdale!

"There—off he goes, quite cross, no doubt." (He was smiling as benevolently as if he could embrace the whole world.) "But we must catch him at the stables. I brought White-star galloping after me, and Duke will rouse up when he sees his beloved horse. You shall take my pony, Agatha. Of course you can ride?"

Agatha could—in a London riding-school and London parks. She had her doubts about the country, but felt strongly inclined to try; for Mrs. Dugdale had entered Kingcombe Holm like a breath of keen fresh air, putting life and spirit into everybody. Nathanael made no opposition, only he insisted on Mary's quiet

grey mare being substituted for Harrie's skittish pony.

"I shall ride with you part way," said he, "and then leave you in Mr. Dugdale's charge, while I stay at Kingcombe."

"Why so?"

"I have business there."

Still the same weary "business" which he never explained or talked about, yet which always seemed to rise up like a bugbear on their pleasures, until Agatha was sick of the sound of the word!

She turned away, and put herself altogether under Mrs. Dugdale's care to be equipped for the ride.

Anne Valery, coming in with her quiet common sense, succeeded in making up the party, which, with one exception, Harrie had left to make itself up according to its own discretion. When Mrs. Harper descended, she found all settled for the spending of a day at Corfe Castle, in picnic style—glorious and free—with a moonlight canter home in the evening. No one was omitted except the Squire, who with considerable dignity declined such *al fresco* amusements; and Anne Valery, who promised to peep in upon them as she passed the Castle on her way to her own house, after spending a few hours with Elizabeth.

Agatha had never been on horseback since she was married. It made her feel like a girl again, and brought back all the wild spirits of her youth, now repressed in propriety by her changed life—until sometimes she hardly knew herself, or fancied she was growing into that object of her former scorn, an ordinary young lady. She cast the subdued and meek "Mrs. Locke Harper" to the winds, and dashed wildly

back for this day at least into “Agatha Bowen.”

Her husband, putting her on her horse, with many injunctions, was surprised to see her give him a careless nod and dart off delightedly, as if she and the grey mare had wings. The Dugdales followed, a wild pair, for Marmaduke was quite another being on horseback.

“Look at him, Agatha,”—and Harrie's laugh ringing on the wind caused the mild grey mare to seem rather restless in her mind. “Did you think my Duke could ride as he does? He never looks so well as on horseback. He is a perfect Thessalian!”

Agatha was amused to find classic lore in Harrie Dugdale, and she gave most cordial admiration to Duke. “He is a magnificent rider; he sits the horse just as if he were born to it.”

“Bless him! so he was. He rode his father's horses at four years old, and went hunting at fourteen. And he has such a beautiful temper, and such a firm will besides—that he could manage the wildest brute in the county. See there!”

White-star had become rather obstreperous, showing his spirit; his master carelessly lent down, giving him a box on each ear, just as if the stately blood horse had been a naughty child; then composedly rode him back to the two ladies.

“Harrie! Missus! do'ee come on! Nathanael is behind, all right. Come along!”

He gave his wife's pony a switch, and off they dashed, she laughing merrily, and he galloping away with such ease and grace that Agatha could not take her eyes off him.

She looked after them with a vague sense of envy,—this odd married pair, in whose union so many things appeared unequal and peculiar, except

for one thing—the love which hallowed and perfected all. When her own husband came up, she, unwilling to talk, and dreading above all that his quick eye should detect anything amiss in her, pushed her horse forward, and calling to Nathanael to follow, rode on after the Dugdales.

Ere they had ridden far, all her wild spirits came back again, and all her wifely feelings too, for her husband seemed as happy as herself, and entered into all her frolics. They swept along like two children, across the breezy moors, purple and fragrant, down by the hilly sheep-paths, lying bare in autumn sunshine. Nathanael proved himself almost as good a horseman as Duke Dugdale: a great pleasure to Agatha, for of all things women do like a man to be manly. Nay, once, in the descent of a hill so steep, that a Cockney equestrian would have been frightened out of his seven senses, Nathanael's prudent daring stood out in such bold relief that Agatha was perforce reminded of the day when he snatched little Jemmie from the bear, the first day when her liking and respect had been awakened towards him. She hinted this, and said how pleasant it was to feel that one's husband was, as she expressed it, “a man that could take care of one.”

“And how very foolish and helpless townfolk—drawing-room gentlemen, appear in the country! I wonder,” and she could not help telling him the comical idea, though not very complimentary to her husband's brother—“I wonder how Major Harper would look on horseback?”

“What did you say? The wind blew that sentence away.”

She hardly liked to repeat it exactly, but said something about Major Harper and his coming down

to Dorset.

Nathanael spurred his horse forward without replying. A minute afterwards he returned to his wife's side, bringing her a great bunch of heather, with yellow gorse mixed, and made jokes about the Dorsetshire saying, “When gorse is out of bloom kissing's out of season.” And evermore he looked secretly at her, to notice if she laughed and was happy, had roses on her cheeks, and pleasure in her eyes. Seeing this, the husband appeared contented and at ease.

They and the Dugdales rode merrily into Kingcombe, much to that good town's astonishment. The equestrian quartette at Marmaduke's door was a sight that the worthy inhabitants of that sleepy street would not get over for a week. Everybody gathered at doors and windows, and a small group of farmers at the market quadrangle stared with all their eyes. The sensation created was enormous, and likewise the crowd,—almost as dense as a wandering juggler gathers in a quiet suburban London street! Agatha, passing through it, laughed till she could laugh no longer.

Her husband, pleased at her gaiety, came to lift her off her horse.

“Not a bit of it!” Mrs. Dugdale cried. “Keep your seat, Agatha; no time to lose; on we go in a minute, when Duke has been to get his letters. Here, Brian, my pet.”—There had rushed out round her horse a cluster of infantine Dugdales.—“Lift Brian up here, Uncle Nathanael, and I'll give him a canter. Bravo! He's Pa's own boy, born for a rider! Come along, Auntie Agatha.”

Agatha would willingly have followed down the street. She was amused by the daring of the mother

and the boy, and amused especially by her new title of “Auntie Agatha.”

“Do let me go, Mr. Harper; I don't want to dismount, indeed.”

“But I have something to say to you—just a few words. We must decide to-day about the house, you know.”

“Never mind the house; I had rather not think about it.” And the mere shadow of past vexation still vexed her. “Ah!” she added, entreatingly, “do be good to me—do let me enjoy myself for once!”

“I would not prevent you for the world.” He dropped her bridle with a sigh, and turned back among his little nephews.

Fred had coaxed the horse from the groom, and Gus was bent on mounting; there was a dreadful struggle, and angry cries for Uncle Nathanael. In the midst of it Uncle Nathanael appeared, like an angel of peace, and setting the boys one behind another on his horse's back, led the animal up and down carefully.

Agatha looked after them, thinking how kind and good her husband was. She wished she had not refused so hastily such a simple request; she began to think herself a wretch for ever contradicting him in anything.

The little party started again, increased by the arrival of the family carriage from Kingcombe Holm, wherein sat Mary and Eulalie. To these were speedily added the three young Dugdales, all in high glee. And it spoke well for the Miss Harpers, whom Agatha was disposed to like least of her husband's relatives, that they made very lenient and kindly aunts to those obstreperous boys.

Agatha was crossing the bridge which bounded

South Street, trying to make her horse stand still while Mr. Dugdale pointed out the identical red cliff where the Danes drew up their ships, and laughing with Harrie at the notion of how terribly frightened the quiet souls in Kingcombe would be at such an incursion now, when Nathanael came on foot to his wife's side.

“Why did you start without speaking to me?”

“I could not help it; I thought you were gone. You will come after us soon?” And she felt angry with herself for having momentarily forgotten him.

“I will come when I have settled this business of the house. You understand, Agatha, I am obliged to decide to-day? You will not blame me afterwards?”

“Oh, no—no!” His extreme seriousness of manner jarred with her youthful spirits. She did not think or care about what he did, so that for this day only he let her be gay and happy. From some incomprehensible cause, his very love seemed to hang over her like a cloud, and so it had been from the beginning. She did so long to dash out into the sunshine of her careless, girlish life, and scamper over the beautiful country with Harrie Dugdale.

“Oh, no!” she repeated only wishing to satisfy him. “Take any house you like, and come onward soon; and oh, do let us be cheerful and merry!”

“We will!” His bright look as she patted his shoulder—a very venturesome act—-gave her much cheer; and when, after she had cantered a good way down the road, she turned and saw him still leaning on the bridge looking after her, her heart throbbed with pleasure. Despite all his reserves and peculiarities, and her own conscious failings, there was one thing to which she clung as to a root of comfort that would never be taken away, and would

surely bear blossom and fruit afterwards—the belief that her husband truly loved her.



*Agatha.* ON HORSEBACK. Page 212.

"If so," she thought, "I suppose all will come right in time, and Agatha Harper will be as happy as, or happier than, Agatha Bowen."

So on she went, yielding to the delicious excitement of being on horseback. She was also much interested by the country round about, which appeared to her as old, desolate, and strange as if she had been a Thane's daughter riding across the moors to the gates of that renowned castle which, as Harrie declared, putting on the physiognomy of some

school-child drawling out a history-lesson, “was celebrated for being the residence of the ancient Saxon kings.”

“And this was the place,” continued she in the same tone, pointing to an old gate-post—“this was the place where His Majesty's most illustrious horse did stop when His Majesty's most sainted body was dragged along by the leg, in the stirrup, on account of the wound given him when he was a-drinking at the castle-door, by his stepmother, Queen Elfrida. All of which is to be seen to the present day.”

Agatha first laughed at this comical view of the subject, then she felt a little repugnance at hearing that stern old tragedy so lightly treated. As she walked her horse along the road which might have been, and probably was, the very same Saxon highway as in those times, she thought of the wounded horseman dashing out from between those green hills and of the murdered body dropping slowly, slowly from the saddle, dragged in dust, and beat against stones, until the woman that loved him —for even a king might have had some woman that loved him—would not have known the face she thought so fair.

It was an idle fancy, but beneath it her tears were rising; chiefly for thinking, not of “The Martyr,” but of the woman—whoever she was—(Agatha had not historical erudition enough to remember if King Edward had a wife)—to whom that day's tragedy might have brought a lifetime's doom. She began to shudder—to feel that she too was a wife—to understand dimly what a wife's love might come to be—also something of a wife's terrors. She wished—it was foolish enough, but she did wish that Nathanael had not been riding on horseback, or else that, in picturing to herself the dead head of the

Martyr dragged along the road, she did not always see it with long fair hair. And then she wondered if these horrible fancies indicated the dawning of that feeling which she had deceived herself into believing she already possessed. Was she beginning to find out the difference between that quiet response to secured affection, that pleasant knowledge of being loved, and the strong, engrossing, self-existent attachment which Anne Valery described—the passion which has but one object, one interest, one joy, in the whole wide world?

Was she beginning really *to love* her husband?

The answer to that question involved so much, both of what had been, and what was yet to come, that Agatha dared not ponder over it.

“Mrs. Harper! Mrs. Harper!” She mused no longer, but hurried on after the Dugdales.

It was not to point out the Castle that Harrie had been so vociferous, but to show a place which she evidently deemed far more interesting.

“Do you see that white house far among the trees? That's where my Duke was born. He lived there in peace and quietness till he got acquainted with Uncle Brian, and came to Kingcombe Holm and fell in love with me.”

“How did he do it? I want to know what is the fashion of such things in Dorset.”

“How did Duke fall in love with me? Really I can't tell. I was fifteen or so—a mere baby! He first gave me a doll, and then he wanted to marry me!”

“But how did he make love, or 'propose' as they call it?” persisted Agatha, to whom the idea of Marmaduke Dugdale in that character was irresistibly funny.

“Make love? Propose? Bless you, my dear, he never did either! Somehow it all came quite naturally. We belonged to one another.”

The very phrase Anne Valery had used! It made Nathanael's wife rather thoughtful. She wondered what was the feeling like, when people “belonged to one another.”

But she had no time for meditation; for now the great grey ruin loomed in sight, and everybody, including the shouting boys in the carriage behind, was eager to point it out, especially when Agatha made the lamentable confession that she had never seen a ruined castle in her life before.

“And you might go all over England and not find such another as this,” said Mr. Dugdale, riding up to her with a smile of great satisfaction. “Nobody thinks much of it in these parts, and few antiquarians ever come and poke about it. Perhaps it's as well. They couldn't find out more than we know already. But no!”—and his eye, taking in the noble old ruin arched over by the broad sky, assumed its peculiar dreamy expression—“We don't know anything. Nobody knows anything about this wonderful world!”

Agatha looked around. On the top of a smooth conical hill, each side of which was guarded by other two hills equally smooth and bare, rose the wreck of the magnificent fortress, enough of the walls remaining to show its extent and plan. Its destroyer had been—not Father Time, who does his work quietly and gracefully—but that worse spoiler, man. Huge masses of masonry, hurled from the summit, lay in the moat beneath, fixed as they had been for centuries, with vegetation growing over them. Some of the walls, undermined and shaken from their

foundations, took strange, oblique angles, yet refused to fall. Marks of cannon-balls were indented on the stonework of the battered gateway, which still remained a gateway—probably the very same under which Queen Elfrida, “fair and false,” had offered to her son the stirrup-cup.

The general impression left on the mind was not that of natural decay, solemn and holy, but of sudden destruction, coming unawares, and struggled against, as a man in the flower of life struggles with mortality. There was something very melancholy about the ruined fortress left on the hill-top in sight of the little town close below, where its desolation was unheeded. Agatha, sensitive, enthusiastic, and easily impressed, grew silent, and wondered that her companions could laugh so carelessly, even when passing under the grey portal into the very precincts of the deserted castle.

“We shall not find a soul here,” said Harrie; “scarcely anybody ever comes at this season, except when our Kingcombe Oddfellows' Club have a picnic on this bowling-green; or schoolboys get together and climb up the ivy to frighten the jackdaws—my husband has done it many a time—haven't you, Duke?”

“I see mamma,” vaguely responded Duke, who was busy lifting his boys down from the carriage, with a paternal care and tenderness beautiful to see. He then, with one little fellow on his shoulder, another holding his hand, and a third clinging to his coat-tails, strode off up the green ascent, without paying the slightest attention to Mrs. Harper. Which dereliction from the rules of politeness it never once came into her mind to notice or to blame.

“There they go! Nobody minds me; it's all Pa!”

said Mrs. Dugdale, with an assumption of wrath; a very miserable pretence, while her look was so happy and fond. “You see, Agatha, what you'll come to—after ten years' matrimony!”

Agatha's heart was so full, she could not laugh but sighed, yet it was not with unhappiness.

He and Harrie wandered over the castle together, for the two Miss Harpers did not approve of climbing. The little boys and “Pa” reappeared now and then at all sorts of improbable and terrifically dangerous corners, and occasionally Mrs. Dugdale made frantic darts after them. Especially when they were all seen standing on one of the topmost precipices, the father giving a practical scientific lesson on the momentum of falling bodies; in illustration of which Harrie declared he would certainly throw little Brian out of his arms, in a fit of absence of mind, thoroughly believing the child was a stone.

At last, when their excitement had fairly worn itself out, and even Mrs. Dugdale's energetic liveliness had come to a dead stop in consequence of a fit of sleepiness and crossness on the part of Brian —Agatha roamed about the old castle by herself; creeping into all the queer nooks with a childish pleasure, mounting impassable walls so as to find the highest point of view. She always had a great delight in climbing, and in feeling herself at the top of everything.

It was such a strange afternoon too, grey, soft, warm, the sun having long gone in and left an atmosphere of pleasant cloudiness, tender and dim, the shadowing over of a fading day, which nevertheless foretells no rain, but often indicates a beautiful day to-morrow. Somehow or other, it made

Agatha think of Miss Valery; nor was she surprised when, as suddenly as if she had dropped out of the sky, Anne was seen approaching.

“Let me help you up these stones. How good of you to come, and how tired you seem!”

“Oh no, I shall be rested in a minute. But I am not quite so young as you, my dear.”

She came up and leaned against the ivy-wall that Agatha had climbed, which was on the opposite side of the hill to the bowling-green, the gathering-spot of the little party. It was a nook of thorough solitude and desolation, nothing being visible from it but the widely extended flat of country, looking seaward, though the sea itself was not in view.

“Why did you climb so high?” said Agatha, as, earnestly regarding her friend, she perceived more than ever before the difference in their years, and felt strongly tempted to wrap her strong young arms round Miss Valery's waist, and support her with even a daughter's care.

“I shall be well presently,” Anne repeated, with cheerfulness. “I have not climbed up to this spot for many years. I thought I would like to come here once again.”

She sat down on a flat stone raised upon two others.

“What a comfortable seat! It might have been made on purpose for you.”

“So it was—long ago. No one has disturbed it since. Come, my dear.”

She drew Agatha beside her—there was just room for two; and they sat in silence, looking at the view, except that Agatha sometimes cast her eyes about rather restlessly. It was a magical answer to

her thoughts when Anne observed:

"I met your husband as I drove through Kingcombe. He desired me to tell you he was detained a little, but would be here ere long. How very thoughtful and good he is!"

Agatha said "Yes"—a mere "Yes," quiet and low.

Miss Valery made no further remark, but sat a long time, absently gazing over the low-lying sweep of country which gradually melted into a greyness that looked like sea.

"Is it the sea?" asked Mrs. Harper.

"No, it lies yonder, behind the hill opposite—where there is the smoke of the furze burning. From that spot I should think one could trace the line of coast almost to Weymouth. Do you remember ever seeing Weymouth?"

"No! how could I?" returned Agatha, surprised by the suddenness of the question, and its form. "I never was in Dorsetshire before."

Anne said something, either in jest or earnest, about one's often fancying one has seen places in a previous existence, and changed the theme by pointing out the view on the other hand. "My house, Thornhurst, lies in that direction. You must come and see me soon, and we will talk more pleasantly than I can do to-day. It is so strange to be sitting here with Mrs. Locke Harper."

"Why so? What makes you so often call me by that name?"

"Only a whim I have. But is it not a good name—a beautiful name? Ah, you child!—you poor little one! To think of *you* becoming Mrs. Locke Harper!"

There was a pathos—a kind of tender retrospection in Anne Valery's manner as she

touched the brown curls and smoothed the neat dress, which—riding hat and skirt having been laid aside or tucked up—made a pretty mountain-maiden out of Nathanael's wife. Agatha never could understand the peculiar fondness with which Miss Valery sometimes regarded her—to-day especially. She seemed constantly on the point of saying something—which she never did say. At last she rose from the stone seat.

"We will talk another day. We must go now." Yet she lingered. "Just let us stand here, in this exact spot; and look at the view." She looked—her eyes absorbing it from every point, as one drinks in, for the last time, a long-familiar draught of landscape beauty.. "My dear!"

The whisper was strangely soft—even solemn.

"You will remember, dear, it was I that brought you here first. You'll come here sometimes, will you not?"

"Oh, very often indeed! It is a delicious place."

"I thought so when I was your age. And you'll not forget the stone seat, Agatha? I hope no one will disturb it. Good-bye! poor old stone."

Saying this in a whisper, she stooped and patted it with her hand—the thin white hand that might once have been so round, pretty, and young. The act, natural even to childishness, might have made Agatha smile, but for a certain something about Miss Valery that invested with dignity even her simplicities. So, merely echoing "Goodbye, old stone!" she followed Anne down the slope.

After a loud-lamenting adieu, especially from the Dugdale boys, Miss Valery mounted her little carriage and drove away into the gathering shadow —Agatha knew not where.

“What a good woman she is! I wish we were all like her!” she said, thoughtfully.

“My dear, nobody can be, especially with a husband and four children. It is a blessing to society in general that Anne Valery never married.”

“But people do marry late in life sometimes. So may she. Do you think she will?”

“Can't say! Don't know! Very mysterious!” ejaculated Harrie. “My brother Fred once hinted—and Fred was a very fascinating young fellow when I was a child—But all that belongs to the year One. I'll hold my tongue.”

Agatha had too much delicacy to inquire further. Still, it seemed very odd that there should be a general impression of Anne's early attachment to Major Harper, in contradistinction to the old Squire's regretful hint that she had refused his eldest son. But these scraps of romance, so far back in the past, were useless searching.

“An excellent woman is Anne Valery,” continued Harrie—“really excellent: but sometimes rather a bore to her friends who have families. My Duke often forgets he has four children to provide for, when he listens to her charitable schemes. 'Twas but the other day he and she were mad about some starving Cornish miners that she sent poor Mr. Wilson to look after.”

“Ah, I remember,” cried Agatha, now interested in things which she had before heard indifferently. She was thirsting for some opportunity of doing good—of redeeming the long waste of idle years and unemployed fortune. “Do tell me about those miners.”

“Little to tell, my dear. Only philanthropic ideas about helping poor wretches that had been thrown

out of work by some cheating speculators shutting up the mines. Anne sent Wilson to find out who the man was, and what could be done. After that I never heard any more of it, nor did my husband either.—Stop—don't run and question him! For goodness' sake let the nonsense drop out of his poor dear head."

Agatha, thus rebuffed, ceased her inquiries, but she inwardly resolved to find out all about the Cornish miners, and consult with her husband about assisting them. He could not object to this good deed—it should be done as privately as ever he liked—she would take care not even to make mention of it before anybody, as in the matter of the subscription. And surely, though he was strange and had his peculiar notions, Nathanael was generous at heart, and would not thwart her in anything really essential, especially when she only wished to follow in the steps of Anne Valery, and use worthily her large fortune.

With these thoughts elevating and cheering her mind, she sat and watched for her husband until he came. She was so glad to see him that she quite forgot to inquire about the house. He seemed at first expectant of her questions, and rather grave, but at last gave himself up to the general merry mood.

Once only, when they were riding homeward side by side, the fading sunset before them, and the low moon hiding herself behind the great black hill of Corfe, Nathanael suddenly said:

"My dear Agatha, perhaps you would like me to tell you"—

"No," she cried, with a quick instinct of reluctance. "Tell me nothing to-night. Let us be happy for this one day."

Her husband sighed, and was silent.

# CHAPTER XVII.

## "Agatha, will you come out and walk with me?"

"Do you not see it is raining?"

He had not indeed, though he had stood at the window in meditation ever since breakfast-time. As for Agatha, she had been so tired with her excursion the previous day that she had done nothing but sleep, and had scarcely opened her lips to her husband or to any one. Now, on this rainy day, she felt the reaction of her high spirits—was dull, dreamy; wished her husband would come and talk to her, and "make a baby" of her. She could not think why he stood at that odious window, pondering, counting rain-drops apparently, and then made the unaccountable proposition of a walk.

"Raining, is it?" He looked up at the murky sky. "What a change from last night."

"I did not know you were so subject to elemental influences?"

"We all are, more or less; but I was just then thinking about other things than what I spoke of. My dear wife, I want to talk to you very much. Where shall we go, so as not to be interrupted?"

"Anywhere you like," said she, resigning herself

to her fate and to a long argument, which she supposed was about the new house. She did not remember about it clearly, but she had a floating suspicion that Nathanael was determined to settle the matter soon, and that she should have a hard struggle between the pretty house she liked, and Mr. Wilson's cottage, which her husband so unaccountably preferred. This was a matter in which she could not yield, come what might. Therefore the "anywhere you like" was in rather an ungracious manner. He seemed determined not to observe this.

"Suppose we go into the conservatory;—you have never seen it. But put on something to keep you warm."

He wrapped Mary's crimson garden-shawl over her head—clumsily enough, for Mr. Harper was not a "ladies' man;" his whole character and habits of life being in curious opposition to the extreme delicacy which Nature had externally stamped upon his appearance. Pausing, he held his wife at arm's length, gazing at her admiringly.

"Will that do? What a gipsy you look, with your red shawl and brown face!"

"Pawnee-face, you know! Do you remember how you once called me so, and how your brother"—

"Come, let us go," he said abruptly, and hurried her through the drawing-rooms. Agatha was rather hurt that his aspect should change so cloudily, and that he should thus quench her little reminiscences of courtship-days, so dear to every happy wife, and gradually becoming dearer even to herself. As they entered the conservatory, she shivered with an uncomfortable sense of gloom.

"What a large, bare place! Even the vines look cheerless—and where have they put all the flowers?

What a shame to send them away, and turn it into a billiard-room."

"It was done years ago, to please—my brother"—(Agatha was amazed at the hard tone of that tender fraternal word—so can the sense of words alter in the saying)—"and my father will not have it removed."

"He must have been very fond of your brother," said Agatha, as, with a woman's natural leaning to the injured side, she thought of Major Harper—his gaiety and his good-nature. She wondered why Nathanael was so rigid and cold in his forced and rare mentioning of his brother's name. As she pondered, her eyes took a serious shadow in their depths.

"What are you thinking about, Agatha?"

The suddenness of the question—the consciousness that she might vex Nathanael did she answer it—made her hesitate, blushing vividly—nay, painfully.

"No, don't tell me. I want to hear nothing, nothing, Agatha. I have before told you so. Do not be afraid."

"How strange you are! What should I be afraid of?"

"Nothing. Forget I said anything. You are my wife now—mine—mine!" and for a moment he pressed her hand tightly. "In time"—he relinquished his hold with a sad smile—"in time, Agatha, I hope we shall become used to one another; perhaps even grow into a contented, sedate married couple."

"Do you think so?" Alas! far more than this had been her thought—the thought which had dawned when she paused, shuddering over the tale of King Edward the Martyr and the woman that loved him—

the dim hope, daily rising, of an Eden not altogether lost, even though she had married so rashly and blindly—a hope that this might have been only the burying of her foolish girlish dream of love, which must needs die in order to be raised up again in a different form and in a new existence.

Somewhat heavy-hearted, Agatha sat down on a raised bench that looked down on the battered and decaying billiard-table, listening to the rain that pattered on the glass roof above the vine-leaves—wondering how old were the ragged-looking, flowerless, fruitless orange-trees that were ranged on either side, the only other specimens of vegetation left. Evidently nobody at Kingcombe Holm cared much for flowers.

“I think we will quit this dull place. You do not seem to like it, Agatha?”

“Oh, yes, I like it well enough. I like the rain falling, falling, and the vine-branches crushing themselves against the panes. They'll never ripen, never—poor things! They are dying for sun, and it will not—will not shine!”

“Agatha, what do you mean?”

“I don't clearly know what I mean. Never mind. Talk to me about—whatever it was that you brought me to unfold. Be quick—I have not a large stock of patience, you know of old.”

“Do not laugh, for I am serious. I wanted to talk to you about our new house.”

“Our new house! Where and what like is it to be, I wonder!”

“Do you not recollect?”

“No; the two we looked at would not do,” said Agatha, determinedly. She guessed what was coming

—that the discussion about Wilson's cottage, which Nathanael seemed so to have set his heart upon, was about to be renewed. But she would never consent to that—never! “The house I liked you did not approve of,” she continued, observing her husband's silence. “The other I could not think of for a moment.”

“But supposing there was no alternative, since we must settle at once?”

“This is the first time you have condescended to inform me of that necessity.”

“If,” he went on, taking no notice of her sharp speech, but speaking with the extreme gentleness of one who himself feels tenfold the pain he is compelled to inflict—“if, as I told you yesterday, we ought to form our plans immediately; and since, Kingcombe being such a small place, there is at present no choice left us but those two houses”—

“Build one! We are rich enough.”

“Not quite.” His eyes dropped, almost like those of guilt. After a pause, he cried out violently:

“Agatha, a secret at one's heart is ten times worse to the keeper of it than it can be to any one else. Have pity for me, have patience with me, just for a little while.”

“What are you talking about? What have you done?”

“Nothing,” said he. “Nothing to harm your peace, my little wife. Believe me, I have committed no greater crime, than”—

“Well!”

“Than having taken Wilson's cottage.”

He tried by smiling to teach her to make light of it—perhaps because it was a thing so light to him. But Agatha was enraged beyond endurance.

“You have absolutely taken it—that mean, wretched hovel that I told you I hated;—taken it secretly, without my knowledge or consent!”

“You mistake there. I told you we were obliged to decide yesterday; you were unwilling to consult with me, and at last—do you remember? you left the decision in my hands. I merely believed your own words, and knowing the necessity of acting upon them, did so. I cannot think I was wrong.”

“Oh, no! Not at all!” cried Agatha, laughing wildly. “It was only like you—under-handed in stealing my few pleasures—very frank and open when you can rule. Never honest or candid with me, except to my punishment. A kind, generous husband, truly!”

These and a torrent more of bitter words she poured out. She never knew till now the passion, the galling sarcasm, there was in her nature. She felt a longing to hate—a wish to wound. Every time she looked at her husband, there seemed a demon rising up within her—that demon which lurks strangely enough in the heart's closest and tenderest depths.

“Cannot you speak!” she cried, going up to him. “Anything is better than that wicked silence. Speak!”

“Agatha!”

“No—I'll not hear you. See what you have done—how you have made me disgrace myself” and she almost sobbed.—“Never in my life was I in a passion before.”

“Is it my fault then?” said he, mournfully.

“Yes, yours. It is you who stir up all these bad feelings in me.. I was a good girl, a happy girl, before you married me.”

“Was it so? Then you shall be held blameless.

Poor child—poor child!”

His unutterable regret, his entire prostration, stung her to the heart, and silenced her for the moment; but speedily she burst out again:

“You call me a child—so perhaps I am, in years; but you should have thought of that before. You married me, and made me a woman. You took away my gay childish heart, and yet in all humiliating things you still treat me like a child.”

“Do I?” He answered mechanically, out of thoughts that lay deep down, far below the surface of his wife's bitter words. These last awoke in him not one ray of anger—not even when at last, in a fit of uncontrollable petulance, she tore his hand from before his eyes, bidding him look at her—if he dared.

“Yes, I dare.” And the look she courted, arose steady, sorrowful, like that of a man who turns his eyes upward, hopeless yet faithful, out of a wrecked ship. “Whatever has been, or may come, God knows that, from the first, I did love you, Agatha.”

Wherefore had he used the word “did!” Why could she not smother down the unwonted pang, the new craving? Or rather, why could she not throw herself in his arms and cry out, “Do you love me—do you love me now?” Pride—pride only—the restless wild nature upon which his reserve fell like water upon fire, without the blending spirit of conscious love which often makes two opposite temperaments result in closest union.

Nevertheless, she was somewhat soothed, and began to compress the mass of imaginary wrongs into the one little wrong which had originated it all.

“What made you take a liking to that miserable house? I hate small rooms—I cannot breathe in them —I have never been used to a little house. Why must

I now? I am not going to be extravagant—nobody could be if they tried, in a poor place like Kingcombe. Since you *will* insist on our living there, and *will* carry out your cruel pride of independence"—

"Cruel—oh, Agatha!" He absolutely groaned.

"Wishing no extravagance, I do wish for comfort—perhaps some little elegance—as I have had all my life."

"You shall have it still, Agatha," her husband muttered. "I will coin my heart's blood into gold but you shall have it."

"Now you are talking barbarously! Or else—how very very wrong am I! What can be the reason that we torture each other so?"

"Fate!" he cried, pacing wildly up and down. "Fate! that has netted us both to our own misery—nay, worse—to make us the misery of one another. Yet how could I know? You seemed a young simple girl, free to love—I felt sure I could make you love me. Poor dupe that I was! Oh, why did I ever see you, Agatha Bowen?"

He snatched his wife on his knee, and kissed her repeatedly—madly—just as he had done on the morning of their wedding-day; never since! Then he let her go—almost with coldness.

"There—I will not vex you. I must not be foolish any more."

Foolish! He thought it foolish to show that he loved her! Without replying, Agatha sat down on the bench where her husband placed her. He might say what he liked: she was very patient now.

He began to explain his reasons for taking the house; that he had naturally more acquaintance with

worldly matters than she had; that whatever their income, it was advisable for young people to begin housekeeping prudently, since it was easy to increase small beginnings, while of all outward domestic horrors there was nothing greater than the horror of running into debt. When he talked thus, at once with wisdom and gentleness, Agatha began to forgive him.

"After all," said she, brightening, "your prudence—which I might call by a harder word, but I'll be good now—your prudence is only restraining me in my little pleasures, and I don't much mind. But if you ever tried to restrain me in a matter of kindness, as you did yesterday, only I guessed the motive"—

"Did you?"

"There—don't look so startled and displeased. I saw you did not like the *éclat* of political charities. But another time, if I want to do good—like Anne Valery, only in a very, very much smaller way—Hark! what is that noise?"

It was a decent-looking working-man, standing out in the pouring rain, watching them through the panes, and rattling angrily at the locked conservatory-door.

"What a fierce eye! It looks quite wolfish. What can he want with us?"

"I will go and see. Some labourer wanting work, probably; but the fellow has no business to come beckoning and interrupting. Stay here, Agatha."

"No—I will come with you." And she tripped after her husband, the momentary content of her heart creating a longing to do good—a sort of tithe of happiness thankfully paid to Heaven.

Nathanael unfastened the glass-door, not without annoyance; for, unlike his wife, *his* joy-tithe

was not yet due.

“What do you want, my good fellow?”

“Some o' th' Harpers.”

“Indeed! Are you after work? You don't look like one of the clay-cutters. Where do you come from?”

“I be Darset, I be; but I comed fra Carnwall.”

“From where?” asked Agatha, puzzled by the provincialism, and attracted at once by the man's intelligent face, and by a keen, misery-stricken, hungry look, which she had truly called “wolfish.”

“I be comed fra the miners in Carnwall,” reiterated the man, raising his voice threateningly. “They sent I back to Darset to see some o' th' Harpers.”

“You must go in, Agatha; it is cold. I cannot have you standing here. Go—quick.” And Agatha was astonished to see how pallid and eager her husband looked, and how anxious he seemed to get her out of the way.

“No, thank you. I am not cold at all. I want to hear this man. Perhaps he is one of the poor miners Miss Valery spoke of at Wheal—what was it?”

“I be comed fra Wheal Caroline, Missus, and I do want one o' th' Harpers. There be the old 'un at the window! Thick's the man for we.”

And he was hurrying off to the bow-window of the Squire's room, which was alongside of the conservatory. But Nathanael called him back imperatively.

“Stay, friend. My father has nothing to do with the mines—it is I. I'll speak to you presently.—Some business of Anne's,” he explained hastily to his wife. “Leave us, dear.”

“Why do you make me go in? I want to hear

about the poor miners; I want to help them, as well as Anne Valery."

"Do'ee help we, Missus!" implored the man, softened by a woman's kind looks. "Do'ee give we some'at to keep 'un fra starving!"

"Starving!" cried Agatha in horror. And even her husband's anxiety was for the moment quelled in the deep pity which overspread his countenance.

"It be nigh that, I tell'ee. Us be no cheats—there be other folk as has cheated we. Fine grand folk as knew nowt o' the mines, but shut 'un up, and paid no money."

"How wicked!"

"But I be come to find 'un out," cried the man fiercely, as his eye lit on Nathanael. "For I do know thick fine folk. And I tell'ee"—

"Silence! you forget you are speaking before a lady. Wait for me, and I will talk with you."

"Will'ee, Mister? Don't'ee cheat, now!" said the miner, with a rude attempt at a sneer.

The young man's cheek flushed, but he said very quietly—

"I promise you, I will speak with you here in half-an-hour. I am Nathanael Harper—Mr. Harper's youngest son."

After a minute's keen observation, the miner pulled off his cap respectfully. "Thank'ee, sir! You bean't *he*, I see. But you be th' old Squire's son, and—I be Darset, I be!"

Another bow—the involuntary respect to the ancient county family from honest labour born upon its ancestral sod, and the man leaned exhausted against the ragged stem of one of the old vines.

"Missus," he said, looking up hungrily—at the

lady this time— “Missus, do'ee gie 'un a bit o' bread!”

Agatha, full of compassion, was eager to send the servants or take him into the kitchen, or even fetch him his dinner with her own hands. Mr. Harper interfered.

“I will bring him some food myself. Stay here, my man; don't stir hence. Remember, you have nothing to do with my father.”

There was a warning severity in the tone which annoyed Agatha. Why did her husband speak harshly to the poor miner?

Still she obeyed Mr. Harper's evident wish that she should go away; and spent the time in Elizabeth's room, telling her of this little incident.

Miss Harper listened with all the quick intelligence of her bright eyes. The only remark she made was:

“What could have led this miner to come back to Dorsetshire after our family?”

Agatha had never thought of this, indeed she did not want to think. Her heart was brimming with charity. She longed to empty it out in a torrent of benefactions, to which even Anne Valery's constant stream of good deeds appeared measured and slow. Elizabeth watched her with a strange piercing expression—Elizabeth, who from her silent nest seemed to behold all things clearer, like a spirit sitting halfway in upper air, to whose passionless wide vision distant mazes take form and proportion. Often, there was something almost supernatural in Elizabeth and her attentive eyes.

“My dear,” she said at last, when Agatha paused for a response to her own enthusiasm, “Man proposes —God disposes! Go and talk over these things with your husband first.” Agatha went.

She met Nathanael on the staircase, going up to their own room.

“Ah; is it you? I am so glad. Come and tell me what has been done about the poor miner.”

“He is gone. I have sent him back to Cornwall.”

“What, so soon? Not to starve at that Wheal—Wheal something or other—I always forget the name?”

“Do forget it. Don't let the matter trouble my little wife. Let her run down-stairs and think of something else.”

He patted her head with assumed carelessness, and was passing her by; but she stopped him.

“Ah! there it is—I am always to be a child! I am to run down-stairs and think of something else, while you go and shut yourself up to ponder over this affair. But I will not be shut out; I will go with you; —come!”

In playful force she drew him to their room, and closed the door.

“Now, sit down, and tell me the whole story. Why, how grave and pale it has made you look! But never mind; we'll find out a plan to help the poor people.”

He gave some inarticulate assent, which checked her by its coldness, sank on the chair she placed, and folded his fingers tightly in one another, so that Agatha could not even strengthen herself in the bold projects she was about to communicate, by stealing her own into her husband's hand. However, she placed herself on the floor at his feet, in the attitude of a Circassian beauty; or—she accidentally thought —not unlike a Circassian slave.

“Begin, please! I must hear about these mines.”

“I doubt if you could understand,—at least with the few explanations I am able to give you at present.”

“Nevertheless, I'll try. Why are the poor men starving in this way?”

“You heard but now. Because the mines were first opened on a speculation, worked carelessly—dishonestly I fear—till the speculator's money failed, and the vein stopped. Then the miners being thrown out of employ were reduced to great distress, as this man tells me.”

“But why should he have come here after your father?”

“And,” continued Nathanael, in a quick and rather inexplicable correlative, “the mines were lately sold as waste land. Anne Valery bought them.”

“Why did she do that?”

“Out of charity; that she might begin some employment—flax-growing, I think—to find food for the poor people. There the tale's ended, my Lady Inquisitive. Will you go down to my sisters?”

“Not yet. I want to talk to you a little—a very little longer. May I?”

And she drooped her head, blushing as the young will blush over the same charitable feeling which the old and hardened ostentatiously parade.

Mr. Harper gazed hopelessly around, as if longing any means of escape and solitude. His wife saw him and was pained.

“What—are you tired of me?”

“No, no, dear, Only I am so busy—and have so many things to think about just now.”

“Tell me some of them.”

“What—tell you all my business mysteries,” he

returned, playfully. “Didn't you say to me once, before we were married, that you hated secrets, and never could keep one in your life?”

“It is true—quite true. I do hate them,” cried Agatha.

“And for all your smiling, I know you are keeping back something from me now.”

“Foolish little wife!”

“Foolish—but still a wife. Look at me and tell the truth. Is there anything in your heart which I do not know?”

“Yes, Agatha, several things.”

The sudden change from jest to deep earnest startled the wife so much that she was struck dumb.

“Circumstances may happen,” he continued, “which a husband cannot always tell to his wife, especially a man of my queer temper and lonely ways. I always knew that the woman I married would have much to bear from me. Did I not tell her so, poor little Agatha?” And he tried to take her hand.

“You are talking in this way to soothe me, but I know well what you mean. No husband ever really thinks himself in fault, but his wife. Emma always said so.”

Mr. Harper dropped the unwilling hand; but the next moment, by a strong effort, reclaimed it firmly.

“Agatha, are we beginning again to be angry with one another? Is there never to be peace between us?”

“Peace” only? Nothing closer, dearer? Yet what was it that, as Agatha looked at her husband, made her think even his “peace” better than any other's love?

"Yes," she murmured, after watching him long in silence—"yes, there shall be peace. Whatever I am, I know how good you are. And," she added, gaily, "now let me unfold a plan of mine for proving how good we both are."

"What is it?"

"I want some money—a good deal."

Mr. Harper turned away. "Wherefore?"

"Cannot you guess? I thought you would at once—nay, that you would be the first to propose it. I am glad I am first. Now, do guess."

"I had rather not, if it is a serious matter. If otherwise, I am hardly quite merry enough for jests to-day. Tell me."

"It is a very simple thing, though it has cost me half-an-hour's puzzling. I never thought so much about business in all my life. Well,"—she hesitated.

"Go on, Agatha."

"I want—it must come out—I want you to take half or all of my—*our* money which is in the Funds (as I believe Major Harper said, though I have not the least idea what Funds are)—and with it to buy a new mine, and set the poor miners all working again; they'll like it a great deal better than flax-growing. And perhaps we could afterwards build schools and cottages, and do oceans of good. Oh! how glad I am I was born an heiress!"

She rose, her eyes brightening; her little figure dilated; she had never looked so lovely—so loveable. And yet the husband sat as it were stone blind and dumb.

"You cannot have any objection to this, I know," Agatha went on. "It is not like giving money openly away—making a show of charity. Nobody need know

but that we do it on our own account—just to increase our riches;" and she laughed merrily at the idea. "Think now—how much money would it take?"

"I cannot tell."

"A great deal, probably, since you look so serious over it," said the wife, a little vexed. "Perhaps my plan is foolish in some things; but I think it is right, and I am very firm—firmer than you imagine—when I feel I am in the right. Surely, living so cheaply in that tiny house—and we will live cheaper still if you choose—we shall have plenty to spare. We must do this. Say that we shall."

Her husband was silent.

Gradually the blush of enthusiasm deepened into that of annoyance—real anger. "Mr. Harper, I wait until you answer me."

As she turned away, Nathanael looked after her. Such a flood of tenderness, reverence, sorrow, passion, rarely swept over a human face.

Then he rose, paced up the room in his usual fashion, and down again; pausing once at the window (a strange thing for him to notice just then) to let out a brown bee that, having come in for shelter from the rain, wanted to go out again with the sunshine. At last he came to Agatha's side.

"My dear wife, it grieves me to pain you by a refusal—grieves me more than you can tell; but the plan you propose is utterly impracticable."

"Indeed!" Her colour flashed, darkened of a stormy red, and paled. She was exercising very great self-restraint.

"I will ask less," she resumed, bitterly. "I had forgotten the extreme prudence of your character. Give me just what *you* think is sufficient for charity."

And her lip tried not to curl—her heart tried not to despise her husband.

Nathanael gave no answer.

"Mr. Harper, three—four times lately you have denied me what I asked. Thrice it was merely my own pleasure—which I relinquished. This time it is a matter of principle, and I will not yield. Will you—since I have made you master of my fortune—will you allow me enough out of it for my own slight gratification? That at least is but justice."

"Justice!" echoed Nathanael, his features sinking gradually into the rigidity they sometimes wore—a warning of how much the gentleness of his nature could bear.

"Hear me for one minute, Agatha. I know this is hard, very hard for you. I have prevented your living in London; I have taken a smaller house than you like; I have restricted you in acts of charity. But for all these things I have reasons."

"Will you tell me those reasons?" It was a tone, not of entreaty, but of threatening—such as a man rarely hears from a woman without all the pride within him recoiling into obstinacy.

Mr. Harper grew yet paler, though still his answer was soft—"Agatha, do not ask me. I cannot tell you."

"You dare not! You are ashamed!"

He walked away from her. When he returned, it was less the lover that spoke than the man. "I am not ashamed of anything I do, and I have clear motives for all. I only desire my wife to have patience for awhile, and trust her husband."

"I trust my husband!" she cried, in violent passion—"When he acts outrageously, unjustly,

insultingly—binds me hand and foot like a child, and then smiles and tells me 'to be patient!' When he has secrets from me—when, for all I know, his whole conduct may have been one long deceit towards me."

"Take care, Agatha." The words were said between his teeth, and then the lips closed in that strong straight line which made his face look all iron.

"I say it may have been—I have heard of such things"—and she laughed fearfully at the horrible thought a tempting devil was putting into her mind —"I have heard of young girls—poor desolate creatures, cursed with riches, and having no one to guard them—of some stranger coming and marrying them hastily, but not for love—oh, not for love!" And her laughter grew absolutely frightful in its mockery. "How do I know but that you thus married me?"

Her wild eyes fixed themselves on her husband. She saw his face change to very ghastliness, and guilt itself could not have trembled more than the shudder which ran through his frame.

"I was right," she gasped, her passion subdued into cold horror—"you did marry me for my money!"

No answer—not a breath—only an incredulous stare. Once more Agatha's passion rose, a sea of wrath, misery, despair, that dashed her blindly on, she recked not where.

"I see it all now—all your wickedness. You never loved me, you only loved my riches. You have them now, and so you can stand there and gaze at me, as hard, as dumb as a stone. But I will make you hear—I will shriek it into your silence again—again—You married me for my money!"

Still no word. The silence she spoke of was awful. Nathanael stood upright, his hands knotted together, the lids dropping over his eyes. He neither

looked at her nor at anything. There was not the slightest expression in his face—it might have been carved in granite. When at last almost to see if he were living man, Agatha clutched his arm, it also felt hard, immoveable, like a granite rock.

"Mr. Harper!" she cried, terror mingling with the outburst of her rage.

He merely lifted his eyes and looked at the door. —Not once—oh! never once at her!

"Ay, I will go," she answered—"most gladly, most thankfully! I will run anywhere to escape your presence."

She crossed the room and tried to unfasten the door, which she had herself bolted a little while before, out of play; but her trembling fingers were useless. She was obliged to call her husband's help, and he came.

Perfectly silent, without a single glance towards her, he undid the fastening, and set the door open for her to pass. A pang of fear, nay remorse, came over Agatha.

"Speak," she cried—"if only one word, speak!"

His lips moved, as though framing an inarticulate "No," and then closed again in that iron line. He still stood holding the door.

Hardly knowing what she did, Agatha sprang past the threshold and tottered a few steps on. Then turning, she saw the door shut behind her, slowly, noiselessly, but *it was shut*. She felt as if the door of hope had been shut upon her heart.

She turned again, and fled away.

# CHAPTER XVIII.

It was late afternoon. The rain had ceased, and glowed into one of those soft October days, so exquisitely sunny and fair. The light glimmered through the closed Venetian blinds of “Anne's room,” and danced on the carpet and about Agatha's feet as she sat, quiet at last, and tried to remember how she had come and how long she had been there. She had seen no one; nobody ever came into “Anne's room.”

The dressing-bell rang—the only sound she had heard in the house for hours.

She started up, waking to the frightful certainty that all was real—that the ways of the household were going on just as usual—that she must rouse up, no matter staggering under what burden of misery, and go through her daily part, as if nothing had happened, and nothing was about to happen.

Nothing? when this day, perhaps this same hour, must decide one of two things—whether she were a wretched wife, bound for life to a man who married her solely for mercenary motives, or whether she were a wife—perhaps in this even more wretched—who had so wronged and insulted her husband that nothing ever could win his forgiveness or restore his love. His love, which, as she now dimly began to see, and shuddered in the seeing, was becoming to her the most precious thing in existence.

Never, until she sat there, quite alone, and feeling what it was to be left alone, after being so watched and cherished—-never until now had she understood what the world would be to her if

doomed to question her husband's honour or to outlive her husband's love.

“It must have been all a dream,” she said, moving her cold fingers to and fro over her forehead. “He never could have wronged me so, or I him. He must surely explain, and I will ask his pardon for what I said in my passion—Unless, indeed, my accusation were true.”

But she could not think of that possibility now—it maddened her.

“I shall meet him soon. I wonder how he will meet me. That will decide all.—Hark!”

She listened—with a vague expectation of footsteps at the door. But no one came.

“I suppose he is in his room still—our room.” And all the solemn union of married life—the perpetual presence, the never parting night nor day, which makes estrangement in that tie worse than in any other human bond—rushed upon her with unutterable terror.

“If he has deceived and wronged me, how shall I endure the sight of him? If I have outraged him, and he will not forgive me—oh, what will become of me?”

She heard various bells ringing throughout the house, and knew that she had no time to lose. She rose up feebly, with that aching numbed feeling which strong agitation leaves in the whole frame, and tottered to the mirror.

“I must look at myself, to see that there is nothing strange about me, in case I meet any one in the passages.—Oh, what a face!”

It was sallow, blanched, with dark shadows round the eyes, and dark lines drawn everywhere.

That first storm of wild passion—that agony of remorse following, had left indelible marks. She seemed ten years older since she had last beheld herself, which was when she pulled out her long curls in the morning. She pulled them out mechanically now, trying to make of them a screen to hide the poor face that she had used to fancy they adorned. Then she flew like a frightened creature along the passages, and without meeting any one, reached her chamber-door. It was a little way open; she need not knock then—knock and wait trembling for the answer. Perhaps Mr. Harper was not there, and so for a few minutes she was safe from the dreaded meeting. She went in.

The room was empty, but her husband's handkerchief and riding-gloves were lying about; he had apparently just gone down-stairs. Nevertheless, though a relief, it was rather a shock to her to find the room deserted. She felt a weight in its silence, forewarning her of she knew not what; she looked round inquiringly, as if the walls could tell her what had passed within them since she left. At last she took up her husband's gloves and laid them by with a care foreign to her general habit, and with a strange tenderness. When Mary's maid answered her summons, she could not forbear asking, carelessly, but with an inward heart-beat—“Where was Mr. Harper?”

“Mr. Locke Harper, ma'am, is sitting reading to master in the library.”

He then could sit and read quietly to his father. With him, too, all household ways went on unaltered —with her only was the tempest—the despair. Her remorse ebbed down—her pride and anger rose. Light—a fierce flashing light—came to her eyes, and crimson roses to her cheeks. She dressed herself with

care, and went down—though not until the last minute—to the drawing-room.

Mary met her at the door. “I was just coming to fetch you. Nathanael said you had been sitting in Anne's room.”

How could he know? Had he watched her?

She answered flippantly, “'Tis very true. I have been enjoying my own company. Very good company too. Have I detained you, though? Is everybody here?”

Everybody was here. *He* was here. Though she never glanced that way, she saw him, and the look he wore. To others it might seem his ordinary look, a little paler, a little more reserved, but she knew what it meant. She knew likewise, now that her passion had subsided, how his whole life—his stainless life—gave the lie to the accusation she had cast upon him. She had outraged him in the keenest point where a proud honourable man can be outraged by his wife; her own hand had cleft a gulf between them which might never close.

At the thought her heart seemed dropping down—down in her bosom, like a bird whose wing is broken, it knows not how. Sick, giddy, she clung to Mary's arm for a moment.

“Nathanael, look here. What is the matter with your wife?”

“Nothing,” Agatha cried. “I have only stupified myself with—with thinking. I will think no more—no more.”

She tossed her head back with a fierce laugh. Her husband, who had half-risen at Mary's call, resumed his seat, making no remark.

He had never been used to show her much

fondness or attention before his family, so it did not appear strange that in the few minutes before dinner he should talk to his sisters, and leave his wife to the courtesies of his father. For it was now an acknowledged fact at Kingcombe Holm that the Squire was growing very fond of Agatha.

Dinner came, the long, dreadful dinner, with the brilliant light glimmering in her face, and showing every expression there; with old Mr. Harper leaning forward to address her every time she relapsed into silence; with the consciousness upon her that there was no medium course, that she must talk and laugh, fast and recklessly, or else fall into tears; with the knowledge, worst of all, that there was one sitting at the bottom of the table whom she dared not look at, but whom nevertheless she perpetually saw.

Her husband had taken his usual place, and sustained it in his usual manner. There was the same brotherly chat with Mary and Eulalie, the same answers to his father, and when once, in the dinner-table courtesies, he addressed his wife, the tone was precisely as it had ever been.

Agatha could have shrieked back her answer, betraying him to all the household! This smooth outside of daily life—and with what below? It was horrible.

Yet she felt herself powerless to burst through it. His perfect silence, leaving his honour, the honour of both, in her hands, was like a chain of iron wrapped round her; however she writhed and dashed herself against it, there it was.

The Squire seemed to remain at table longer than ever to-day. He would not let his woman-kind depart. He had many toasts to give, and various old reminiscences to unfold to his daughter-in-law. She

heard all in a misty dream, and kept on vaguely smiling. At last the purgatory was ended, and they rose.

Nathanael held the door open for his wife and sisters to retire—things went on so formally even in the every-day life at Kingcombe Holm. In passing, Agatha felt as if she must burst through that icy barrier he had drawn; she *must* meet her husband's look, and compel him to meet hers. She gave him a look, proud, threatening, yet full of hidden misery. He would surely answer that.

No! No response—not even anger. Some sorrow perhaps, but a sorrow that was stern, hopeless, undemonstrative, as was his own nature. If any wreck had been, it had already sank down into those deep waters, of which the surface appeared perpetually calm.

Agatha threw him back another look. Scorn was there and hatred—she felt as though she did really hate him at that moment. Her heart gave a leap, like a smitten deer, and then a “laughing devil” seemed to enter therein, and dash her on—anywhere—to anything.

“Come, Mary—come Eulalie, we must be very merry tonight, and my husband must join, for all his solemnity. Shake it off quick, Mr. Harper, or we'll call you a deciever—a smooth-faced, smiling cheat.”

Laughing out loud—she caught his hand, wrung it violently, and struck it aside.

“How comical you are!” said the languid Eulalie.

“But,” whispered sensible Mary, “are you quite sure Nathanael liked the joke.”

“Who cares?” Yet Agatha looked back.

He had merely drawn his hand in again to the

other, and his colour faintly rose. Otherwise the poor, mad, passionate girl might as well have dashed herself against a rock. She grew still again, with a kind of fear. Her very limbs tottered as she went towards the drawing-room, and all the time that she lay there on the sofa, Mary bustling about her and chattering all kinds of domestic nothings, Agatha saw, as in a vision, her husband's face, so beautiful in its very sternness, so pure and righteous-looking, whilst she felt herself so desperately, daringly wicked. All the “black, ingrained spots,” which had become visible in her soul, and she knew herself to be worse than any one knew her—appeared gathering in one cloud, until she sickened at her own likeness. For beside it rose another image—and such an one! Yet there was a time when she had thought it a great sacrifice and condescension that Nathanael should be allowed to love her. Now—

No, she dared not hear the cry of her heart. She dared not do anything but hate him, as he must surely hate her. Had he stood before her that minute, she would have flung away this softness, made her flashing eyes burn up their tears, and appeared all indifference. He might if he chose be as cold as ice, as proud as Lucifer;—she would be the same. She would never once let him suspect that which this day's misery had shown her was kindling in her heart. A something, before which the pleasant little vanity of being adored, the content of an easy unexacting liking in return, fell like straws in a flame. A something which she tried to call wrath and hate, but which was truly the avenging angel, Love.

It seemed an age before Mr. Harper came upstairs. When he did, his father was leaning on his arm. The old gentleman looked tired, as if they had been talking much, yet seemed to regard with a

lingering tenderness his son, once so little of a favourite. Why did he? Why did Nathanael soon or late win every one's attachment? And how could he show that reverent attention to his father, that cheerful kindness to his sisters, while *she* sat there, jealous of every look and word? Each time he addressed any of these three, Agatha felt as if some unseen power were lashing her into fury.

It is a strange and terrible thing, but nevertheless true, that a good man, a kind man, a generous man, may sometimes quite unconsciously drive a woman nearly mad; make her feel as though a legion of fiends were struggling for possession of her soul, goad her weakness into acts which torture alone causes, and the after-blackness of which, presented to her real self, creates a humiliation which only drives her madder still. Men, that is, good men, who are stronger and better able to do and to bear—ought to be very gentle, very wise, in the manner they deal towards women. No short-coming or wrong, however great, from the weaker to the stronger, can merit an equal return; and according to the law that the more delicate the mental and physical organisation, the keener is the power of suffering; so no man, be he ever so wise or tender-hearted, can rightly estimate the depth of a woman's agony.

Agatha rose, and went away by herself into a smaller room that led out of the other, not unlike her own pet sitting-room in her maiden days—the room where she had once stood by the firelight, and Nathanael had come in and given her the first trembling, thrilling love-kiss. She stood in the same attitude now. Did she remember it? Was she, in that shadowy corner, with glimpses of light and fragments of talk pouring in from the other room,

dreaming over that old time—old, though it happened scarcely three months ago—dreaming it over, with oh! what different emotions!

And when she heard a step—her ears were very quick now. Did she turn, and think to see her lover of old—so little loved? Alas! without lifting her eyes, she felt the presence was no longer that of her timid young lover, but of her husband.

Mr. Harper came in, and for the first time since that fearful minute when she quitted him, the husband and wife were alone. Not quite so, for he had left the door wide open—purposely, she thought. There was a full vision of Mary playing chess with her father, and of Eulalie lounging on the sofa, gazing now and then with idle curiosity into the little room.

It was insulting! Why, if he came to speak healing words, did he let his whole family peer into the mysteries which ought to be strictly sacred between the two whom marriage had made one? If only he had shut the door! If only she could do it, and then turn and cling round his neck, or even weep at his knees—for that frantic desire did strike her for a moment—anything, to win from him pardon and peace!

"Agatha, are you quite at leisure?"

To dream of answering such a tone with a flood of tears! or of clinging round a neck that lifted itself up in such a marble pride! It was impossible.

"I am quite at leisure, Mr. Harper."

At such a crisis, and between two such characters, the fate of a lifetime may depend upon the first word. The first word had been spoken, and answered.

Agatha turned to the fire again, and her husband

to the shadow. Either it was fancy, or the effect of natural contact, but the one face seemed to flame, the other to darken—suddenly, hopelessly—as when the last glimmer of light fades out upon a wall.

"Can you speak with me for a few moments?"

"Certainly. Shall it be here?"

"I think so."

Agatha sat down; smoothed her dress, and held her folded hands tight upon her knees, lest he should see how they were trembling.

Mr. Harper resumed. His tone was gentle, though with a certain strangeness in it, a want of that music which runs through all deep-toned low voices, and which in his was very peculiar.

"It appears to me—though nothing shall be done against your decision—that, considering all things, it would be better that our stay in my father's house were made as short as possible."

"Yes—yes." Two long pausing words, said beneath her breath.

"Accordingly I rode to Kingcombe this afternoon, and find that we can enter the cottage on Saturday. To-day is Thursday——"

"Is it?—Oh yes. I beg your pardon. Proceed."

"If it would be agreeable and convenient to you, I think we had better arrange matters so. I have already told my father it was probable we should leave on Saturday. Are you willing?"

"Quite willing."

"It is settled then. On Saturday evening we go home."

Go home! To their first home! To that new bridal nest, which, be it the poorest dwelling on earth, seems—or should seem—holy, happy, and

fair! What a coming home it was! Better, she thought, that he had cast her adrift, or torn himself from her and placed the wide world between them. Rather any open separation than the mockery of such a union.

"Home!" she cried. "I will not go—I cannot. Oh, not home!"

"To a house, then—call it by what name you please. To your own house, which we will merely *say* is mine. Your comfort"—he stopped a little—"must always be the first consideration of your husband."

"My husband!" she repeated, almost in a shriek—and the old fit of fierce laughter was coming back.

At this moment Eulalie's curious eyes were seen turning towards the little room. Nathanael moved so as to shield his wife from them. "Hush!" he said, sorrowfully, even with a sort of pity—"hush, Agatha. We are married. Between us two there must be, under all circumstances, honour and silence."

His manner was so solemn, free from bitterness or anger, that Agatha's passion was quelled. She was awed as by the sight of some dead face, wronged grievously in life, but which now only revenges itself by the hopelessness of its mute perpetual smile. She remained staring blankly into the fire, plaiting and unplaiting the sash of her dress with heedless fingers. Eulalie might peer safely.

"There was another thing," resumed Nathanael, "which, before telling the rest of the household, I wished to say to you. I had business in Weymouth to-morrow; and—if"—

"Well? I listen."

"If—I were to ride there to-night"—

"Go." A soft, quick word—a mere motion of the

lips—and yet it was the one word of doom.

After that, without saying more, Mr. Harper walked back slowly into the drawing-room, and Agatha sat by the fireside alone.

She heard the rest talking—complaining—reasoning—heard one or two persuasive calls for “Agatha”—but she never moved. Then came the bell hastily pulled, and the old Squire's testy summons for “Mr. Locke Harper's horse,” and “was it a fine night, and the moon risen?” Then the drawing-room door opened and closed. No—he was not gone—not without saying adieu. He would surely pay his wife that deference. Outside the wall she heard his foot ascending the staircase, slowly, with heavy pauses between each step. She crept close to the farther door—behind the curtain, and listened.

“Agatha—where is she gone to?” said Mary, peeping carelessly into the dark room.

“Oh, she has followed her husband up-stairs, of course. Think of all the charges and farewells—the kissing and the crying. 'Tis a wonder she did not insist on riding with him across the country, and coming back at midnight, as I suppose Nathanael will do. La? what's to become of these very devoted husbands and wives.”

Agatha crushed her hands against the wall She felt as if she could almost have torn Eulalie's heart out—if she had a heart. While in her own bosom, leaping up in all its strength, ready at once for heroism, love, and fury—for any nobleness or any crime—was that fountain of all her sex's actions, that mainspring of all her life—the fatal woman-heart.

She waited until she heard Nathanael descend the stairs, and then, as he passed into the drawing-room to his sisters, she, by the little curtained door,

passed out into the hall. There she remained until the rest came; the sisters trooping after Nathanael, and the old Squire following likewise, to see that his son had the best and steadiest horse for a night-ride, which ride, he took care to observe, pointedly, was a most uncourteous proceeding, and warranted by nothing, save the fact of its being performed on the especial service of Anne Valery.

“Agatha—where is Agatha hiding herself?” said Mary. “She ought not to keep her husband waiting a minute."

“Oh, no?” And the little figure, all in white, glided out from some queer corner of the hall, and stood like a ghost in the moonlight. “Good night—good night.” She threw out her hand with those of the others—threw it—not gave it.

Nathanael took the hand, but did not say good night—indeed he never spoke at all.

“Well, are you not going to embrace one another, stage-fashion? Don't let Mary and me interrupt you, pray.” And the two Miss Harpers drew back a little from the young couple.

Mr. Harper bent coldly over his wife's brow, hid under the shadow of her heavy hair.

“No, no; not that,” Agatha whispered, recoiling from his touch. “Never that again.”

He opened the hall-door—saying adieu to neither father nor sisters—leaped on his horse, and was gone.

“Agatha, Agatha; where are you running? He is far down the road by this time. Come in, do! Are you so very reluctant to be left for a few hours alone?”

“Oh, no! Oh, no!” And Agatha went back to the drawing-room with her sisters-in-law.

Alone! The word she had repudiated rose up like a spirit, everywhere, all over the house. Not a room but what seemed empty, strange. Fast and busily the Miss Harpers talked—yet all around was, oh! such silence. The silence that we feel in a house when some voice and step has gone out of it, which no one misses except we, and which we miss as we should miss the daylight or the sun.

When all grew quiet, and Agatha sat in her own room—expecting nothing, for she knew he would not come—but still sitting, with her hair falling damp about her, and her eyes fixed on the mirror for company, yet half growing frightened as if it were a strange object on which she gazed—then, indeed, there was silence—then, indeed, she was *alone*.

## CHAPTER XIX.

Mr. Harper did not ride home by midnight, as his wife was well assured he would not do, though with some idle hope put into her mind by Eulalie, she sat at the window until the stars whitened in the dawn.

At noon—which seemed to come slowly, every hour a day—Mr. Dugdale appeared with a message, which by some wondrous good fortune he remembered to deliver—that Nathanael had returned from Weymouth to Kingcombe, and was waiting there. Agatha gathered with difficulty that her husband wished her to return with Mr. Dugdale.

"I will not go."

"That's right! I wouldn't do it upon any account," said Eulalie, with not the kindest of laughs. "I wouldn't be sent for like a school-girl. Let Nathanael come himself and fetch you. What a rude fellow he is!"

"Eulalie!—You forget you are speaking of your brother and my husband. I will be ready in five minutes, Mr. Dugdale."

Duke lifted his placid but observant eyes, and smiled. "That's good. Come along, my child."

He had never spoken so kindly to her before. It was as if he read her trouble. Her anger faded—she was near bursting in tears. In a little while she had taken the good man's arm—which Eulalie pointedly informed her was not the fashion at Kingcombe—and was walking with him to meet her husband.

Marmaduke talked but little; marching on leisurely in a meditative mood, and leaving his young sister-in-law to follow his example. Once or twice she felt stealing down upon her one of his kindly, paternal glances, and heard him saying to himself his usual winding-up of every mental difficulty:

"Eh!—We know nothing! Nobody knows anything. But everything always comes clear sometime."

At the verge of the town, apparently coming to meet them, she saw Nathanael—saw him a long way off. Her heart leaped at the first vision of the tall slender figure and light hair; but when he approached she was walking steadfastly along. Her eyes lowered, and her mouth firm set. He came up, silently gave her his arm, and she took it as silently.

Mr. Dugdale and her husband immediately

began to talk, so there was no need for Agatha to do anything but walk on, trying to remember where she was, and what course of conduct she had to pursue; trying above all to repress these alternate storms of anger and lulls of despair, and deport herself not like a passionate child, but a reasonable woman—a woman who, after all, might have been heavily wronged.

Sometimes she essayed to consider this—to recall, as is so difficult always, the original cause of difference, the little cloud which had produced this tempest—but everything was in an inextricable maze.

Ere long, Nathanael's silence warned her that they two were alone, Mr. Dugdale having made himself absent, and being seen afar off, diving into a knot of market-politicians. Arm-in-arm the husband and wife passed on through the street. Agatha pulled her veil down, and caught more steadfast hold of her husband's arm—he was her husband, and she would maintain their honour in the world's sight. She felt how many curious eyes were watching them from windows—how many gossiping tongues would be passing comment on the looks and demeanour of Mr. and Mrs. Locke Harper.

“Shall we go over the house now, or would you like to call for my sister?”

“No—we will go at once,” returned Agatha.

Steadfastly—mechanically—the young husband and wife looked over their future home, which was all but ready for habitation. It was not a mean abode now; to Mr. Wilson's furniture had been added various comforts and luxuries. Agatha asked no questions—scarcely noticed anything. She merely moved about, trying to sustain her position in the

eyes of the work-people that showed her round the house; stopping a minute to speak kindly to the servant who was already installed there, and who, dropping a dozen respectful curtsies, explained that she was the daughter of “Master Nathanael's” nurse.

Everything seemed arranged for Mrs. Harper's comfort, as by invisible hands. She never inquired, or even thought, who was the origin of it all. She could not believe she was in her own home;—her married home;—she felt as if each minute she should wake and find herself Agatha Bowen, in the old rooms in Bedford Square, with all things else a dream.

“Oh, that it were,” she sighed within herself. “Oh that I had never”—

She paused here—she could not wish that she had never seen Nathanael.

They quitted the cottage and went out into the street, for country and town blended together in tiny Kingcombe. Mr. Harper closed the wicket-gate, and looked back upon the little house. There was an unquiet glitter in his eye, and his chest heaved violently for a few moments. Then, with all outward observance, he linked his wife's arm in his, and they proceeded onwards.

At the end of East Street they met Harriet Dugdale—the Dugdales seemed always wandering about Kingcombe after one another, and turning up at intervals at odd corners.

“Here you both are! I was looking for my husband. Has anybody seen Duke. Oh, where on earth is Duke gone to? He said he would be back in five minutes—which means five hours.”

“I left him at the market-place.”

“That's an hour ago. He has been home two or three times since then. Do you think he could get on

for a whole hour without wanting the Missus? Oh, there he is. Stop, and I'll catch him."

He was caught, and led forward prisoner by his pretty wife, who never once let him go, lest he should slide away again, and become absorbed in the mysterious electioneering groups that haunted the town.

"Now—Harrie—Missus, just wait—I'll be back in a minute."

"Not a minute! Anne has sent word that she wants you directly—you and Nathanael. You'll go, brother!"

"Whither?"

"To Thornhurst, to meet Mr. Trenchard and some other folk. You must start immediately."

Mr. Harper glanced towards his wife, who had dropped his arm; not pointedly, but as though release were welcome.

"What, couldn't it leave its pet again?" cried Harrie, laughing. "Bless it, nobody demands that terrible sacrifice. Do you think Anne would invite husbands without their wives? We are all to go—if you agree, Agatha."

"Oh, yes!" It was quite indifferent to her where she went, or what she did.

So they all four started in one of those inimitable conveyances called dog-carts, which seem to offer every facility for "accidental death," either by flying over the horse's head, tumbling under the wheels, or slipping off behind.

"Where will you sit, my dear? Beside your husband, I suppose? Mine drives."

Agatha answered by springing up beside Mr. Dugdale, with some vague jest about husbands being

no company at all. The dark fit had passed, and she was now in a mood of desperation.

They dashed on quickly; Marmaduke was a daring driver.

Sometimes Agatha even thought he would overturn them in the road. Little she cared! She was in that state of excitement when the utmost peril would only have made her laugh. Passing under the three hills, and looking up at the old castle, silent and grey, the daylight shining through the fissured apertures that had been windows, she turned round and recklessly proposed to Harrie their scrambling up the green slope and rolling down again.

"E—h, my child!" said Duke Dugdale, turning his mild benevolent looks on the flushed face beside him. "Don't'ee try that, don't'ee, now! When people once set themselves rolling down-hill they never stop till they get to the bottom. It's always so in this world."

Agatha laughed more loudly. She wished her husband to hear how merry she was. She talked incessantly to Mr. Dugdale or Harrie, and held herself very upright, so that Nathanael, who sat behind her, might not even feel the touch of her shoulder. She, who had hitherto been so indifferent to everybody, so mild in her likings and dislikes—never till now had she felt such strange emotions. Yet each and all carried with them a fierce charm. It was like a person learning for the first time what thirst was, and drinking fire, because, in any case, he must drink. And with all her wrath there seemed a spell over heart, brain, and senses, which never for a moment allowed her to cease thinking of her husband. Every movement he made, every word he uttered, she distinctly felt and heard.

The way grew unfamiliar; they were passing through a track of country, wilder, and more peculiar than any Mrs. Harper had yet seen in Dorsetshire—a road cut through furzy eminences, looking down on deep, abrupt valleys, that might have been the bed of dried-up lakes or bays; long heathery sweeps of undulating ground, with great stones lying here and there; cultivation altogether ceasing—even sheep becoming rare; and ever when they chanced to rise on higher ground, a sharp, salt, sea-wind blowing, not a human being to be seen for miles.

“Here's the gate. I'll open it. Now we get into Anne Valery's property,” said Harrie, as she leaped down and leaped up again, mocking Nathanael's “brown study.”

“What a change!” Agatha cried. “I have not seen such trees in Dorsetshire.”

“They seem indeed to have grown on purpose for Anne. Her grandfather built Thornhurst. A queer desolate spot to choose, but it's a perfect little nest of beauty. There!”

The road opened upon a semicircular green plane, levelled among the hills, as it were on purpose, and planted round with a sheltering bulwark of trees—lime, chestnut, oak—rising higher and higher, until at the summit, where the sea-breeze caught them, grew nothing but the perpetual Dorsetshire fir. On the edge of the semicircle stood the house, this green plane before it, behind, a wide stretch of country, where the tide, running for miles inland, made strange-shaped lakes and broad rivers, spread out glistening in the afternoon sun.

“Anne, must always be near the sea. I don't think she would live even here unless she knew that just climbing those rocks would bring her in sight of the

Channel. She has quite an ocean-mania."

"I'll learn it from her. I want a convenient little mania. Suppose I cure myself of my old grudge against the sea, and go from hatred into love, or from love back again into hatred—as people do."

"What a comical girl you are!"

"Very. Stay now. Wait till the horse is quiet, and I'll take a leap down—just like a person leaping into"—

"Hold, Agatha"—and she felt her arm caught by her husband. It was the first time he had touched or addressed her since they left Kingcombe. "Don't spring down—it is not safe. Stay till I lift you."

"I do not want your help."

"Excuse me, you do; you are not used to this sort of carriage.'

"Stand aside—I *will* jump down," she cried, roused by the contest, slight as it was, but enough to show the clashing of the two wills. "Stand aside," she repeated, leaning forward with glittering eyes, giddy, and in so great confusion of mind as to be in real danger—"we will see who gives way."

"Are you in earnest?" Nathanael whispered.

"Quite. Go!"

"I would go if it were play. But when I see my wife about to do any frantic thing to her own injury, I shall restrain her—thus."

Balancing himself on the carriage-step, he clasped the little figure in his arms—tight—strangely tight and close. Before Agatha could resist, he had lifted her safely down, and set her free.

She stood passive—astonished. What could it be in that firm will, in that sudden clasp, which made her feel—was it anger? No not anger, though her

cheeks glowed and her breast heaved. Why was it, that as Nathanael walked onward towards the house, his wife looked after him with such a mingling of attraction and repulsion? What could it be, this strange power which gave him the preeminence over her—which taught her, without her knowing it, the mystery that causes man to rule and woman to obey; Very thoughtful—even unmoved by Harrie's loud laughter at the “excellent joke”—Mrs. Harper suffered herself to be led on by her sister-in-law.

“Nonsense, child, don't look so serious. Men will have their way—especially husbands. Mine gets obeyed as little as any one; but now and then, when it comes to the point”—here Harrie looked astonishingly grave, for her—“I'm obliged to give in to Pa; and somehow Pa's always right, bless him!”

How every word of one happy wife went like a dagger into the other wife's heart! But there was no shield. Here they were in Anne Valery's house, obliged to appear as cheerful guests, especially the newest guest, the bride. Agatha tried, and tried successfully, to play her part:—misery makes such capital hypocrites!

“Isn't this a large house for a single woman?” said Mrs. Dugdale, as the two ladies passed up-stairs. “Yet Anne constantly manages to fill it, especially in summer-time. The dozens of sick friends she has staying here to be cured by sea-breezes! the scores of young people that come and make love in those green alleys down the garden! But then in the lulls of company the house is dull and silent—as now.”

It was very silent, though not with the desolation which often broods over a large house thinly inhabited. The room—Anne's bedroom—lay westward, and a good deal of sunshine was still

glinting in. A few late bees were buzzing about the open window, cheated perhaps by the feathery seeds of the clematis, which had long ceased flowering. There was no other sound. But many fine prints, a few painted portraits, and several white-gleaming statuettes, seemed as the sunlight struck them to burst the silence, with mute speech.

“Oh, you are looking at Anne's 'odds and ends' as I call them. Rather a contrast, her walls and ours. I don't see the use of prints and plaster images—always in the way where there are children. But Anne is so dreadfully fond of pretty things. She says they're company. No wonder! A solitary old maid must find herself very dull at times.”

“Must she?—then she is the more glad to see her visitors”—a pleasant voice, a silken-rustling step, which in Agatha's fancy seemed always to enter like daylight into a dusky room—and Miss Valery came to welcome her guests.

She addressed Mrs. Harper first, and then Harrie, who looked confused for the moment. But it was not a trifle that could upset the equanimity of the honest-speaking Harrie Dugdale.

“Bless us, Anne, how softly you walk!' Listeners,' etc.—You know the saying! But you might listen at every door in Dorsetshire, and never hear worse of yourself than I said just now.”

“Thank you. When I want a good character I shall be sure to come to Harriet Dugdale.—And now, what is the news with the little wife! whom I have yet to bid welcome to Thornhurst. Welcome Mrs. Locke Harper.” Anne said the name, as she often did, with a peculiar under-tone of hesitation and tenderness; then, according to her frequent habit, she put her hand on her favourite's shoulder, and began

to play with the brown curls. “Have you been quite well and happy since I saw you?”

The question, so simple, so full of kindness, pierced Agatha's soul. Alas? how much had happened since she sat on the stone seat at Corfe Castle, and looked over the view with Anne Valery! How little did Anne or any one know that she was wretched—maddened—hating herself and the whole world—believing in nothing good, nothing holy—not even in her who spoke. The words, the smile, appeared the mocking hypocrisy of one who had persuaded her to marry, and must ere long know of that hasty marriage the miserable result This thought steeled her heart even against Anne Valery.

She burst into a sharp laugh. “Well! Happy! Cannot you see? You are the best person to answer your own question.” And she moved away out of the room.

Anne looked after her, thoughtfully, rather sadly. Perhaps she was used to have her pets glide from her, dancing out indifferently into the merry world. She made no attempt to follow Agatha, but led the way down-stairs into the drawing-room.

“Mr. Trenchard, come and let me introduce you to Mrs. Locke Harper.”

As Miss Valery said this, an elderly gentleman, dapper, dandy, and small, escaped from under the hands of Duke Dugdale—those big earnest hands that were laid upon him in all the apostleship of sincere argument—and came, nothing loth, as his eager bow showed, to do the polite to the young bride who had been lately brought to the county. For Mr. Trenchard, besides the wondrously sweetening power of his candidateship, came of a very ancient name in Dorsetshire. He was evidently a beau too—

one of those harmless general adorers whom the influence of a graceful woman touches even unto old age.

Agatha saw in his first look that he admired her, and she was in that proud desperate mood when a girl is ready to catch hold of the attentions or conversation of any one—even an elderly gentleman. She was very gracious to Mr. Trenchard—nay, altogether bewitching—though for the first ten minutes she herself saw and heard nothing save a thing in black with white hair, talking to her of the beauties of Dorsetshire. More distinctly than aught he said, she heard what was passing in the group at the other end of the room—especially her husband's voice, so quiet and deep, always a tone deeper than any other voices, falling through all the rest like a note of music. And she soon found out that Anne was listening also—to Nathanael, of course. She always did.

Mr. Trenchard followed the direction of the two ladies' eyes, and ingeniously took up the text.

“I assure you, Mrs. Harper, it is a pleasure to all the neighbourhood that your husband has come back from America. I remember him quite a child, and his uncle a young man. And really, how like he is, in both feature and voice, to what his uncle used to be at that time. As he stands there talking, I could almost fancy it was Mr. Locke Harper.”

“Mr. Locke Harper,” repeated Agatha. “Was that the name Uncle Brian went by?”

“Yes, save with those privileged people who called him Brian. But they were few. He had not the fortune or misfortune of possessing a thousand and one intimate friends. Yet all respected him, and remember him still. It will be a real satisfaction to

have in the country a second Mr. Locke Harper,—Dear me, how like he is! Don't you see it, Miss Valery?"

"There is a general likeness running through all the Harper family."

"Except the eldest son, though even to him I can trace some resemblance here"—and he bowed to Mrs. Dugdale. "And this reminds me that I knew beforehand I should probably have the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Harper in Dorsetshire. Only two days ago I saw at Paris Major Frederick Harper."

"Is Major Harper at Paris?" eagerly cried Agatha, caught by the name, which had so soon passed out of the daily interests of her life, that its sound was already quite strange. It reached her now like a comforting breath of old times—a something to catch hold of in the wide, dreary maze around her. Her former guardian seemed to rise up before her; with all his cheery, good-natured ways; his compassion when she had been newly made an orphan; his kindness of manner that remained—ay, to the very last.

In a rush of many feelings that softened her voice to positive tenderness, she cried, "Oh do tell me all about Major Harper?"

And this time she did not notice that, in the political discussion going forward, it was Mr. Dugdale who spoke, his brother-in-law having ceased the argument and become silent.

"Madam," returned the candidate, with a smile —perhaps a little too meaning a smile—"I will, with pleasure, tell you everything. I guessed from his anxious questions concerning you, and whether I had met you in Dorsetshire, that before he was your brother-in-law Major Harper had the happiness of

being an intimate friend of yours."

"He was my guardian."

"That fact he did not inform me of. Indeed we had little time for conversation. We merely dined together, and parted almost immediately. He seemed in the midst of a whirl of pleasant engagements, as Major Harper invariably is. Charming, agreeable man! An immense favourite with all ladies."

Agatha answered "Yes" rather coldly. Her attention was wandering; she had missed the sound of her husband's voice altogether. But the next moment she heard him behind her.

"Mr. Trenchard?"

"Well, my dear sir? Are you also come to ask questions about your brother, whom, as I have been telling Mrs. Harper, I had the pleasure to meet in Paris?"

"So I have just heard you say. Where, and how was he living?"

Agatha thought this a strange question for Nathanael to put to a third party concerning his own brother. She was glad to hear Miss Valery observe, with genuine tact, that Major Harper was always careless in the matter of giving addresses.

"He was living—let me see—at 102 Rue—, one of the handsomest and pleasantest streets in Paris. I remember he said he was obliged to take this *appartement* for three months, after which he was going to act the hermit and economise. Very unlikely that, I should think, for a man of Major Harper's social habits."

"Very," Agatha said, being looked to for a response. She was much surprised to learn this of her brother-in-law; still more did she wonder at the rigid

silence with which her husband heard the same.

"I think, Mrs. Harper, we may safely say that his determination will not last. A mere fit of misanthropy after rather too much gaiety. In such a pleasant fellow as Frederick Harper we must excuse a few broken resolutions."

"We ought," said Anne Valery, with that rare gentleness which makes men listen to a woman even when she "preaches." "It is a very hard trial for any one to be thrown into the world with so many gifts as Major Harper. A man whom all men like, and not a few women are prone to love, goes through an ordeal so fierce, that if he withstand it he is one of the greatest heroes on earth. If he fall"—and Anne lowered her voice so that Agatha could scarcely hear, though she felt sure Nathanael did—"if he fall, we ought, through all the wrong, clearly to discern the temptation."

It was a new doctrine, the last Agatha would have expected to hear on the lips of such a sternly good woman as she had painted Miss Valery. She said so, adding, with her usual plainness, "I thought, somehow, that you did not like Major Harper?"

"Nay, we were young together. But hush, my dear, your husband is speaking."

He was saying, with quite an altered expression, something about "my brother Frederick." But after that mention Major Harper's name died out of the conversation, as out of Agatha's memory. Alas, not the unfrequent fate of the Major Harpers of society—meteors, never thought of but while they are shining, and forgotten as soon as they have burnt themselves out.

By this time the two or three stray visitors—gentlemen-farmers, Anne's tenants, as Mrs. Dugdale

whispered—had disappeared, and Mr. Trenchard was the sole stranger left in the drawing-room. Miss Valery did the honours of her house with a remarkably simple grace.

“I give no state dinner parties,” she said, smiling, to Mr. Trenchard. “It is a whim of mine that I never could see the use of friends meeting together merely to eat and drink, or of offering them more and richer fare than is customary or necessary. But if you will stay and dine with me, and with these my own people, country fashion, even though you have been a ten years' resident in London”—

“But have never forgotten Dorset, and good Dorset ways,” said the old gentleman, as he bowed over the hostess's hand. Then, obeying Anne's signal, he offered his arm to Mrs. Harper to lead her in to dinner;—the innocent daylight dinner, with real China-roses looking in at the window, and an energetic autumn-robin singing his good-night before the sun went down.

Agatha could have been happy, merry—she was still so young, and the weight on her heart was the first that ever had fallen there. At intervals she struggled to forget it—almost succeeded; and then the first glimpse of her husband's face, the first tone of his voice, brought the burden back again. Her spirits grew wilder than ever, lest any one should guess she was so very, very miserable.

After dinner, dreading Anne's eyes, she rushed off into the garden with Harrie Dugdale; tossing back her hair, and inhaling by gasps the cold evening wind, that it might bring calm and clearness to her brain. Even yet she felt as though she were dreaming.

Returning, she found lights in the drawing-room.

Mr. Trenchard, in a patient attitude, was listening to Marmaduke Dugdale; some distance off, Nathanael sat talking to Miss Valery. Anne was leaning back in an arm-chair: the lamp shining full on her face showed how very pale and worn it was. Her voice, too, sounded feeble, as Agatha caught the words:

"In two months, you think? That is a long time."

"It cannot be sooner, Marmaduke says. I met him on board the ship at Weymouth; when he told me of this innocent little scheme he was transacting."

"But you will not tell"—

"Uncle Brian? No, of course not. Yet I think it would do Uncle Brian good to know how dearly Marmaduke and all his friends here care for him. Yet he might not believe it—I think he never did."

Anne was silent.

"He used to say," continued Nathanael, who was sitting where he could not see his wife, and for once heard not her soft step over the carpet—"Uncle Brian used to say, that it was wisest neither to love nor need love. I think different. It is a cruel, hardening, embittering thing for a man to feel that no one loves him."

—"Love—love! Have you two sage ones been discussing that folly? Now, may I have the honour to hear?"

"If Anne will talk; I have done speaking," said Mr. Harper, as he gave Agatha his chair, and slowly moved away to the other circle.

Thus, ever thus, he went from her, escaping the chance of either being wounded or healed. Agatha was nearly wild. With all her might she flung herself into conversation with Mr. Trenchard, and tried to conjugate that verb—hitherto a mystery to her

innocent mind—*to flirt*. She wished to make herself beautifully hateful—bewitchingly foul; or rather she did not care what she made herself, if she only made *him*—who had now in her thoughts sank to the namelessness, which proves that one name is fast filling up the whole world—made him stir from that mountain height of impassive calm—melted him into repentance—shook him into frenzied jealousy. Anything—anything—so that he no longer should stand before her like a serene Alp, which nothing human could disturb, and which—ah, in all her madness, she saw that but too clearly!—which had always such a heavenly light shining on its forehead —a purity "God-given," like his name.

His name, which she had once so disliked, but which now caught a strange beauty. Lately, she had looked out its meaning in a list of Bible names; and many a time, the night before, she had said it to herself, crying it out into the dark, until its soft Hebrew vowels grew musical, and its holy Hebrew meaning grew divine. "Nathanael—Nathanael—*God-given*." Might he not indeed be a husband given unto her of God—to lead her in the right way, and make a true noble woman of her; such as a woman is always made by the love of, and the loving of, a noble man.

But these were sacred night-time thoughts which vanished in the daylight, or only came in snatches and rifts, careering through the blackness that surrounded her.

And still she talked to the fortunate Mr. Trenchard; made herself more agreeable than she had ever believed possible. The elderly beau was fascinated, and even Mr. Dugdale turned from election-papers, to look at his fair sister-in-law with genuine admiration—now and then nodding to Harrie, as if to see what she thought of this new light

that had shot across their country hemisphere. At which Mrs. Dugdale once or twice pretended to be mightily jealous, until her husband, with his inconceivable sweet smile, his way of patting her knees with his big gentle hand, and the utterly inexpressible tone of his “Nay, now Missus” made matters quite straight, and plunged back into his politics.

All this while Anne Valery sat in her arm chair—speaking little, looking from one to the other of her guests with a wandering, thoughtful eye, that, for once, noticed little the things around her, because her mental vision was afar off.—Whither—

And Marmaduke went on with his benevolent schemes for improving Dorsetshire and the world; and his Harrie had her dreams too—possibly about the advantage an M.P.'s interest might prove in future days to “the children;” and the young couple, in all the whirl of their misery, still clung to hope and youth and life, so little of which way they had trod, and so much of which lay before them. No one thought of her who sat apart, looking smilingly on them all, but to whom they and the things surrounding them were day by day growing more dim—who was fading, fading, even while she smiled.

## CHAPTER XX

When, late at night, the party reached Kingcombe, it was resolved that the Harpers should

remain there until morning. Agatha, worn out with bodily fatigue and the great tension of her mind during so many hours, laid her head down on her pillow, closed her aching eyes, and never opened them till near upon broad noon. Then she found breakfast was long over in the early house of the Dugdales, and that Nathanael had left her and gone out some hours before.

"He would not let me come and wake you—he said you slept so heavily and looked so tired. Certainly, he is the very kindest husband! Who ever would have believed that stiff, cold disagreeable Nathanael, who came home from America some months ago, puzzling us all, would have turned out so well. It is your ladyship's doing, I suppose."

So ran on Mrs. Dugdale, nor noticed how beneath her words her sister-in-law writhed, as though they had been sharp swords. Harrie was not a penetrating woman; Agatha had already discerned that, and thought, with a bitter smile, that it was well they were coming to live at Kingcombe, and that Mrs. Dugdale would be a very safe and amusing companion.

"Now, what is to be done to-day?" said she, as she ate the breakfast which Harrie brought her, and looked round the strange bed-room, which made her feel more bewildered than ever. So many phases, so many lives did she seem to have passed through since she was married.

"The first thing to be done, my dear, is to take you back to Kingcombe Holm, to do respectful to your papa-in-law. Very punctilious is the Squire. If Nathanael had not ridden over there at some unearthly hour this morning, he never would have forgiven your not returning at night—the last night

too, for I see your husband is determined to be settled at the cottage this evening."

"Ah, that is well." Agatha breathed more freely. She was so glad to hide herself under any roof that was her own. And perhaps a vague thought crept up, that some time—not for days yet, but when she could bend her pride to soften him—when they were living quite alone together—all might be gradually explained, nay, healed, between her and her husband. She was on the whole not sorry to go "home."

"I see you two are quite agreed," laughed Harrie. "Marvellous union, Mrs. Locke Harper. You'll be really a pattern couple soon, and throw Duke and me cruelly in the shade. Now, dress like lightning, and I'll drive you and the children over to grandpapa's. Most likely well meet Pa and Nathanael somewhere about the town."

But, with the general vagueness of the Dugdale habits, that meeting did not arrive, nor was Mr. Harper anywhere to be seen.

"I dare say he is at the cottage, where I was bid not to take you upon any account. Charming little mysteries, I suppose, attendant on bringing home the bride. Very nice. Heigh-ho! I remember how happy I was when my poor dear Duke brought me home for the first time!"

"Where was that?" They were dashing over the moors, Agatha sitting rather silent, and Harrie's tongue galloping as fast as Dunce, her steed. Little Brian was perched on his mother's knee, holding the reins—a baby Phaeton, though with small danger of setting the world on fire—at least just yet.

"Where was it, my dear? Why, to the same old house we live in, empty and gloomy then, though it's

full enough now. And I had been married—(hold your tongues, Fred and Gus! you can't have the whip, simpletons!)—married only three weeks, and it was queer coming back to my native place; and my father was rather cross that I had married Duke at all, and —I was foolish enough to cry."

Here Harrie laughed, and gave Dunce a lash that quite discomposed his pony faculties, and made Brian scream with delight.

"And what did your husband say?"

"Say? Nothing. He never speaks when he's vexed or hurt; only, a little while afterwards he came beside me, and said something about my being such a young girl, so gay-hearted and pretty—(bah!—though I was pretty then)—too young, he said, to marry such an elderly man, etc. etc. etc."

"And what did *you* say?"

"Likewise nothing. I just jumped on his knee, and took him round the neck, and—But that isn't of the slightest consequence to anybody. Tuts! On with you, Dunce!" And Harrie leaned forward, her eyelashes glittering wet in spite of her fun.

"I know I don't deserve him," she continued. "I never did. Nobody could. There are a lot of bad men in the world, but when a man is really good, there's hardly a woman alive that is good enough for him. And I'm not half good enough for Duke—but—I love him! That's all. Bless thee, Brian! thee is Pa's own boy all over!"

And Harrie kissed the little fellow passionately, with something more even than a mother's love.—Agatha could have lifted up her arms and shrieked with misery.

It was a strange long day at Kingcombe Holm; many things to be arranged, many questions to be

parried, many prying eyes to be avoided. But the general conclusion seemed to be, that this sudden movement was a mysterious whim of Nathanael—and Nathanael was supposed by one-half of his family to be mightily prone to mysteries and whims.

At length, when the day was nigh spent, and Agatha had dressed for the last of those formal dinners to which she had never been able quite to reconcile herself, she took refuge in Elizabeth's room. Thither she had of late absented herself; there was something so formidable in the keenness of Elizabeth's silent eyes. Hesitating before the door, she remembered when she had last quitted it. It required all her bravery to cross the threshold once more.

“Come in. I hear your foot, Agatha.” There was no stepping back now.

The same atmosphere of peace and sanctity pervading the pretty room; the same lights dancing through the painted window on the silk coverlet; the same face, which had all the colourless reality of death, without any of its ghastliness—a smiling repose, such as is seen only at the beginning and end of life's tumult—in the cradle and in the coffin. Its effect upon Agatha was instantaneous. Her trembling ceased; she stepped lightly, as one does in entering a holy place.

“Elizabeth!” It seemed a beautiful name, a saint's name, and as such came quite naturally, though she had rarely before been so familiar with any one of her new sisters. She kneeled down and kissed Elizabeth.

“That is right. You are good to come. And where have you been, my little sister?—I have not seen you for three days.”

“Is it so long?”

“Yes—though it may seem longer to me here. You remember you came and told me a long story about a Cornish miner. How did the tale end? What, no answer?”

None. She tried to hide herself—crush herself into the very floor where she sat, out of reach of Elizabeth's eyes.

“Ah, well, dear! I shall not ask.”

“Perhaps my husband will tell you some day. Talk to me of something else, Elizabeth. And oh! however I may look and speak, don't notice me. Let me feel that I need not make pretences with you.”

“You need not. Nothing that happens here goes beyond these four walls. Everybody tells me everything.”

Elizabeth might well say this. There was that about her which made people fearless and free in their confidence; it did not seem like talking to a mortal woman, mixed up continually in the affairs of life, but to one removed to a different sphere, where there was no chance of betrayal.

Her room was a safe confessional, and she was a sort of general conscience in the house.

“Everybody tells you everything,” repeated Agatha. “Does my husband?”

“Not yet; at least not in words.”

“Then I will not. Only let me come here, and”—

She covered her face, and for a few moments wept fully and freely, as one weep's before one's own heart and before God. Then she dried her eyes, and the storm was over.

Elizabeth only said, “Poor child—poor child. Wait!” But the one word struck like a sun-ray

through darkness. No one ever “waited” but had some hopeful ending to wait for.

“Now,” said Agatha, overcoming her weakness —“now let us talk. What have you been doing all day?”

“Little else than read this, and think over it. You know Frederick's hand, I see? He does not usually write such long letters, even to me. All is not right with him, I fear.”

“Indeed!”—and Agatha met unsuspiciously the keen look of Elizabeth. “Yet he is well and in the midst of gaieties; Mr. Trenchard said so yesterday. They met in Paris.”

“Did they?” Elizabeth lay musing for a good while; then suddenly said, observing her young sister, “Agatha, you are listening? There's some one at the door?”

It was Nathanael. Any one might have known that by the quick flush that swept over his wife's features. But when this passed she was again composed—not at all like the young creature who had wept by Elizabeth's couch. She merely acknowledged her husband's presence, and leaving her place vacant for him, took up a book.

He said, “I did not know my wife was here. Were you and she talking? Shall I leave you?”

Elizabeth smiled. “Then you must take your wife also, for I will not be the sundering of married people. But nonsense! Sit down both of you. We were speaking about Frederick. Has he written to you?”

“No.”

“In this letter”—Nathanael's eyes fell on it and froze there—“he gives me no address. Agatha says he is living in Paris. Do you remember where?”

“I do not.”,

“Perhaps your wife does.”

Agatha had a useful memory for such things. She repeated the address given by Mr. Trenchard, exactly.

“Good child! When I write I shall tell Frederick how you remembered him. But he has been equally mindful of you. He asks many questions, and seems very anxious about you.”

“Does he? He is very kind,” said Agatha, somewhat moved. She felt all kindness deeply now.

“He is kind,” Miss Harper continued, thoughtfully. “When he was a boy, there never was a softer heart. Poor Frederick!” And the name was uttered with a fondness that Agatha had never noticed in any other of Major Harper's family towards him. It led her to look sympathisingly towards Elizabeth.

“Are you uneasy about him? Oh! I do hope nothing is wrong with poor Major Harper.” And she almost forgot her own feelings in thinking how unbrotherly it was of Nathanael to sit there like a stone, saying nothing. Elizabeth also seemed hurt; the elder brother was clearly her favourite—clung to as sisters cling, through good report and evil. She looked gratefully at Agatha.

“Thank you. You are a warm-hearted girl. But you ought to keep a warm heart for Frederick. You do not know how tenderly he always speaks of you.”

Agatha coloured, she hardly knew why, except because she saw her husband start and look at her—one of those keen, quick looks that only last a moment. Under it she blushed still deeper—to very scarlet.

Mr. Harper stood up. “I think, Elizabeth, we must go now. Agatha shall come to you again in a day or two—and you and she can then talk over both your sisterly loves for Frederick.”

He spoke lightly, but Agatha heard a jarring tone—she was growing so familiar with his every tone now. Why did he thus speak, thus look, whenever she uttered or listened to his brother's name? Could it be possible that Emma had told him —No, she threw that thought from her in scorn—the scorn with which she had once met the insinuation that she had been “in love” with Major Harper. Emma could not have been so foolish, so wicked, or, if she had, any manly honour, any honest pride, would have made Nathanael speak of it before their marriage. Since, she felt certain that Mr. Harper had not interchanged a single word alone with Mrs. Thornycroft.

In disgust and shame that her vanity—oh! not vanity, but a feeling that, holy as it was, her proud heart still denied—had led her to form the suspicion, Agatha cast it from her. She who had no secrets, no jealousies, felt it to be impossible that Nathanael should bury within his breast that foul thing—a secret jealousy of his brother.

Especially now, when it seemed as if his love itself were dying or dead—when on quitting Elizabeth's room, he walked with her, silent, or making smooth brief speeches, as he would to any other lady—any lady he had met for the first time, and was handing courteously down to dinner. Her heart boiled within her! Was she to pour it out before him in complaint—repentance? Was she to accuse him of jealousy, and be met with a calm contemptuous smile?—to betray the growing passion of her heart, in order to light up the few stray embers

that might yet be lingering feebly in his? Never! She walked on haughtily, carelessly, dumb.

The evening slid on, hardly noticed by her. Night came; when, after many ceremonious family adieux, which she responded to without ever hearing —after one frantic rush along the dim passages to Elizabeth's door, where she drew back and left the tearful good-bye unspoken, for *he* was standing there —after all this the Squire put her into the family coach, with Mrs. Dugdale at her side and Nathanael opposite. Bidding her farewell, the old man gave, with less stateliness than tenderness, his fatherly blessing upon her and her new home. They reached it. Again she laid her head upon a strange pillow in a strange room, and slept, as she always did when very wretched, the heavy, stupifying sleep which lasts from night till morning—deadening all care, but making the waking like that of one waking in a tomb.

Agatha woke with the sunshine full in her eyes, and the early church-bells ringing.

"Oh, where am I? What day is this? Where is my husband?"

The new maid, Nathanael's foster-sister, was standing by, smiling all respectful civilities, informing her in broad Dorset that it was Sunday, time for "missus" to get up, and that "master" was walking in the garden.

They "mistress" and "master," head and guide of their own household!—they, two young creatures, who so little time ago had been a youth and a girl, each floating adrift on life, without duties or ties. It had seemed very strange, very solemn, under any circumstances, but now—

"God help me, poor helpless child that I am! Oh,

what shall I do?”

Such was the inward sob of Agatha's heart. She almost wished that she could have turned her face again on the pillow, and slept there safely for eternity.

But the matin church-bells ceased—it was nine o'clock. She must rise, and appear below for the first time as mistress in her own house. Also, she remembered faintly something which Mrs. Dugdale had said about the custom at Kingcombe—an irrefragable law of country etiquette—-of a bride's going to church for the first time, ceremoniously, in bridal dress. And no sooner had she descended—wrapped in the first morning-frock she could lay her hands upon, than Harrie entered.

“So—I am your first visitor you see. Many welcomes to your new home! And may it prove as happy, as merry—and some day, as full—as ours. Bless you, my dear little sister!”

She pressed Agatha in her arms with more feeling than Harrie usually showed. But, for Agatha's salvation, or she would have burst into sobs, it was only momentary.

“Come, no sentiment! Call in Nathanael, and eat your breakfast quickly, you atrociously lazy folks! Don't you know you have only half-an-hour and you must go to church, or all Kingcombe would be talking.”

“I meant to go—I shall be ready in two minutes.”

“My patience! ready—in such a gown! Come here Nathanael. Are you aware it's indispensable for your wife to appear at church in wedding costume, just as she did on that blissful day, when”—

“Hush! I'll do anything you like, only hush!”

whispered Agatha. Harrie laughed, and said something about “sparing her blushes.” There were none to spare—she was as pale as death. What, appear before her husband, dressed as on the morning when if not altogether a happy bride, she at least had the hope of making her bridegroom happy, and the comfort of believing that he loved her and would love her always! The mere thought of this sent a coldness through all her frame.

Nathanael said, “You told me this before, Harriet. It is an idle custom; but neither my wife nor myself would wish to go against the world, or the ways of our own people. Arrange it, as Agatha says, according as you like.”

He had then heard her whisper—he had seen her paleness. How had he interpreted both?

The church-bells began to ring again, and Harrie prepared to vanish, though not until she had dressed Agatha, scanned her from top to toe, vowed the bonnet did not become her a bit, and that she looked as white as if she were again about to go through the formidable marriage-service.

“A sad pity!—because to-day you'll be looked at a great deal more than the clergyman. We are a terribly inquisitive town; and weddings are scarce at Kingcombe.—Take your wife, Nathanael. There you go—a very handsome, interesting young couple. Nay, don't cheat the townsfolk by taking the garden way.”

“Do, pray?” entreated Agatha of her husband. “Don't let the people see us.”

“You foolish child!” cried Harrie, as she made herself invisible through the front-door, throwing back her last words as an unconscious parting sting. “Folks will think you are ashamed of your husband.”

Agatha took no notice, nor did Nathanael.

Silently they walked to church, the garden way, which led them out opposite the eastern door. Entering with his wife on his arm, his bare head erect, though the eyes were lowered, his whole face still and steadfast, but looking much older since his marriage.—Mr. Harper was a man of whom no one need be ashamed. His wife glanced at him, and, in spite of all her sorrow, walked proudly up the aisle—prouder far than on her wedding-day. She never thought of herself or of the people looking at her. And—Heaven forgive her, poor child!—for the moment she never thought of Whose temple she was entering, until the clergyman's serious voice arose, proclaiming those “sacrifices” which are “a broken spirit.” Then her spirit sank down broken within her, and under her thick white veil, and upon her white velvet bridal Prayer-book, fell tears, many and bitter. The poorest charity-girl that stared at her from the gallery would not that day have envied the bride.

Service over, out of the church they went as they had come, arm-in-arm; the congregation holding back; all watching, but from some mysterious etiquette which must be left to the Kingcombeites to elucidate, no one venturing to speak to Mr. and Mrs. Locke Harper. The Squire's household did not attend this church, nor the Dugdales either; so that the young people walked home without speaking to a soul, and scarcely to each other. They were both very grave. A word, perhaps, from either would have unlocked a heart flood; but the word was not spoken. They met at the gate of the cottage Mrs. Dugdale and her boys. Soon all the solemn influences of the temple passed away. They were in the world once more—the hard, bitter, erring world.

“We are come in to see Auntie Agatha and Uncle

Nathanael," said Harrie, as the children stood rather awe-struck by Mrs. Harper's dazzling appearance. "And we are going to take both back with us for dinner, as you promised. Early country dinner, my dear, which can't by any means be eaten in those fine clothes."

"I will take them off." And her foot was on the stairs.

"Stay; don't you see your husband looking at you. Let me look too—we are never likely to see you dressed as a bride again."

Agatha paused, but Mr. Harper had already turned away. His gaze—would she had seen it! but she did not—was ended.

She ran up-stairs, she looked in the glass once more at the vision which, from the age of childhood, almost every girl beholds herself in fancy—the dazzling white silk, orange-flowers, and lace, trappings of a day, never to be again worn. Then she tore them off, wildly—desperately; wishing one minute that she could bury them in the earth out of her sight, and again wrapping them up tenderly, as we wrap up clothes that are now nothing but empty garments, from which the form that-filled them has vanished evermore.

Afterwards she dressed herself in ordinary matronly garb, and came down with matronly aspect to Harry and the little boys.

A mid-day country dinner, eaten in peace and quietness, where people keep Sunday in Christian fashion—at least externally—where no visitors come in, and no gay evening reunions put an unholy close to the holy day; when the father of the family gathers his children round him in the long, sleepy afternoons, or takes a walk with them in the

summer-twilight while all the neighbours are safe in church; after which, as a great treat, the elder ones sit up to supper, and the little ones are put to bed by mamma's own hands; then pleasant weariness, perhaps some brief evening prayer, sincere without cant—the household separates—the house darkens—and the day of rest ends.

This was the way they kept Sunday at the Dugdales'. It was something new to Agatha, and she liked it much. She threw herself into the domestic ways as if she had been used to them all her life, and specially made herself popular with the father and the little ones. Marmaduke looked benevolently upon his sister-in-law, seemed quite to forget she was “a young lady,” and even was heard to call her “my child” four times,—at which she was very pleased and proud. Over and over again, with youth's wild thirst to be happy, she tried to forget the weight on her life, and plunge into a temporary gaiety. Sometimes she even caught herself laughing outright, as she played with the children; for no one can be miserable always, especially at nineteen. But whenever she looked up, or was silent, or paused to think, the image of her husband came like a cloud between her and her mirth. No—she never could be really happy.

Nathanael was all day very quiet and abstracted. He did not romp with his little nephews, and only smiled when Harrie teased him for this unusual omission of avuncular privilege. Once, Agatha saw him sitting with the youngest little girl fast asleep against his shoulder, he looking over her baby-curls with a pensive, troubled eye, an eye which seemed gazing into the future to find there—nothing! A strange thrill quivered through Agatha's heart to see him so sitting with that child.

After tea Mrs. Dugdale proposed turning out of doors all the masculine half of the family, except the infant Brian, before whom loomed the terrific prospect of bed. So off they started. Gus being seen to snatch frantically at Pa's hand, and Fred, sublime in his first jacket, walking alongside with an air and grace worthy of the uncle whose name he bore.

"There they go," cried Mrs. Dugdale, looking fondly after them. "Not bad-looking lads either, considering that Pa isn't exactly a beauty. But pshaw! what does that signify? I think my Duke's the very nicest face I know. Don't you, Agatha?"

Agatha warmly acquiesced. She had entirely got over the first impression of Duke's plainness. And moreover she was learning day by day that mysterious secret which individualises one face out of all the world, and makes its very deficiencies more lovely than any other features' charm. She could fully sympathise with Harrie's harmless weakness, and agreed—looking at Brian, who in fact strongly resembled his father, angelicised into childhood, keeping the same beautiful expression, which needed no change—that if Mr. Dugdale's sons grew up like him in all points, the world would be none the worse, but a great deal the better.

Thus talking—which little Brian seemed actually to understand, for he stood at her knee gazing up with miraculously merry eyes—Agatha watched her sister-in-law's Sunday duty, religiously performed, of putting the younger two to bed, while the nurses went to church, or took walks with their sweethearts. For, as Harrie sagely observed, "'the maidens' as we call them in Dorsetshire, 'the maidens' will fall in love as well as we."

So chattering merrily—while she dashed water

over Miss Baby's white, round limbs, and let Brian caper wildly about the nursery, clad in all sorts of half-costumes, or no costume at all—Mrs. Dugdale initiated Agatha into various arcana belonging to motherhood and mistress-of-a-family-hood. The other listened eagerly, so eagerly that she could have laughed at herself, remembering what she was six months before. To think that to-morrow she must begin her house-keeping—she, who knew no more of such things than a child! She snatched at all sorts of knowledge, talked over butchers, and bakers, and house expenses, and Kingcombe ways of marketing, taking an interest in the most commonplace things. For pervading everything was the consciousness, "It is *his* home I have to make comfortable." That thought sanctified and beautified all.

"You are quite right, my dear," said Harrie, pausing in her walk up and down, patting and singing to Baby, who stared with open eyes over her shoulder, and obstinately declined going to sleep. "You will turn out a notable woman, I see. It's a curious and melancholy fact, which we don't ever learn till we are married, that all the love in the world is thrown away upon a man unless you make him comfortable at home. A neat house and a creditable dinner every day go more to his heart than all the sentimental devotion you can give. It's all very well for a man in love to live upon roses and posies, and kisses and blisses, but after he is married he dearly likes to be comfortable."

Agatha was silent for a moment, hardly venturing to believe, and yet afraid she must. "I heard Miss Valery once say that no man's love after marriage is exactly as it was before it; that the thing attained soon loses its preciousness, and that the wife has to assume a new character, and win another kind

of love. I wonder if this is true. I wonder"—and suddenly she changed her seriousness for the tone of raillery she always used with Harrie Dugdaie—"I wonder whether our husbands adore us first, and afterwards expect us to adore them."

"So they do; I assure you they do! And a pretty amount of adoring and waiting upon your husband will require. I wouldn't for the whole universe have my Duke such an awfully exacting, particular, provoking, disagreeably good, or inexplicably naughty animal as my brother Nathanael."

"Mrs. Dugdaie!" Agatha hardly knew whether to laugh or to be indignant. She only knew that she felt ready to spring up like a chained tigress when anybody said a word against Mr. Harper.

"There now, don't waken the baby. Keep yourself quiet, do. See, there's its husband coming down the street to comfort it. He is looking up here, too. Run down, do'ee now; and if she'll be a good girl she shall have the neatest household and the best husband in Kingcombe—always excepting mine."

Agatha did not run down; but she leant over the landing, and heard the footsteps and voices in the hall—steps and voices which always seem to put new life into a house where its ruler is dear to the hearts of wife and children. Troubled as she was—laden with even a new weight since the talk with Mrs. Dugdale—Agatha listened, and felt that in spite of all, the house seemed brighter for the entrance of *her* husband. She tried to catch what he was saying, but only heard the voice of Mr. Dugdaie.

"Of course, as you say, it's necessary. But really tomorrow—so soon—and for such a long time too! Couldn't both go together?"

Nathanael made some inaudible reply.

“To be sure, you know best. But—poor young thing!—I wonder what my Harrie would have said to me. Poor, pretty little thing!”

The words, the manner, startled Agatha; She could not make them out. She descended, looking alarmed, uneasy—a look which did not wear off all the rest of the evening.

In leaving she wondered why Mr. Dugdale woke from his dreaminess to bid her good-night with a fatherly air, addressing her more than once by his superlative of kindness, “My child.” When she took her husband's arm to go out of the lighted hall-into the night, Agatha trembled, as if something were going to happen—she knew not what.

The street was very dark, for Kingcombe people were economisers in gas; and besides kept such primitive hours, that at ten o'clock you might walk from one end of the town to the other and not see a light in any house. There was not a soul abroad except these two, and their feet echoed loudly along the pavement. At first Agatha, blinded by coming out of light into darkness, saw nothing, but stumbled on, clinging tightly to her husband. At length she perceived whereabouts they were—the black, quaintly-gabled houses, the market-cross, and, far above the sleepy town and its deserted streets, the bright wonderfully bright stars.

Agatha took comfort when she saw the stars.

“Have we far to go? I am rather tired,” she said to her husband, chiefly for the sake of saying something.

“Tired, are you? Then you must have a quiet day tomorrow. It will be very quiet, I doubt not;” and he sighed.

“Why so? What is to be done to-morrow? Shall

you have to ride over to Thornhurst?"

"No; I saw Anne Valery yesterday. I shall not see her again for a good while."

"Indeed!"

"There is business requiring me in Cornwall. To-morrow I am going away."

"Going away!" The words were little more than a sigh. She felt all cold and numb for the moment. Then a sudden flood of the old impetuous pride came over her. Going away! Leaving his young wife! Leaving her alone in her new home—alone the second day, to be wondered at, and pointed at, and pitied! Perhaps he did it to humble and punish her. It was cruel—cruel! And again the demon or angel—which took such various forms that she hardly knew the true one—rose up rampant within her.

"Mr. Harper, this is sudden—will look strange. You ought to have told me before."

"I did not know it myself until last night. That my going to Cornwall is necessary, on business grounds, I have already made clear to Marmaduke. He will tell his wife, and Harriet will tell all the world. I have so arranged that you will have no difficulty of any kind. This house will go on as usual, or you can visit at Thornhurst and at my father's. There will be no loss to you of anything or anybody —except one, whose absence must be welcome." "Welcome!" she repeated in an accent of bitter scorn.

"You said so yourself. Hush! do not say it again. When we part, let it be in peace!"

He spoke in a smothered, exhausted voice, and holding the gate open for her to pass, leaned upon it as if he could hardly stand. But Agatha perceived nothing—she was dizzy and blind.

“Peace?” she repeated, driven mad by the mockery of the word. She saw the door half-open, the warm light glimmering within the hall—so soft—so home-like. The torture was too strong—her senses began to give way.

Without knowing what she did, without any settled purpose except to escape from the misery of that sight, Agatha pushed her husband from her, turned and fled—fled anywhere, no matter where, so that it was into night and darkness, away from her home and from him.

She did not know the way; she only knew that she ran up one street and down another like the wind. Her state of mind was bordering on insanity. At length she paused from sheer exhaustion, and leaned against a doorway—like any poor outraged homeless wretch.

The good man of the house came softly out to look up into the quiet night before he bolted his door. He stood musing, contemplating the stars. It was a minute or more before he noticed the bowed human form beside him. When he did, there was no mistaking the compassionate voice.

“Eh, poor soul! What's wrong wi'ee?”

Agatha sprang up with a cry. There were two standing by her, from whose presence she would gladly have run to the world's end—Mr. Dugdale and her husband. The one remained petrified with astonishment—the other said but three words, in a dull mechanical voice, as if every feeling had been struck out of the man by some thunderbolt of doom.

“Agatha, come home.”

Again she tried to burst from him and fly, but her arm was caught, and Marmaduke Dugdale's grave look—the look he fixed upon his own children

when they erred, constraining them always into repentance and goodness—was reading her inmost soul.

“Go home, poor child! I'll not tell of you or him. Go home with your husband.”

She felt her hand laid, or grasped—she knew not which—in that of Nathanael; who held it with invincible firmness. There was no resisting that clasp. She rose up and followed him, as if led by an invisible chain. Her madness had passed, and left only a dull indifference to everything. The die was cast; she had laid open the miseries of their home, had disgraced him and herself before the world. It signified little where she went or what she did; they were utterly separated now.

Without again speaking, or taking notice of Mr. Dugdale, she suffered Nathanael to lead her away, passing swiftly down the silent streets. Neither husband nor wife uttered a single word.

The moment she entered the house she walked up-stairs, slowly, that he might not see her tottering; went into her own room, and locked her door with a loud, fierce turning of the key, that seemed to shriek as it turned.

There, for almost an hour, she sat motionless. The maid, half asleep, came to the door with a light, but Agatha bade her set it down, and sat in the dark. Dark—altogether dark, within and without; with no hope or repentance, or even the heroism of suffering; wrathful, sullen, miserable; wronged—yet conscious that she had sinned as much as she was sinned against; seeing her husband and herself stand as it were on either edge of a black gulf, hourly widening, yet neither having strength to plunge it to the other's side.

Here she sat, upright and still, body and soul wrapped in a leaden, shroud-like darkness, until gradually a stupor possessed her brain.

“I am so tired,” she murmured, “I must go to sleep. He will not leave till to-morrow. But it does not signify. Nothing signifies. I must go to sleep.”

She unlocked the door and drew in the candle, flaring in its socket. She had to press her fingers on her eyeballs before they could bear the light, all was so very dark. She Sotted her hair up anyhow, took off her clothes, and crept to bed, almost as if she were creeping to her tomb. The fragment of candle went out, sinking instantaneously, like a soul quenched out of existence, and all was total darkness. In that darkness a heavy hand seemed to lay itself on Agatha's brain, and press down her eyelids. Scarcely two minutes after, she was asleep.

Hour after hour of the night went by, and there was not a sound, not a breath in the room. The late moon rose, and gave a little glimmer of light through the curtains. Now and then there was a faint noise of some one moving in the house, but Agatha never stirred. She slept heavily as some people invariably sleep under the pressure of great pain.

Towards morning, when moonlight and dawn were melted together, and the room was growing light enough to discern faces, there was a step at the door, and a ray flashing through the opening, for Agatha had left it ajar.

Nathanael set down the candle outside and came in softly. He was dressed for a journey—evidently just ready to start. He looked very ill, sleepless, and worn.

Standing a minute at the door, he listened to his wife's breathing, low and regular as that of a child.

Nature and repose had soothed her; she slept now as quietly and healthfully as if she had never known trouble. Her husband crept across the room very carefully, and remained watching her. Oh! the contrast between the one who *watched* and the one who slept!

At first he stood perfectly upright, rigid, and motionless.

Then his hands twisted themselves together, and his eyes grew hot, bursting. His lips moved as in speaking, though with never a sound. It was the dumbness—the choking dumbness of that emotion which made it so terrible. Such silence could not last—he seemed to feel it could not—and so moved backward out of hearing. There he stood for a little while, leaning against the wall, his hand bound tightly over his forehead, and sighing, so bitterly sighing!—that gasp which bursts from men who have no tears.

At length he became calmer, but still stood without the door. He even moved the candle further off, as though afraid its glare, might disturb the sleeper—forgetful that the room was now growing all bright with daybreak. At this moment the clock striking in the hall below made him start.

Hastily he took out a paper that he had hid somewhere about him. It was in his own handwriting, all sealed and endorsed. “Not to be opened except in case of my death.” Nevertheless he tore it open—tore likewise an under-cover addressed to his wife, and began to read:

“I know you never loved me. From something I overheard on our marriage-day—from other words afterwards let fall in anger by my brother, I also know that you loved”—

He crushed the paper, his eyes seeming literally to flame. Then all the fury died out of them, and left nothing but tenderness. He listened for the soft breathing within—soft and pure.

"No!" he murmured. "I will not leave her honour to the chance of written words. No other human being must ever know what I knew. If I live, it is not worse than it was before; and should any harm come to me, let her think I died in ignorance. Better so."

He tore the paper into small strips, and deliberately burnt them one by one in the candle, making a little pile of the ashes, but afterwards scattering them about the fireplace. Then putting out the light—for the house was now filled with the soft grey dawn—Nathanael stepped once more into his wife's room.

And still she was sleeping—sleeping at the very crisis of her fate. Her face was composed and sweet, though her hands were still clenched, and one of them almost buried in her loose hair.

Her husband stood and looked at her, trying long to keep himself firm and self-restrained, as though she were aware of his presence. But at last the holy helplessness of sleep subdued him. From standing upright he sank gradually down—down—till he was crouching on his knees. Shudder over shudder came over him—sigh after sigh rose up, and was smothered again in his breast. At last even the strong man's strength gave way, and there fell a heavy, silent, burning rain.

And all the while the wife slept, and never knew how he loved her!

After a while this ceased. Nathanael opened his eyes and tried to look once more calmly on his wife. She stirred a little in sleep, and began to smile—a

very soft, meek, innocent smile, that softened her lips into infantine sweetness. She was again Agatha, the merry Agatha, as she had been when he first saw her, before he wooed her, and shook her roughly from her girlish calm into all the struggles of life. He could have cursed himself—and yet—yet he loved her!

Kneeling, he put his arm softly over her. Another moment and he would have yielded to the frantic impulse, and snatched her to his heart for one—just one embrace—heedless of her waking. But how would she wake? only to hate and reproach him. He had better leave her thus, and carry away in his remembrance that picture of peace, which blotted out all her bitter words, all her cruel want of love—made him forget everything except that she had been the wife of his bosom and his first love.

He drew back his arm, gradually and noiselessly. He did not attempt to kiss her, not even her hand, lest he should disturb her; but kneeling, laid his hand on the pillow by hers, and pressed his lips to her hair.

"I am glad she sleeps—yes, very glad! She is quite content now, she will be quite happy when I am gone, God love thee and take care of thee—my darling—my Agatha."



*Agatha.* THE HUSBAND'S FAREWELL. Page 280.

Kissing her hair once again, he rose up and went away.

As he departed, the first sunbeam came in and danced upon the bed, showing Agatha fast asleep, sleeping still. She never woke until it had been broad day for a long time, and the sun creeping over her pillow struck her eyes.

Then she started up with a loud cry—she had been dreaming. Tears were wet upon her cheek. She

called wildly for her husband. It was too late.

He had been gone at least three hours.

# CHAPTER XXI

## "Mrs. Harper—Missus—there's a carriage at the door."

"Say I am not at home."

She had given the same sullen answer to every visitor for four weeks, shutting herself up in stern seclusion, determined that, whatever cruel comments they made, the neighbourhood should have no power of spying into the mystery of "that poor Mrs. Locke Harper who did not live happy with her husband." For so she felt sure had been the result of that fatal betrayal to her brother-in-law. Since, as Harrie had once said, "Duke never could keep a secret in his life!" But even his own wife could not thoroughly fathom the good heart of Marmaduke Dugdale.

"Not at home?" repeated Dorcas, who had been very faithful to her young mistress. "Not when it's Miss Valery, who has been so ill? Oh, Missus, do'ee see Miss Valery."

Mrs. Harper hesitated, and during that time her visitor entered uninvited.

"So, Agatha, as you did not come to see me, I have come at last to see you."

“I am sorry”—

“What, to see me?” said Anne, smiling. But the voice was weak, and the smile had a sickly beauty. Agatha was struck by a change, slight, yet perceptible, which had come over Miss Valery.

“I hear you have been ill—will you take the arm-chair? Are you better to day?”

“Oh yes,” returned Anne, briefly; she was never much in the habit of talking about herself. “But you, my dear, how have you been this long time? Come and let me look at you.”

“It is not worth while. Never mind me. Talk of something else.”

“Of your husband, then. When did you hear from him?”

“Last week.”

“And is he quite well? Will you give a message to him from me when you write again?”

“I never write.”

Miss Valery looked surprised, pained. Evidently to her sick-room had reached the vaguest possible hints of what had happened. Or else Anne must have refused to hear or credit what she was persuaded was an impossible falsehood. In all good hearts scandal unrepeated, unbelieved, dies a natural death.

To Mrs. Harper's brief, sharp sentence there was no reply; her guest turned to other topics.

“Harriet Dugdale comes home to-morrow. It is not often she takes it into her head to pay a three weeks' visit from home. You must have missed her a good deal.”

“No, I did not. I have never been outside the garden.”

“Was that quite right, my dear? And your sisters-

in-law complain bitterly that you will not go to Kingcombe Holm."

"They should have taken more trouble in coming to ask me.

"Nay, in this world we should not judge too harshly. We cannot see into any one's motives. There may have been reasons. I know the Squire has not been at all well; and Mary has spent her whole time in watching him, and in coming to Thornhurst to nurse me."

"Have you been so very ill, then? I wish—I wish —"

"That you also had come to see me? Well, you will come now. Not to-day; for I am going to use this lovely autumn morning in taking a journey."

"Whither?"

"To Weymouth, opposite the Isle of Portland."

After this answer both were silent. Agatha was thinking of the night when her husband rode to Weymouth. Anne was thinking—of what?

At length she put her thoughts aside, and turned to watch the young wife, who had fallen into a sullen, absent mood.

"Does your house please you, Agatha? It is very pretty, I think."

"Yes, very. I do not complain. Would you like to look over it? Or shall I give you some cake and wine? That is the fashion, I believe, when a visitor first comes to see a bride in her new home."

The bitterness, the sarcasm of her manner were pitiful to see. Anne Valery watched her, sadly, yet not hopelessly. There was in the calm of that pale face a clearness of vision which pierced through many human darknesses to the light behind.

She only said, “Thank you, I will take some wine; I like to keep up good old customs,”—and waited while Mrs. Harper, with a quick excited manner, and a countenance that changed momentarily, did the first honours of her household. So sad it was to see her doing it all alone! More widow-like than bride-like.

As she came up with the wine-glass, Miss Valery caught her hand, holding it firmly in defiance of Agatha's slight effort to get free.

“Wait a minute for my good wishes to the bride. May God bless you! Not with fortune, which is oftentimes only a curse”—

“That is true,” muttered Agatha, bitterly.

“Not with perfect freedom from care, for that is impossible, or, if possible, would not be good for you. Every one of us must bear our own burden; and we can bear it, if we love one another.”

Agatha's lips were set together.

“If,” continued Anne, firmly—“If we love any one with sincerity and faithfulness, we are sure to reap our reward some time. If any love us, and we believe it and trust them, they are sure to come out clear from all clouds, our own beloved, true to the end. Therefore, Agatha, above all blessings, may God bless you with *love*! May you be happy in your husband, and make him happy! May you live to see your home merry and full—not silent!—may you die among your children and your own people—not alone!”

The sudden solemnity of this blessing, enhanced by the feebleness of the voice that uttered it, awoke strange emotions in Agatha. She threw herself on her knees by the armchair, where Anne lay back—now faint and pale.

"Oh, if you had been near me—if I had known you always, and you had brought me up, and made a good woman of me."

"Perhaps I ought," murmured Anne, thoughtfully. "But, just then, it would have been so hard—so hard!"

"What are you saying? Say it again. All your words are good words. Tell me."

"Nothing, dear. Except"—here Miss Valery raised herself with a sudden effort mental and bodily —"Agatha, will you go with me to Weymouth?"

"If you like. Anywhere to be with you. I am sick of myself."

"We all are at times, especially when we are young, and do not quite understand ourselves or others. The feeling passes away. But as to Weymouth —do you still dislike to go near the sea?"

"Yes—no! I will try to bear it; I think I could, by your side. And you shall not go alone on any account."

"Thank you," said Anne, taking her hand. So they went.

An innocent line of railway darted past Kingcombe, in the vain hope of waking that somnolent town. It was a pleasant whirl across the usual breezy flats of moorland, by some meadows where a network of serpentine streams flashed in the sun. Agatha felt more like her own self; with her, the spirit of Nature was always an exorciser of internal demons; and Anne's conversation aided the beneficent work.

At Dorchester they took a carriage, and drove across the country to Weymouth.

"Are you not getting weary? you looked so but

lately," said Agatha to Miss Valery.

"Not at all, I feel strong now." Her eyes and cheeks were indeed very bright; she leaned forward and gazed eagerly around.

"This Weymouth seems familiar to you, Miss Valery?"

"Yes; we used to come here every summer—Mr. and Mrs. Harper and the children and I, until she died. She was as good as a mother, or an elder sister"—here Anne hesitated, but repeated the words —"like an elder sister—to me. We were all very happy in those times. It is a great blessing, Agatha, to have had a happy childhood. Where did you spend yours?"

Agatha looked uneasy. "Chiefly in London—I told you."

"But before then, when you were a very little girl?"

"I do not know. Don't let us talk about that."

"Not if you do not wish it." Anne's eyes, which had watched her closely, turned away, and after a few minutes were riveted on a line of blue sea sweeping round a distant headland, and curving off to the horizon. As she looked she became very pale, and shivered. Agatha hardly noticed her, being so busy examining the new regions into which they now entered—the ordinary High Street of an ordinary country town. The sea view had vanished.

Suddenly the carriage turned a corner, and they burst upon the shore of Weymouth Bay. A great, blue, glittering bay, with two white headlands shutting it in; the tide running high, the waves dashing themselves furiously against the sea-wall of the esplanade, breaking into showers of spray, and curling back into the foaming whirl below.

Agatha started, and put her hands before her eyes. “I know that sight—I remember that sound. Oh! where is this place? why did you bring me here?”

At this cry Miss Valery, roused from her momentary fit of abstraction, took hold of Agatha's hand. The girl was trembling violently.

“My dear, I did not expect this, or you should not have come here. This is Weymouth. Now do you remember?”

“How should I? Was I ever here before?” She peered from under her hand at the sparkling sea. “No, it is not like that sea; it is too bright. Yet I hear the same roll against the same wall. It is very foolish, but I wish we could get away.”

“Presently,” said Anne's soothing voice. “We must drive along this shore, and then we will get out at an inn I know, and rest.”

Her manner, her expression, as she fixed her eyes full upon her, struck Agatha with an indescribable feeling. She looked eagerly at Miss Valery, trying to read in that worn face some likeness to the one which had impressed her childish memory with almost angelic beauty.

“Tell me—you say you have been often here—did you ever one stormy day follow a ship that was outward bound? You were in a little boat, and the ship was standing out to sea, round that point—and”—

She stopped, for Anne's face was livid to the very lips. Agatha forgot her own question and its purport.

“Stop the carriage. Let me hold you. Dear—dear Miss Valery, you are worn out—you are fainting.”

"No—I never faint—I am only tired. Don't speak to me for a minute or two, and I shall be well."

With a long sigh she forcibly brought life back to her cheeks—a feeble life at best. Agatha, watching her, was smitten by a dread which now entered her mind for the first time, driving thence all personal feelings, and making her gaze with sorrowful anxiety on the friend beside her who had been all day so cheerful and kind. And she thought with a remorse amounting to positive horror, that she herself during that day had more than once spoken sharply even to Anne Valery.

A great awe came upon her, reflecting how often we unconsciously walk hand-in-hand, and talk of our own petty earthly trials, with those whose souls' wings are already growing, already stirring with the air that comes to bear them to the unseen land.

It was a relief indescribable, when leisurely strolling along the pavement, she saw among many strange faces one that seemed familiar. The hands knotted loosely at his back, the light hair straggling out from under the hat, that was pushed far up from the forehead—no, she could not be mistaken. She uttered a cry of pleasure.

"Look, look! there he is; I am certain it is he."

Anne started violently.

"Mr. Dugdale, Mr. Dugdale!" Agatha called out.

He came up to the carriage with the most lengthened "E—h!" that she had ever heard him utter. "What brought you two here? This bleak day too. Very wrong of Anne!"

"But she would come. She said she wanted a breath of sea-air, and I think, besides, she has business."

"No," interrupted Anne, "no business, except bringing Agatha to see Weymouth. Now shall we rest, and have some tea at the inn. You'll come with us, Mr. Dugdale?"

"Yes, I want to speak to you, Anne. I've got news about—that little affair you know of. That was why I came to Weymouth to-day. Eh, now—just look there!"

With a countenance brimful of pleasure he came to Miss Valery's side, and pointed to a steamer that lay in the offing.

"It's the *Anna Mary*. She made the passage from New York in no time. I've been aboard her already. I fancied I might find him there. Now, what do you think, Anne?"

"Is he come?" said Anne, in a steady voice. She had quite recovered herself now.

"No—not this time. But he will sail, for certain, by the next New York packet to Havre."

"Thank God!" It was a very low answer—just a sigh, and nothing more.

"And we have satisfactorily ended all that business which you first put into my head," continued Duke, rubbing his hands with great glee. "It was a risk certainly, but then it was for him. My children will never be a bit the poorer."

"No," murmured Anne Valery to herself.

"And think what an election we shall have! With him to make speeches for Trenchard, and argue in this wonderful way about Free-trade, and tell the farmers all about Canadian wheat! Glorious!"

"What are you both talking about?" cried Agatha, who had been considerably puzzled. "Do let me hear, if it is not a secret."

“No secret,” said Anne, turning round, speaking clearly and composedly, and not at all like a sick person. “Mr. Brian Harper is coming home.”

Agatha clapped her hands for joy.

When they dismounted from the carriage, and had ordered tea at the inn, Anne still seemed quite strong. She said it was the sea-breeze that brought life to her, and stood at the open window gazing over the bay. Agatha thought she had never seen Miss Valery's face so near looking beautiful as now; it was the faint reflex of girlhood's brightness, like the zodiacal light which the sun casts on the sky long after he has gone down.

After tea,—at which meal Mr. Dugdale did not appear, a fact that nobody wondered at, since he was left to wander about Weymouth at his own sweet will, without Harrie to catch him and remind him that there was such a thing as time, likewise such sublunary necessities as eating and drinking—after tea Miss Valery and Mrs. Harper sat at the window together.

It was only an inn-window, the panes scribbled over with many names, and it lighted an ordinary inn-parlour, looking on the esplanade. Yet it was a pleasant seat; quiet, too, for the town was almost deserted as winter-time came on. The bay, smoothed by the ebbing tide, lay like crystal under a sky where sunset and moonlight mixed. Agatha ventured to look at the sea now. She beheld with a curious interest a sight till now so unfamiliar, taking a childish pleasure in watching the great white arm of moon-rays stretch further and further across the water, changing the ripples into molten silver, and making ethereal and ghostlike every little boat that glided through them.

By-and-by came a group of wandering musicians, playing very respectably, as German street-musicians always do. They converted the dark esplanade and the shabby inn-parlour into a fairy picture of visible and audible romance.

“It is quite like a scene in a play,” said Agatha, laughing and trying to make Miss Valery laugh. She could not see her clearly in the moonlight, but she did not like her sitting so quiet and silent.

“Yes, very like a play, with '*Herz, mein Herz,*' for a serenade. What a sweet old tune it is!”

“I used to sing it once.” And Agatha began following the instruments with her voice. “No, I can't sing. I could sooner cry.”

“Why? Are you sorrowful?”

“No—happy. Yet all feels strange, very strange.” She crept to Miss Valery, wrapped her arms round her waist, and laid her head timidly on her shoulder. Anne drew her nearer, with a more caressing manner than she ever used to any one. Agatha Harper seemed that night of all nights to lie very near her heart.

“*Herz, mein Herz,*” died faintly away down the esplanade; there was nothing but the glitter of the bay, and the moon climbing higher and higher above the Isle of Portland.

Anne spoke at last, amidst the half-playful, half-tender caresses that were so dear to Agatha, who had never known what it was to be calmly and safely in a mother's arms. Lying thus seemed most like it.

“Do you think I care for you, Agatha, my child?”

“I cannot tell. Perhaps not, for I am not good enough to deserve it.”

“Do you know what first made me care for

you?”

“No—unless it was for the sake of my husband.”

Anne gave no reply, and her husband's name plunged Agatha into such a maze of painful thought, that she was for a long time altogether silent.

“Shall I tell you a story, Agatha?”

“Anything—anything, to keep me from thinking.”

“If I do, it is one you must not tell again, unless to Nathanael, for I would put no secrets between husband and wife.”

“Ah, that is right—that is kind. Would that *he* had thought the same!”

“What did you say, dear?”

“Nothing! Nothing of any consequence. Don't mind me. Go on.”

“It is a history which I think it right and best to tell you. You will both need to keep it sacred for a little while—not for very long.”

As she spoke, a shudder passed through Anne's frame. Was it the involuntary shrinking of mortality in sight of immortality?

Shortly afterwards she began to talk in her usual sweet tone—perhaps a shade more serious.

“'There were once two *friends*—three I should say, but the third far less intimate than the other two. Something happened—it is now too long ago to signify what—which made the elder of the first two angry with his dearest friend and the other. He went away suddenly, writing word to his friend—his own—that he should sail next day, leaving England for ever.”

“That was wrong!” cried Agatha. “People ought never to be passionate and unjust in friendship. It

was very wrong."

"Hush! you do not know all the circumstances; you cannot judge," Anne answered hastily. "His friend, who greatly honoured him, and knew what pain his loss would bring to many, wished to prevent his going. She"—

"It was a woman, then?"

"Yes."

"And were they *only* friends?"

"They were friends," repeated Miss Valery, in a tone which, doubtful as the answer was, made Agatha feel she had no right to inquire further.

"She never knew how much he cared for her until that last letter he wrote, just after he had gone away. On receiving it, she followed him—which she had a right to do—to the place he mentioned, a seaport from which he was to sail. When she reached it, the vessel had already heaved anchor and was standing out to sea. She saw it—the very ship he was on board—in the middle of the bay."

"The bay! Was it then"—

"Hush, dear, just for a little,—I cannot speak long. It was a stormy day, and few boats would go out. However, there was on the beach a woman who was also very eager to catch the vessel. Together they managed to get a boat, and embarked—this lady I speak of—the woman and a little girl."

Agatha listened with painful avidity.

"It was not the woman's own child, or she could not have been so careless of it It was tossed into the bottom of the boat, and lay there crying. The lady felt sorry for it, and took it in her arms. They had gone but a little way from the shore when it was playing about her, quite happy again. While playing

—she looking at the ship, and not watching the little thing as she ought to have done—the child fell overboard."

A loud sob burst from Agatha.

"Hush, still hush, my darling! The child was saved. The ship sailed away, but the child—you *know* that she was saved. I am thankful to God it was so!"

Anne wrapped her arms tightly round the sobbing girl, and after a few moments she also wept.

"I remember it all now," cried Agatha, as soon as she found words—"the shore, the headlands, the bay. I was that little child, and it was you who saved me!"

Anne made no answer but by pressing her closer.

"I felt it the first moment I ever saw you. I never forgot you—never! But how did you know me?"

"Was I likely ever to lose sight of that little child? And also, years before, I had once or twice met your father—though this would have been nothing. But from that day I felt that you belonged to me. And now, since you are become a Harper, you do."

Agatha embraced her, and then suddenly looked mournful.—"But yourself? Tell me, did you ever again meet your—your friend?"

No answer. A slight movement of the lips sufficed to explain the whole.

"And it was all through me," cried Agatha, to whom that soft smile was agony. "And what have I done in requital? I have lived a useless, erring life; I have suffered—oh, how I have suffered! Far better I had been left lying at the bottom of that quiet bay. Why did God let you save me?"

"That you might grow up a good and noble woman, fulfilling worthily the life He spared, and giving it back into His hands, in His time, as a true and faithful servant. Dare not to murmur at His will —dare not to ask why He saved you, Agatha Harper."

Saying this, as sternly as Anne Valery could speak—she tried to put Agatha from her breast, but the girl held her too fast.

"Oh, do not cast me away. I have nobody in the world but you. Forgive me! Guide my life which I owe you, and make it worth your saving. Love me—teach my husband to love me. If you knew how miserable I am, and may be always."

"No one is miserable always," returned Anne faintly, as she leaned back, her hands dropping down cold and listless. "We grow content in time. We shall all be—very happy—some day."

She spoke with hesitation and difficulty. The next minute, in spite of her declaration that she never fainted, Miss Valery had become insensible.

## CHAPTER XXII.

"What, up and dressed already, without sending for me? Did you not promise last night that I should do everything for you just as if I were your child? How very naughty you are, Miss Valery."

Agatha spoke rather crossly; it was a relief to

speak so. Anne turned round—she was sitting at the window of the inn bed-chamber looking on Weymouth Bay.

“Am I naughty? And you have assumed the right to scold me? That is quite a pleasure. I have had no one to scold me for a great many years.”

There was a certain pathos running through her cheerfulness which made Agatha's heart burst. She had lain awake half the night thinking of Anne Valery, and had guessed, or put together many things, which made her come with uncontrollable emotion into the presence of her whose fate had been so knotted up with her own. For that this circumstance had in some way or other brought about Anne's fate—the one fate of a woman's life—Agatha could not doubt. Neither could she doubt who was this “friend.” But she said nothing—she felt she had no right.

“Don't look at the sea, please. Look at me. Tell me how you feel this morning.”

“Well—quite well. We will go home to-day. What did you tell Mr. Dugdale last night?”

“Only what you desired me—that, being wearied, you felt inclined to stay the night at Weymouth.”

“That was right.—Look, Agatha, how beautiful the sea is. I must teach you not to be afraid of it any more. Next year”—

She paused, hesitated, put her hand to her heart, as she often did, and ceased to speak; but Agatha eagerly continued the sentence:

“Next year we will come and stay here, you and I; or perhaps, as a very great favour, we'll admit one or two more. Next year, when you are quite strong, remember. We will be very happy, next year.”

She repeated the words strongly, resolutely, dinning them into Miss Valery's ear, but she only won for answer that silent smile which went to her heart like an arrow. She rushed for safety to the commonplaces of life, to the quick, hasty speeches which relieved her. She began to be very cross about some delay in breakfast.

“Never mind me, dear,” said Anne's quieting tones. “I am quite well, and want nothing. Only let us sit still, and look at the sea.” And she drew her from her eager bustling about the inn-parlour to the place where they had both sat the previous night. Agatha balanced herself on the arm of the chair, determined she would not be serious for an instant, and would not let Anne talk. Yet both resolutions were broken ere long. Perhaps it was the bright stillness of the sea view, sliding away round the headland into infinity, which impressed her in spite of herself. Still she struggled against her feelings.

“I will not have you so grave, Miss Valery. Mind, I will not.”

“Am I grave? Nay, only quiet; and so happy! Do you know what it is to be quite content with everything in one's life—past, present, and to come, knowing that all is overruled for good, forgiving everybody and loving everybody?”

Agatha linked her arms tighter round Miss Valery's neck.

“Don't talk in that way, or look in that way—don't. Be wicked! Speak cross! I will not have you an angel. I will not feel your wings growing. I'll tear them out. There.”

She laughed—laughed with brimming eyes—until she sobbed again. Her feelings had been on the stretch for hours, and now gave way. Anne bent

down from her serenity to notice and soothe the wayward child.

“Poor little thing, she wants taking care of as much as anybody. When will her husband come home?”

“Never—never!” cried Agatha, hardly knowing what she said. “I shall lose him—you—all.”

Miss Valery smiled—the composed smile of one who ascending a mountain, sees the lowland mazes around laid out distinct and clear, and looks over them to their ending.

“Yes, my child, he will come back. Absence breaks slender ties, but it rivets strong ones. Have faith in him. People like him, if they once love, love always. He will come back.”

There was a great light in Miss Valery's countenance, which irresistibly attracted Agatha. She dried her eyes, forgot her own personal cares, and listened to the comforter.

“Think how much we love those that are away. Once perhaps we used to vex and slight them and be cross with them, but now we carry them in our hearts always. We forget everything bitter, and remember only the sweet; how good they were, and how dearly we loved them. Our thoughts and prayers follow them continually, flying over and about them like wandering angels, that must be laden with good. And all this loving—all this waiting—all this praying, year after year—I mean day after day”—she suddenly turned to Agatha. “Be content, my child. He will come back.”

Agatha made no reply. She was not thinking of herself just then. She was thinking of the life, compared to which her own nineteen commonplace years sank into nothingness; of the love beside which

that feeling she had so called, looked mean and poor; of the patient endurance—what was her patience? And yet she had fancied that never was woman so tried as Agatha Harper.

With a resolve as sudden as brave, and in her present state of mind to be brave at all it must needs be sudden, Agatha determined to put herself and her troubles altogether aside, and think only of those whom she loved.

"Come," she said, and rose up strong in the courage of self-denial. "We will indulge in no more dreariness; it is not good for you, and I won't allow it, my patient. You shall be patient, in every sense, for a little while longer, and then we'll all be very happy—*all*, I say, next year."

With this declaration she made ready to carry her friend off to Kingcombe—to her own little house—where she was bent on detaining Anne prisoner. Miss Valery declared herself quite willing to be thus bound for a day or two, until she was strong enough to go to Kingcombe Holm.

"But I'll not let you go—I'll be jealous. Why must you be wandering off to that dreary place?"

"Its not dreary to me; I always loved Kingcombe Holm; and I must pay it one last visit before—before winter."

"But there is plenty of time," returned Agatha, hastily. "Why go just now?"

"Because"—Miss Valery spoke after a moment's pause, very steadfastly—"Because I have reasons for so doing. My old friend, Mr. Harper, has a few strong prejudices, some of them to the hurt of his brother, and I wish to talk to him myself before Mr. Brian Harper comes home."

While Miss Valery said this name, Agatha had

carefully bent her eyes seaward. In answering, her colour rose—her manner was more troubled and hesitating by far than that of her companion.

"Go, then. I will not hinder you. Nobody can feel more interest than I do in Uncle Brian. When do you think he will be here?"

"In three weeks, most likely."

Anne made no other remark, nor did Agatha. In a short time they were driving homeward along the margin of the bay. That well-remembered bay, the sight of which even now made Agatha feel as if she were dreaming over again the one awful event of her childhood. And Anne—what felt she? No wonder that she did not talk.

They came to a spot where the formal esplanade merged into a lonely sea-side walk, leading towards the widening mouth of the bay, and commanding the farthest view of the Channel as it curved down westward into the horizon. Agatha turned pale.

"I remember it—that line of coast with the grey clouds over it. I lay on these sands, and afterwards when you fell, I sat and cried over you. This was the place, and it was over that point that the ship disappeared."

Anne was speechless.

Agatha clasped her hand:—they understood one another. The next minute the carriage turned. Miss Valery breathed a quick sigh, and bent hurriedly forward; but the glitter of the ocean had vanished—she had seen the last of Weymouth Bay.

It was a weary journey, for Anne seemed very feeble. Her young nurse was thankful when the flashing network of streams told how near they were whirling towards Kingcombe. As the train stopped, Mrs. Dugdale was visible on the platform; Duke also,

not at the station—that being a degree of punctuality quite impossible—but a little way down the road.

"Well, Miss Anne Valery and Mrs. Locke Harper! To be gallivanting about in this way! I declare it's quite disgraceful. What have you to say for yourselves? Here have I been running up to every train to meet you, and tell you"—

"What?" Agatha's cheek flushed with expectation. Anne grew very white.

"Now, Mrs. Harper, you need not be so hasty —'tisn't your husband. A great blessing if it were. All the town is crying shame on him for staying away so long."

Agatha threw a furious look at her sister, and dragged Miss Valery along, nor stopped till she saw the latter could hardly breathe or stand.

"Stay, my child. Harriet, you should not say such things. Nathanael is only absent on business—my business; he will come home soon."

These words, uttered with difficulty, calmed the rising storm. Harrie laughingly begged pardon, and was satisfied.

"Well, the sooner Nathanael comes, the better. There was a gentleman last night wanting him."

"What gentleman?"

"Can't tell. He left no name. A little wiry shrimp of a fellow who seemed to know all about our family, Fred included; so Duke, in his ultra hospitality, took the creature in for the night, and this morning drove him over to Kingcombe Holm. There, don't let us bother ourselves about him. How do you feel now, Anne? Quite well, eh?"

"Quite well," Anne echoed in her cheerful voice that never had a tone of pain or complaining. But it

seemed to strike Mr. Dugdale, who had lounged up to her side. His peculiarly gentle and observant look rested on her for a moment, and then he offered her his arm, an act of courtesy very rare in the absent Duke Dugdale. Agatha walked on her other hand; Harrie fluttering about them, and talking very fast, chiefly about the wonderful news of yesterday, which her husband had just communicated.

“And a great shame not to tell me long before. As if I did not care for Uncle Brian as much as anybody does. What a Christmas we shall have—Uncle Brian, Nathanael, and Fred.”

“Is Major Harper coming?” The question was from Anne.

“Elizabeth hopes so. He surely will not disappoint Elizabeth. And he must come to see Uncle Brian; they were such friends, you know. All the middle-aged oddities in Kingcombe are on the *qui vive* to see Uncle Brian and Fred. They two were the finest young fellows in the neighbourhood, people say, and to think they should both come back miserable old bachelors! Nobody married but my poor Duke! Hurra!”

So she rattled on until they reached Agatha's door. One of the Kingcombe Holm servants stood there with the carriage. Mrs. Locke Harper was wanted immediately, to dine at her father-in-law's.

“I will not go. I will not leave Miss Valery. They don't often ask me—indeed, I have never been since—No, I will not go,” she added obstinately.

“Do!” entreated Anne, who had sat down, faint with a walk so short that no one thought of its fatiguing her—not even Agatha.

“T' Squire do want'ee very bad, Missus. Here!” And the old coachman, almost as old as his master,

gave to Mrs. Harper a note, which was only the second she had ever received from her husband's father. It was a crabbed, ancient hand, blotted and blurred, then steadied resolutely into the preciseness of a school-boy—one of those pathetic fragments of writing that irresistibly remind one of the trembling failing hand—the hand that once wrote brave love-letters.

"You are highly favoured; my father rarely writes to any one. What does he say?" cried Harrie, rather jealous.

Agatha read aloud:

> *"My dear Daughter-in-law, "Will you honour me by dining here to-day, without fail? "I remain, always your affectionate Father, "Nathanael Harper."*

"'Your affectionate Father,'" repeated Mrs. Dugdale. "He hardly ever signed that to me in his life, though I am his very own daughter, and his eldest too. He never signed so to anybody but Fred. Bah! what a big blot He is almost past writing, poor dear man! Come, Agatha, you cannot refuse; you must go."

"She must indeed," echoed Anne Valery.

"Even though the Squire has been so rude as never to ask me or Duke, though Duke saw him this very morning, when he rode over to Kingcombe Holm to tell the news about Uncle Brian.—Bless us, Anne, don't look so. Is there anything astonishing in my father's letter? How very queer everybody seems to-day!"

Agatha felt Miss Valery draw her aside.

"You will surely go, my dear, since he wishes it."

“But if I don't wish it—if I had far rather stay with you! Why are you so anxious for my leaving you?”

“Are you angry with me again, my child?”—Agatha clung to her fondly. “Then go. Behave specially well to your husband's father. And stay—say I am coming to see him to-morrow.”

“But you cannot—you are not strong.”

“Oh yes, very strong,” Anne returned hastily. “Only go. I will stay contentedly with Dorcas.”

Agatha went, very much against her will She had shut herself up entirely for so long. It was a torment to see any one, above all her husband's family, who of course were constantly talking and inquiring about him. The stateliness of Kingcombe Holm chafed her beyond endurance; Mary's good-natured regrets, and Eulalie's malicious prying condolings; worst of all the penetration of Elizabeth. She fancied that they and all Kingcombe were pointing the finger at “poor Mrs. Locke Harper.”

Pondering over all these things during the solitary drive, her good resolutions faded out from her, and her heart began to burn anew. It was so hard!

She crossed the hall—the same hall where she had alighted when Nathanael first brought her home. It looked dusky and dim, as then. She almost expected to see him appear from some corner, with his light, quick step and his long fair hair.

It was hard indeed—too hard! She hurried through, and never looked behind.

Eulalie and Mary were sitting solemnly in the drawing-room.

“So you are come, Mrs. Harper. We never

thought you would come again. We thought you would sit for ever pining in your cage till your mate came back again. What a naughty wandering bird he is!"

"Don't, Eulalie. No teasing. I am sure we were all very sorry for your loneliness, dear Agatha."

"Thank you for giving yourselves that trouble."

"Oh, no trouble at all," said the well-meaning and simple Mary. "And we would have come to see you or fetched you here, but I had to go so much to Thornhurst while Anne was ill, and Eulalie—somehow—I don't know—but Eulalie is always busy."

Eulalie, whose hardest toil was looking in the glass, and patting her dog's ears, assented apologetically. Perhaps she read something in her sister-in-law's face which showed her that Agatha was not to be trifled with.

"Will you go up and see Elizabeth? She has often asked for you."

"Has she? I will go after dinner," briefly answered Agatha She would not be got rid of in that way.

"Shall we sit and talk then, till my father comes in with that queer little man who has been with him all day? about whom Mary and I have been vainly puzzling our brains. Such an ugly little fellow, and, between you and me, not *quite* a gentleman. I wonder at papa's asking him to stay and dine. I shan't do the civil to him; you may."

"Thanks for the permission."

"Perhaps that is the very reason Papa sent for you," continued Eulalie, stretching herself out on the sofa. "The person said he knew you, and asked Mary

where you were living, and whether you were very happy together, you and your husband."

Agatha rose abruptly, dashing down a heavy volume that lay on her knee—she certainly had not a mild temper. While she wavered between reining in her anger as she had last night vowed, and pouring upon Eulalie all the storm of her roused passions—the door opened, and Mr. Harper entered with his much-depreciated guest.

The old gentleman was dressed with unusual care, and walked with even more of slow stateliness than ordinary. He met Agatha with his customary kindness.

"Welcome. You have been somewhat of a stranger lately. It must not happen again, my dear." And drawing her arm through his, he faced the "little ugly fellow" of Eulalie's dislike.

"Mr. Grimes, let me present you to my son's wife, Mrs. Locke Harper."

"You forget, sir," interrupted Grimes, importantly; "I have long ago had that honour, through Major"—

The old Squire started, put his hand to his forehead—"Yes, yes, I did forget. My memory, sir—my memory is as good as ever it was."

The sharp contradictory ending of his speech, the colour rising to the old man's cheek and forehead, whence it did not sink, but lay steadily, a heavy, purple blotch, attracted Agatha's notice—certainly more than Mr. Grimes did.

"I had the honour, Mrs. Harper," said the latter, bowing, "to be present when your marriage settlement was signed. I had likewise the honour of preparing the deed, by the wish and according to the express orders of Major Har"—

"That is sufficient," interrupted the Squire. "Sir, I never burden ladies with the wearisomeness of legal discussion.—Did you drive or ride here, Agatha?"

"If you remember, you sent the carriage for me."

"Yes, yes—of course," returned the old man. "It was a pleasant drive, was it? Your husband enjoyed it too?"

"My husband is in Cornwall"

"Certainly. I understand."

Which was more than Agatha did. She could not make him out at all. The wandering eye, dulled with more than mere age—for it had been his pride that the Harper eye always sparkled to the last; the accidental twitches about the mouth, which hung loosely, and seemed unable to control its muscles; above all, the extraordinary and sudden lapse of a memory which had hitherto been wonderful for his years. There was something not right, some hidden wheel broken or locked in the mysterious mechanism that we call human life.

Agatha felt uneasy. She wished Nathanael had been at home: and began to consider whether some one—not herself—ought not to write and hint that his father did not seem quite well.

Meanwhile, she closely watched the old man, who seemed this day to show her more kindness and attention than ever,—there was no mistaking that. He kept her constantly at his side, talking to her with marked courtesy. Once she saw his eyes—those poor, dull, restless eyes, fixed on her with an expression that was quite unaccountable. Going in to dinner, his step, which began measured and stately, suddenly tottered. Agatha caught his arm.

"You are not well—I am sure of it."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Grimes, who was following close behind, with the very reluctant Miss Mary towering over his petty head. "No wonder that Mr. Harper is not quite well to-day."

The Squire swerved aside, like an old steed goaded by the whip, then rose to his full height, which was taller than either of his sons—the Harpers of ancient time were a lofty generation.

"Mr. Grimes, I assure you I am quite well. Will you do me the honour to cease your anxiety about me, and lead in my daughter to her seat?"

Grimes passed on—quenched. There was something in "the grand old name of gentleman" that threw around its owner an atmosphere in which plebeian intruders could not breathe.

"A person, Agatha," whispered the Squire, as his eyes, bright with something of their old glow, followed the evidently objectionable guest—"A person to whom I show civility for the sake of—of my family."

Agatha assented, though not quite certain to what. Scanning Mr. Grimes more narrowly, she faintly remembered him, and the unpleasant, nasal-toned voice which had gabbled through her marriage settlement. She wondered what he had come to Nathanael for?—why Nathanael's father paid him such attention?

On her part, the sensation of dislike, unaccountable yet instinctive dislike, was so strong, that it would have been a real satisfaction to her mind if the footmen, instead of respectfully handing Mr. Grimes his soup, had handed himself out at the dining-room window.

The dinner passed in grave formality. Even Mr. Grimes seemed out of his element, being evidently,

as Eulalie had said, “not *quite* a gentleman,” either by birth or breeding, and lacking that something which makes the grandest gentlemen of all—Nature's. He tried now and then to open a conversation with the Miss Harpers, but Eulalie sneered at him aside, and Mary was politely dignified. Agatha took very little notice of him—her attention was absorbed by her father-in-law.

Mr. Harper looked old—very old. His hands, blanched to a yellowish whiteness, moved about loosely and uncertainly. Once the large diamond mourning ring which the widower always wore, “In memory of Catherine Harper,” dropped off on the table-cloth. He did not perceive the loss until Agatha restored it, and then his fingers seemed unable to slip it on again, until his daughter-in-law aided him. In so doing, the clammy, nerveless feel of the old man's hand made her start.

“Thank you, Mrs. Harper,” he said, acknowledging her assistance with his most solemn bend. “And Catherine—Agatha, I mean, if you would be so kind—that is”—

“Yes? observed Agatha, inquiringly, as he made a long pause.

“To—remind me after dinner, my dear. I have duties now—important duties.—My friends!” Here he raised himself in his chair, looked round the dessert-laden table with one of his old smiles, half condescending, half good-humoured, then vainly put his hand on the large claret jug, which Agatha had to lift and guide to her glass—“My friends, I am delighted to see you all. And on this happy occasion let me have the honour of giving the first toast. The Reverend Frederick Harper and Mistress Mary Harper.”

Mary and Eulalie drew back. “That is grandfather and grandmother—dead fifty years ago. What does papa mean?”

But the whisper did not reach the old man, who drank the toast with all solemnity. Mr. Grimes did the same, repeating it loudly, with the addition of “long life, health, and happiness.” The daughters each cast down strange, shocked looks upon her untouched glass. No one spoke.

“Do you make a long stay in Dorsetshire?” observed the Squire, addressing himself courteously to his guest.

“That depends,” Grimes answered, with a meaning twinkle of the eye—an eye already growing moistened with too good wine.

“Did you not say,” Mary Harper continued, fancying her father looked at her to sustain the conversation—“did you not say you were intending to visit Cornwall?”

“No ma'am. Would rather be excused. As Mr. Harper knows, the place would be too hot to hold *me* after certain circumstances.”

“Sir!” The old man tried hard to gather himself up into stern dignity, and collect the ideas that where fast floating from him. “Sir,” he repeated, first haughtily, and then with a violence so rare to his rigidly gentlemanly demeanour that his daughters looked alarmed—“Sir—at my table—before my family—I beg—I”—Here he suddenly recovered himself, changed his tone, and bowed—“I—beg your pardon.”

“Oh, no offence, Squire; none meant, none taken. I came with the best of all intentions towards you and yours. And if things have turned out badly”—

“Did you not say you were acquainted with Cornwall?” abruptly asked Agatha, to prevent his again irritating her father-in-law, who had leaned back, sleepily. He would not close his eyes, but they looked misty and heavy, and his fingers played lazily with one another on the arm of his chair; Agatha laid her own upon them—she could not help it. She lost her fear of the repellent Mr. Harper in the old man, so helpless and feeble. She wished she had come oftener to Kingcombe Holm, and been more attentive and daughter-like to Nathanael's father.

“As to Cornwall,” said Grimes, in a confidential whisper, “between you and me, Mrs. Harper, mum's the word.”

Agatha drew herself up haughtily; but looked at the old Squire and grew patient. She even tried to eke out the flagging conversation, and luckily remembered the news which Duke Dugdale had that morning ridden over to communicate. She could not help thinking it very odd that no one in the house had hitherto mentioned Mr. Brian Harper's expected return.

“Shall you not be very glad, Mary, to see Uncle Brian. You have heard, of course, how soon he will be here?”

“Uncle Brian here!—And nobody told us. Only think, papa”—

“My dear Mary!” There was a gentleness in the Squire's voice more startling even than his violence.

“Did you know, papa, that Uncle Brian is coming home?”

“I think—I—Yes”—with a struggle at recollection—“my son-in-law told me that some commercial business which Brian is transacting for him will bring my brother home. I shall be very

happy to see him. You, too, will all be delighted to see your Uncle Brian."

"An uncle? The usual rich uncle from abroad, eh?" whispered Mr. Grimes to Agatha. "I ask merely for your own sake, ma'am, and that of my friend Nathanael."

Agatha curled her lip. That the fellow should dare to speak of "my friend Nathanael!" She glanced at Mary that they might leave the drawing-room, when seeing her father-in-law was about to speak she paused.

The old Squire rose in his customary manner of giving healths. His voice was quavering but loud, as if he could scarcely hear it himself, and tried to make it rise above a whirl of sounds that filled his brain. "My friends and children—my"—here he looked uncertainly at Agatha—"Yes, I remember, my daughter-in-law—allow me to give one toast more—Health, long life, and every blessing to my son—my youngest, worthiest, *only* remaining son and heir, Nathanael."

"*Only* son!"—Every one recoiled. The worn-out brain had certainly given way. Mary and Eulalie exchanged frightened glances. Agatha alone, touched by the unexpected tribute to her husband, did not notice the one momentous word.

"Now, Squire, that's hardly fair," cried Mr. Grimes, bursting into a hoarse vinous laugh. "A man may go wrong sometimes, but to be thrown overboard for it, and by one's father, too—think better of it, old fellow. And ladies by way of an antidote, allow me to give a toast—Success to my worthy and honourable—*exceedingly* honourable client, Major Frederick Harper."

The old Squire leaped up in his chair, with eyes

starting from their sockets. His lips gurgled out some inarticulate sound scarcely human; his right arm shook and quivered with his vain efforts to raise it; still it hung nerveless by his side. Consciousness and will yet lingered in his brain, but physical life and speech had gone for ever. He fell down struck by that living death—that worse than death, of old age—paralysis.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

The whole household was in terror and disorder. Eulalie had rushed screaming from the room—Mary went about, trembling like a leaf, trying to get restoratives—Agatha knelt on the floor, supporting the old man's head in her lap, speaking to him sometimes, as by the motion and apparent intelligence of his eyes she fancied he might possibly understand her.

“Oh, he is dead, he is dead!” cried Mary, as she took up the senseless hand, and let it fall again with a burst of tears.

“No, he is not dead—he hears you;—take care,” said Agatha, putting the frightened daughter aside with a firmness which rose in her, as in similar characters it does rise, equal to the necessity. She looked on the trembling Mary—on the servants gathering round with silent horror, and saw there were none who, so to speak, “had their wits about them,” except herself. Scarcely knowing how she did

it, she instinctively assumed the rule. She, the young girl of nineteen, who had never till then been placed in any position of trial.

"Send all these people away. Quick Mary! Bring some one who can carry him to his room. And—stay, Eulalie, sit down there and be quiet. Don't let any one go and alarm Elizabeth."

She gave these orders and everybody listened and obeyed; people are so ready to obey any guiding spirit at such a crisis. Then she bent down again over the poor corpselike figure that rested against her knee, kissed the old man's forehead, and tried to comfort him. She had heard of cases, when though deprived of speech and motion, the sufferer was still conscious of all passing around him. Therefore she wished as soon as possible to remove her father-in-law out of the way of the terrified household.

He was carried to his room through the hall where he had lately trod so stately,—the poor old man now helpless as the dead. Leaving the dining-room, Agatha thought she saw his eyes turn back, as if he knew that he was crossing the doorway he would never cross more, and wanted to take a last look at the familiar things. Otherwise he seemed continually watching herself. She walked beside him till he was laid upon his bed, and then tried again to speak to him. She did it caressingly, as though the old dying man had been a sick child.

"Be content, now—quite content. I will take care of you, and see that all is done right. I shall, not be away two minutes; I am only going to send for help —your own doctor from Kingcombe. We must try to get you well. Lie here quiet."

Quiet! It was like enjoining stillness to a corpse! Agatha shuddered when she had used the word. For

a moment the dread of her position rose upon her. In that lonely house, at night too, with no help nearer than Kingcombe: and even then no husband, no friend—for she dared not send to poor, sick Anne Valery! And she so young, so inexperienced.—But no matter! She would try to meet everything—do everything. She felt already calm and brave.

The first thing necessary was to send for medical aid. This she did; having the forethought to write a few clear lines, lest the messenger should fail. She despatched word likewise to the Dugdales. She felt quite composed; everything right to be remembered came clearly into her head. It was the grand touch-stone of her character; the crisis of danger which shows whether a woman has that presence of mind which exalts her into a domestic heroine, an angel of comfort; or the weakness which sinks her into a helpless selfish fool.

The latter was hardly likely to become a true picture of Agatha Harper.

She went about with Mary, giving some orders to the servants, for sickness always comes startingly upon an unprepared and unaccustomed house; and tried to find a few soothing words for the terrified Eulalie, who clung crying about them both, forgetting all her affectations. If the Beauty had any love left in her, it was for her father. Lastly, Agatha took a light, and went swiftly along the passages to the distant wing of the house which Elizabeth occupied.

"Miss Harper," her maid said, "had gone quietly to rest, and was then fast sleeping."

Poor Elizabeth! this seemed the hardest point of all.

"When did she see her father?"

“This morning. The master always comes up every morning after breakfast to see Miss Harper.”

And they would never see one another again, this helpless father and daughter—never, till they met bodiless, in the next world!

For the moment Agatha felt her courage fail She glided quickly from the door, but came back again. Elizabeth had waked, and called her.

“What is the matter? I know something is the matter.”

“Do tell her,” whispered the maid, “She'll find it out anyhow—she finds out everything. And she has been so ill all day.”

Agatha entered. There was no deceiving those eyes.

“Elizabeth, dear Elizabeth—your father—it is very hard, but—your father”—She hesitated; it was so difficult to convey, even in gentlest words, the cruel truth. Miss Harper regarded her keenly. The bearer of ill-tidings is always soon betrayed, and Agatha's was not a face to disguise anything. Elizabeth's head dropped back on the pillow.

“I perceive. He is an old man. He has gone home before me. My dear father!”

The perfect composure with which she said this astonished Agatha. She did not understand how near Elizabeth always lived to the unknown world, and how welcome and beautiful it was in her familiar sight.

“No; he is alive still. But, if he should not come in to see you to-morrow-morning”—

“I shall go unto him; he shall not return unto me,” murmured Elizabeth, as her eyelids fell, and a few tears dropped through the lashes. “Tell me the

rest, will you?"

"He has been seized with paralysis, I think; he cannot speak or move, but seems still conscious. I do not know how it will end."

"One way—only one way; I feared this long. My grandfather died so. Agatha"—calling after her, for she was stealing away, she could not bear it —"Agatha, you will take care of him?"

"I will as his own daughter."

"And, if possible"—here Elizabeth's voice faltered a little—"give my love to my dear father."

Agatha fled away. She hid herself in the recess close by "Anne's window," as it was called, and for a minute or two cried violently. It did her good. With those tears all the selfishness, anger, and pain flowed out of her heart, leaving it purer and more peaceful than it had been for a long time. It was not a foolish, miserable girl, but a brave, tenderhearted, sensible woman, who entered the door of the sick-chamber where the poor old man lay.

No one was there but the coachman who had carried his master up-stairs. Many servants hovered about the door, but none dared enter. Either they were afraid of the Squire—afraid even now, or else the motionless figure that lay within the bed-curtains was too like death. Old John sat beside it, with tears running down his cheeks.

"Oh, Mrs. Harper, look at th' Master. He be all alive in's mind. He do want bad to speak to we. Look at 'un, Missus!"

"Give me your place, John. I will try to understand him. Father!"—She faltered a little over the word, but felt it was the right word, now. The old man moved his head towards her with a feeble smile. The expression of his face was clearer and more

natural, only for that terribly painful inarticulate murmur, which no one could comprehend.

“I have done all I could think of,” Agatha continued, speaking softly and cheerfully. “The doctor will be here soon; Mary and Eulalie are down-stairs. I have myself told Elizabeth that you are ill;—she is composed, and sends her love to her dear father. Was all this right?”

Mr. Harper appeared to assent.

“I will sit beside you till the doctor comes, and then I will write to my husband. You would like him to come home?”

He seemed slow of comprehension, troubled, or excited. Agatha vainly tried to analyse the dumb expression of the features. With all her quickness she could not make out what he wanted. At last, a thought struck her. His eldest son, his favourite—

“Would you like me to send for Major Harper?”

No words could tell the change which convulsed the old man. Abhorrence—anger—fear—all were written in his countenance. He rolled his head on the pillow, he struggled to gasp out something—what, his daughter-in-law could not guess. She was inexpressibly shocked. One thing only seemed clear, that for some cause or other the mere mention of Frederick's name worked up the father into frenzy.

“Hush! do not try to speak. I will send for no one but Nathanael. Will that content you?”

He made a motion of satisfaction, and became quiet. His features gradually composed themselves, and, he sank into torpor.

Agatha still sat by the bed, holding his wrist, for she knew not moment by moment how soon the pulse might stop. The old man's own daughters were

too terrified to approach him. They came on tiptoe to the door, looked in, shuddered, and went back. No one stayed in the room but the old coachman, who had been Mr. Harper's servant since they were both boys; and he sat in a corner crying like a child, though silently. Agatha might as well have sat there quite alone, the atmosphere around her was so still and solemn.

She had never before been in her father-in-law's room—-the state bedroom, in which for centuries the Harper family had been born and died. The great mahogany bed itself was almost like a bier, with its dark velvet hangings, and dusty plumes. Everything around was dusty, gloomy, and worn out; the Squire would have nothing changed from the time when the last Mrs. Harper died there. In a little curtained alcove the lace hung yellow and dusty over her toilet-table, just as she had left it when she laid herself down to the pains of motherhood and death. Her portraits—one girlish, another matronly, but still merry and fair—hung opposite the bed. Between them was a longitudinal family-group, in the very lowest style of art—a string of children, from the big boy to the tottering baby, in all varieties of impossible attitudes. Their names were written under (not unnecessarily)—Frederick, Emily, Harriet, Mary, Eulalie. The only names missed were Nathanael and “poor Elizabeth.”

Mechanically Agatha observed all these things during the first half-hour of her vigil; involuntarily her mind floated away to musings concerning them, until she forcibly impelled it back to consider the present. It was in vain. Innumerable conjectures flitted through her brain, but not one which she could catch hold of as a truth. Of one thing only she felt sure, that something very serious must have

happened—some great mental shock, too powerful for the Squire's feeble old age. And this shock was certainly in some way or other connected with Major Harper.

An hour later, when she was beginning to count every beat of the old man's pulse, and look forward with dread to a midnight vigil beside that breathing corpse, the doctor came.

Agatha waited for his dictum—it needed very little skill to decide that. A few questions—a shake of the head—a solemn condolatory sigh; and all knew that the old Squire's days were numbered.

“How long?” whispered Mrs. Harper, half closing the door as they came out.

“I cannot say. Some hours—days—possibly a week. We never know in these cases. But, I fear, certainly within a week.”

*What* would be “within a week?” Why is it that every one dreads to say the simple word “*die*?”

Agatha paused. She had never yet stood face to face in a house with death. The sensation was very awful. She glanced within at the heavy-curtained bed, and then at the fair, girlish portrait which peered through the folds at its foot—the painted eyes, eternally young, seeming to keep watch smilingly. The old man and his long-parted wife, to be together again—“within a week.” It was strange—strange.

“His sons should be sent for,” hinted the doctor. “Mr. Locke Harper is in Cornwall, I believe; but the other—Major Harper——”

“Frederick—Yes, we must send for Frederick,” sobbed Mary. “My father cares more for him than for any of us. Oh, poor Frederick!”

“But,” Eulalie said—they were all whispering together at the door—“I don't think any one of us, not even Elizabeth, knows Frederick's address just now. A week ago he was passing through London, but he does make such a mystery of his comings and goings. Oh, if he were only here!”

“Ask my father,” cried Mary—“ask him if he would like to see Frederick.”

As she said this rather too loudly, there was a strange smothered sound from the bed. Agatha ran. The old Squire was gasping, choking, with the frightful effort to speak. His face was purple—his eyes wild—yet the poor bound tongue refused to obey his will.

“Hush! be composed,” said his daughter-in-law, soothingly. “You shall see no one. No one shall be sent for. Will that do?”

He grew calmer, but restless still.

“Shall my husband come? He will do you good—he does everybody good. Would you like to see Nathanael?”

A faint assent—scarcely intelligible—and then the Squire dropped off again into sleep. Agatha left him and went to his daughters, who lingered outside.

“I think Major Harper has somehow vexed him. He will only see my husband. A messenger must be sent to Cornwall. Who will write?”

“Who but yourself,” said Eulalie, hardly able even then to repress a look, beneath which Agatha's cheek glowed fiery red; “who so fit as yourself to tell this to your husband?”

“You are right;” and she smothered down her swelling heart into a grave dignity. “Get the messenger ready—I will write here—in this room.”

She turned-within—closed the door—looked once more at the old man, trying by that mournful sight to still the earthly anger that was again rising in her heart,—and sat down to write.

It was a hard task. She scribbled the date, and paused. This, strangely enough, was the first letter she had ever written to him. She did not know how to begin it. Her heart beat—her fingers trembled. To tell such news to the dearest friend and husband that ever woman had, would be a difficult and painful thing, and for her to tell it to him, as they were now! For the first letter he ever had from her to be this! And how could she write it?—she who till to-day would almost have cut off her right hand rather than have humbled herself to write to him at all. Yet now all the wrath was melting out of her, and tenderness swelling up afresh. We always feel so tender over those that are in trouble.

"Yes, I will do it," muttered Agatha. And she wrote firmly the words—"*My dear husband*" They seemed at the same time to imprint themselves on her heart as a truth—invisible sometimes, yet when brought near to the fire of strong emotion or suffering, found ineffaceably written there.

The letter was a mere brief explanation and summons; but it bore the words, duty-words certainly—yet which no duty would have forced Agatha to write had they been untrue—"*My dear husband*"—"*Your affectionate wife.*"

She despatched it, and re-entered the sick-room. All was quiet there—the very hopelessness of the case produced quiet. There was nothing to be done, watched, or waited for. Doctor Mason sat by his patient, as he had declared his intention of doing through the night. He sat mournfully, for he was a

kind, good man—the family doctor for thirty years.

“Let all go to bed,” he said to Agatha, seeming to understand at once that she was the moving spirit in the family. “Make the house perfectly quiet, and then”—

“I will come and sit up with you.”

Doctor Mason looked compassionately at the slight girlish figure, and the face already wan with the re-action after excitement. “My dear Mrs. Harper, would not a servant do as well?”

“No, I am his son's wife. What should I say to my husband if—if anything happened, and he not there, nor I?”

“Good. Then stay,” said the doctor, kindly grasping her hand. He was a man of few words.

It took some time and patience to quiet the house, and persuade Mary and Eulalie to retire. When all was done, and Agatha passed swiftly, lamp in hand, through the dark, solitary rooms, she felt frightened. The house seemed so silent—already so full of death.

There was one thing more to be done—to write a line ready for Anne Valery's waking, otherwise she would expect her home, as she had promised, in the early morning. How would she tell all these horrors, even in the gentlest way, to the feeble Anne, for whom, however unknown to others, and disguised by the invalid herself, Agatha felt an ever-present dread that she in vain tried to believe was only born of strong attachment. We never deeply love anything for which we do not likewise continually fear. Agatha almost recoiled from the idea of mentioning danger or death to Anne Valery.

She went into the dining-room to write. Everything there appeared just as when this great

shock struck the household into confusion; the dessert was not removed—the wine in which he had drunk Nathanael's health, remained yet in Mr. Harper's glass. Agatha shrank back. She half expected to see some shadowy form—not himself but Death, rise and sit in the arm-chair whence the old man had fallen.

Brave she was, but she was still a girl, and a girl of strong imagination. Her heart beat audibly; she put the lamp down in the middle of the room, where it might cast more light, and render less ghastly the last flicker of one wax-candle, the fellows of which had been left to burn out in their sockets. Then she sat down, covered her eyes, and tried to think connectedly of all that had happened this night.

Something touched her. She leaped up—would have screamed, but that she remembered the room overhead—the room. She crouched down—again covering her eyes.

Another touch, and a stirring in the window-curtain near which she sat. There was something—every one knows that horrible sensation—*something* else in the room besides herself.

“Who is it?” she said, still not looking up, frightened at her own voice.

“It's me, ma'am—only me.”

Everybody in the house had forgotten Mr. Grimes.

Half-intoxicated at the time of Mr. Harper's seizure, he had stayed behind in the dining-room, drunk himself stupid, and slept himself sober—or partly so. They say drink is a great unfolder of truth; if so, the old lawyer's sharp face betrayed that, in spite of all his past civility, he had not the kindest feeling in the world towards the Harper family.

“So, young lady, I frightened you? You did not expect to find me here.”

“I did not, indeed; I had quite forgotten your very existence,” said Mrs. Harper, point-blank. She had conceived a great dislike to Mr. Grimes, and Agatha was a girl who never took much trouble to disguise her aversions.

“Thank you, ma'am. You are polite, like the rest of the Harpers. But words, fair or foul, won't pay anything. Where's the Squire? He and I have not yet settled the little business I came about.”

“Mr. Grimes, perhaps you are not aware that my father-in-law is dangerously ill—can enter upon no business, and see no person.”

“In-deed?” His thorough insolence of manner brought Agatha's dignity back. She remembered that she was a lady belonging to the house, and that this fellow, whose behaviour made his grey hairs so little worthy of respect, was her father-in-law's invited guest.

“Sir,” she said, drawing up her little figure, and trying to look as much Mrs. Locke Harper as possible, “you must be aware that in the present state of the house a stranger's presence is undesirable. It is not too late to order the carriage. Will you favour me by going to sleep at Kingcombe?”

Mr. Grimes looked disposed to object; but she had her hand on the bell, and her manner, though perfectly civil, was resolute—so resolute, that he became humble.

“Well, Mrs. Harper, I'm willing to oblige a former client, but I should like to put to you a few questions before leaving.”

“Put them.”

“First—what's wrong with the old gentleman?”

“He has had a paralytic stroke—probably caused, the doctor says, by some great shock, which was too much for him, being an old man.”

The other old man looked uneasy, as though some touch of nature smote him for the moment.

“You don't think”—here he crept backward, shambling and cowardly—“you don't think I had any hand in causing this—this very melancholy occurrence.”

“You?” There was undisguised scorn in Agatha's lip. As if any Mr. Grimes could do harm to a Harper! “Nothing of the kind—pray do not disquiet your conscience unnecessarily.”

“But I did bring him unpleasant news, for which I'm rather sorry now. I had much better have told his son. When shall I be likely to see my friend Nathanael?”

His friend Nathanael! Agatha could have crushed him and stamped upon him, had he been worth it.

“Mr. Locke Harper,” she said, trying hard to keep her temper—“Mr. Locke Harper will be at home to-morrow night. You can then make to him any communications you please. At the present, the greatest benefit you can confer on this sad house is to absent yourself from it.”

“'Pon my life, Mrs. Harper, you might waste a little more breath on me, lest I might think it worth while to spend a little too much breath on you and yours. Do you know what claim I have upon your family?”

“That of being Major Harper's lawyer, I believe, and possibly mine before my marriage. It is not likely

that my husband has continued to use your services afterwards."

Agatha said this sharply, for she was annoyed to feel herself in such total darkness regarding her husband's affairs. For a moment she felt half alarmed at the expression, "My friend Nathanael." Could they be allied, he and this disagreeable man? Could Grimes have acquired any power over him, that he was smiling in such a sinister, mysterious way?

"My services? Really, Mrs. Harper, this is very amusing. You surely must be aware that your husband has not the slightest occasion for anybody's services in the management of his affairs. One can't make something out of nothing, and when there is not a halfpenny left"—

"Explain yourself."

"My dear young lady, is it possible you don't know the unfortunate circumstance, at least one of the unfortunate circumstances which brought me here? Why, Mr. Locke Harper knew it months ago. He and I had several conferences together on the subject. But we husbands are obliged to be uncommunicative, as my wife would tell you, if you had the pleasure of knowing Mrs. Grimes"—

"Will you keep to the point, sir?" said Agatha, sternly. She felt very stern—very bitter. The old wound was reopening sorer than ever. Nathanael had "held conferences" with this fellow—confided to him secrets which he had not told to her—his own wife! Here was a new pang—a new indignity. In its sharpness she forgot everything else; even the silent room overhead. She had just self-possession and pride enough not to question; she would have been more than human had she not paused to hear.

"Well, Mr. Grimes!" she said, confronting him,

her hand still on the door, where she had placed it as a mute signal which he refused to understand.

“I own, Mrs. Harper, it is a hard case. At the time I really felt as sorry for you as if you had been my own daughter. All to happen so soon after your marriage, too! Some persons might blame me for consenting to keep back the facts, but I assure you Major Harper compelled me to draw up the settlement exactly according to his orders.”

“Sir—will you hasten—my time is occupied.”

“So is mine, madam; fully occupied. I shall waste no more of it in giving advice to young women who are as proud as peacocks, and as poor as church-mice. If it wasn't for that highly respectable young man, your husband, I should say it served you right.”

“What?” said Agatha, beneath her breath.

“Mr. Locke Harper found out, a month after his marriage, that somebody had made ducks and drakes of all his wife's property. So, as I hear, the poor young man has had to turn land-steward just to keep his kitchen fire burning. That's all. Very odd you don't know it.”

“I do now.”

“Well, you take it quietly enough. You seem quite satisfied.”

“I am so.”

Mr. Grimes regarded her in perfect bewilderment. She showed no token of dismay or grief, but stood calmly by the open door.

“I'm not satisfied though,” cried he, at last growing heated—“I'm not going to have shareholders coming down upon me, and be hunted from London and from my profession, just because Major Harper”—

"I would rather not hear of Major Harper, or any one else, to-night. Once more—will you oblige me by leaving?"

Her thorough self-possession, her air of command—controlled the man in spite of himself. He moved away, bidding her a civil good-night.

"Good-night, Mr. Grimes; I will light you to the door."

"Ugh!" He gave a grunt—seemed inclined to hesitate—looked up at Mrs. Harper, and—obeyed.

Agatha came slowly back through the hall, feeling all stunned and stupified. She sat down, smoothed her hair back with her hands, heaved one or two weary sighs, and tried to think what had happened to her.

"So, I am no heiress. I have lost all my money, and am quite poor. He knows it—knew it a long time ago, and did not tell me. Why did he not tell me, I wonder?"

Here was a pause. For a moment she felt inclined to doubt the fact itself; truthful people have little suspicion of chicanery or falsehood, and when she came to think, innumerable circumstances confirmed Grime's statement. Yes, it must be true. This, then, was Nathanael's secret. Why had he kept it from her.

"As if he thought I cared for money! As if"—and a choking filled her throat—"as if I would have minded being ever so poor did he only love me!"

The thought burst out naturally, like water forcing its way through muddy reeds—showing how, deep down, there lay the living spring.

"Now, let me consider. He must have had some strong reason for keeping this secret. It cost him

much; he said so. But I never heeded that. How I wearied him about not taking the house; how angry I was at his acceptance of the stewardship. And it was for me he wished to toil—for me, and for our daily bread! Yet he would not tell me. And all the while he must have had numberless cares and anxieties without, and his own wife blindly tormenting him at home. Last of all I called him *mercenary*. And what did he answer? Nothing! Not one reproach—not one word of anger. Yet still—he kept his secret Why?"

Here she paused again. All was mystery.

"It might have been through tenderness—to save me pain. Yet no—for he could not but see how his silence stung me. Then since he kept not this secret for love of me—and I am hardly worth such loving—it must have been from some motive, perhaps higher than love—some bond of honour which he could not break. Did he not say something to that effect once? Let me think."

Again she sat down, and so far as her excited feelings would allow, tried to recall the story of their acquaintance, courtship, marriage—a six-month's tale—how brief, yet how full. Amidst its confusion, amidst all the variations of her own feelings, stood out one steadfast image—her husband.

His character was peculiar—very peculiar. Its strength, reticence, power of silentness and self-control were beyond her comprehension; but its uprightness, truth, and rigid immaculate honour—she could understand those. It must have been his sense of honour and moral right that in some way impelled this concealment, even at the hazard of wounding the wife he loved—if he ever had loved her.

For a minute or so Agatha's mind almost lost its

balance, rocking on this one point of torture—then it settled. "*God knows I did love you, Agatha.*" He had said so—he who never uttered a falsehood. It was enough.

"Yet he '*did*' love me; that means he does not now. I have wearied him out with my folly, my coldness, and at length with that one last insulting wrong. I—to tell him he 'married me for my money'—when all the while I was a beggar on his hands! Yet he never betrayed a word. Oh, no wonder he despises me. No wonder he has ceased loving me. He never can love me any more."

She burst into a passion of tears, and so remained for long. At last a sudden thought seemed to dart through her sorrow. She leaped upright, clasping her hands above her head in the rapturous attitude of a child.

"There is a better thing than love—goodness. And whether he loves me or not, he is all good in himself. I know that now. It is I only that have been wicked, and have lost him. No matter. Anne was right. My noble husband! I would not give my faith in him even for his love for me!"

She said this in a delirium of joy—a woman's pure joy, when she can set aside the selfish craving for love, and live only in the worthiness of the object beloved. It was beautiful to see Agatha as she stood, her features and form all radiant. One person, creeping in, did see her.

Old John the coachman, stood in the doorway with his mournful face.

Agatha awoke to realities. Death all but present in the house—misfortune following—and she had given way to that burst of joy!

She drew her hand across her forehead—sat

down at the table—wrote the three lines she had intended to Anne Valery, and then went her way, to watch all night long beside her husband's father.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

A night and a day had passed, and the household had grown somewhat accustomed to the cloud that hung over it. It was but natural. How soon do most families settle themselves after a great shock!—how easily-does any grief become familiar and bearable! Likewise, saddest thought of all—how seldom is any one really missed from among us, painfully missed, for longer than a few days—a few hours!

By evening, when all Kingcombe was yet talking over the “shocking event” at Kingcombe Holm, the “afflicted family” had subsided into its usual ways—a little more grave perhaps, but still composed. Some voluble fresh grief arose when Anne Valery came—Anne, ever foremost in entering the house of mourning—and took her place among the daughters of the family, ready to give sympathy, counsel, and comfort. It was all she was strong enough to do now. The chief position in the household was still left to Agatha.

Dr. Mason gave his directions and went away. There was nothing more to be done or hoped for. The form which lay in the Squire's bedroom might lie there for days, weeks, months—without change. The

old coachman and his wife watched their master alternately; but he took little notice of them. In every conscious moment his whole attention was fixed upon Agatha. His eyes followed her about the room; when she talked to him he feebly smiled. She could not imagine why this should be, but she felt glad. It was so sweet to know herself in any way a comfort to the father of Nathanael.

She sat for hours by the old man's bedside, trying to think of nothing but him. What were all these worldly things, loss of fortune or youth, or even love itself, to the spirit that lay on the verge of a closed life—passing swiftly into eternity?

So she sat and strove to forget all that had happened, or was happening to herself; ay, though every now and then she would start, fancying there was a voice in the hall, or a step at the door. And she would hesitate whether to run away and hide herself from her husband's presence or wait and let him find her in her right place—beside his dying father.

And then—how would he meet her? how look—how speak? Yet these conjectures were selfish. Most likely he would scarcely notice her—his heart would be so full of other thoughts. What right had she, his erring wife, to obtrude herself upon his feelings at such a time? She could only look at him, and watch him, and silently help him in everything. Alas, she might not even dare to comfort him!

Towards evening the suspense of expectation grew less, from the mere fact of its having lasted so many hours. Agatha went down in the course of dinner. The dining-table looked as usual, only fuller, from the presence of the Dugdales and Miss Valery. Mary had of necessity taken her father's place, but not his chair—it was put aside against the wall, and

nobody looked that way.

Agatha seated herself next to Miss Valery, quietly—they were all so very quiet. Anne whispered, “How is he?” and the rest listened for the answer—the usual answer, which all foreboded. Then Harriet made an attempt to speak of other things—of how the rain pattered against the window-panes, and what an ill night it was for Nathanael's journey. She even began to doubt whether he would come.

“He is sure to come,” said Miss Valery.

And while she was yet speaking there swept round the house a wild burst of storm, in the midst of which were faintly discerned the sound of a horse's feet. They all cried out—“He is here!”

A minute more and he was in the room—drenched through—flushed with riding against wind and rain. But it was himself, his own self, and his wife saw him.

When those who are much thought of return from absence, for the first minute they almost always seem unlike the image in our hearts.—It was not thus that Agatha had remembered her husband. Not thus—abrupt, agitated: anything but the calm and grave Nathanael.

He looked eagerly round the room—all rose: but Miss Valery was the first to take his hand.

“Thanks, Anne, I knew you would be with them. Is he”—

“Just the same—no change.”

The young man breathed hard. “Are you all here?” He took his three sisters and kissed them one after the other, silently, brotherly—Anne likewise. There was one left out—his wife, who had hidden

behind the rest. But soon she heard her name.

"Is Agatha with you?"

She approached. Her husband took her hand—paused a moment—and then touched her cheek with his lips, as he had done to his sisters. He did not look at her or speak—it seemed as if he were not able.

They drew round Nathanael, nearly all weeping. There was, as is natural at such times, an unusual outburst of family tenderness. And, as was natural also, no one seemed to think of the young wife—the stranger in the circle. Agatha slid away from the group and disappeared.

Shortly after, she had taken her usual place in the sickroom. It had struck her that the old man ought to be prepared for his son's coming, so she had at once proceeded to his bedside. But it was useless—he was sleeping. She sat down noiselessly in her old seat, and watched, as she had done for many an hour in this long day, the smiling portrait at the foot of the bed—her husband's mother, whom he never saw.

While she sat, footsteps entered the room. Agatha turned quickly round to motion the intruder to silence, and perceived that it was Nathanael.

She fancied—nay, was sure—that he started when he saw her. Still, he came forward. She rose, and would have given him her seat, but he put his hand on her shoulder, and gently pressed her down again. The old servant who watched near her went respectfully to the further end of the room.

It was a solemn scene; the dim light—the total silence, broken only by the feeble breathing of the old man, who lay passive as death, without death's sanctity of calm. Over all, that gay youthful portrait which the lamp-light, excluded from the bed, kindled

into wonderfully vivid life—far more like life than the sleeper below.

The young man stood mournfully watching his father, until startled by a flash of fire-light on the canvas, his eyes wandered to the painted smile of his unknown mother, and then turned back again to the pillows—the same pillows where she died.. His fingers began to twitch nervously, though his features remained still. Slowly, Agatha saw large tears rise and roll down his cheeks. Her heart yearned over her husband, but she dared not speak. She could but weep—not outwardly, but inwardly, with exceeding bitter pangs.

At length the old man stirred. Agatha remembered her duty as nurse, and hastily whispered her husband:

“I think you should move aside for a minute. Don't let him see you suddenly—it will startle him.”

“That is thoughtful of you. But who will tell him?”

“I will—he is used to me. Are you awake, father?”

Nathanael caught the word, and looked surprised.

“Dear father,” she continued, soothingly, “will you not try to wake now? Here is some one come to see you—some one you will be glad to see.”

The Squire's eyes grew wild; he uttered a thick, painful murmur.

“Some one who was sure to come when he knew you were ill—your son.” She paused, shocked at the frenzied expression of the old man's face. “Nay—your younger son—Nathanael—may he come?”

She perceived some faint assent, beckoned to her

husband, saw him take her place at the bedside, and then stole away, leaving the son alone with his father.

Agatha rejoined the rest of the family. They were all sitting talking together as Nathanael had left them. After her leaving, they said, he had hardly spoken at all, but had gone up directly after her.

In about half-an-hour he re-appeared—greatly agitated. His sisters all turned to him as he entered, but he avoided their eyes. Agatha never lifted hers; she sat in a dim corner behind Miss Valery.

“What do you think of him, Nathanael?” asked Mary, in a low voice.

“I cannot yet tell; I want to hear how he was seized. Which of you saw most of him yesterday?”

“No one, unless it was Agatha. He was shut up in his study until she came.”

“And who has been most with him since?”

“Agatha.”

A soft expression dawned in the young man's eyes as they sought the dim corner.

“Will Agatha tell me what *she* thinks of my father's state?”

This appeal, so direct—so unexpected—could not be gainsaid.

Yet, when Nathanael addressed her, Agatha's agitation was so visible that it attracted observation —especially Mrs. Dugdale's.

“Poor child!” said Harrie, compassionately, “how pale she looks!”

“No wonder,” Mary added. “She is more worn out than any of us. She sat up all last night.”

Nathanael's eyes were on his wife again, full of

ineffable gentleness. “Agatha, come over and rest in this armchair. I want to talk to you about my father.”

She obeyed. He spoke in a low voice:

“I feel deeply your having been so kind to him.”

“It was right. I was glad to do it.”

“What do you think caused his illness?”

“Doctor Mason said it was probably some severe mental shock.”

Nathanael looked alarmed. “Indeed! and did the rest of the family know anything?—guess anything?”

“Nothing.”

Her husband fixed on her a penetrating gaze; she returned it steadily.

“Agatha,” he hurriedly said, “you are a sensible girl—more so than any of my sisters. I want to consult with you alone. Come and walk up and down the room with me where they cannot overhear us.”

She did so. How strange it was!

“Do you think my father had any sudden ill news? Did he see any person yesterday?”

“A stranger came to him. Your brother's lawyer, Mr. Grimes.”

“Grimes? Oh, my poor father!”

He sat down abruptly. Agatha wondered at his mingling the two names. What should Grimes have to do with his father?

“Did any one else see Grimes?”

“I did.”

“What did he say to you? Was it”—he dropped his head, and spoke half inaudibly—“Was it anything about my brother?”

Agatha marvelled, even with a sort of pain.

Father, brother, every one before her! “He never named Major Harper, that I can remember. But he said”—

“What?”

Agatha drew back. How could she speak of such petty things as money and fortune then! She answered softly, and with a full heart:

“Never mind. It was a mere trifle, not worth telling, or even thinking of now. Another time.”

Nathanael regarded his wife doubtfully, but she bore the look. She was speaking the simple truth. Loss of fortune did seem “a mere trifle” now, when he was safe back again, and she sat in his presence, he talking to her as gently as in the olden time. Her simplicity in worldly things was so extreme that even Nathanael passed it over as impossible. He only said:

“Well, all must come out ere long. We cannot think of it now. Tell me more about my poor father.”

“There is little more to tell. His manner was rather strange, I thought, all dinner-time. He drank healths as usual—especially yours. His mind was wandering then, for he called you his *only* son. Then Mr. Grimes gave another toast—Major Harper. At that moment your father fell from his chair.”

Nathanael started up—“I knew it would be so. He could not bear such shame—my poor old father!”

“Nathanael,” cried Harrie, from the fireside group, “come and give us your opinion. I say that he ought to be sent for at once.”

“Who?”

“Frederick”

Nathanael cried out violently, as if self-control were no longer possible.

“Never! Here have I used every effort,

smothered every feeling, made every sacrifice, to save my poor father from knowing all this—and in vain! You may talk as you like, but I say Frederick shall never enter these doors. He is as good as his father's murderer."

"Hush!" cried Anne Valery, going to him while the others stood aghast. She only knew what fearful storms can be roused in these quiet natures.

"I will not hush. I have been silent too long over his wrong-doing."

"But some"—breathed Anne scarce audibly —"some whom he wronged have been silent for a lifetime."

Nathanael paused; Anne's reasoning was from facts unknown to him; but he saw the agony in her face. She continued in a whisper:

"Be slow to judge him, if only for his sisters' sakes—his dead mother's—the honour of the family."

"I have thought only too much of all these things."

"Then, for his father's sake—his father, who is going away to the other world leaving a son unforgiven. Beware how you not only take your brother's birthright, but seal your brother's curse."

"God forbid. Oh, Anne—Anne!"

He pressed his hand over his eyes, and leaned back a moment—leaning, though he did not know it, against his wife, who had stolen behind his chair. No one else came near; they all shrank from their brother as if he were suddenly gone mad. Looking up, he saw only Miss Valery.

"Forgive me, Anne; I cannot control myself as I used to do: I have been very ill lately, but don't tell my wife."

Anne took no notice; perhaps she wished the wife should learn the husband's real heart as she—his old friend—knew it.

“Don't think I would harm Frederick. Not for worlds. Do you know,” and his voice lowered, “I dare not trust myself even to be just over his misdeeds, lest I should be slaying my enemy.”

“Your enemy? It is too hard a word.”

“No! it is true.” He glanced round, perceiving no one near but Miss Valery. “Anne,” he whispered, “do you remember the parable of Nathan? Why did he do it—the cruel rich man who had enjoyed so much all his life? Why did he steal my one little ewe-lamb?”

“Stay!” cried Anne, with a sudden suspicion waking in her. “I don't clearly understand. Tell me again.”

“No, no,” he said recovering himself. “I have nothing to tell—But we are wasting time. Anne, it shall be as you say.” And he drew a long hard breath. “Which of us had best write to my brother?”

Rising, he found out who had been behind him. He looked horrified.

“Agatha!—did you overhear me?”

The suspicion wounded her to the core. Her pride and sense of justice were alike roused.

“Have no fear, Mr. Harper,” said she; “I shall not betray your secrets. I do not even comprehend them; except that I think it very wicked for brothers to be such enemies.”

He made no answer.

“And,” continued Agatha, growing bolder, as she was prone to do on the side of the mysteriously wronged, “I would have sent for Major Harper myself, had not your father seemed unwilling. But

the eldest son ought to be here."

"He shall be—your husband will write," interposed Miss Valery.

The husband moved away. He had thoroughly frozen up again into the Nathanael of old, whose coldness jarred against every ardent impulse of Agatha's temperament—rousing, irritating her into opposition.

"There is no need for him to trouble himself. What was right to be done has luckily not waited for *his* doing it. Elizabeth herself informed her brother."

"When?"

"This afternoon. I sent the letter myself to Mr. Trenchard's, where I found out he had been staying."

As Mrs. Harper said this, her husband's eyes literally glared.

"You knew where he was staying?—Agatha—Agatha?"

But Agatha's look was fixed on the door, to which her sisters-in-law had gathered hastily. There was a talking outside—a welcome as it seemed. She forgot everything except her sense of right and justice to one unwarrantably and unaccountably blamed.

"It is surely he," she cried, and ran eagerly forward.

"Nathanael!"

"Frederick!"

The two brothers, elder and younger, stood confronting each other.

# CHAPTER XXV.

"Elizabeth sent for me—Elizabeth only showed me that kindness. Oh, it was very cruel of you all—you should have told me my father was dying."

It must have been a hard heart that could have closed itself altogether against Frederick Harper now.

He leant against the doorway, the miserable ghost of his gay self. Born only for summer weather, on him any real blast of remorse or misfortune fell suddenly, entirely, overthrowing the whole man.

"Elizabeth says it happened yesterday; and must have been because—because Grimes—Oh, God forgive me! it is I that have killed my father!"

Every one shrank back. None of his sisters understood what he meant; but the mere expression seemed to draw a line of demarcation between them and the self-convicted man. Agatha only approached him—she felt so very sorry for her old friend.

"You must not talk in this way, Major Harper. If you did vex him in any way, it is very sad; but he will forgive you now. You cannot have done any real harm to your father."

Her kind voice, her perfectly guileless manner, struck each of the brothers with various emotion. The eyes of both met on her face: Frederick dropped his, and groaned; Nathanael's brightened. For the first time he addressed his brother:

"Frederick, she is right; you must not talk thus. Compose yourself."

It was in vain; his easy temperament was

plunged into depths of childish weakness. “Oh, what have I done? You said truly, it would kill him to hear *that*. And my heedlessness drove Grimes to go and tell him. Yes, your prophecy was true: I have been the disgrace of our house—the destruction of my father. What shall I do, Nathanael?”

And he held out his hands to his younger brother in the helplessness of despair.

“The first thing, Frederick, is for you to be silent Anne, take my sisters away; my brother and I have something to say to one another. What? no one will go? Then, brother, come with me.”

The other rose mechanically; Agatha likewise. She began to put circumstances together, and guess darkly at what was amiss. Probably she herself had to do with it. She remembered in what strict honour the old Squire held the duty of a guardian, as he had shown in what he said about his own relation to Anne Valery. Perhaps some carelessness of his son's had caused her own loss of fortune. Yet that was not a thing to break his father's heart, or harden his brother's against him. Mere chance it must have been; ill-luck, or at the worst carelessness. There could not be any real dishonour in Major Harper. And after all what was money, when they could be so much happier without it? She determined to go to her husband and openly say so, telling all that had come to her knowledge of their secrets. They should no longer be angry with one another—if it were on her account.

So she followed after them, with her soft, noiseless step; and when the two brothers stood together in their father's deserted study, there she was between them.

“Agatha!” They both uttered her name—the

elder in much confusion. He had seemed all along as though he could scarcely bear the sight of her innocent face.

“Don't send me away,” she said, laying a hand on either. “I know I am a young ignorant thing, and you are wise men; but perhaps a straightforward girl may be as wise as you. Why are you angry with one another?”

Both looked uncomfortable. Major Harper tried to throw the question off.

“Are we angry with one another? Nay, I am sure”—

“Don't deceive me—this is no time for making pretences of any kind. What is this quarrel between you two?” And she turned from one to the other her fearless eyes.

Major Harper could not meet them; Nathanael did, calmly, but sorrowfully.

“Agatha, I cannot tell you.”

“But I can tell *you*; and I will, for it is right. Major Harper, do not be unhappy. Believe me, I care not one jot for all the money I ever had. If you have lost it, I am sure it was accidentally. You would not wilfully wrong me of a straw.”

Again Major Harper groaned. Nathanael stood speechless with amazement. At length he said, very gently:

“How did you find this out, Agatha?”

“Mr. Grimes told me.”

“Was that all he told?”

“Yes.”

Major Harper looked relieved. Nathanael watched him sternly. After a while he said:

"Frederick, this is the right time to explain all. Do not start; you need not fear *me*; in any case I shall hold to my promise. But if you would explain—for my sake, for others' sake"—

The other shrank away. "No, not now," he whispered; "oh! brother, not now. Give me a little time. Don't disgrace me before her—before them all."

Nathanael's stature rose. Without again speaking, he shook his brother's hand from off his shoulder with a gesture, slight yet full of meaning, and turned towards Agatha. He seemed to yearn over her, though he checked every expression of feeling except the softness of his voice.

"I am glad you have found out we are poor—that in some things my wife may see I have not been so cruel to her as she thought."

Agatha's cheeks crimsoned with emotion. Why—why were they not alone that she need not have smothered it down, and stood so quiet that he believed she did not feel? He went on, rather more sadly:

"But this is not a time to talk of our own affairs; you shall know all ere long. Will you be content until then?" And he held out his hand.

She took it, looking eagerly into his face. There was something there so intrinsically noble and true! Though his conduct yet seemed strange—unreasonable towards her, harsh towards his brother, still, in defiance of all, there was that in his countenance which compelled faith. And there was that in her own heart, a something neither reason nor conviction, but transcending both, which leaped to him as through intervening darkness light leaps to light. She felt that she must believe in her husband.

He seemed partly to understand this, and smiled

—a pale, faint smile, that quickly vanished.

"Now, Agatha," he said, opening the door for her, "go and see how my father is, and then you must go to bed. I will sit up with him to-night. I cannot have my poor wife killing herself with watching."

His voice sunk tenderly; he even put out his hand, as if to stroke her hair after his old habit, but drew it back—Major Harper was looking on. Again the dark fire, lit so fatally on his marriage-day, and since then sometimes fiercely raging, sometimes smothered down to a mere spark, yet never wholly extinguished, rose up in the young man's strong, self-contained, strangely silent heart. Would his pride never let it burst forth, that, mingling with the common air, it might burn itself to nothingness! But how many a whole life has been tortured and consumed by just such a little flame, a mere spark, let fall by some evil tongue which is set on fire of hell.

While they paused—the wife waiting, she knew not for what, except that it seemed so easy to follow and so hard to quit her husband—there was a cry heard on the staircase at the foot of which they stood. Mrs. Dugdale came running down in terror.

"Nathanael—Agatha—I have told my father that Fred is here. Oh, come to him, do come!"

No time for pitiful earthly passions, jealousies, and regrets. Nathanael ran quick as lightning, his wife following. But at the door of the sick-room even she recoiled.

The old man sat up in bed, raised on pillows; either the paralysis had not been so entire as was at first supposed, or he had slightly recovered from it. His right arm moved feebly; his tongue was loosed,

though only in a half-intelligible jabber. But his countenance showed that, however lay the miserable body, the poor old man was in his right mind. Alas! that mind was not at peace, not lighted with the holy glow cast on the dying by the world to come, It was filled with rage and torment.

Nathanael ran to him, “Father, father, you will destroy yourself. What is it you want?”

The answer was unintelligible to his son, but Agatha gathered from it that the chamber-door was to be shut and bolted. She did so; yet even then the sick man's fury scarce abated. Broken words—curses that the helpless lips refused to ratify; terrible outbursts of wrath, mingled with the piteous moan of senility. Last of all came the name, once given proudly by the young father to his first-born, and now gasped out with maledictions from the same father's dying lips—“Frederick.”

Nathanael and Agatha looked at one another with horror. They both knew that the old Squire was bent on driving from his death-bed his own, his first-born son.

Agatha instinctively held down the palsied hands, which were trying to lift themselves towards heaven—not in prayers!

“Father, don't say—don't even think such terrible things. Whatever he has done, forgive him!—for the love of God, forgive him!”

The old man regarded her, and his excitement seemed redoubled. Agatha fancied it was the father's pride, dreading lest she, a stranger, knew the cause of his anger.

“No, no!” she cried, “I scarcely understand anything; my husband would not tell me. Whatever has happened can all be hushed up. We would

forgive anything to a brother—oh, would we not?" And she appealed to Nathanael, who stood motionless, great drops lying on his forehead, though his features were so still.

"It is true, father," he whispered. "No one knows anything but me, and I have kept your honour safe that he might redeem it some time. Perhaps he may. And remember, he is your son—the first-born of his mother. Hush, Agatha!" Nathanael continued, as he saw a sudden change come over the old man's face. "Don't say any more now. Leave me to talk with my father."

With the grave tenderness that he always showed her, he took his wife by the hand, led her to the door, and closed it. Greatly moved, yet feeling satisfied he would do what was right, Agatha obeyed and went down-stairs.

The sisters and brother were assembled in the study. Marmaduke was there too, but took little part in the family lamentation, except in keeping a perpetual tender watch over the grief of his own Harrie. Anne Valery was absent.

Frederick Harper sat apart. A sullen gloom had succeeded to his misery—with him no feeling ever lasted long, at least in the same form. Harriet and Eulalie were inspecting with great curiosity their elder brother, whose presence among his long-estranged household seemed accompanied with such a mysterious discomfort. They eyed him doubtfully, as if he had done something very wrong that nobody knew of. Mary only, who was next eldest to himself, ventured to address some kind words, and bestir herself about his comfort.

Thus the family sat, Agatha among them, for more than an hour. No one thought of going to bed.

All remained together, in a strangely quiet, subdued state, Major Harper being with them all the time, though he hardly spoke, or they to him. He seemed a stranger in his father's house.

Once when he had gone for a few minutes to Elizabeth's room—he had been with Elizabeth long before his coming was known to any of the rest, it was believed—Mary began in her lengthy wandering way to tell anecdotes of his boyish doings; how handsome he was, and how naughty too; and how, when he got into disgrace, she, by the scheming of Elizabeth, used secretly to carry bread-and-honey and apples to his bedroom. And she wiped her eyes, the good, plain-looking sister Mary, saying over and over again,

“Poor Fred!” She never thought of him, like the world, as “Major Frederick Harper,” but only as “Poor Fred!”

Several times Agatha stole up-stairs to the door of the room which enclosed the sorrow-mystery of the house. It was always shut, but she could hear Nathanael's voice within—his soft, kind voice, talking quietly by the bedside.

“I never see anything like 'un,” said the coachman's wife, who sat without the door. “He do manage th' Squire just as the poor dear Missus did. He do talk just like his mother.” And that was evidently the perfection of everything in the old woman's eyes.

Agatha sat down beside her on the staircase, listening to the wind without, that swept fiercely over the hollow in which Kingcombe Holm lay, as if ready to bear away on its pinions a departing soul. It was an awful night to die in. Agatha listened, sensitive to every one of its terrors. But above them

all—above the shadow of coming death, fear of the future, anxiety in the present—rose one thought—the thought of her husband.

It gave her no pain—it gave her no joy—yet there it was, a visible image sitting strong and calm in the half-lighted chamber of her heart, every feeling of which crept to its feet and lay there, like priestesses in the twilight before a veiled god.

Nathanael at last opened the door. He looked like one who has struggled and conquered not only with things without, but things within. His face had all the pallor, but likewise all the peace of victory. Agatha rose to meet him.

“Have you been waiting for me this long while? Good child!” And he smiled, but solemnly, as with an inward sense of the Presence which makes all things equal—softens all asperities and calms all passions.

“Do you know where my brother is?” asked Nathanael.

“Down-stairs, with the rest.”

“Will you go and fetch him?”

Agatha looked up at her husband half incredulously. “Have you then succeeded? Is all made right?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, how good—how good you are!” She grasped his hands and kissed them, her eyes floating in tears; then, lest he should be displeased, ran quickly away.

Miss Valery met her at the stairhead, coming from the gallery where were Elizabeth's rooms. They exchanged the usual question, “How is he now?” and then Agatha said:

“Be glad with me! I am sent to fetch Major

Harper."

Anne pressed her hand. "Go and tell him. He is with Elizabeth."

And there Agatha found him overcome with grief—the gay, handsome Major Harper! steadfast neither in good nor evil. He sat, his head bent, his hair falling disordered, its greyness showing, oh! so plain. Plainer still were the wrinkles which a life of smiles had carved only the deeper round the mouth —token of how near upon him was creeping a desolate unhonoured age. By his side, talking softly, with his hand in hers, lay the crippled sister, perhaps the only living creature who really loved him.

"Major Harper," Agatha spoke softly, laying her hand upon his shoulder. The poor broken-down man, dropping into old age! there was no fear of his thinking she was in love with him now.

"Well, what do you want?"

"I am sent to fetch you to your father."

He looked incredulous;—Agatha repeated her message.

"My husband sent me. Your father wishes very much to see you. Come."

"Elizabeth!" He turned to her as if she could make him understand this incomprehensible news.

Elizabeth clasped his hand and loosed it. She said nothing, but Agatha saw she was weeping for joy. Her brother rose and went through the long gallery they passed, his sister-in-law carrying the light, and leading him. He had quite forgotten his courteous manners now. Agatha thought of the days in London—when he had escorted her to operas, and murmured over her in drawing-rooms, making her so happy and honoured in his notice. Poor Major

Harper! How vain were all the shows of his brilliant life, the men who had courted him, the women who had flattered and admired him! Agatha forgave him all his follies—ay even all the hearts he had broken. There was not one of those poor hearts, not one, on which he could rest his tired head now!

At the door of their father's room Nathanael met him, a new and more righteous Jacob dealing with a more desolate Esau. And like Esau's was the cry that broke from Frederick Harper as he went in and flung himself on his knees by the bed.

"*Bless me—even me also—O' my father.*"

There was no answer. The words of forgiveness were denied his hearing. The old Squire could but look at his son, and move his lips in an articulate murmur.

Agatha ran to Major Harper's side. It was pitiful to see the shock he had received, and the frenzied way in which he called upon his father to speak—if only one word.

"He cannot speak, you know, but he does indeed forgive you. Be sure that he forgives you!"

Her husband drew her away to the little curtained alcove which had been Mrs. Harper's dressing-room. There they stood, close together—for Nathanael did not let her go, and she clung to him in tears—while the father and son had their reconciliation.

It was silent throughout, for after the first burst, Major Harper was not heard to speak. Now and then came a sound like the smothered sob of a boy. No one saw the faces of father and son; they were bent together, just as when, years upon years ago, the proud father had sometimes condescended to let his baby son, his first-born and heir, go to sleep upon his

shoulder.

Thus, after many minutes, Nathanael found them lying.

He held the curtain aside to see his father's countenance; it was very peaceful now, though with a dimness gathering in the open eyes. Agatha had never before seen that look—the unmistakable shadow of death. She shrank back, trembling violently. Her husband put his arm round her.

“Do not be afraid, my child,” he whispered, using the old word and tone. She rested on him, and was quieted.

“I think we had better call them all in now.”

“Shall I fetch them?” said his wife, and went out, flitting once more through the still, ghostly house. But she thought of her husband, of his last word and look, and had no fear.

They came in, all that were now living of the old man's children—save one—the poor Elizabeth. They stood round the bed, a full circle, his two sons, his three daughters, his son-in-law and daughter-in-law, and lastly Anne Valery. She was the palest and most serene of all.

Thus for an hour or more they waited—so slow was the last closing of the long-drawn-out life. There was no pain or struggle; merely the ebbing away of breath. The palsied hands, white and beautiful to the last, lay smooth on the counterpane; and when occasionally one or other of his daughters knelt down and kissed him, the old man feebly smiled. But whenever he opened his eyes, they travelled no farther than to the face of his eldest son—rested there, brightened and closed.

And thus, lying quietly in the midst of his children, at daybreak the old Squire died.

# CHAPTER XXVI.

## The old man was gathered to his fathers.

It was the day after that on which he had been borne to the place appointed for all living. A new coffin rested beside that of Catherine Harper in the family vault; the portrait still smiled, but on an empty bed. There was no separation now.

At Kingcombe Holm the house had awakened from its sleep of mourning; the shutters were opened, and the sunshine came in familiarly on the familiar rooms—where was missed the presence of him who had abided there for threescore years and ten. But what were they? Counted only as “labour and sorrow”—they had all passed away, and he was gone.

The family met—a large table circle. They looked melancholy, all in their weeds, but otherwise were as usual. A certain gravity and under-tone in speaking alone remained. Mary had again begun to busy herself over her housekeeping; and Eulalie, looking prettier than ever in her black dress, was listening with satisfaction to the Reverend Mr. Thorpe, a worthy, simple young man, who had come at once to pay the family of his affianced the respect of attending the funeral, and to plan another ceremony, when the decent term of mourning should

be expired.

Major Harper, now recovering something of his old elasticity of manner, took the place at the foot of the breakfast-table, whence Mary, presiding as usual, cast over to him glances sometimes of pride, sometimes of doubtful curiosity, as if speculating on what sort of a ruler the future head of the house would be.

A very courteous and graceful one, most surely! —to judge by the way in which he was doing the agreeable to his sister-in-law. Quite harmlessly, only it seemed as necessary for Major Harper to warm himself in the fair looks of some woman or other, as for a drenched butterfly to dry its wings in the sunshine. He was indeed a poor helpless human butterfly, not made for cloudy weather, storm, or night!

But he fluttered in vain; Agatha took no notice of him whatsoever. Her whole nature had deepened down to other things—things far beneath the shallow ken of Major Harper.

During this week, when the numerous duties of the brothers of the family left its womenkind nearly alone, shut up in the house of mourning, with nothing outwardly to do or to think of beyond the fold of crape or a gown, or the make of a bonnet—Agatha had learnt strange secrets. They were not of Death, but of Love.

She had seen very little of her husband. Either by necessity or design, he had been almost constantly away; at Thornhurst, arranging business for Miss Valery, who had gone home; sometimes at Kingcombe, in his own house—his lonely house; and for two days and nights, to the astonishment and slight scandal of his sisters, he had been absent in

Cornwall. But wherever he was, or whatever he had to do, he either saw or wrote to his wife every day; kind, grave words, or kinder letters; brother-like in their wisdom and tenderness—just the sort of tenderness that he seemed to believe she would wish for from him.

Agatha accepted all—these brief meetings—these constant letters; saw the wounding curiosity of his sisters relax, and even Harriet Dugdale acknowledged how mistaken had been her former notions, and on what excellent terms her brother and his wife now evidently were; she really never thought Nathanael would have made such an attentive, affectionate husband! And Agatha smiled outwardly a proud satisfied smile; while inwardly—-oh, what a crushed, remorseful, passionate heart was there!

A heart which now began to know itself—at once its fulness and its cravings. A heart thirsting for that love, wanting which, marriage is but a dead corrupting body without the soul—love, the true life-union, consisting of oneness of spirit, sympathy, thought, and will—love which would have been the same had they lived twenty thousand miles apart, ay, had they never married at all, but waited until eternity united those whom no earthly destinies could altogether put asunder. Now out of her own soul she learnt—what not one human being in a million learns, and yet the truth remains the same—the unity, the immortality, the divineness of Love, to which the One Immortal and Divine gave His own name.

She sat in her usual quiet mood, she did everything in such a quiet, self-contained fashion now—sat, idly talked to by Major Harper, whom she did not hear at all. She only heard, at the further end

of the table, Nathanael talking to Mary. Sometimes she stole a glance, and thought how cordial his manner to his sister was, and how tender his eyes could look at times. And she sighed. At her sigh, her husband would turn, see her listening to Frederick with that absent downcast look—and become silent.

Not an angry jealous silence now—his whole manner showed how much he honoured and trusted his wife—but the hush of a deep, abiding pain, a sense of loss which nothing could ever reveal or remove.

But men must keep up worldly duties; it is only women, and not all of these, who can afford the luxury of a broken heart. Mr. Harper rose, nerved for the day's task—a painful one, as all the family knew. The elder brother had shrunk from it, and it had been left to Nathanael, who in all things was now the thinker and the doer. The impression of this had fixed itself outwardly, effacing the last remnant of his boyish looks. As he stood leaning over Mary, Agatha thought he had already the aspect of middle age.

“It will not take me long, Mary, since you say my father kept his papers in such order. Probably I shall have done by the time the Dugdales come. You are quite sure there was a will?”

“Quite sure; you will probably find it in the cabinet. I saw him looking there the very afternoon of the day he died. I was calling him to dinner, but his back was turned, and I could not make him understand—poor father!”

Mary's eyes filled, but the younger brother said a few kind words, and her grief ceased The rest were silent and serious, until Nathanael, going away, addressed Frederick rather formally. All speech

between them, though smooth, was invariably formal and rare.

“You are satisfied to leave this duty in my hands?—you do not wish to share it?”

“Oh, no, no!” hurriedly answered the other, walking away in the sunny window-seat, and breathing its freshness eagerly, as if to drive away the bare thought of death and the grave.

Nathanael went out—but ere he had closed the door a little hand touched him.

“What do you want, Agatha?”

“I should like to go with you, if you would allow —that is, if you would not forbid me.”

“Forbid you? Nay! But”—

“I want—not to interrupt you, or share any family secrets—but just to sit near you in the room. This is such a strange, dreary house now!” And she shivered.

Her husband sighed. “Poor child—such a child to be in the midst of us and our trouble! Come with me if you will.” And he took her into the study.

No one had been there since the father died; directly afterwards some careful hand had locked the door, and brought the key to Nathanael; and it was the only room in the house whose window, undarkened, had met during all that week the eye of day. It felt close with sunshine and want of air. Mr. Harper opened the casement, and placed an arm-chair beside it, where Agatha might look out on the chrysanthemum bed, and the tall evergreen, where a robin sat singing. He pointed out both to her, as if wishing to fortify her with a sense of life and cheerfulness, and then sat down to the gloomy task of looking over his father's papers.

They were very few—at least those left open in the desk; merely accounts of the estate, kept with brevity and with much apparent labour; sixty years ago literature, nay, education, were at a low ebb among English country gentlemen. But all the papers were so carefully arranged, that Nathanael had nothing to do but to glance over them and tie them up—simple yearly records of the just life and honest dealings of a good man, who transferred unencumbered to his children the trust left by his ancestors.

"I think," said Nathanael—breaking the dreary silence—"I think there never was one of the Harper line who lived a long life so stainlessly, so honourably, as my father."

And somehow, as he tied up the packets, his finger slightly trembled. Agatha came and stood by him.

"Let me help you; I have ready hands."

"But why should I make use of them?"

"Have you not a right?" she said, smiling.

"Nay, I never claim as a right anything which is not freely given."

"But I give it. It pleases me to help you," said Agatha, in a low tone, afraid of her own voice. She took the papers from him, and tried to make herself busy, in her innocent way. It cheered her.

Nathanael watched her for a minute. "You are very neat-handed, Agatha, and it is kind of you to help me."

"Oh, I would help any one." Foolish, thoughtless words! He said no more, but went and looked over the cabinet.

This was a sadder duty. There were letters

extending over more than a half century. The Squire received so few that he seemed never to have burnt one. The oldest—fifty years old—were love-letters, of the time when people wrote love-letters beginning "Honoured Miss," and "Dear and respected Sir," overlaying the plain heart-truth with no sentimentalisms of the pen. The signatures, "Catherine Grey," and "Nathanael Harper," in round, formal, girl and boy hand, told how young they were when this correspondence began;—young still, when its sudden ceasing showed that courtship had become marriage. From that time, for nearly twenty years, there was scarcely a letter signed Catharine Harper.

"This looks," said Agatha, who unconsciously to both had come to stand by her husband and share in his task—"this looks as if they were so rarely parted that they had no need for letter-writing."

"It was so: I believe my father and mother lived very happily together."

"I should like to read these letters all through, if I might? They are the only love-letters I ever saw."

"Are they, indeed?"

The sharp questioning look startled Agatha. She remembered that first letter of Nathanael's—perhaps he was vexed that she had apparently forgotten it—the letter which had been such a solemn epoch in her young life. She coloured vividly and painfully.

"I mean—that is"—

Her husband looked another way. "You shall have these letters if you so much desire it."

"Thank you. I would like to keep something of your mother's. And she was indeed so happy in her marriage?"

“Very happy, Anne Valery says. My father's was not a perfect temper, but she understood him thoroughly, and he trusted her. He had need; he knew—what is a rare thing in marriage now-a-days—that he had been his wife's first love.”

Agatha made no reply, and the conversation dropped.

Next to Mrs. Harper's letters, and preserved with almost equal care, was another packet. It began with a child's scrawl—double-lined, upright and stiff:

“My dear Father,

“Uncle Brian has ruled me this paper, and ruled Anne another. We are all very merry at Weymouth. We don't want to come home, except to see”—(here a word, apparently “*ponies*” had been carefully altered, by a more delicate hand, into something like “*Papa*”)—“Anne's love, and everybody's, from your dutiful son,

“Frederick.”

“'*Frederick?*'—I thought the letter was yours.”

“No, if he had kept any it was sure to be my brothers. Frederick must have them back.”

“Let me tie them up,” said Agatha stretching out her hand.

“No—no—are they so very precious? Why do you want to touch them?” said he, sharply, drawing them out of her reach.

“Only that I might help you.”

Mr. Harper regarded her a moment, and then put back the letters into her lap. “Forgive me, I did not mean to be cross with you. But this task confuses me.”

He leaned his elbow on the cabinet, covering his eyes, and stood thus for two or three minutes.

Agatha remained silent—who could have intruded on the emotion of a son at such a time? None but a wife who could have stolen into his heart with a closer, dearer claim, and she, alas! *she* dared not. Weeks ago—when she believed herself wronged—it would have been far easier. The higher he rose, the lower she sank, weighed down by the bitter humility that always comes with fervent love. She watched him—her heart throbbing, bursting, yearning to cast itself at his feet—yet she dared not.

"Now let us look over some other letters. I wonder whether Mary was right, and it is here we shall find the will!"

He, then, was only thinking of letters and wills! Agatha turned away, and went to sit by the window and watch the chrysanthemums.

At last she was attracted back by her husband's voice.

"This is the will, I see, by the endorsement. Take it, Agatha; we will not touch it till the Dugdales come. And here are more letters to my father. Do you think I ought to burn them or look them over first?"

The confidential tone in which he spoke soothed Agatha. It was a sort of tacit acknowledgment of her wifely rights to his trust.

"I think, suppose you look them over"—

"I cannot," said he, wearily. "Will you?" And he gave her a handful in her lap. Agatha felt pleased; she thanked him, and turned them over one by one.

"Here is a hand which looks like Miss Valery's."

"It is hers. Set them by."

She opened another, in a careless and very illegible hand, which she could not recognise at all:

"My dear Brother,

"The approaching marriage in your family, of which you inform me, unfortunately cannot alter my plans. I must recover my lost fortunes abroad.

"Frederick told me yesterday his certainty of being accepted by Miss Valery. He might have told me sooner, but perhaps thought me too much of a crusty old bachelor to sympathise with his felicity. Possibly I am.

"You ask if Anne has communicated to me the coming change in her life? No.

"Farewell, brother, and God bless you and yours.

"B. L. H."

"Why, this is Uncle Brian!" cried Agatha, giving the letter to her husband. He read it, laid it aside without comment, and sat thinking. She did the same. Turning, their eyes met; and they understood each other's thoughts, but apparently neither liked to speak. At last Nathanael said:

"It must have been so, though I never guessed it before."

"But I did, though she never openly told me."

"Well, it is a strange world!" mused the young man. "Poor Uncle Brian!"

"When do you expect him home?"

"Any day, every day. Thank God!"

"Did you not think she seemed a little better yesterday," said Agatha hesitatingly. "Just a very little, you know."

"A little better; is she ill? What, very ill?"—Agatha's mute answer was enough. "Oh, poor, poor Anne! And he is coming home!"

"Perhaps," said Agatha, shocked to see her husband's emotion—"perhaps if we take great care, and she is very happy,—people must live when they

are happy"—

"Few would live at all then," was the answer, unwontedly bitter. "Better not—better not; poor Anne! It is a hard, cruel, miserable world."

"Why do you say that, Nathanael?"

He started, and Agatha too, for opening the door, with a bright, clear look, was she of whom they were just talking—Anne Valery.

"I knew I might come in. I heard what you were doing here," and a slight sadness crossed her face. "Is it all done, now?"

"Nearly," and Mrs. Harper hurriedly folded the letter, which lay still on her lap. Miss Valery's eye caught the writing; Nathanael gave it to her.

Anne read it; at first with a natural womanly feeling—nay, even agitation. Soon this ceased, absorbed in the infinite peace and content of her whole mien. "I knew all this long ago," she said calmly. "It was a—a *mistake* of Frederick's."—Then, still calmly; "What do you think I have just heard from Marmaduke!—He"—there could be but one she meant—"he has safely landed at Havre."

"Uncle Brian!" the young people both cried, and then instinctively repressed the joy. It seemed too sacred to be expressed in ordinary fashion. And passing naturally from one thought to another, Nathanael glanced round the room; the unused desk, the scattered papers left to be examined by the unfamiliar hands of a younger generation. Had the absent one come but a little sooner! "Alas!" he said, "it seems as if the world's universal sorrow lay in those words, '*Too late.*"'

Miss Valery sank on a chair, her temporary strength departing. Her hands dropped into that fold that was peculiar and habitual to them—a simple

attitude, not unlike Chantrey's “Resignation.”

“You speak truly, Nathanael. But 'our times are in *His* hand.'”

She said no more, and shortly Mr. Harper, taking with him the sealed packet that was endorsed “*My Will*” led the way to where the family were assembled. In doing so there grew over him the hard silence always visible when he was much affected. But Agatha was not surprised or hurt: she began to understand him better now.

In the dining-room were only the immediate family. Every one knew the probable purport of the will, and how simple a document it was likely to be; for the patriarchal old Squire hated the very mention of law, and it had been his pride that, though not entailed, the inheritance of Kingcombe Holm had descended for centuries unbroken by a single legal squabble. Therefore they all waited indifferently, merely to go through a necessary form; Harriet Dugdale and her husband, Eulalie and her *fiancé*, and the solitary Mary. Major Harper alone was rather restless, especially when the three others came in from the study. It was noticeable that, with all his smooth manner, Frederick never seemed quite at ease in the presence of Miss Valery. Nevertheless he tried, and successfully, to assume his position as elder brother and present head of the family. He gave Anne a gracious welcome.

“I scarcely expected you would have honoured us so far. This is entirely a family meeting.”

“Shall I leave?”

“Oh, no,” cried everybody at once, “Anne is so thoroughly one of the family.”

“Certainly,” responded Major Harper, bowing though his brows were knit. He waited till Anne took

her seat, and then sat down, silent. Many changes, vivid, and various, passed over his flexible mouth. At last, leaning forward, he hid it with his hand. There was a brief hush in the men, of solemnity—in the women, of mourning. More than one tear splashed on the black dress of the tender-hearted Mary.

Nathanael stood—the will in his hand—hesitating.

“It seems to me, that as this is a family meeting, we might—not necessarily, but still out of kindness and respect—postpone it for a few days, that the only remaining member of the family may be present.”

“Who is that?” said the elder brother.

“Uncle Brian.”

One or two voices, especially the Dugdales, seconded this, and eagerly proposed to wait for Uncle Brian.

“Impossible!” Major Harper said, hastily. “I have engagements. I cannot wait for any one.”

“But”—

“Nathanael—don't argue. Remember, I am the elder brother. Give me my father's will.” Nathanael paused a moment, and gave it. “The seal has been broken and re-fastened,” Frederick added, breaking it with rather nervous hands. He tried to glance over it, but his eyes wandered unsteadily. “There, take it and read. I hate business.”

And he threw himself back in his seat, which happened to be the old Squire's especial chair. Agatha thought it was thoughtless of him to use it.

Nathanael read the will aloud. It was dated ten years back, and was in the Squire's own hand, drawn up simply, but with perfect clearness. The division of

fortune was as they all expected: a moderate funded sum to each of the daughters and to Nathanael; the estate, with all real and personal property, to go to the eldest son. There were a few small bequests to servants, and one gift of the late Mrs. Harper's jewels.

“I meant them,” the old man wrote, “for my eldest son's wife. Disappointed in this, I leave them to Anne Valery.”

Major Harper moved restlessly in his chair. Anne sat quiet. The young Agatha looked at them, and wondered if people grew callous as they grew old.

“Is it all read?” said Frederick.

“Yes. Stay, here are a few lines; a codicil, I fancy, affixed with seals to the body of the will I can hardly make it out.”

And as Mr. Harper perused it, his wife observed his countenance change. He let the paper drop, and sat silent.

“What is it? Read,”, cried Harrie Dugdale.

“I cannot—Anne, will you? God knows, brothers and sisters”—and he looked all round the circle with an eagerly appealing gaze—“God knows I never knew or dreamed of this. Anne, read.”

“Shall I read, Major Harper?”

He was gazing out of the window with an absent air. At the sound of her voice he started, and gave some mechanical assent.

Anne read the date—of only twelve days back.

“That was the very day that he was taken ill, you know,” whispered Mary.

The codicil began:

“I, Nathanael Harper, being in sound mind and body, do hereby make my last will and testament,

utterly revoking all others, in so far as relates to my two sons. I leave to my younger son, Nathanael Locke Harper, all my landed, real, and personal estate, praying that he may long live and maintain our name in honour at Kingcombe Holm. To my eldest son—having no desire to expose to ruin the family estate, or link the family name with more dishonour than it already bears—to my eldest son, Frederick Harper, I leave the sum of One Shilling."

Anne's reading ceased. Dead silence, utter, frightened silence, followed. Then arose a chorus of women's voices—"Oh, Frederick!—oh, Frederick!"

Frederick rose, feebly smiling. "It is a mistake—all a mistake. My father was not in his right mind."

The sisterly tide turned. "Oh, hush, Frederick! How wicked of you to say so!"

"Well read it over again," said Marmaduke Dugdale, waking up into the interests of the world around him. Anne gave him the paper, and he read it with his ponderous, manly voice, rounding out every bitter word which Anne had softened down. All was undoubtedly legal, signed in his own hand, and witnessed by two of his servants. There could be no doubt it was done immediately before the paralytic attack, when he was perfectly in his senses; indeed, he could not be said ever to have lost them.

The family sat, awed by their father's deed; to question which never struck them for a moment—legal chicanery was not rife at Kingcombe Holm. They looked at the disinherited brother with a sort of shrinking wonder, as if he had done some great unknown wickedness. He might have sat there ever so long, conscience-stricken and stupified, but this family gaze stung him into violence.

"I say it is a cheat—how or by whom contrived I

know not—but it is a cheat. My father loved me—the only one of you who ever did. If there was a coolness between us, he forgave me when he died. You all saw that."

There was no denying it. Every one remembered how the father's last dying look of love had been on his eldest son. Again the tide of family feeling changed. They threw doubtful glances towards Nathanael, except his wife. But she drew closer to him, and trembled and doubted no more.

He stood, meeting the eyes of all his family. In his aspect was great distress, but entire composure—not a shadow of hesitation or confusion. Nor, on the other hand, was there any triumph. When he spoke—they seemed expecting him to speak—his voice was low and steady:

"You know, brother, and all the rest of you know, that I have had no hand in this matter."

"I know nothing of the sort," cried Frederick. "I only know that I have been defrauded—disgraced.—Not by any act of my father's, or he would not lie quiet in his grave. My father always loved me." And the quick feeling natural to Major Harper made him hesitate—unable to proceed. But soon he continued, vehemently:

"I will find out this. Evil speakers, malicious, underhand hypocrites, have turned my father against me. I declare to Heaven that I never wronged any"—

Frederick stopped—interrupted not by words, for there was perfect silence—but by a certain quiet look of Anne Valery's, which fastened on his face. He turned crimson—he had so much of the woman in him, though of womanhood in its weakest form. He glanced from Miss Valery to Agatha, and then back again.

“Anne—Anne Valery, tell me do you know anything?”

“Everything.”

“You—even you!” For the moment, he cowered in such emotion as was pitiful to see; but it passed and he grew desperate.

“I say, I will contest this will. It shall be proved invalid. My lawyer Grimes”—

“Mr. Grimes has been here, and is now gone to America,” Anne whispered. “I urged and assisted him to go, that he should not throw disgrace on the family.”

Again Frederick cowered down, then rose, goaded to the last degree. “Nevertheless, this will shall not stand. I will throw it into Chancery. I will leave for London this very day.”

“Stay,” said Nathanael, starting from deep thought, and intercepting him as he was quitting the room. “One word, Frederick.”

“Not one! You are all against me, but I will brave you all. I will have my rights—ay, even if I plead my father's insanity.”

“Oh, horrible!” cried his sisters.

“Frederick, you know that to be impossible,” said Nathanael, sternly.

“Then I will plead what may prove a deeper disgrace to the family than madness, or even—what I am supposed to have done,” catching his brother's arm, and hissing out the words in his face—“I will plead that the will is *a forgery*.”

Nathanael wrenched away his hold, thereby throwing Frederick back almost to the floor. The two stood for a moment glaring at one another, in that deadly animosity, most deadly when it arises

between brothers,—and then the younger recovered himself. It might be because, instantaneously as the struggle had begun and ended, he had heard a woman's cry of terror, and the name uttered was not “Frederick,” but “Nathanael.” Also, as he stood, he felt two little hands steal from behind and tighten over his own. He grew very calm then.

“Frederick, you must unsay that word. There are some things which a man cannot bear even from his brother. No doubt can exist that this is my father's own writing, and no forgery. You know that as well as I do.”

“As well as you do! Exactly what I meant to observe,” said Major Harper, with his keenest and politest sneer.

Nathanael moved back. A man's roused passions are always terrible; but there is something ten times more awful in fury that is altogether calm—molten down as it were to a white heat. Never but once—that uneffaceable *once*—had Agatha seen her husband look as he looked now.

“Pause one minute, Frederick. If you had waited and heard me speak——”

“I dare you to speak!”

“It would be better not to dare me. I am at my last ebb of patience. I have kept faithfully my promise to you. None of our family know—not even my own wife—all that is known by you and me, and our father whom we buried yesterday. I would have saved him from the knowledge if I could, but it was not to be. Now, take care. If you drive me to it”—

He hesitated. Agatha felt his hand—the thin boyish hand—grow cold as ice and rigid as iron. She uttered a faint cry.

“Agatha, my wife,” with the old sweetness in the

whisper, “go and sit down. Leave me to reason with my brother.”

“No, let *me* do that,” said one coming between. It was Anne Valery.

She had risen from the chair where, during almost all this time, she had sat like a statue, only none watched her, not even Agatha. When she rose, it was with a motion so slow and gliding, her soft black dress scarcely rustling as she moved, that Frederick Harper might well start, thinking a supernatural touch was on his arm.

“Anne, is it you? I had forgotten you. No”—he muttered, half to himself, turning from the contest with his brother to gaze on her—“no, I never did—never do forget you.”

“I believe that. Come and speak to me here.”

Unresisted, she put her arm in his, and led him away to the deep bay-window, circled with a low-cushioned sill, such as delights children. Anne sat down.

“Are you determined on this cruel course?”

“I must recover my rights,” was the sullen answer. “Any man would.”

“And when you have done this—supposing it practicable—what further do you purpose?”

“What further?” He looked puzzled, but at last perceived her meaning. With an impulse eagerly caught, as Major Harper caught all impulses, good and ill, he cried—“Yes, I understand you. My first act, on coming to my property shall be to right poor Agatha.”

“I thought so,” said Anne, kindly. “But you will not be able. There are others whose claims will be upon you the instant you have money to satisfy them

—the shareholders. They know nothing of Agatha Bowen. Remember you expended her fortune as you worked the mine—*in your own name.*"

Major Harper looked confounded with shame. "And you knew all this, Anne—you! For how long?"

"For some months—ever since I bought Wheal Caroline."

"And you never betrayed me!"

"We were playfellows, Frederick." She spoke softly, and turned her face to the other side of the bay-window.

He forgot she was old now—he remembered only the familiar voice and attitude, the same as when in her girlish days she used to sit on the cushioned window-sill and talk with him for hours.

"Playfellows! Was that all, Anne? Only playfellows?"

"Only playfellows," she repeated firmly. "Never anything more. You knew that always." And, perhaps unconsciously, Anne looked down on a ring—plain, not unlike a childish keepsake—which she always wore on the wedding-finger of her left hand.

Major Harper sighed, not one of his sentimental sighs, but one from the deeps of his heart. A smile, hollow and sad, followed it. "I suppose it is idle talking now, but—but—you were my first-love, Anne! If things had gone differently, I might have been a different man."

"Not so. God ordained your fate, not I. No man need be ruined for life because a woman cannot love him. Human beings hang not on one another in that blind way. We have each an individual soul; on another soul may rest all its hopes and joys, but on God only rests its worth, its duties, and its nobility.

We may live to do His work, and rejoice therein, long after we have forgotten the very sound of that idle word—happiness."

She paused.

"Go on; you talk as you always used to do."

"Not quite," said Anne, with a faint smile; "I am hardly strong enough. Frederick," and her eyes had their former lovely, earnest look—earnest almost to tears, save that girl-tears had from them long been dried,—"Frederick, for the sake of our olden days—of your mother whom we both loved—of your father who has gone to her—listen to me for a little. Trust to your brother—he will not act unjustly. Do not create dissensions in your family; do not let people say that the moment Mr. Harper's head was laid in the grave his children quarrelled over his property."

"I do not quarrel—I but take my right," cried Major Harper, becoming again the "man of the world," as he saw, the curious glances that from time to time reached the bay-window. "Thank you for this good advice; for which my brother owes you even more than I. But I am not a child now, nor a boy in love, to be talked over by a woman."

Miss Valery rose, rather proudly. "Nor am I that woman, Major Harper. But I have been so long united in affection with your family; I could not bear to think it would be brought to dishonour. Surely—surely *you* will not be the one to do it."

Again as he turned to go, she drew him back by those earnest eyes.

"Frederick, it would grieve me so, ay, break my heart, to see them brought into open shame, the old familiar home, and the name—the dear, dear name."

Major Harper's bitter tongue burst its control and stung. "I now see your motive. Everybody knows

how very dearly Anne Valery has all her life loved the Harper name."

Anne rose to her full height, and a blush, vivid as a girl's, dyed her cheek. "I have," she said—"I have loved it, and I am not ashamed."

The blush paled—she sank back on the window-sill. Major Harper was alarmed.

"Anne—how ill you look! What have I done to you?"

"Nothing," she answered; and, catching his arm, drew herself upright once more.

"Frederick, we were children together, and you loved me; some day you will remember that. Afterwards we grew up young people, and, still thinking you loved me—but it was only vanity then —you did me a great wrong; I will not say how, or when, or why, and no one knows the fact save me—but you did it. You did the same wrong to another lately."

"How—how?"

"You said to Mrs. Thornycroft—you see I have learnt all, for I wrote and asked her—you said that you 'feared' poor little Agatha loved you, and"—

"I know—I know."

"You know, too, that vanity misled you; that it was not true. But it was a wicked thing to say; trifling with a woman's honour—torturing those who loved her—bringing on her worlds of suffering. Still, she is young, and her suffering may end in joy;—mine"—

Anne paused; the human nature struggled hard within her breast—she was not quite old yet. At length it calmed down—that last anguished cry of the soul against its appointed destiny.

She took her old playmate by the hand, saying gently,

“I am going away soon—going *home*. Before I go, I would like to say, as I used to do when you were unkind to me as a child, 'Good-night, and I forgive Fred everything.'”

“Oh, Anne—Anne.” He kissed her hand in strong emotion.

“Hush! I cannot talk more,” she went on quickly. “You will do as I ask? You will wait until—until”—

She stopped speaking, and put her handkerchief to her lips. Slowly, slowly, red drops shone through its folds. Major Harper called wildly for his sisters.

“I knew how it would be,” cried Mary Harper. “It has happened twice before, and Doctor Mason said if it happened again”—

“Oh, God forgive me!” groaned Frederick, as his brother carried Anne Valery away. “She will die—and I shall have killed her!”

## CHAPTER XXVII.

Anne Valery did not die. Agatha had said she would not; and the young heart's creed was true. It had its foundation in a higher law than that of physical suffering.

After a few days she was able to be moved to her own house, according to her earnest desire; after a few more, the energy of her mind seemed to put

miraculous strength into her feeble body.

"I knew you would get well," said Agatha joyfully, as she watched her patient returning to ordinary household ways; only lying down a little more than Anne was used to do, and speaking seldom and low always, for fear of the bleeding at the lungs. "I knew you must get well, but I never saw anybody get well so fast as you."

"I had need," Anne answered. "I have so much to do."

"That you always have. What a busy rich life—rich in the best sense—yours has been! How unlike mine!"

"I hope so—in many things," said Anne, to herself. "But I must not speak much. I talked my last talk with poor Frederick in the bay-window. Where is Frederick?"

"He has been riding up and down the country day after day—he seems to find no rest."

Anne looked sorry. "And we are so quiet here!"

It was indeed very quiet, that sombre house at Thorn-hurst, through whose wintry rooms no one wandered but Agatha, excepting the old, attached servants. Yet this was of her own will. She had been jealous that any one should attempt to nurse Anne but herself. She left even her own home to do it. Yet—the bitter thought followed her ever—this last was small renunciation. No one would miss her there!

During the days when Miss Valery lay ill, the world without had been shut from Agatha's view. Woman-like, she lived within the four walls and beside the sick couch, and had only seen her husband for a few minutes each day, when, though he talked to her only of Anne, his manner had a soft, reverent tenderness, and a troubled humility, as if he

began to see a different image in his young wife. She was different, and he too. Neither knew how or when the change came—but it was there.

She did so miss him, when, having taken them safe to Thornhurst, and told her "that she might stay there as long as Anne needed her, but no longer"—ah, that happy "but!"—he went away to his own little house at Kingcombe, and busied himself there for three days.

"Do you think Nathanael will come and see us this morning?" said Anne, looking up from the papers with which she was occupied, towards Agatha, who stood at the window watching down the road.

"Did you want my husband!"

"Oh, no! I can do my business myself now. But I think he will come."

"Why do you think so?"

"Why?—Child, come here." And as Agatha knelt by the sofa, Miss Valery leaned over her, twisting her curls and stroking down the lids over her brown eyes in the babyish, fondling ways which all good people can condescend to at times, especially when recovering from sickness.

"She is a foolish child! Did she fancy nobody loved her? Did she think everybody believed she was wicked (and so she was, now and then, very wicked). Does she suppose nobody sees her poor little goodnesses? Oh, but they do! They will find all out without my telling. It is best to leave things alone."

"You must not speak; it will do you harm."

"Not thus whispering. Nay, lay the head down again. Imagine it only a little bird in the air talking to my child. Some kind of characters—I once knew

the like well!"—and Anne's whisper came through a half sigh—"are very proud and jealous over the thing they love. They cannot bear a breath to rest on it, or to go from it to any other than themselves. They are very silent, too; would die rather than complain. They are strong-willed and secret—and as for persuading them to anything against their will, you might as well attempt to cleave with your little hand to the heart of a great oak. You must shine over it, and rain softly on it, and cling close round it, and it will take you into its arms, and support you safe, and hang you all round with beautiful leaves. But you must always remember that it is a noble forest-oak, and that you are only its dews, or its sunshine, or its ivy garland. You must never attempt to come between it and the skies."

Anne ceased. Agatha looked up with moistened eyelids.

"I understand; I will try—if you will stay with me. I cannot do anything right without you."

Anne smiled. "Poor little Agatha! Not even with the help of her husband?"

"My husband! Oh, teach me to be a good wife, such a wife as you would have been—as you may be"—

Agatha felt a soft finger closing her lips, and knew that on *that* subject there must still be, as ever, total silence. She hid her face, and obeyed.

At length Miss Valery started. "There is a horse coming down the road, I think. Go, look. It may be your husband."

Agatha rose, and ran to the window.

Anne half rose too. "I fancy I hear two horses. Is anybody with Nathanael?"

“Only Mr. Dugdale.”

“Ah! well!” There was the slightest possible compression of eyelids and mouth, and Anne resumed her place again. “It is very kind of Marmaduke.”

The visitors came in softly. Duke Dugdale was the kindest, gentlest soul to any one that was ill—wise as a doctor, merry as a child. But now—though he strove to hide it—his countenance was overcast.

“It's no use, Anne,” he said, after a brief greeting, during which he felt her pulse in quite a professional way, and pronounced it “stronger—much stronger—and too quick almost.”

“What is of no use?”

“Brian Harper won't come home! All his abominable, con—yes, I'll out with it—his confounded pride.” And Duke tried to look very savage, but couldn't manage it.

“Where is he?”

“Somewhere near Havre; we can't make out where. He will not write. Ask Nathanael.”

“I am afraid it is too true,” said Nathanael, leaving his wife, to whom he had been talking by the window. “I shall have to hunt him out, and use all my persuasions before he will come home; because he is too proud to return poor as he went out. What shall I say to him, Anne? I shall start to-morrow.”

Agatha turned quickly round. Her husband did not see her anxious look—he was watching Miss Valery.

“Tell him, Nathanael, that his brother is dead, and his presence needed in the family. Once make him understand that it is right to come, and he will come. No one was ever more able to do or to suffer

*for the right*, than Brian Harper."

Marmaduke shook her hand heartily. "Anne, you are as wise as a man, and as faithful as a woman. If poor Brian were going to be hanged for murder, I do believe-his old friend would find a good word to say for him!"

"Well," said Nathanael, after a silence, "I shall go to Havre to-morrow. You can spare me, Anne? And for my wife"—

Agatha hung her head. A vague dread smote her. She would have given worlds to have courage enough to beg him not to go.

"Havre is across the sea," she murmured. "Surely Uncle Brian would come home in time, if you waited."

Waited! she caught a sight of Anne's bent profile, marble-like, with the shut eyes. Waited!

Agatha crept to her husband's side. "No—no waiting," she whispered. "Go. I would not keep you back an hour. Bring him. Quick—quick."

Could Anne have heard, that she wakened up into such a life-like smile? "No, dear, you must not send your husband away so hastily. Let him sail from Southampton to-morrow; that will do. He wants to talk to you to-day."

Nathanael looked surprised. "It is true, I did; and I told my brother to meet me here this afternoon. Did you know that too?"

"I guessed it. You are doing right, quite right. I knew you would. I knew *you*, Nathanael."

She held out her hand to him, warmly.

"Dear Anne! But you forget—it is not I only who have to do it."

"Not a word! Go and tell her all. Let her be the

first to hear it. Away with you! the sun is coming out. Run and talk in the garden-alleys, children!"

Her manner, so playful, yet full of keen penetration, drove them away like a battery of sunbeams.

"What does she mean?" said Agatha, looking up puzzled, as they stood in the hall.

"She reads people's minds wonderfully clear; she always did, but clearer than ever now. It is strange. Agatha, do you think"—

"I think all sorts of things about her—different and contrary every hour. But the chief thought of all is, that you must go to Havre at once. I long for Uncle Brian's coming. How soon can you return?"

"As soon as practicable, you may be sure of that. But you must relax your interest even in Uncle Brian just now; I want to talk to you. Shall we go, as Anne said, into the garden-alleys?"

"Anywhere that is sunny and warm," said Agatha, with a light shiver. Her husband regarded her with that serious pathetic smile which was one of his frequent moods.

"Must you always have sunshine, Agatha? Could you not walk a little while in the shade? Not if I were with you?"

She cast her eyes down, trembling with a vague apprehension of ill; then gazed in the kind face that grew kinder and dearer every day. She put her hand in her husband's without speaking a word. He folded it up close, the soft little hand, and looked pleased.

"Come now, let us go into the garden."

Agatha wrapped a shawl about her, gipsy-fashion, and met him there. It was one of those mild days that sometimes come near upon Christmas, as if

the year had repented itself, and just before dying, was dreaming of its lost springtide. The arbutus-trees were glistening with sunshine, and under the high wall a row of camellias, grown in great bushes in the open air, the pride of Anne's gardener and of the whole county of Dorset, were beginning to show buds, red, white, and variegated, as beautiful as summer roses.

"I used to be so fond of this walk when I was a little lad," said Nathanael, "I remember, after I had the scarlet-fever, being nursed well here; and how every day when my brother came, he used to carry me up and down this sunny walk on his back. Poor Fred! he was the kindest fellow to children."

"Kindness seems his nature. I think that if your brother did any harm it would never be through malice or intention, but only weakness of character."

"I perceive," Mr. Harper said, abruptly—"you have no bitter feeling against my brother Frederick."

"How could I? He never did me wrong. Except, perhaps, it was his carelessness that made me poor." Here Agatha hesitated, for she was touching upon a dangerous subject—one so fraught with present emotion and with references to past suffering, that hitherto both husband and wife had by tacit consent abstained from it. There had been no confidential talk of any kind between them.

"Go on," her husband said; "we must speak of these things some time; why not now?"

"Though he made me poor," she continued, "it was probably through accident. And I have no fear of poverty"—how simply and ignorantly she pronounced that terrible word!—"I do not mind it in the least, if you do not."

"Was there any need for that *if*, Agatha?"

"No," she replied, and was silent. Shame and remorse gathered over her like a cloud. She thought of those wicked words she had spoken—words which to this day he had neither answered nor revenged. He had even suffered the smooth surface of daily kindnesses to grow over that gaping wound of division. Was it there still? Did he remember it? Could she dare to allude to it, if only to implore him to forgive her? She would in a little time—perhaps when they were by themselves in their own house, when she would throw herself at his knees and weep out a confession that was beyond all words—words could but insult him the more. There are some wounds that can only be healed by love and silence.

"I think it is time," said the husband—"full time that you heard all, or nearly all, connected with this painful matter. It is mere business, which I will try to make intelligible if possible. You ought not to be quite so ignorant of worldly matters as you are, since, if anything happened to me—But I have provided against almost everything."

"What are you talking of?" said Agatha, holding him tight, with a faint intuition of his meaning.

"Of nothing painful. Do not be afraid. Only that I think it right to explain to you what has occurred to us since our marriage—in worldly things I mean."

"Yes. I am listening."

"Before we married," he continued, distinctly, and rather proudly, "I knew nothing whatever of your fortune—not even its amount. I made no inquiries, interfered in no way, except reading the settlement I signed. The settlement stated that your property was safe in the Funds. This was a"—his brow darkened—"it was—*not true*. The whole had been taken out, contrary to your father's expressed

will, and embarked in a mining speculation in Cornwall."

"Those miners whom Miss Valery aided? Was it my money that was wasted at Wheal Caroline? Was it me from whom the poor miner came to seek redress?"

"No; the transaction was more blameable even than that. It was all carried on in my brother's name. He was made what they call 'managing director' of the company: Grimes being solicitor. There were a few shareholders—his clients—widows and unmarried women who had put by their savings, and such like poor people who wanted large interest, and some richer ones, important enough to make public their ruin—for everybody lost all."

"But the poorer shareholders—the widows—the old maids?"

"Ay, there's the pity—there's the wickedness," said Nathanael, beneath his breath. "People tell me such things are common in England, but I would have starved rather than have been mixed up in such a transaction, even in the smallest way, and with property that was bona fide my own."

"And," said Agatha, slowly understanding, "this property was not Major Harper's own. Also, his doing the thing secretly afterwards, and leading you to believe what was—not quite true. I must say it, I think it was very wrong of your brother."

"Don't let us talk of him more than we can help. Remember—a brother, Agatha!"

More light dawning on his strange conduct, his self-command, his secrecy even with her. His wife clung to his arm, her heart brimming with emotion that she dared not pour out. For he seemed inclined to be reserved even now.

"You see," he added, as they walked along, "I have had some few things to try me."

Agatha pressed his arm. Oh that she could break through that awe of him and his goodness, that shame of her own foolish erring self!

"Agatha," he said, stopping suddenly, "the thing that hurt me was my father. If only he had died a month ago, and never heard of this!"

If only now Agatha could speak! But she felt choking. They walked past the windows and looked in. "There is Anne sitting by herself as she used to sit, watching Fred and me in the garden. He was such a handsome, gay young man. I felt so proud of being his little brother. And my poor father—he had not a hope in the world that did not rest on Frederick."

He walked on rapidly back into the shadiest and darkest walk. There he stopped. "Agatha," taking both her hands, and reading her features closely —"Agatha, would you be very unhappy if we went back and lived, poor, in the little cottage?"

"Unhappy? I?"

"I would try that you should not be. I can earn quite enough to give you many comforts. We should not be any more content if we claimed our rights and lived in prosperity at Kingcombe Holm."

"Oh, no!"

"Besides, I am not sure that these are our rights, morally speaking. I think, if my father had lived long enough, he would have undone what he did in a moment of passion, and let the first will stand. This is what I have said to myself, when considering that I have duties towards my wife as well as towards others, and that this would restore what was taken from her. 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.' But,

Agatha, we would not urge that law?"

"Never! God forbid! And Major Harper was so kind to me when I was an orphan."

"*Only* kind? Did he never—No, I am getting foolish. Say on, Agatha. Come, sit here; we can talk, and nobody can see or hear us." And he led his wife to a sheltered arbutus-bower. "Well, was my brother so kind to you?"

"He was, indeed. For the sake of that time I would forgive him anything; I have already forgiven him a good deal."

"Indeed? Tell me or not, as you choose; I urge no right to pry into your secrets."

"Oh, don't look, don't speak in that way! Why should I not tell you? I would have told you before, had you asked. It was nothing—indeed nothing. But I was a proud girl, and he made me angry with him."

"For what cause?"

She grew confused—hesitated; the shamefacedness of girlhood came over her. "I will tell you," she said at last boldly. "It is surely no harm to tell anything to my husband:—Major Harper once said to Emma Thornycroft, that he thought I was 'in love' with him."

"Well!"

"It was cruel, it was wicked, it insulted my pride. And more than that—it wounded me to the heart that *he* should say so."

"Was it—don't speak if you don't like—was it *true*?"

"No," cried Agatha, the blood rushing in a torrent over her face. "No, it was not true. I liked, I admired him, in a free girlish way; but I never, never loved him."

There was a minute's hush in the arbutus-bower, and then Nathanael sank down to his wife's side—down, lower yet, to her very feet. He wrapped his arms round her waist, laying his head in her lap. His whole frame shook convulsively.

"Oh Heaven! You surely did not think *that?*" cried Agatha, appalled.

"I did, ever since the day we were married. I heard him say so in the church.—He repeated it to me afterwards.—And it was a lie! Curse"—

"No, no, forgive him!" And Agatha sobbed on her husband's neck, clasped by him as she never thought he would clasp her in this world.

At last he rose, pale and sad. "There is other forgiveness needed. I have been very cruel to you, Agatha. I had made him a promise, and to it I sacrificed myself and you too, without remorse. But now you see how it was. I could have judged my brother that I loved; I dared not *slay my enemy.*"

The only answer was a soft hand-pressure.

"I hardly know what I am about, Agatha,—not even whether or no my wife loves me; she did not when we were first married, I fear?"

Agatha drooped her head.

"Never mind, she shall love me yet; I am quite fearless now." He stood up, holding her tight in his arms, as if daring the whole world to wrest her from him. His whole aspect was changed. It was like the breaking up of an Arctic winter, when the trees bud, and the rivers pour sounding down, and the sun bursts out, reigning gloriously. For a long time they remained thus, clasped together, so motionless that the little robin of the arbutus-trees hopped on to a bough near them and began a song.

"We must go in now," said Agatha.

"Ay; we must not forget Anne, or anybody. One can do so much good when one is happy!"

"I feel so." She rose, hanging on his arm, but trembling still, almost frightened by the insanity of his joy, whirled dizzily in the torrent of his overwhelming love.

"You understand now what I had to say to you! You can guess how I mean to act as regards my brother?"

"I think I can."

"And you will give your consent? Without it I would have done nothing. I would not have taken from my wife these worldly goods, and left her only me and my love, unless she willed it so."

"I do will it."

"God bless her." He lifted Agatha from her feet, rocking her in his arms like a baby. "I always said God bless her! even when I was most wretched—most mad. I knew she was one of His angels—a woman worthy of all love, though she had none for me. I was not very cruel to her, was I?"

"No—no."

"I will never be cruel to her any more. I will smother down all my pride, my reserve, the horrible suspiciousness which is rooted in my nature. I will never doubt or wound her—only love her—only love her."

Breathless, Agatha trembled to her feet again. Her husband stood by her side—calmer now, and radiant in the beauty of his youth. Manly as he was, there was something about him which could only be expressed by the word "beautiful"—a something that, be he ever so old, would keep up his boyish

likeness—his look of “the angel Gabriel.”

“Let us go into the house now.”

They went—those two young hearts thrilling and bounding with life and joy—into the darkening house, the hushed presence of Anne Valery.

She was lying on her sofa, very still and death-like. The white cap tied under her chin, the hands folded—the perfect silence in and about the room—it was like as if she had lain down to rest, calmly and alone, in her solitary house, and in her sleep the spirit had flown away;—away into the glorious company of angels and archangels, never to be alone any more.

But it was not so. Hearing footsteps, Anne opened her eyes, and roused herself quickly. She looked from one to the other of the young people—at the first glance she seemed to understand all A great joy flashed across her; but she said nothing. She as well as they were long used to that peculiarity of nature—which especially belonged to the Harper family—a conviction of the uselessness of talk and the sacredness of silence.

“Has my brother arrived?” said Nathanael.

“Not yet.”

“Marmaduke is gone?”

“Yes; he wanted to get up a Free-trade dinner for the welcoming”—here she smiled—“of one whom he says all Dorset will be delighted to welcome—your Uncle Brian. Worthy Duke! It is his hobby, and one likes to indulge him in it.”

“Most certainly. And where is the dinner—Uncle Brian's grand dinner—to take place?”

“I persuaded him to change it into a public meeting, and give the clay-cutters—many of them

Mr. Locke Harper's former people, and some now old and poor—a New Year's feast instead. You will see to that, Nathanael?" And she laid her hand on his arm with rather more earnestness than the simple request warranted.

Nathanael assented hastily, and spoke of something else.

"I am rather sorry I asked my brother to meet me here; I forgot he has not been to Thornhurst for so many years."

"It is time then that he came," said Anne, gently. "I shall be very glad to see him."

While she was speaking, her old servant entered, with the announcement of "Major Harper."

Just the Major Harper of old—well-dressed, courtly, with his singularly handsome face, and his short dark moustache, sufficient to mark the military gentleman without degrading him into the puppy; Major Harper with his habitual good-natured smile and faultless bearing, so gracefully welcomed, so gaily familiar in London drawing-rooms.—But here?—

He paused at the door, glanced hastily round the old familiar room, with the known pictures hanging on the walls, and the windows opening on the straight alley of arbutus-trees. His smile grew rather meaningless—he hesitated.

"Will you come to this chair near me? I am very glad to see you, Major Harper."

"Thank you, Miss Valery."

He crossed the room to her sofa, Nathanael making way for him. He just acknowledged his brother's presence and Agatha's, then took Miss Valery's extended hand, bowing over it with an

attempt at his former grace.

“I hope I find your health quite re-established? This change to your own pleasant house—pleasant as ever, I see”—he once more glanced round it—paused—then altogether broke down. “It seems but a day since we were children, Anne,” he said, in a faltering voice.

Agatha and her husband moved away. They respected the one real feeling which had outlasted all his sentimentalism. For several minutes they stood at the far window apart. When Anne called them back, Major Harper had recovered himself, and was sitting by her.

“Nathanael, our old friend here says you wished to speak with me?”

“I did.”

“Make haste, then, for I am going to London to-night I have made up my mind. I cannot settle here in Dorsetshire.”

“Not if it were your father's wish—his last longing desire?”

“Anne, for God's sake don't speak of my father.” He leant his elbow on the table and covered his eyes.

Nathanael and Agatha exchanged looks, then both smiled—the happy smile of a clear conscience and a heart at rest. “Tell him now,” whispered the wife to her husband.

“Brother!”

Major Harper lifted up his head.

“My elder brother!” And Nathanael offered the hand of peace, which, in spite of all outward and necessary association, neither had offered or grasped since Frederick's return to Dorset.

“What do you mean?”

"I mean that you are my elder brother—my father's favourite always. If he had lingered but another day he would doubtless have proved that, and have done—what I intend to do, just as if he had himself accomplished it. Do you understand me?"

"No!" And Major Harper looked thoroughly amazed.

"Do you see this? which you, either from forgetfulness, or trust in me—I had rather believe the latter—left in my hands on that day." And he drew from his pocket the will which had been read. "You spoke of throwing it into Chancery, and there would be scope for a century of Chancery business here. But I choose rather to respect the honour and unity of the family. Therefore, with my wife's entire consent in her presence, Anne's and yours, I here do what my father, had he lived, would certainly have done."

He took up the codicil, separated it from the will to which it was fastened by seals, and quietly, as if it had been a fragment of worthless paper, put it into the fire.

"Now, Frederick, the original will stands."

Frederick sat motionless. He seemed hardly to believe the evidence of his own eyes. He watched the curling, crackling paper with a sort of childish curiosity. When at last it was completely destroyed, he shut his eyes with a great sigh of satisfaction.

Miss Valery softly touched him. "Major Harper, every brother would not have acted thus."

"No, indeed. Just Heavens, no!" he cried, as the whole fact burst on him, touching his impressible nature to the quick. "My dear Nathanael! My dear Agatha! God bless you both."

He wrung their hands fervently, and walked to the window, strongly affected. The husband and wife

remained silent. Anne Valery lay on her sofa, and smoothed her thin fingers one over the other with a soft, inward smile.

"How nobly you both act towards me! and I—how have I acted towards you?" said the elder brother, in deep and real compunction. "I would give half I possess to undo what has been done, and all through my cursed folly and weakness. Do you know that I have lost every penny of your fortune, Agatha?"

"Mr. Grimes told me so lately."

"What, only lately? Did you not know before? Did not your husband"—

"No," she cried, eagerly. "My husband never betrayed you, even by a single word. I am glad he did not. I had far rather he had broken my heart than his own honour."

Anne turned to look at the young face, flushed with feeling; and her own, caught something of the glow, though still she spoke not.

"But," said Major Harper, eagerly, addressing his sister-in-law—for Nathanael sat in one of those passive moods which those who knew him well alone could interpret—"but my honour must not be broken either. I must redeem all I lost; and I will, to the very last farthing. Only wait a little, and you shall have no cause to blame me, my poor Agatha!"

"Nay, *rich* Agatha," was the murmur that Nathanael heard, as two little hands came from behind and alit on his shoulders, like two soft white doves. He caught them, and rose contented, cheerful and brave.

"No, Frederick, you must dismiss that idea. It is untenable, at least for a long time. My wife and I are going to play at poverty." He smiled, and drew her

nearer to him.

“Besides,” said Miss Valery, putting in her quiet voice, to which every one always listened now, “I think there are perhaps stronger claims than Agatha's on Major Harper.”

“Indeed? Anne, tell me what I can do. Anything,” he added, much moved, “so that my old friends may think well of me. Speak!”

She did so, raising herself, though with some exertion, and re-assuming the sensible, straightforward, business-like ways which through her long life of solitary independence had caused Anne Valery to be often called, as Duke Dugdale called her, “such a wise woman!”

“I should like very much to see all things settled in the Harper family. Your sisters are provided for; Eulalie will be married next year; and you will keep Mary and Elizabeth always with you at Kingcombe Holm. Promise that, Frederick.”

He assented most energetically.

“There is no need to fear for these,” looking affectionately at Nathanael and his wife. “Work is good for young people; and I—or others—will always see that they have work enough supplied to bring in wherewithal to keep the wolf from their door. For the present, they are a great deal better poor than rich.”

“Thank you, prudent Miss Valery,” said Nathanael laughing.

She responded cheerfully, and then turning to Major Harper, went on with seriousness:

“In other instances, much suffering has been caused by your means; and I would not have it said that any suffered through the Harper family. I have

done what I could to prevent this. Matters are mending at Wheal Caroline. Nathanael tells me I shall have—that is, there will be—a fine flax-harvest there next year."

Speaking of "next year," Anne's voice faltered, but the momentary feebleness passed.

"Still, there is one thing, Frederick, which nobody can do but you; and it is necessary not only to save yourself but to redeem the honour of your house. It will not cost you much—only a few years' retrenchment, living with your sisters at Kingcombe Holm."

Again Major Harper protested there was nothing in the world he would not do for the sake of virtue, and Anne Valery. She drew her desk to her, and gave him paper and pen.

"Write here, that you will pay gradually to certain shareholders I know of, the money they lost through trust in your name, and in that of the family. It is hardly a legal claim, or if it be, they are too poor to urge it—but I hold it as a bond of honour. Will you do this, Frederick? Then I shall be happy, knowing there is not a single stain on the Harper name."

In speaking, she had risen and come beside him, looking faded, wan, and old, now that she stood upright, in her black dress, and close cap. Her beauty was altogether of the past, but the moral influence remained.

Frederick Harper took the pen, hesitated, and laid it down. "I do not know what to write."

Anne wrote for him a few plain words, such as a man of honour must inevitably hold as binding. He watched idly the movement of the hand that wrote, and the written lines.

"You have the same slender fingers, Anne, and your writing looks just as it used to do," he said, in a subdued voice.

"There, now—sign."

"Sign!—It is like witnessing a will," said Major Harper, laughing.

"I wish you to consider it so," returned Anne, in a low voice. "Consider it my last will—my last desire, which you promise to fulfil for me?"

He looked at her, took the pen, and signed, his hand trembling; then kissed hers.

"Anne, you know, you were my first love."

The words—said half jesting, yet with a certain mourn-fulness—were scarcely out of his lips, than he had quitted the room. They soon heard the clatter of his horse along the avenue. Major Harper was gone out into the busy world again. He never set foot in quiet Thornhurst more.

The three that were left behind breathed freer—perhaps they would hardly have acknowledged it, but it was so.

"Well, now it is all done," said Nathanael, as he drew closer to the sofa where Anne lay—with Agatha performing all sorts of little unnoticed cares about her. "And now I must think about going."

No one asked him where, but Agatha glancing out of the window, thought, with a shiver, of the dreadful sea curving over into boundlessness from behind those hills.

"I find I must start at once," he continued, "if I would catch the next boat to Havre. It sails from Southampton to-morrow morning. I have just time to ride back to Kingcombe and catch the mail train. No, I'll not let you come home with me," he added,

answering a timid look of Agatha's, which seemed to ask, should she come and help him? “No, dear, I can help myself—such a useful-handed fellow doesn't want a wife even to pack up for him. And, possibly, if you were with me, I should only find it the harder to go. It is rather hard.”

“But it is right”

“I think,” said Anne—they had not known she was listening—“I think it is right, or I would not let Nathanael go. And Heaven will take care of him, and bring him safe home to you, Agatha. Be content.”

“I was content,” she said, somewhat lightly. It was a strange thing, but yet human nature, that her husband's fits of passionate tenderness only seemed to make her own feelings grow calm. Whether it was the shyness of her girlhood, or the variableness of a love not spontaneous but slowly responsive, or whether—a feeling wrong, yet alas! wondrously natural—it was the mere wilfulness of a woman who knows herself to be infinitely beloved, certain it was that Agatha appeared not quite the same as a few hours before. Affectionate still, and happy, happier than it is the nature of deep love to be; yet there was a something wanting—some strong stroke to cleave her heart, and show beyond all doubt what lay at its core. The heart often needs such teaching; and if so, surely—most surely it will come.

Agatha followed her husband to the hall. He was grave with his leave-taking of Anne Valery, who had looked less cheerful, and had breathed rather than spoken the last “God bless you!—Come back soon.” The young man did not again say, even to himself, anything about his journey being “hard.”

But as he stood in the hall with his wife, he lingered. Youth is youth, and love is love, and each

seems so real—life's only reality while it lasts. No human being, while drinking the magic cup, ever looks or listens to those who have drank, and set it down empty. Be the history ever so sad, each one thinks, smiling, “Oh, but I shall be happier than these.”

Nathanael took his wife in his arms to bid her good-bye. She stood, looking down; bashful, reserved, but so fair! And so good likewise—all her girlish whims could not hide her heart-goodness. In her whole demeanour was the germ of that noble womanhood which every good man wishes his wife to possess, that she may become his heart of hearts, the desired and honoured of his soul, and remain such, long after all passion dies. There was one thing only wanting in her—the light which played waveringly in and out—sometimes flashing so true and warm and bright, and then disappearing into clouds and mist. The husband could not catch it—not though his eyes were thirsting for the blessed ray.

“These few days will seem a long time, Agatha.”

“Will they?”

Nathanael took the smiling face between his hands, and looked down, far down, into the brown depths of her eyes.

“Do you”—He hesitated. “I never asked the question before, knowing it vain; but now, when I am going away—when”—

He paused, the deep passion quivering through his voice.—“Do you love me, Agatha?”

She smiled—some insane, wicked influence must have been upon her—but she smiled, hung her head in childish fashion, and whispered, “I don't quite know.”

“Well—well!” He sighed, and after a brief

silence bade her good-bye, kissed her once, and went towards the door.

“Ah—don't go yet. I was very foolish. I never, never can be half so wise as you. Forgive me.”

“Forgive you, my child? Ay, anything.” And he received her as she ran into his arms, kissing her again tenderly, with a sad earnestness that almost increased his love.

“Now I must go, my darling wife. Take care of yourself, and good-bye.”

So they parted. Agatha went in dry-eyed; then locked herself in the library, and cried violently and long.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

“They are sure to be home to-morrow; nothing can prevent their being home to-morrow,” said Agatha, as she read over neither for the first time, nor the second, nor the third, her husband's letter, received from Havre.

It was night now, and they were sitting by the fire in Miss Valery's dressing-room. It had been one of Anne's best days; a wonderfully good day; she had walked about the house, and given several orders to her delighted servants, who, old as they were, would have obeyed the most onerous commands for the pleasure of seeing their mistress strong enough to give them. Some, however, wondered why she

should be so particular about the order of a house that never was in disorder, and especially why various furniture arrangements which had gradually in the course of time been altered, should be pertinaciously restored, so that all things might look just as they did years and years ago. Also, though it was a few days in advance of the orthodox day, she would have the house adorned with “Christmas,” until it looked a perfect bower.

“It do seem, Mrs. Harper,” said the old housekeeper, confidentially—“it do seem just as on the last merry Christmas, afore the family was broke up, and Mr. Frederick turned soldier, and Mr. Locke Harper—that's his uncle—went away with little Master Nathanael, Mr. Locke Harper as is now.”

And Agatha had laughed very heartily at the idea of her husband being “little Master Nathanael;” but she had not told this conversation to Anne Valery.

All afternoon the house had been oppressively lively, thanks to a visit from the Dugdale children; which little elves were sent out of the way while their mother performed the not unnecessary duty of putting her establishment in order. For Harrie was determined that her house, and none other, should have the honour of receiving Uncle Brian. As Nathanael had taken for granted the same thing, and as Mary Harper had likewise communicated her opinion, that it was against all etiquette for her poor father's only brother to be welcomed anywhere but at Kingcombe Holm, there seemed likely to be a tolerable family fight over the possession of the said Uncle Brian.

The little Dugdales had talked of him incessantly all day, communicating their expectations

concerning him in such a funny fashion that Agatha was ready to die with laughing, and even Anne, who had insisted on having the children about her, was heard to laugh sometimes. She let little Brian climb about her sofa, and answered all sorts of eccentric questions from the others, never seeming weary. At last, when the sound of merry, young voices had died out of the house, and its large, lofty rooms grew solemn with the wailing of the wind, Anne had retreated to her dressing-room, where she sat watching the fire-light, or answering in fragments to Agatha's conversation.

This conversation was wandering enough; catching up various topics, and then letting them drop like broken threads, but all winding themselves into one and the same subject "They will be home to-morrow."

"I hope, nay, I am sure of it, God willing!" said Anne, softly. "He often puts hindrances in our way, but in the end He always works things round, and we see them clearly afterwards. Still we ought hardly to say even of the strongest love or dearest wish we have, 'It *must* be!' without also saying 'God willing.'"

Agatha replied not. This was a new doctrine for her. How rarely in her young, passionless, sorrowless life, she had thought of the few words, oft used in cant, and Agatha hated all cant—"the will of God." She pondered over them much.

"What sort of a night is it" said Anne, at length.

"Very dreary and rainy, and the wind is high."

"No matter, it will not reach them. The *Ardente* will be safe in Southampton-water by this time."

Agatha recurred to the perpetual letter; "Yes, so my husband tells me here."

"And therefore," Miss Valery continued, laying

her hand over the paper, “his good little wife shall fold up this, and not weary herself any more with anxiety about him. Those who love ought above all others to trust in the love of God.”

After this they sat patient and content—nay, oftentimes quite merry, for Agatha strove hard to amuse her companion. And the wind sang its song without—not threateningly, but rather in mirth; and the fire burnt brightly, within. And no one thought of them but as friends and servants—the terrible Wind, the devouring Fire.

It was growing late, and Agatha began to use the petty tyranny with which Miss Valery had invested her, insisting on her friend's going to bed.

“I will presently; only give me time—a little time. I am not so young as you, my child, and have not so many hours to waste in sleeping. There now, I'll be good. Wait—you see I am already pulling down my hair.”

She did so, rather feebly. It fell on her shoulders longer and thicker than any one would have believed—it was really beautiful, except for those broad white streaks.

“What soft fine hair,” cried Agatha, admiringly. “Ah, you shall go without caps in the spring—I declare you shall.”

“Not at my age.”

“That cannot be so very ancient. I shouldn't mind asking you the direct question, for I am sure you are not one of those foolish women who are ashamed to tell their age, as if any number of years matters while we keep a young warm heart.”

“I am thirty-nine or forty, I forget which,” said Anne, as she drew her fingers through the long locks, gazing down on them with some pensiveness. “I

myself never liked hair of this colour, neither brown nor black; but mine was always soft and smooth, and some people used to think it *pretty* once."

"It is pretty now. You will always be beautiful, dear, dear Anne! I will call you Anne, for you are scarcely older than I, except in a few contemptible years not worth mentioning," continued the girl, sturdily. "And I will have you as happy, too, as I."

Anne sat silent a minute or two, the hair dropping over her face. Then she raised it and looked into the fire with a calm sweet look that Agatha thought perfectly divine.

"I have been happy," she said. "That is I have not been unhappy—God knows I have not. I have had a great deal to do always, and in all my labour was there profit. It comforted me, and helped to comfort others; it made me feel that my life was not wholly thrown away, as many an unmarried woman's is, but as no one's ever need be."

"But some are. Think of Jane Ianson, of whom Emma wrote me word yesterday. If ever any woman spent a mournful, useless life, and died of a broken heart, it was poor Jane Ianson."

"Her story was pitiful, but she somewhat erred," Anne answered, thoughtfully. "No human being *ought* to die of a 'broken heart' (as the phrase is) while God is in His heaven, and has work to be done upon His earth. There are but two things that can really throw a lasting shadow over woman's existence—an unworthy love, and a lost love. The first ought to be rooted out at all risks; for the other —let it stay! There are more things in life than mere marrying and being happy. And for love—a high, pure, holy love, held ever faithful to one object,"—and as she spoke, Anne's whole face lightened and

grew young—“no fortune or misfortune—no time or distance—no power either in earth or heaven can alter *that*.”

There was a pause, during which the two women sat silent and grave. And the wind howled round the house, and the fire crackled harmlessly in the chimney, but they noticed neither—the fierce Wind—the awful Fire.

“It is a wild night,” said Agatha at last. “But they are landed at Southampton long ago. Last night was lovely—such a moon! and they were sure to sail, because the *Ardente* only plies once a week, and there is no other boat this winter-time. Oh, yes! they are quite safe in Southampton. I shouldn't wonder if they were both here to breakfast to-morrow.”

And Agatha, with her little heart beating quick, merrily, and fast, never thought to look at her companion. Anne's eyes were dilated, her lips quivering—all her serenity was gone.

“To-morrow—to-morrow,” she murmured, and as with a sudden pain, put her hand to her chest, breathing hard and rapidly. “Agatha, hold me fast—don't let me go—just for a little while.—I *cannot* go!”

She clung to the young girl with a pallid, frightened aspect, like one who looks down into a place of darkness, and shudders on its verge. Never before had that expression been seen in Anne Valery. Slowly it passed away, leaving the calmness that was habitual to her. Agatha hung round her neck, and kissed her into smiles.

“Now,” she said, rising, “let us both go to bed. You look tired, my child, and we must have your very best looks when you make breakfast for *them* in the morning. That is, if they both come here.”

“They will come—my husband says so. He

knows, and is determined that Uncle Brian shall know—everything."

Anne sat still—so still, that her young companion was afraid she had vexed her.

"No, dear—not vexed. But no human being can know everything! It lies between him and me—and God."

So saying, she rose, fastened up the long hair in which the last lingering beauty of her youth lay—put on her little close cap, and was again the composed gentle lady of middle age.

She rung for the housekeeper, and gave various orders for the morning, desiring a few trivial additions to the breakfast, which would have made Agatha smile, but that she noted a slight hesitation in the voice that ordered them.

"Is there anything your husband would like especially? I don't quite understand his ways."

Agatha blushed as she answered—"Nor I."

"You will not answer so in a few months hence," said Anne, when they were alone. "It is a very unromantic doctrine, but few young wives know how much the happiness of a home depends on little things—that is, if anything can be little which is done for *his* comfort, and is pleasant to *him*. There's a lecture for you, Mistress Agatha. Now go to bed, and rise in the morning to begin a new era, as the happiest and best wife in all England."

"I will," cried Agatha, laughing, though with a tear or two in her eyes. To think how much Anne had guessed of the wretched past, yet, with true delicacy, how entirely she had concealed that knowledge!

They embraced silently, and then Miss Valery

went into her own room, where, year after year, when all the duties and cheerfulness of the day were done, the solitary woman had shut herself in—alone with her own heart and with God. The young wife stood and looked with thoughtful reverence at the closed door of that room.

It was eleven o'clock, yet somehow Mrs. Harper did not feel inclined to go to bed. She had too many things to think of, too many plans to make and resolutions to form. Her life must settle itself calmly now. Its trouble, tumult, and uncertainty were over. She felt quite sure of her husband's goodness—of his deep and tender love for herself—nay, also of her own for him—only that was a different sort of feeling. She thought less on this than on the other side of the subject—how sweet it was to be so dear to him. She would try and deserve him more—be to him a faithful wife and a good house-wife, and make herself happy in his devotion.

She smiled as she passed through the hall where he had stood and said, “Do you love me?” She wished she had frankly answered “Yes,” as was indeed the truth; only his strong love had lately made her own seem so poor and weak.

Lingering on the spot which his feet had last pressed, she tried to fancy him beside her, and acted the scene over again, “making believe,” childish fashion, that she stood on tiptoe attempting to reach up to his mouth—a very long way!—and there breathing out the “Yes” in a perfectly justifiable and unquestionable fashion. And then she laughed at her own conceit—the foolish little wife!—and tripped off into the drawing-room, lest the old butler, who always went round the house at midnight to see that all was safe, might catch her at her antics. Still, were they not quite natural? Was she not a very happy

and fondly-worshipped wife? and was not her husband coming home the next morning?

Entering the drawing-room, her high spirits were somewhat sobered down; its atmosphere felt so gloomy and cold. The fire had nearly died out—the ill-natured fire, that did not know there was a cheerful little woman coming to sit beside it and dream of all sorts of pleasant things.

“I wish fires would never go out,” said Agatha, rather crossly; and she stirred it, and blew it, and cherished it, as if it were the only pleasant companion in this dreary room.

“How I do love fire,” she said at last, as she sat down on the hearth-rug and warmed her little feet and hands by the blaze, and would not look in the dark corners of the room, but kept her face turned from them, as during her life she had kept it turned away from all gloomy subjects. Passionate anguish of her own making, she had known; but that stern, irremediable sorrow which comes direct from the unseen Mover of all things and lays its heavy hand on the sufferer's head, saying, “Be still, and know that I am God”—this teaching, which must come to every human soul that is worth its destiny, had never yet come to Agatha Harper.

Was it this unknown something even now tracking her, that made her long for the familiar daylight, and feel afraid of night, with its silence, its solitude, and its dark?

“I will go to bed and try to sleep,” she said. “It is but a few hours. My husband is certain to be here in the morning.”

She rose, laughed at herself for starting on some slight noise in the quiet house—old Andrews locking up the front door, probably—snuffed her candle to

make it as bright as possible, and prepared to go upstairs.

A light knock at the door.

“Come in, Andrews. The fire is all safe, and I shall vanish now.”

She said this without looking round. When she did look she was somewhat surprised to see, not the butler, but Marmaduke Dugdale. It was odd, certainly, but then Duke had such very odd ways, and was always turning up at impossible hours and in eccentric fashion. He looked eccentric enough now, being thoroughly drenched with rain, with a queer, scared expression on his face.

Agatha was amused by it. “Why, what a late visitor! The children are gone home hours ago, though they waited ever so long for 'Pa.' Have you been all this while at Mr. Trenchard's?”

“I haven't been there at all.”

Agatha smiled.

“Don't'ee laugh—now don't'ee, Mrs. Harper.” And Duke sat down, pushing the dripping hair from his forehead, pulling his face into all sorts of contortions, until at last it sunk between his hands, and those clear, honest, always beautiful eyes, alone confronted her. There was that in their expression which startled Agatha.

“What did you come for so late, Mr. Dugdale?”

“What did I come for?” he vaguely repeated. “Now don't'ee tremble so. We must hope for the best, my child.”

Agatha felt a sudden stoppage at the heart which took away her. breath. “Tell me—quick; I shall not be frightened;—he is coming home to-morrow.”

“My dear child!” muttered Duke again, as he

held out his hands to her, and she saw that tears were dropping over his cheeks.

Agatha clutched at the hands threateningly—she felt herself going wild. “Tell me, I say. If you don't—I'll——”—

“Hush—I'll tell you—only hush!—think of poor Anne! And there's hope yet. Only they have not come into Southampton-roads—and last night there was a fire seen far out at sea—and it might have been a ship, you know.”

Thus disconnectedly Marmaduke broke his terrible news. Agatha received them with a wild stare.

“It's impossible—totally impossible,” she cried, uttering sounds that were half shrieking, half laughter. “Absolutely, ridiculously impossible. I'll not believe it—not a word. It's impossible— *impossible!*”

And gasping out that one word, over and over again, fiercely and fast, she walked up and down the room like one distraught. She was indeed quite mad. She had not any sense of anything. She never once thought of weeping, or fainting, or doing anything but shriek out to earth and Heaven that one denunciation—that such a thing was and must be —“*impossible!*”

Marmaduke caught her—she flung him aside.

“Don't touch me—don't speak to me! I say it's *impossible!*”

“Child!” And his look became more grave and commanding than any one would have believed of the Dugdale. “Dare not to say impossible! It is sinning against God.”

Agatha stopped in her frenzied walk. Of a sudden came the horrible thought that *it might be*—

that the hand might have been lifted—have fallen, striking the whole world from her at one blow.

"Oh God!—oh merciful God!"

In that cry, scarcely louder than a moan, yet strong and wild enough to pierce the heavens, Agatha knew how she loved her husband. Not calmly, not meekly, but with that terrible love which is to the heart as life itself.

Of the next few minutes that passed over her no one could write—no one would dare. It was utter insanity, yet with a perfect knowledge of its state. Madness, stone-blind, stone-deaf—that uttered no cry, and poured out no tears. She walked swiftly up and down the room, her hands clenched, her features rigid as iron. Mr. Dugdale and old Andrews could only watch pitifully, saying at times—which may all good Christians say likewise!—"God have mercy upon her."

No one else came near—the servants were all asleep, and Miss Valery's room was in another part of the house. Possibly she slept too—poor Anne!

"Now," said Agatha, in a cold, hard voice, clutching Marmaduke's arm, "I want to know all about it. I don't believe it, mind you!—not one word—but I would like to hear. Just tell me. How did you get the news?"

"From Southampton, to-night. It happened last night A steamer saw the burning ship, and went, but the fire had already reached to the water's edge. There was not a soul in or near the wreck when it went down."

Agatha shuddered, and then said, in the same hard voice: "It was some other ship—not the *Ardente*."

Marmaduke shook his head, drearily. "They

found a spar with 'Ardente' upon it. But they saw no boats, and some people think, as there were but few passengers, they all got safe off, and may reach the shore."

"Of course they will!—I was sure of that;" returned Agatha, in the same wild, determined tone. "Let me see! it was a quiet night. I stood a long time looking at the moon—Ah!"

The ghastly thought of her standing there looking up at the moon, and the pitiless moon looking down on the sea and on him! Agatha's senses reeled—she burst into the most awful laughter.

Marmaduke held her fast—the whimsical absent Marmaduke—now roused into his true character, kind, as any woman, and wiser than most men.

"Agatha, you must be quiet. It is wicked ever to despair. There is a chance—more than a chance, that your husband has been saved. He has infinite presence of mind, and he is a young, strong, likely lad. But Brian—poor Brian! my dear old friend!"

Duke Dugdale's bravery gave way—he was of such a gentle, tender heart. The sight of his emotion stilled Agatha's frenzy, and made it more like a natural grief, though it was hard yet—hard as stone.

"Come," she said, taking his hand, and smiling piteously—"come—don't cry. I can't!—not for the world. Let us talk. What are you going to do?"

"I am going right off to Southampton—whence they have sent steamers out in all directions to pick up the boats, if they are drifting anywhere about the Channel. Fancy—to be out in the open sea, this winter-time, with possibly no clothes or food!"

"Hush!"—shuddered Agatha's low voice—"hush! or I shall go quite mad, and I would rather not just yet—*afterwards*, I shall not mind."

"Poor child!"

"Don't now," and she shrank from him. "Never think of me—*that* does not signify. Only something must be done. No weeping—no talking—*do* something!"

"I told you I should. I am going"—

"Go then!" Her quick speech—the wild stamp of her foot—poor child, how mad she was still!

Mr. Dugdale took no notice except by a compassionate look—perhaps he, too, felt there was no time to lose. He went towards the door—she following.

"I am off now—I shall catch the train in two hours," said he, springing on his horse in the dark wet night. "Harrie will be with you directly—only she thought I had better come first. Go in—go in—my poor child."

Agatha obeyed mechanically, for the moment She walked about the house, in at one room and out at another, meeting no person—for Andrews had gone to call up some of the servants. The heavy quiet around stifled her. Faster and faster she walked—clutching her hands on her throat for breath—sometimes uttering, with a sort of laughing shriek, the one word in which seemed her only salvation —"Impossible!—utterly and entirely impossible!"

She sat down for a moment, trying to think over more clearly the chances of the case—but to keep still was beyond her power. She resumed that rapid walk as if she were flying through an atmosphere of invisible fiends. It felt like it.

Once, by a superhuman effort, she drove her mind to contemplate the *possible*—the winds, the flames, the waves, and him struggling among them. She saw the face which she had last seen so life-like

—as a *dead face*, with its pale, pure features and fair hair. And even that face never to be again seen by her through any possible chance! For him to be blotted out altogether from the world, and she left therein! “Oh, God—oh, God!” The despairing, accusing shriek that she sent up to His mercy!—May His mercy have received and forgiven it!

She began to count up the hours that must pass before she could receive any tidings, good or ill. To stay quietly in the house and wait for them!—you might as well have told a poor wretch to sit still and wait for the bursting of a mine. No rest—no rest. The very walls of the house seemed to press upon her and hem her in. She saw a bonnet and shawl hanging up in the hall, caught both, and ran out at the front door.

Out—out under the stars. She walked with her face lifted right up to them, her eyes flashing out an insane defiance to their merciless calm. The rain fell down thick, and it was very cold, but she never thought of putting on the bonnet or the shawl; or, if she thought at all, it was with a sort of longing that the rain might come and cool her through and through, or the sharp wind pierce to her breast and kill her. Once she had a thought of running a mile or two across the hills, and leaping from some cliffs into the sea; so that, whichever way this suspense ended, she might be safely dead beforehand—dead, too, in the same ocean, washed by the same wave. All the foolish Romeo-and-Juliet-like traditions of people killing themselves on some beloved's tomb, seemed to her now perfectly real, possible, and natural. Nothing was unnatural or impossible—save living.

How to live, even for a day, an hour, in this horrible, deathly stagnation, she did not know. At last, walking on blindly through the night, she came

to the termination of the Thornhurst estate. Was she to go back and lull herself into the stupor of patience?—to be kissed and wept over, and preached resignation to?—left to sit mutely in that quiet house, while he was dashed about, fighting with the sea for life?—or watching the clock's travelling round hour after hour, not knowing but that every peaceful minute might be the terrible one in which he died?

"No," she said to herself, while the awful but delirious joy which has struck many in a similar position, struck her suddenly, "he is not dead. If he had died, he would have told me—me whom he so loved He could not die anywhere, or at any time, but in some way or other I should certainly have known it."

And as she stood in the dark road—quite alone with the hills and stars, calmed down into a supernatural awe, Agatha almost expected to see her husband stand before her in the old familiar likeness. She would not have been afraid.

But no apparition came. All nature, visible and invisible, was silent to her misery. If she went back to the house, all there would be silent too.

She took her resolution—though it could hardly be called a resolution, being merely the blind impulse of despair. She climbed over the gate—she had not wit enough to unfasten it—and ran, swift and silent as some wild animal, along the road to Kingcombe.

The rain ceased, and her dripping clothes dried of themselves, so as not to encumber her movements. By some happy chance her feet were well shod, and now, gathering her wits as she went, she put on the shawl—not the bonnet, her head burned so, and felt so wild Just then, far into the darkness, she heard

wheels rolling and rolling. It was Mrs. Dugdale driving along rapidly towards Thornhurst—but without one slash of the whip or one word of conversation with Dunce. When she stopped to open a gate the glare of the chaise-lamps showed the little black figure by the roadside. Harrie screamed—she thought it was a ghost.

"Any news? any news?"

"Gracious! is it you, child? No news—none! Get up, quick, and come home."

But Agatha fled on and on, noticing nothing, except once, when with a start she saw the great black outline of Corfe Castle looming against the night-sky.



*Agatha.* ALONG THE ROAD. Page 394.

When she reached Kingcombe, it was still dark. She could not even have found her way, save for the faint sky brightness lent by the overcast moon; and the distance she had traversed was all but miraculous. It seemed as if she had not walked by natural feet, but some unseen influence had drawn and lifted her the whole way. When she stood in Kingcombe streets she hardly believed her senses—save that nothing was hard of belief just then, except the one horror—incredible, unutterable.

Mr. Dugdale was walking up and down Kingcombe railway station, waiting for the early train. One or two sleepy porters were eyeing him with a sort of pitying curiosity, for ill news spreads fast in a country neighbourhood. There was no one else about. Nobody perceived a little figure creeping up the road and coming on the platform. Even Marmaduke did not lift his eyes or relax his melancholy walk until something touched him on the arm. He stood astonished.

"It is I, you see. You are not gone yet."

"How did you come—you poor child?"

"From Thornhurst—I walked. But how soon shall you start?"

"Walked from Thornhurst!—at this time of night!" said one of the railway-men, who knew the family—as indeed did every one in the neighbourhood. "Lord help us—it's that poor Mrs. Harper!"

Mr. Dugdale tried to remove Agatha from the platform, but she resisted.

"I am come to go with you to Southampton."

"What need of that? Go back to my house, poor child. If anything is to be done I can do it. If nothing —why"—

"I *will* go."

The determination was so calm, the grasp of the little hand so strong, that her brother-in-law urged no more. He went in his quiet way to take her ticket, the railway folk moving respectfully aside, and whispering among themselves something about "poor Mrs. Harper, that was going to Southampton to see after her husband."

Coming back, Duke attempted not to talk to her,

but stood by her side—she would stand—sometimes feeling at her damp shawl, or wrapping her up in the tender careful fashion that he used to his own little ones. At last the great fiery eye, accompanied by the iron beast's snorting gasps, appeared far in the dark. Agatha drew a long breath, like a sob.

Mr. Dugdale lifted her in the carriage, almost without a word. One of the railway-men brought from somewhere—nobody ever learned where—a rug for her feet, and a pillow for her head to lean on. A minute more, and they were whirled away.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

Every one knows that story, perhaps the most terrible of its kind for many years—and Heaven grant! for many more to come—when a noble ship, with her full complement of human beings, fought at once with winds, and waves, and fire, until came down upon it, and upon all the homes which that one hour desolated, the certain doom. One shudders even at writing of such things, save that they must of necessity happen, and not rarely. But for one such tale as that of the *Amazon*, which convulses a whole kingdom with horror, there must be many unknown chronicles of equal dread, save that the little vessel sinks unnoticed into its sea grave, and the destruction carried with it passes not beyond its own immediate sphere. Such was the case with the Ardente.

When the train neared Southampton it was already bright morning. Everybody was moving about on the solid, safe, sunshiny earth—nobody thought of shipwrecks and disasters at sea. Many a one looked lazily at the glittering Southampton-water; no one dreamed how, far beyond the curving line of horizon, human beings—husbands and brothers—might be floating about without food or water, frozen, thirsting, dying or dead, under the same sunny sky.

Passing the spot where the wide reach of bay opens, Marmaduke quickly drew down the carriage-blind. He would not for worlds that the poor Agatha should look at that merry-glancing, cruel sea. She seemed to notice the movement, and stirred from the corner where she had sat during all the journey, motionless, save for her perpetually open eyes.

“How light it is! quite morning!”

Marmaduke turned, felt her pulse, and began softly chafing her cold hand.

“Don't, now,” she said piteously. “Don't be kind to me—please don't! Talk a little. Tell me what you think it best to do first.”

The sharp-lined, worn face, not pallid, or without consciousness—some people, to their misery, never can lose consciousness—mournfully did worthy Duke regard it! But he did not say a word of sympathy; he knew she could not bear it. Her physical powers were so tightly strung that the least soft touch would make them give way altogether.

Mr. Dugdale stated briefly, and as if it had been the most matter-of-fact thing in the world, how he meant to go to the owners of the *Ardente* and get the first tidings of her there; how, if neither that nor any rumours he could catch in and about the docks, were

satisfactory, he should hire a small steamer and beat up and down Channel, calling in at all the ports where it was likely boats might have been picked up.

"They would be, probably, in twenty-four hours or so. If we don't hear in three days—three days at this time of year"—he stopped with a perceptible shudder—"then, Agatha," and Duke's gentle voice grew gentler, and solemn like a psalm, "then, my child, we'll go home."

Agatha bowed her head. Bodily exhaustion calmed her mind, and soothed her into a feeling which made even the last dread alternative less fearful. She felt a conviction that such "going home" would only be a prelude to the last going home of all, when she should never part from her husband more. She did not much mind now, even if all were to end so. Perhaps it would be best.

They got out of the carriage. All her limbs were cramped—she could hardly stand. Mr. Dugdale took her unresisting, to a quiet inn he knew, and there made her lie down and take food. Somehow, even in the last extremity, Duke Dugdale could win people over to do his pleasure, which was always for their own good.. He sat by her and talked, but only for a few minutes—he had no thought of wasting even in kindness the time on which might hang life or death.

"I am going now, and you must stay here till my return, which is sure not to be for at least two hours."

"Two hours!—Oh, take me with you!"

Duke shook his head. "You would only hinder me, I fear. See there, now!"

Trying to rise and cross the parlour, she had nearly fallen. A drowsy weakness stole over her—she let her good brother have his own way entirely. Very

soon she found herself alone in the parlour, lying in the dusky light of closed blinds, with the dull murmur creeping up from the street—lying quietly in a state of passive patience.

No human brain can endure a great strain of mental anguish long. A merciful numbness usually seizes it, in which everything grows hazy and unreal, and consequently painless. Agatha felt convinced she was half-asleep, and that she should wake up in her own room at Thorn-hurst or at Kingcombe, and find out everything to be a dream. Or even granting its reality, she seemed to view the whole story like some unconcerned person, or some being from whom this troubled world had passed away, and grown less than nothing and vanity. She gazed down upon herself as it were from a great height, thinking how sad a story it was, and how it would have grieved herself to hear it of any one else. But all her thoughts were disconnected and unnatural. The only tangible feeling was a sort of comfort in remembering the last day they had spent together—in thinking how he loved her, and that, living or dying, he would know how she loved him now.

In this state she lay for an indefinite time—a period that had no human measurement. It seemed at once a day and a moment. No counted time could ever appear so like eternity.

At last there was a hand upon the door. Mr. Dugdale had come back. Agatha started up, and sat frozen. For her life she could not have uttered a sound. He took her hand, saying, gently:

“My dear child!”

Surely he could not have spoken so, if—No, in that case his lips would have been paralysed, like her own.

“We must bear up yet, little sister. There is a chance.”

The flood broke forth. Agatha flung herself on the sofa-cushions, sobbing, weeping, and laughing at once. Duke patted her on the shoulder, walked round her, stood eyeing her with his mild, investigating look, as if he were pondering some great new problem in human nature. Finally, he sat down beside her, and cried likewise.

Agatha for the first time spoke naturally. “Thank you, brother—you are a very good brother to me. Now, tell me everything.”

“Everything is but little. It's like hanging on a thread—but we'll hold on.”

“We will,” said Agatha, setting her lips together, and sitting down firmly to listen. She was in her right senses now. She had undergone the shock, and risen from it another woman.

“I wish you would make haste and tell me. You don't know how quiet I am now, nor how much I can bear—only tell me.”

Marmaduke began, speaking in fragments hurriedly put together, looking steadily down on his hands, using a brief business tone—just as if every syllable had not been planned by him on his way back, so that the tidings might fall most gradually on the poor wife's ear.

“It was indeed the Ardente. Four sailors were picked up yesterday, in one of her boats. They say it's likely that others may have got off in the same way.”

“Ah!” That wild sob of thanksgiving! Marmaduke seemed to dread it more than despair. He hastily added:

“But they had many things against them. The

fire happened at midnight. When it broke out there was no one on deck but one passenger, walking up and down. He was a young man, the sailors say, tall, with long light hair."

The speaker's voice faltered; he could not bear to see the misery he inflicted. At last Agatha motioned to hear more.

"One sailor remembers him particularly, because during all the tumult he was almost the only person who seemed to have his wits about him. He was seen everywhere—getting out the boats, quieting the passengers—doing it all, the man says, as steadily as if he had been in his own house on shore, instead of in a burning ship. If there was any one likely to have saved his own life and the lives of others, the sailors think it must be that young man."

"When did they see him last?"

"Not five minutes before the ship went down. He was in a boat with several more. They think it was he because of his light hair. He was leaning over towards a floating spar, helping in a woman and child."

"Ah, then it was he! It was my husband!" cried Agatha, clasping her hands, while her countenance glowed like that of some Roman wife, who, dearer even than his life, esteemed her husband's honour.

"I believe," she said, as that rapture faded, and the natural pang returned—"I firmly believe that he has been saved. God would not let him perish. He must have got safe off from the wreck in that boat. Don't you think he has?"

Duke could not meet those eager eyes; he fidgeted in his seat, looked down on his hands, and told them over, finger by finger. At last he said, with that peculiar upward look which, amidst all his

eccentricities, showed the beautiful serenity of a righteous man—a man who "walked with God:"

"Child, we can none of us be certain either way. We can only do all that lies in human power, and leave the event in the hand of One who is wiser and more loving than us all."

Agatha bowed her head, and her heart with it, almost to the dust. She remembered Anne Valery's saying—how much those who loved have need to trust in God. Poor Anne! Never until this minute had any one thought of Anne at home at Thornhurst. Shocked at the selfishness that often comes with great misery, Agatha cried eagerly:

"Did you hear anything about Uncle Brian?"

"No—nothing." The quick, husky tone, as Marmaduke turned and walked away, betrayed how keenly the good man suffered, though he never spoke of any sufferings but Agatha's. She was deeply touched.

"Take hope," she said earnestly. "He will be saved. My husband would never forsake Uncle Brian."

"I know that; but then Nathanael is young, and has something to live for, while Brian is getting on in years—older than I am.—I should like to have seen him again, and have shown him little Brian; but—well it's a strange world! Heaven's mercy is sure to give us a life to come, perhaps many lives—if only to make clear the hard mysteries of this. I should like to have talked that matter over once again with poor Brian."

And Duke seemed wandering into his mild, dreamy philosophies, till Agatha recalled him.

"Now, what is to be done? You said, if we heard nothing, the boats must be drifting about somewhere

in the Channel"—she shivered—"and then we would take a little steamer, and go and look for them?"

"I know. She's getting ready."

"That is right. Then we will go on board at once," said Agatha, with decision. She, who a week ago would have been terrified at the bare thought of setting her foot on the deck of any vessel!

"Poor little delicate thing," muttered Duke, watching her. "It will be a rough sea to-night, and we may be a day or two in getting round the coast. You had better go home, Agatha."

She shook her head.

"Somebody once told me you had never been at sea in your life; and in winter-time this Dorset coast is rough always, sometimes dangerous."

"Dangerous! and he is there!" She began tying on her bonnet, hastily, but steadily, as steadily as if preparing for an every-day walk. "Now, I am quite ready. Let us start."

Her brother made no more objections, but took her through the busy Southampton streets. Once, on the quay, two lounging sailors touched their hats to Mr. Dugdale, and Agatha heard a whisper of "Belongs to some o' the poor fellows as went down in the *Ardente*." She shuddered, as if there were already upon her the awful sign of widowhood.

—The wide Southampton harbour, with the crafts of all nations gliding to and fro upon it—the bustle of the landing and embarking place—the hurrying crowd, eager after their own business, none thinking of the one little vessel suddenly whelmed in that wondrous sea-highway, ever thronged, yet ever lonely, or of the wrecked crew drifting hither and thither, no one knew where. The tale had been a day's talk, a day's pity—then forgotten.

Agatha stood in the midst of all, but saw nothing. Nothing but the grey, bleak, merciless sea, howling and dancing to her feet like a victorious enemy, or sweeping off into the silence of the wintry horizon, there grimly folding up its mystery, as if to say, “Of me thou shalt know nothing.” But Agatha felt as if, to win that secret, she was ready to pierce into nethermost hell.

“Quick, let us go,” she said, and almost bounded into the little vessel. She stood on the deck, trembling with excitement, watched the paddles crash into obedience the cruel waves, ride over them, on—on—to the mouth of the bay. And now for the first time she was out on the open sea.

It was one of those gloomy winter days when the whole ocean looks sullen—heavy with brooding storms. No blue foamy sweeps, no lovely sea-green calms; nothing but leaden-coloured hills of water, swelling and sinking, with black valleys between. Agatha remembered a story she had read or heard in her childish days, of some wrecked sailor lad, doomed to death by his mates because the boat was too full for safety, who asked leave to sit on the gunwale until after the curl of the wave, and then quietly dropped off into the smooth hollow below.

It was horrible! She could not look at the sea—it made her mad. She could only look skywards, and try to find a break in the dun clouds; or else over to the horizon, to see something—ever so faint and small a something—breaking the line of water and sky.

The men on board apparently knew Mr. Dugdale, and he them. They worked with a respectful solemnity, as if aware of their sad errand. The boat was a little steam-tug, and she cut her way

over the heavy seas like a bird. Two men, and Marmaduke, kept watch constantly with the glass, shorewards and seawards. Sometimes they went so far out that the hazy coast-line almost vanished, and then again they ran in-shore under the gigantic cliffs that lock the south of England coast.

Hour after hour, the poor wife remained on deck, sometimes walking about restlessly, sometimes lying wrapped in sails and rugs, her face turned seaward in a dumb hopelessness that was more piteous than any moans. The seamen, if they happened to come near, looked at her with a sort of awe, mingled with that compassionate gentleness which sailors almost always show towards women. More than once, great rough hands brought her food, or put to use half-a-dozen clever nautical contrivances for the sheltering of “the poor lady.”

Late at night she went down below; by daybreak she was on deck again. She found Mr. Dugdale in his old place by the compass and the telescope. He had slept by snatches where he sat, never giving up his watch for a single hour.

“E—h!” he said, when she came and touched him. “I was dreaming of the Missus and the little ones at home!”

“Do you want to go home?”

“No—no!—not while there's a hope. Keep heart, my child!”

But they looked at each other's faces in the dawn, and saw how pale and disconsolate both were. And still the little lonely boat kept rocking over the sea—the pitiless sea, that returned neither answer nor sign.

Another day—another night: just the same. Once or twice they came on the track of some vessel; a

ship outward or homeward bound, and told their story; shouting it out, in brief business-like words—how horrible they sounded! And the ship's people would be seen to come to her side, stand a while looking at the melancholy little steamer on its hopeless search—then pass on. All the world seemed passing on slowly, slowly—leaving them to that blank sea and sky, and to their own despair.

On the evening of the third day, Marmaduke, who had kept aloof for several hours, came and stood by his sister-in-law. She was leaning at the stern, looking shorewards at two columns of rock, which the watery wear of ages had parted from the cliffs, leaving them set upright in the sea, a little distance from one another, with the breakers boiling between.

“There's 'Old Harry and his wife,' as the Dorset people call them. We are near home now, Agatha.”

“Home!” She gasped the word in an agony, and turned her face again seawards—towards the grey desolate line where the Channel melted away.

“The steamer can't run on much longer without putting in-shore,” said Duke, after an interval.

Agatha almost shrieked; “You are not going to land? We have been out such a little—little while! And you said yourself the boats would live a long time in the open Channel.”

“But that was three days ago.”

“Three days—oh, Heaven!—three days.”

And the black, black cloud fell over her; the near vision of an existence wherein *he* was not—the going home a widow—or worse, because she could never have the certainty of widowhood. To be incessantly watching by day, and starting up at night, with the thought that he was come! Never to know when,

where, or in what manner he died; to have no last blessing—no last kiss! At the moment, Agatha would have given her whole future life—nay, her immortal soul—to cling for one minute round her husband's neck and tell him how she loved him—with the one perfect love which nothing now could ever alter, weaken, or estrange.

Mr. Dugdale moved aside. He knew that for this burst of anguish there was no consolation. After a time, he came and said those few soothing words which are all that people can say, without being those “miserable comforters” who only torture the more.

Even then, in that last moment of anguish, there was power in the good and soothing influence so peculiar to Marmaduke Dugdale. Agatha grew calmer—at least more passive. Soon, she saw that the little steamer's head was turned to the shore. A convulsion passed over her, but she did not rebel.

“There is a faint hope even yet,” said Duke, with a melancholy voice that almost gave the lie to his words. “They may have drifted safe ashore somewhere—though it would be almost a miracle. Or they may have been carried far out to sea, and been picked up by some outward-bound ship. It's just a chance—but”—

Agatha understood that “but” Nothing but strong conviction would have forced it from her brother-in-law's lips. Her last hope died.

An hour or two more they spent in gliding up the narrow channel of that salt-water swamp, which at high tide appeared so glittering from the Thornhurst road. When approached, it was a muddy chaos, desolate as an uninhabited world.

They went as far up-stream as the little steamer

could run, and then landed on the bank which abutted on some rushy meadows. It was a dark winter's night—there was not a soul abroad, though some faint light showed they were near the town. The bells of Kingcombe Church were ringing merrily through the mist.

"I had quite forgotten," muttered Duke to himself. "This must be Christmas-eve."

What a Christmas-eve!

He half led, half lifted Agatha through the wet fields and along the road.

"You will go to my house, and let the Missus and me take care of you, my child?"

"No, no; I will go home!"

So, without any further argument, he took her to her own gate. There it was, the familiar gate, with its shiny evergreens glittering in the lamp-light; beyond it, the dusky line of Kingcombe Street.. The cottage within was all dark, except for the faintest ray creeping under the hall-door. Marmaduke opened it, and called Dorcas. She came, and when she saw them, rushed forward sobbing.

"Oh, missus, missus—is it my missus?"

It was indeed the sorrowful mistress, who stood like a spectre in her desolate home. But Dorcas dragged her in, and opened the parlour-door.

There was an odour of warmth—bright light, which so dazzled Agatha that at first she saw nothing. Then she saw some one lying on the sofa. And lo! there—half-buried in pillows, haggard and death-like, yet alive—was a face she knew—a calm, sleeping face—falling round it the long light hair.

# CHAPTER XXX.

It was Christmas morning. All the good people of Kingcombe were going to church. One only household did not go to church—there was hardly need, when all their life henceforward would be one long grateful psalm.

Agatha came down much as she had done on her first Sunday morning in the same house, and made breakfast in the little parlour. There was a strange hush about her—a joy too solemn for outward expression. When she had finished all her preparations, she stood by the window, looking on the sunny little garden, and listening to the Christmas-bells. The tears sprang faster—faster—her lips moved. What she was uttering no ear heard—save One. Whatever the good Kingcombe people thought, He to whom the whole earth is a temple, and all time a long Sabbath of praise—would forgive her that she did not go to church that day.

She heard a foot on the stairs, and ran thither like lightning.

Nathanael appeared. He was extremely feeble—every motion seemed to give him pain;—and his whole appearance was that of one rescued from the very jaws of the grave. But he looked so happy—so infinitely happy!

Agatha half-scolded him. “Why did you not call

me? Why not let me help you to walk? I can do it, I know." And creeping under his arm, she tried to convert her little self into a marvellously strong support.

Her husband only smiled, allowing himself to be led to the sofa, laid down, and made comfortable with countless pillows. Then she stood and looked at him.

"Are you content?"

"Quite content," he murmured. "So content, that I want nothing in this wide world."

And by his look his wife knew that this was true.

"Agatha, darling, you have been crying? Come and sit here."

She came—making a minute's pretence of smiles, and then fell on his neck, weeping,

"Oh! I don't deserve to be so happy—so very happy!"

"Child," he answered, with a grave tenderness, "if we went by desert, who among us would deserve anything? Should I, who was so hard and cold towards my poor little wife, when, if I had said one word out of my real heart, and not kept it down so proudly—Ah! I was very wicked. I, too, did not deserve that God should save me from death, and bring me home to my dear wife's love. Darling! don't let us talk of deservings; only let us try to be good, and always, always love one another."

Oh, the heavenly silence of that embrace, the life of life, that was in it! Now for the first time the bond of full and perfect love was drawn round the husband and wife, sacredly shutting them in from the world without, which could never more come between them, or intermeddle with their sorrows or

their joys.

At length Agatha freed herself gently from his clasp, saying, after her old habit of hiding emotion under a jest, something about the impossibility that the mistress of a household could idle away her time in this way. She made her husband's breakfast, and insisted on watching him finish it.

Drinking, he said with a shudder, “Oh, Agatha, you don't know what it is to be thirsty! The hunger was nothing to it.”

“Don't talk of that, don't,” murmured she, turning pale.

“I will not, dear. But was it not strange that we should have drifted ashore at Weymouth?”

“Very strange.”

“Have you sent over the way this morning, to see after Uncle Brian?”

“Not yet; but Harrie will take care of him. He is not near so much hurt as you, and I must look after my own husband first.” And once again wistfully gazing at him, she threw her arms round his neck, murmuring, “My own—my own!”

The church-bells ceased, the breakfast was removed, and the husband and wife sat together.

“Somebody,” said Nathanael, suddenly —“somebody ought to go and see Anne Valery this Christmas-day.

“Does she know?”

“She knew last night. Marmaduke said he should ride over and tell her.”

“What news for her to hear—dear, dear Anne!”

And they fell into a silence.

Agatha said at last, “When am I to see Uncle

Brian?”

“Very soon, dear. Yet—stay—is not that some one at the door?”

It certainly was. People walked into one another's houses so very unceremoniously at Kingcombe. This visitor, however, paused in the hall, and then opened the parlour-door.

He was a remarkably tall man, with grey hair, and features not unlike Nathanael's, being regular and delicate. But their expression was much harsher, and indicative of a strong will and a settled bitterness, which only passed over when he smiled. This smile was very beautiful, and seemed to steal from his worn and hard-lined aspect at least ten years. Agatha knew who he was immediately.

“Uncle Brian!” Nathanael sprang up, despite his weakness, and they grasped one another's hands as heartily as if they had not met for years.

“Is this your wife?”

“It is indeed; my own dear wife.”

“God bless her.” Mr. Locke Harper took Agatha by the hand, and looked at her keenly. The peculiar expression either of bitterness or melancholy came over his face, but as he watched her it gradually faded off. There seemed an enchantment in the young wife's sweet looks.

“You two are very happy?”

They exchanged a glance, which needed no words of confirmation; but Agatha said, with a shy blush, and a womanly grace that made her sweeter-looking than ever.

“We are all the happier now Uncle Brian has come home.”

“Thank you, my dear. Thank your husband too,

for me. I would have been lying 'full fathom five' in the Channel now, if it were not for that boy."

"That boy" sounded oddly enough, save for the world of tenderness in the phrase, and the look which accompanied it. Any one could see at once the strong attachment subsisting between the uncle and nephew. No more was betrayed, however, and they soon began a conversation as natural and unconcerned as if they had gone through no peril, and suffered no emotion. Certainly, however strong their feelings, the Harpers were not a "sentimental" family.

Agatha thought, as like a dutiful wife she sat still and listened, that she had never seen any man—saving her husband of course—whose mien was so simple, yet so truly noble, as Brian Locke Harper's. She watched him with a pathetic curiosity, thinking what he must have been as a young man, with many other thoughts besides, which came from the very depths of her woman's heart.

Uncle Brian talked, though in a rather fragmentary and brief fashion, of Kingcombe and of the changes he found. He never by any chance mentioned any other place than Kingcombe, until Nathanael happened to ask him where Duke was this morning?

"He has ridden out."

"But I wanted to see him, and thank him for being so kind to my poor little wife. Where has he gone?"

"To Thornhurst." The word came out sharp, low, yet with a certain tone that made it unlike other words. After saying it, Uncle Brian sat moodily looking at the fire from under his eyebrows, until Agatha, with womanly wisdom, broke the silence, by

speaking to her husband.

"I think some time this afternoon I ought to go and see Anne Valery."

"You shall go, dear."

Uncle Brian observed, never moving his eyes from the fire, "Harriet said that she—Miss Valery—was not quite strong this winter. Was that true?"

Agatha answered, "That it was only too true."

Something in her manner seemed to startle Mr. Locke Harper; he threw towards her one of his flashing, penetrating looks.

"We have indeed been very anxious about poor Anne," she answered. "But winter is a trying season, and we hope, in the spring"—

"Yes, in the spring," repeated Uncle Brian, hastily. "What a gay garden you have for Christmas." He opened the glass door, and immediately went out. They saw him walking about, backwards and forwards, among chrysanthemum beds and arbutus-trees, passing hurriedly, and with a bent-down, abstracted gaze, which beheld nothing.

"Does he know about her?" said Agatha to her husband. "You said you would tell him."

"I could not, his mood was too bitter. And there are some things in which not even I dare break upon the reserve of Uncle Brian. He is as secret and as proud—as I am."

"Ah, but"—

"I understand that 'but' my child. I know how much both he and I have often erred."

His wife pressed his hand fondly, to indicate how love had sealed its kiss of forgiveness upon all things. Nathanael smiled, and continued:

"I found Uncle Brian in such a strange mood at

Havre. I dared not speak of anything just then, but thought the fit time would be when we came near the Dorset coast, and his heart was softened at the sight of home. I was walking on deck, pondering how to tell him, when the fire began."

"Ah, don't." And Agatha forgot everything—it was natural she should—in rejoicing once more over the beloved saved. Suddenly, there was heard a fluttering, and a chattering with Dorcas in the hall, marking an unmistakable approach—Mrs. Dugdale with her young flock.

Harrie was in the best of spirits and heartiest of moods, though that may be an unnecessary superlative regarding a lady who had never been seen either moody or out of spirits since her cradle. She embraced Agatha warmly, and even went through the same ceremony with her brother Nathanael, which he bore with exemplary fortitude, but shook his hair after it, like a boy who has been petted against his will. However, he kissed his little nephews good-humouredly, let Brian sit astride on his sofa-pillows, benignly assured Fred's inquiring mind that Uncle Nathanael had not been to the bottom of the sea and up again—and answered Gus with a more serious voice, that it was not exactly "funny" to be drowned.

"Funny? No, indeed," exclaimed the mother. "I am sure the shock was dreadful to us all. I don't know when *I* shall get over it And that reminds me that Duke thinks it had been too much for poor Anne. She is worse,—keeping her bed. I don't understand sick people much, but if Agatha could go —Oh, there you are, Uncle Brian! Duke sent a message to you. He says, he is afraid it will be some days before you can see your old friend Anne: she is very ill indeed."

Brian stood silent, resting his hand on the glass-door. The colourless face, void of any expression, excepting the eyes, and they—never, while she lived, did Agatha forget the look of those eyes! She whispered, passing him by,

"I am going to her now—I shall send word soon;" and left the room.

There was a slight difficulty about her being driven to Thornhurst, as she insisted on her husband's keeping quiet at home. Harrie made a dozen plans and counter-plans, until they were all frustrated by Brian Harper's rising from the corner, where he had sat motionless.

"If you will allow me, I will drive you there."

"Thank you." There was no more said about it; they started.

Mr. Locke Harper scarcely spoke to his niece all the way, until just as they were passing the gate where, on that awful walk, Agatha had startled Mrs. Dugdale.

"I hear you came all these miles on foot, in the middle of the night. It was a very brave thing for a woman to do. I did not think any woman could have love enough in her to do it."

"I know several who would do much more."

"Who are they?"

"Harrie Dugdale, probably; and for certain, Anne Valery."

Brian said no more until they reached the gates of Thornhurst. There he helped her to descend, reins in hand, and waited. Just as Agatha was going he touched her arm:

"Ask how she is, will you?"

Agatha sent the message up-stairs, and remained

with him for a minute or two. He stood motionless by the horse, his hat pulled down over his brows—nothing visible but the sharp profile of his mouth. Old Andrews called him “that gentleman”—eyed him with some curiosity, then bowed, and wished him a “merry Christmas, sir,” country fashion.

The answer about the mistress of Thornhurst was brief; she was “much the same;” the servants did not seem to apprehend any danger.

Brian shook his niece's hand. “I shall go back across the moors to Kingcombe. Tell her, if, at any time, she would like to see an old friend”—

He stopped, threw down Dunce's reins, and started off towards the high ground, striding over heather and furze, with his free backwoodsman's step.

Andrews looked after him. “If that be any man alive it be Mr. Locke Harper! O Lord! and I didn't know 'un—my dear old master! Mr. Harper! Sir! Mr. Locke Harper.” He ran a little way in vain pursuit of the retreating figure; then Agatha saw him sit down on a stone, hide his face in his shaking old hands, and cry for joy.

While, far over the hill-side, in very sight of the closed blinds of Anne's room, the returned wanderer strode away, and disappeared.

It was some time before Agatha could summon courage to walk up-stairs. All things seemed so strange. She could hardly realise the fact that she had been driven from Kingcombe by Uncle Brian's own self, and that she was now going to tell Anne Valery that he was here.

At last, calmed by faith in heaven, and in that next holiest faith, love, she opened the door of Anne's bedroom.

It was silent, solemn, and peaceful. There was a prayer-book by the bedside, open at one of the Christmas-day psalms. No one lingered in the room, or about the couch, with sisterly or friendly care; all was serene but lonely, as Anne's whole life had been. At the opening of the door, a faint voice asked, “Who is there?”

“Only I! Oh, Anne, dearest Anne!”

There was a pause of weeping silence, though one only wept. Miss Valery soothed the girl in all sorts of tender ways.

“You have suffered much, my poor child, but it is over now. Forget it. You will be very happy now.”

“And you too—you too, Anne! But why do you lie here so drearily, with no one near you?”

“I like it.”

“But you will rise soon? You must get well now they are come home. You little think how anxious all are about you.”

“That is kind. Everybody was always very kind to me.”

After a few moments, during which Anne lay with her eyes shut, and Agatha watched, with an unaccountable dread, the wonderful, spiritual calm of her features, she suddenly said:

“You have seen him, have you not?”

“Uncle Brian? Yes.”

“How does he look? Was he harmed by that—that awful three days at sea?

“No; he seems quite well. He drove me to Thornhurst.”

“Then he is here?” And there came a slight trembling over the placid face.

"He had to go back to Kingcombe, I believe," said Agatha, hesitating. "But he told me to say, if you liked to see an old friend—He does not know how ill you have been," she added, with irrepressible vexation, "or else I should have felt very, very angry, even with Uncle Brian."

"Hush! You do not understand him yet," said Anne, gently, as she once more closed her eyes. Many thoughts seemed to sweep over her, but none left a trace of bitterness behind. She was past all restlessness or suffering now.

"How are you all going to keep Christmas, Agatha? You ought to be very happy. After such a week as this has been, everything seems happiness now."

"Not everything—when you are not with us, Anne—I mean, not with us to-day."

"But I shall be with you, to-day and every day. I believe I shall never be far away from Thornhurst and Kingcombe, and Kingcombe Holm."

She said this more to herself than to Agatha, who listened, her throat choking; then answered abruptly, "You are talking too much—you must be quiet."

Anne smiled—one of her old smiles, so full of cheerfulness. "I think I am quiet enough already, but I will obey."

She turned her face to the pillow, and lay for a long time without moving. At length she said:

"Agatha, I want you to do something for me."

"What is it?"

"I would like to see your husband, and my old friend, Mr. Brian Harper. Will you go and fetch them?"

"I will to-morrow, but"—

"No—dear, not to-morrow; I must see them to-day—this very Christmas-day. Go—you will not be away long. And we will send the carriage, so that the journey can do Nathanael no harm."

"You are always thinking of every one," said Agatha, as she turned to obey. She felt it was a solemn mission. All her bright plans about Thornhurst grew dim; she could not look forward. Yet, warm in the strength of youth and love, she cherished a faint hope still.

When she reached Kingcombe, Brian had not come home. They sent messengers for him in all directions, but in vain. At last they were forced to drive back without him—hopelessly peering through the dusk to see if they could discern his tall figure across the moors. When they were dashing at full speed through Thornhurst-gate, some one rose up from the hedge beside it, and stopped the horses.

"Is anything the matter at the house? Speak, can't you, fellow?"

The voice hoarse and commanding—the tall, spare figure, the grey hair—it could be none other than Brian Harper.

Nathanael called to him. "Uncle Brian, we have been looking for you everywhere. Anne wants to see you. Come."

"I will." He walked away and was lost in the furze-bushes; but when the carriage drove up to the door they found him already standing there. They all entered the house together.

Anne's maid met them with a delighted countenance. Her mistress was so well—thank God! She was up, and sitting in the drawing-room!

There in truth she was, in her usual seat, wearing her ordinary dress. She had taken off the invalid-cap, and her soft hair was arranged as carefully as if no white lines marred its brownness. She looked less old than usual—nay, almost beautiful—so exquisitely peaceful was the expression of her countenance.

Nathanael and his wife hung back, letting Mr. Harper meet her first.

She rose and held out both hands to him. "Welcome home again—welcome home!"

He said nothing, but grasped the hands, and retained them fast. There was a long, long look, eye to eye, face to face,—a look, in which were gathered and summed up all the years since they were young, together,—and then the two old friends sat down side by side. Agatha thought it strange that they should meet in such a calm, commonplace way—but then she was young. She did not know how quietly flows the outward surface of a tide that has flowed on, deep, solemn, and changeless, for five-and-twenty years.

In a little while they were all sitting round the fire—the merry Christmas fire with its blazing pine-log—talking just as naturally and familiarly as though no emotion had stirred them. Anne Valery, resting in her arm-chair, looked on and smiled. She talked little, but listened to the rest, and by an inexplicable sweet calmness, made them all so much at ease, that it seemed to Agatha as if they four had known one another for a whole lifetime, and been always as happy as now.

As the evening advanced, the Christmas dinner was announced.

"I am sorry I cannot sit at the head of my own

table to-day, but”—and Miss Valery gently laid her hand on Brian's arm—“you will take my place, old friend?”

He made some unintelligible answer, and they all left the drawing-room. It was a rather silent dinner; yet, somehow, no one looked sad. No one could, with Anne's cheerful influence pervading the whole house.

Agatha soon rose and rejoined her. She was sitting just as they had left her—but whether it was through the light being dimmer, or through a certain thoughtfulness in her face, Agatha thought she did not look quite the same.

“Are you well?” Are you sure you are not tired? And”—here Agatha ventured to wrap her arms round her and gaze up in her eyes with a fulness of meaning—are you happy?”

“Ay, happy! perfectly happy!” The look and tone were such as Agatha never forgot. They expressed a bliss that of its intensity could not necessarily endure for more than the briefest time in this changing world. It belonged to the world everlasting.

“Will you go back, dear, and ask Brian to come to me? I would like to talk a little, alone, with my old friend.”

Agatha obeyed. When she had delivered her message, Mr. Locke Harper rose without speaking. She saw him go into the drawing-room and close the door; then she came back to her husband.

For more than two hours Agatha and Nathanael sat, not liking to go in without being summoned. At last they ventured to pass the door. The silence within was so death-like that it half frightened them.

“I wish she would call,” Agatha whispered. “She looked so strangely white when she spoke to me.

Hush! is not that some one stirring? I must knock."

She did so, but there was no answer. At last, trembling all over, she caught hold of her husband's hand and made him enter.

The room was quite still—dimly-lighted—for the fire had been suffered to burn itself almost out. Anne sat in her arm-chair, with Brian kneeling beside her, his arms clasping her waist, and hers linked behind his neck. Neither moved, or seemed to notice anything; and the two young people, greatly moved by the scene, were gliding away, when a last glimmer of the fire showed them Anne Valery's face. They saw it—grasped one another's hands with an awe-struck meaning—and stayed.

In a minute or two Anne faintly spoke.

"I think there is some one near? Is it Agatha?"

The young girl flung herself on Anne's hand. —"It is I—and my husband. May we stay? We, too, loved you, dear, dear Anne?"

"I know that! One minute, just one minute, Brian."

She loosed her clasp of him a little; the other two came near, she kissed them both, and bade "God bless them." Then raising herself up and speaking with all her strength, she said,

"You will bear witness, and say to them all, that if I had married, none but Brian Locke Harper would ever have been my husband: and therefore I have left to him Thornhurst, and all I have in the world, in token of my love and reverence—just as if—I had been—his wife."

With the last words, uttered very feebly, Anne sank back into her old attitude. She lay there many minutes, her face beautiful in its perfect rest. The

other face—his face—was altogether hidden. But they saw that, as his arms grasped her round, every muscle was quivering. The convulsion grew so strong that even Anne felt it. She opened her eyes, and tried to speak again.

"Brian, poor Brian? Be content! it is not for long —not for very long."

Her fingers began to flutter feebly on his neck. She fringed the grey locks round them in a childish, absent way, muttering to herself.

"How very soft it feels still! He used to have such beautiful hair!"

Then, as if she felt her mind wandering, and strove to recall it, that to the very last moment it might rest on him, she again forcibly opened her eyes and fixed them on Brian's face. They never left it afterwards. The whole world seemed to have faded from her except that face. For a minute or two longer she lay looking at him, her countenance all radiant, until, gradually and softly, her eyes closed.

"Hush!" whispered Nathanael, as he drew his weeping wife closer to his bosom, and pointed out the beatitude of that dying smile. "Hush—she is quite happy. She has gone home!"

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AGATHA'S HUSBAND: A NOVEL ***

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