

STAND FAST, CRAIG-ROYSTON! (VOLUME
II)

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STAND FAST, CRAIG-ROYSTON!

A Novel

BY

WILLIAM BLACK,

AUTHOR OF

"A DAUGHTER OF HETH," "MACLEOD OF DARE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. II.

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STAND FAST, CRAIG-ROYSTON!

CHAPTER I. DOUBTS AND DREAMS.

And at first Vincent was for rebelliously thrusting aside and ignoring this information that had reached him so unexpectedly. Was he, on the strength of a statement forwarded by an unknown correspondent in New York, to suspect—nay, to condemn unheard—this proud and solitary old man with whom he had all this while been on terms of such close and friendly intimacy? Had he not had ample opportunities of judging whether George Bethune was the sort of person likely to have done this thing that was now charged against him? He went over these past weeks and months. Was it any wonder that the old man's indomitable courage, his passionate love of his native land, and the constant and assiduous care and affection he bestowed on his granddaughter, should have aroused alike the younger man's admiration and his gratitude? What if he talked with too lofty an air of birth and lineage, or allowed his enthusiasm about Scotland and Scottish song to lead him into the realms of rodomontade: may not an old man have his harmless foibles? Any one who had witnessed Maisrie's devotion to her grandfather, her gentle forbearance and consideration, her skilful humouring of him, and her never-failing faith in him, must have got to know what kind of man was old George Bethune.

And yet, when Vincent turned to the letter, it seemed terribly simple, and straightforward, and sincere. There was no vindictiveness in it at all; rather there was a pained surprise on the part of the writer that a loyal Scot—one, too, who had been admitted into that fraternity of song-writing exiles over the water—should have been guilty of such a flagrant breach of trust. Then Lord Musselburgh's patronage, as the young man knew very well, had taken the form of a cheque; so that the charge brought by the writer of this letter practically was that George Bethune had obtained, and might even now be obtaining, money by fraud and

false pretences. It was a bewildering thing—an impossible thing—to think of. And now, as he strove to construct all sorts of explanatory hypotheses, there seemed to stand in the background the visionary form of Mrs. Ellison; and her eyes were cold and inquiring. How had she come to suspect? It was not likely that she could be familiar with the Scotch-American newspaper offices of the United States.

No, he could make nothing of it; his perplexity only increased. All kinds of doubts, surmises, possible excuses went chasing each other through his brain. Perhaps it was only literary vanity that had prompted the old man to steal this project when it was placed before him? Or perhaps he thought he had a better right to it, from his wide knowledge of the subject? Vincent knew little of the laws and bye-laws of the literary world; perhaps this was but a bit of rivalry carried too far; and in any case, supposing the old man had erred in his eagerness to claim this topic as his own, surely that did not prove him to be a charlatan all the way through, still less a professional impostor? But then his making use of this scheme to obtain money—and that not only from Lord Musselburgh? Oh, well (the young man tried to convince himself) there might not be so much harm in that. No doubt he looked forward to issuing the volume, and giving his patrons value in return. Old George Bethune, as he knew, was quite careless about pecuniary matters: for example, if the bill for those little dinners at the various restaurants was paid by some one, that was enough; the old gentleman made no further inquiries. He was content to let his young friend settle these trivial details; and Master Vin was willing enough. In fact, the latter had devised a system by which the awkwardness of calling for the bill in Maisrie's presence was avoided; this system worked admirably; and Mr. Bethune asked no questions. Doubtless, if he had remembered, or taken the trouble, he would have paid his shot like anyone else.

But amid all these conflicting speculations, there was one point on which the mind of this young man remained clear and unswerving; and that was that whatever might be the character or career of old George Bethune, his principles or his practice, Maisrie was as far apart and dissociated from them as if worlds intervened. If there had been any malfeasance in this matter, she, at least, was no sharer in it. And the more he pondered, the more anxious he became to know whether Maisrie had any idea of the position in which her grandfather was placed. How much would he be entitled to tell her, supposing she was in ignorance? And when could he hope for an opportunity? And then again, failing an opportunity, how was he to go and spend the evening with those two friends of his, pretending to be entirely engrossed by their little amusements and occupations outdoors and in, while all the time there was lying in his pocket this letter, unanswered and perhaps unanswerable?

Fortune favoured him. Towards evening, a little before six o'clock, he heard

a door shut on the other side of the street; and, lifting his head, he perceived that it was Mr. Bethune who had just come out of the house, alone. Here was a chance not to be missed. Waiting for a couple of minutes, to make sure that the coast was clear, he passed downstairs, crossed the little thoroughfare, and knocked. The landlady told him that Miss Bethune was upstairs, and upstairs he went. The next moment a voice that he knew well invited him to enter, and therewithal the two young people found themselves face to face.

"You are early," she said, with a little smile of welcome, as she stopped in her sewing.

"Yes," said he, and he added quite frankly, "I saw your father go out, and I wished to speak with you alone. The fact is, Maisrie," he continued, taking a chair opposite her, "I have heard from America to-day about that proposal I made—to get some one to collect materials for your grandfather's book; and the answer is rather a strange one—I don't quite understand—perhaps you can tell me something about it." He hesitated, and then went on: "Maisrie, I suppose it never occurred to you that—that some one else in America might be proposing to bring out a similar book?"

She looked up quickly, and with a certain apprehension in her eyes.

"Oh, yes, I knew. My grandfather told me there had been talk of such a thing. What have you heard?"

He stared at her.

"You knew?" said he. "Then surely you might have told me!"

There was something in his tone—some touch of reproach—that brought the blood to her face; and yet she answered calmly and without resentment—

"Did I not tell you?—nor my grandfather? But perhaps neither of us thought it of much importance. It was only some vague talk, as I understood; for everyone must have known that no one was so familiar with the subject as my grandfather, and that it would be foolish to try to interfere with him. At the same time I have always been anxious that he should get on with the book, for various reasons; and if you have heard anything that will induce him to begin at once, so much the better."

It was clear that she was wholly in ignorance of the true state of the case.

"No," said he, watching her the while. "What I have heard will not have that effect, but rather the reverse. To tell you the plain truth, the American or Scotch-American writer has finished his book, and it will be out almost directly."

She sprang to her feet with an involuntary gesture, and stood still for a moment, her lips grown suddenly pale, and her eyes bewildered: and then she turned away from him to hide her emotion, and walked to the window. Instantly he followed her.

"Maisrie, what is the matter!" he exclaimed in astonishment, for he found

that tears had sprung to her eyes.

"Oh, it is a shame—it is a shame," she said, in broken accents, and her hands were clenched, "to steal an old man's good name from him, and that for so small a thing! What harm had he ever done them? The book was such a small thing—they might have left it to him—what can they gain from it—"

"But Maisrie—!"

"Oh, you don't understand, Vincent, you don't understand at all," she said, in a despairing sort of way, "how my grandfather will be compromised! He undertook to bring out the book; he got friends to help him with money; and now—now—what will they think?—what can I say to them?—what can I do? I—I must go to them—but—but what can I say?"

Her tears were running afresh now; and at sight of them the young man threw to the winds all his doubts and conjectures concerning George Bethune's honesty. That was not the question now.

"No, you shall not go to them!" said he, with indignant eyes. "You?—you go to any one—in that way? No, you shall not. I will go. It is a question of money: I will pay them their money back. Tell me who they are, and the amounts; and they shall have every farthing of their money back, and at once: what can they ask for more?"

For a second she regarded him with a swift glance of more than gratitude; but it was only to shake her head.

"No, how could I allow you to do that? What explanation could you make? There must be some other way—often I have wished that ray grandfather would let me try to earn something—I am willing enough—and I am never sure of my grandfather, because he can believe things so easily." She had grown calmer now; and over her face there had come the curious look of resignation that he had noticed when first he saw her, and that seemed so strange in a young girl. "I might have expected this," she went on, absently and sadly. "My grandfather can persuade himself of anything: if he thinks a thing is done, that is enough. I am sure I have urged him to get on with this book—not that I thought anybody could be so mean and cruel as to step in and forestall him—but that he might get free from those obligations; but I suppose when he had once arranged all the materials in his own mind he felt that the rest was easy enough and that there was no hurry. He takes things so lightly—and now—the humiliation—well, I shall have to bear that—"

"I say you shall not," he said, hotly. "I claim the privilege of a friend, and you cannot refuse. Who are the people to whom your grandfather is indebted over this volume?" he demanded.

"For one, there is Lord Musselburgh," she said, but indifferently, as if no hope lay that way. "And there is Mr. Carmichael, who owns an Edinburgh

paper—the *Chronicle*.”

“Very well,” said he, promptly. “What is to hinder my explaining to them that circumstances have occurred to prevent Mr. Bethune bringing out the volume he had projected; and that he begs to return them the money they had been good enough to advance?”

She shook her head again and sighed.

“No. It is very kind of you: You are always kind. But I could not accept it. I must try some way myself—though I am rather helpless: it is so difficult to get my grandfather to see things. I told you before: he lives in a world of imagination, and he can persuade himself that everything is well, no matter how we are situated. But it was shameful of them,” she said, with her indignation returning, and her lips becoming at once proud and tremulous, “to cheat an old man out of so poor and small a thing! Why, they all knew he was going to write this book—all the writers themselves—they were known to himself personally—and glad enough they were to send him their verses. Well, perhaps they are not to blame. Perhaps they may have been told that he had given up the idea—that is quite likely. At all events, I don’t envy the miserable creature who has gone and taken advantage of my grandfather’s absence—”

She could say no more just then, for there was a sound below of the door being opened and shut; and the next minute they could hear old George Bethune coming with his active step up the flight of stairs, while he sang aloud, in fine bravura fashion, “’Tis the march—’tis the march—’tis the march of the Cameron men!”

The little dinner in the restaurant that evening was altogether unlike those that had preceded it. The simple and innocent gaiety—the sense of snugness and good-comradeship—appeared to have fled, leaving behind it a certain awkwardness and restraint. Vincent was entirely perplexed. The story he had heard from America was in no way to be reconciled with Maisrie’s interpretation of her grandfather’s position; but it was possible that the old man had concealed from her certain material facts; or perhaps had been able to blind himself to them. But what troubled the young man most of all was to notice that the old look of pensive resignation had returned to Maisrie’s face. For a time a brighter life had shone there; the natural animation and colour of youth had appeared in her cheeks; and her eyes had laughter in them, and smiles, and kindness and gratitude; but all that had gone now—quite suddenly, as it seemed—and there had come back that strange sadness, that look of unresisting and hopeless acquiescence. Alone of the little party of three George Bethune retained his usual equanimity; nay, on this particular evening he appeared to be in especial high spirits; and in his careless and garrulous good-humour he took little heed of the silence and constraint of the two younger folk. They made all the better audience; and he could

enforce and adorn his main argument with all the illustrations he could muster; he was allowed to have everything his own way.

And perhaps Vincent, thinking of Maisrie, and her tears, and the hopelessness and solitariness of her position, may have been inclined to resent what he could not but regard as a callous and culpable indifference. At all events, he took the first opportunity that presented itself of saying—

"I hope I am not the bearer of ill-news, Mr. Bethune; but I have just heard from New York that someone over there has taken up your subject, and that a volume on the Scotch poets in America is just about ready, and will be published immediately."

Maisrie glanced timidly at her grandfather; but there was nothing to fear on his account; he was not one to quail.

"Oh, indeed, indeed," said he, with a lofty magnanimity. "Well, I hope it will be properly and satisfactorily done: I hope it will be done in a way worthy of the subject. Maisrie, pass the French mustard, if you please. A grand subject: for surely these natural and simple expressions of the human heart are as deeply interesting as the more finished, the more literary, productions of the professional poet. A single verse, rough and rugged as you like—and the living man stands revealed. Ay, ay, so the book is coming out. Well, I hope the public will be lenient; I hope the public will understand that these men are not professional poets, who have studied and written in leisure all their lives; it is but a homely lilt they offer; but it is genuine; it is from the heart—and it speaks to the heart—"

"But, grandfather," said Maisrie, "you were to have written the book!"

"What matters it who compiles the pages?—that is nothing at all; that is in a measure mechanical. I am only anxious that it should be well done, with tact, and discretion, and modesty," he continued—and with such obvious sincerity that Vincent was more than ever perplexed. "For the sake of old Scotland I would willingly give my help for nothing—a little guidance here and there—a few biographical facts—even an amended line. But after all the men must speak for themselves; and well they will speak, if the public will but remember that these verses have for the most part been thought of during the busy rush of a commercial life, and written down in a chance evening hour. It will be a message across the sea, to show that Scotland's sons have not forgotten her. MacGregor Crerar—Donald Ramsay—Hugh Ainslie—Evan MacColl—Andrew Wanless—I wonder if they have got Wanless's address to the robin that was sent to him from Scotland—you remember, Maisrie?

'There's mair than you, my bonnie bird,
Hae crossed the raging main,
Wha mourn the blythe, the happy days,

They'll never see again.
 Sweet bird, come sing a sang to me,
 Unmindfu' o' our ills;
 And let us think we're ance again
 'Mang our ain heather hills!

The book will be welcomed by many a proud heart, and with moist eyes, when it gets away up among the glens, to be read by the fireside and repeated at the plough; and I think, Maisrie, when you and I take a walk along Princes-street in Edinburgh we may see more than one or two copies in the bookseller's windows. Then I hope *Blackwood* will have a friendly word for it; and I am sure Mr. Carmichael will allow me to give it a hearty greeting in the *Weekly Chronicle*."

"But, grandfather," said Maisrie, almost piteously, "surely you forget that you undertook to bring out this book yourself!"

"Yes, yes," said he, with perfect good humour. "But 'the best laid schemes o' mice and men, gang aft agley.' And I do not grudge to some other what might have been mine—I mean the association of one's name with such a band of true and loyal Scotchmen. No; I do not grudge it; on the contrary I am prepared to give the volume the most generous welcome in my power; it is not for a brother Scot to find fault in such a case, or to be niggard of his praise. I hope we are capable of showing to the world that 'we're a' John Thampson's bairns."

Maisrie was growing desperate. Her grandfather would not understand; and how was she to speak plain—with Vincent listening to every word? And yet she knew that now he was aware of all the circumstances; concealment was impossible; and so she forced herself to utterance.

"Grandfather," said she—and her face was flushed a rose-red, though she seemed to take no heed of her embarrassment, so earnest and imploring was her speech, "You cannot forget the obligations you put yourself under—to Lord Musselburgh and Mr. Carmichael, and perhaps others. You undertook to write the book. If that is impossible now, it is a great misfortune; but at least there is one thing you must do; you must explain to them what has happened, and give them back the money."

The old man could no longer shelter himself behind his gay and discursive optimism; he frowned impatiently.

"I have already told you, Maisrie," said he, in severely measured accents, "—and you are grown up now, you might understand for yourself—that there are times and seasons when the introduction of business matters is uncalled for, and, in fact, unbecoming; and one of these is, surely, when we come out to spend a pleasant evening with our young friend here. I do not think it necessary that we should discuss our business affairs before him—I presume he would consider

such a thing somewhat inappropriate at a dinner-table.”

Maisrie’s lips quivered; and her grandfather saw it. Instantly he changed his tone.

”Come, come,” said he, with a cheerful good nature. ”Enough, enough. I can quite comprehend how the *res angusta domi* may tend to give money, and questions of money, an over-prominence in the minds of women. But money, and the obligations that money may place us under, are surely a very secondary affair, to one who looks at human nature with a larger view. I thank God,” he went on, with much complacency, ”that I have never been the slave of avarice, that even in times of great necessity I have kept subsidiary things in their proper sphere. I do not boast; our disposition is as much a matter of inheritance as the shape of our fingers or feet; and that disposition may be handed down without the accompanying circumstances that developed it. You follow me, Mr. Harris?”

”Oh, yes,” said the younger man, gloomily; that quiver of Maisrie’s lips was still in his mind.

For the first time since he had known them Vincent was glad to get away from his companions that night: the situation in which he found them and himself alike involved was altogether so strange that he wanted time to think over it. And first of all he put aside that matter of the Scotch-American book as of minor importance: no doubt some kind of explanation was possible, if all the facts were revealed. It was when he came to consider the position and surroundings of Maisrie Bethune that the young man grew far more seriously concerned; indeed, his heart became surcharged with an immeasurable pity and longing to help. He began to understand how it was that a premature sadness and resignation was written on that beautiful face, and why her eyes so rarely smiled; and he could guess at the origin of that look of hopelessness, as though she despaired of getting her grandfather to acknowledge the realities and the responsibilities of the actual life around him. To Vincent the circumstances in which this young girl was placed seemed altogether tragic; and when he regarded the future that might lie before her, it was with a blank dismay.

Moreover, he now no longer sought to conceal from himself the nature of this engrossing interest in all that concerned her, this fascination and glamour that drew him towards her, this constant solicitude about her that haunted him day and night. Love had originally sprung from pity, perhaps; her loneliness had appealed to him, and her youth, and the wistful beauty of her eyes. But even now that he knew what caused his heart to leap when he heard her footfall on the stairs, or when he happened to look up at the table to find her regard fixed on him, there was no wild desire for a declaration of his fond hopes and dreams. Rather he hung back—as if something mysteriously sacred surrounded her. He had asked her for a flower: that was all. Probably she had forgotten. There

seemed no place for the pretty toyings of love-making in the life of this girl, who appeared to have missed the gaiety of childhood, and perhaps might slip on into middle-age hardly knowing what youth had been. And yet what a rose was ready to blow there—he said to himself—if only sunshine, and sweet rains, and soft airs were propitious! It was the wide, white days of June that were wanted for her, before the weeks and the months went by, and the darkness and the winter came.

No, he did not speak; perhaps he was vaguely aware that any abrupt disclosure on his part might startle her into maiden reserve; whereas in their present relations there existed the frankest confidence. She made no secret of the subdued and happy content she experienced in this constant companionship; her eyes lit up when he approached; oftentimes she called him 'Vincent' without seeming to notice it. She had given him a flower?—yes, as she would have given him a handful at any or every hour of the day, if she fancied it would please him, and without ulterior thought. They were almost as boy and girl together in this daily intercourse, this open and avowed comradeship, this easy and unrestricted familiarity. But sometimes Vincent looked ahead—with dim forebodings. He had not forgotten the murmur of that wide sea of separation that he had beheld as it were in a vision; the sound of it, faint, and sad, and ominous, still lingered in his ears.

It was in one of these darker moments that he resolved, at whatever risk, to acquaint old George Bethune with something of his irresolute hopes and fears. The opportunity arrived quite unexpectedly. One morning he was as usual on his way to his lodgings when, at the corner of Upper Grosvenor Street, he met Mr. Bethune coming into Park Lane alone.

"Maisrie is well?" Vincent asked, in sudden alarm, for it was the rarest thing in the world to find grandfather and granddaughter separated.

"Oh, yes, yes," the old man said. "She has some household matters to attend to—dressmaking, I think. Poor lass, she has to be economical; indeed, I think she carries it to an extreme; but it's no use arguing with Maisrie; I let her have her own way."

"I wanted to speak to you—about her," Vincent said, and he turned and walked with the old man, across the street into Hyde Park. "I have often wished to speak to you—and—and of course there was no chance when she herself was present—"

He hesitated, casting about for a beginning; then he pulled himself together, and boldly flung himself into it.

"I hope you won't take it for impertinence," said he. "I don't mean it that way—very different from that. But you yourself, sir, you may remember, you spoke to me about Maisrie when we were down at Henley together—about what her future might be, if anything happened to you—and you seemed concerned.

Well, it is easy to understand how you should be troubled—it is terrible to think of a young girl like that—so sensitive, too—being alone in the world, and not over well-provided for, as you have hinted to me. It would be so strange and unusual a position for a young girl to be in—without relations—without friends—and having no one to advise her or protect her in any way. Of course you will say it is none of my business—”

”But you would like to have it made your business,” said old George Bethune, with a bland and good-natured frankness that considerably astounded his stammering companion. ”My dear young friend, I know perfectly what you would say. Do you think I have been blind to the friendly and even affectionate regard you have shown towards my granddaughter all this while, or to the pleasure she has enjoyed in having you take part in our small amusements? No, I have not been blind. I have looked on and approved. It has been an added interest to our lives; between you and her I have observed the natural sympathy of similar age; and I have been glad to see her enjoying the society of one nearer her own years. But now—now, if I guess aright, you wish for some more definite tie.”

”Would it not be better?” the young man said, breathlessly. ”If there were some clear understanding, would not a great deal of the uncertainty with regard to the future be removed? You see, Mr. Bethune, I haven’t spoken a word to Maisrie—not a word. I have been afraid. Perhaps I have been mistaken in imagining that she might in time—be inclined to listen to me—”

He stopped: then he proceeded more slowly—and it might have been noticed that his cheek was a little paler than usual. ”Yes, it may be as you say. Perhaps it is only that she likes the companionship of one of her own age. That is natural. And then she is very kind and generous: I may have been mistaken in thinking there was a possibility of something more.”

He was silent now and abstracted: as he walked on he saw nothing of what was around him.

”Come, come, my friend!” George Bethune exclaimed, with much benignity. ”Do not vex yourself with useless speculations; you are looking too far ahead; you and she are both too young to burden yourselves with grave responsibilities. A boyish and girlish attachment is a very pretty and engaging thing; but it must not be taken too seriously—”

And here for a second a flash of resentment fired through Vincent’s heart: was it well of this old man to speak so patronisingly of Maisrie as but a child when it was he himself who had thrust upon her more than the responsibilities and anxieties of a grown woman?

”Take things as they are! Do you consider that you have much cause to complain, either the one or the other of you?” old George Bethune resumed, in

a still lighter strain. "You have youth and strength, good health, and a constant interest in the life going on around you: is not that sufficient? Why, here am I, nearing my three score years and ten; and every morning that I awake I know that there lies before me another beautiful, interesting, satisfactory day, that I am determined to enjoy to the very utmost of my power. To-morrow?—to-morrow never yet belonged to anybody—never was of any use to anybody: give me to-day, and I am content to let to-morrow shift for itself! Yes," he continued, in firm and proud and almost joyous accents, and he held his head erect, "you may have caught me in some unguarded moment—some moment of nervous weakness or depression—beginning to inquire too curiously into the future; but that was a transient folly; I thank God that it is not my habitual mood! Repining, complaining, anticipating: what good do you get from that? Surely I have had as much reason to repine and complain as most; but I do not waste my breath in remonstrating with 'fickle Fortune.' 'Fickle Fortune!'" he exclaimed, in his scorn—"if the ill-favoured jade were to come near me I would give her a wallop across the buttocks with my staff, and bid her get out of my road! 'Fickle Fortune!' She may 'perplex the poor sons of a day;' but she shall never perplex me—by God and Saint Ringan!"

He laughed aloud in his pride.

"Why," said he, suddenly changing into quite another vein, "have you not yet come to know that the one priceless thing to think of in the world—the one extraordinary thing—is that at this precise moment you can see? For millions and millions of years these skies have been shining, and the clouds moving, and the seas running blue all round the shores; and you were dead and blind to them; unknowing and unknown. Generation after generation of men—thousands and thousands of them—were looking at these things; they knew the hills and the clouds and the fields; the world existed for them; but you could see nothing, you were as if lying dead. Then comes your brief instant; it is your turn; your eyes are opened; and for a little while—a passing second—the universe is revealed to you. Don't you perceive that the marvellous thing is that out of the vast millions of ages it should be this one particular moment, this present moment, that happens to be given to you? And instead of receiving it with amazement and wonder and joy, why, you must begin to fret and worry and lay schemes, as if you were unaware that the gates of the empty halls of Pluto were waiting to engulf you and shut you up once more in darkness and blindness. Look at those elm-trees—at the water down there—at the moving clouds: isn't it wonderful to think that in the immeasurable life of the world this should happen to be the one moment when these things are made visible to you?"

Vincent perceived in a kind of way what the old man meant; but he did not understand why this should make him less concerned about Maisrie's position,

or less eagerly covetous of winning her tender regard.

"Well, well," said old George Bethune, "perhaps it is but natural that youth should be impatient; while old age may well be content with such small and placid comforts as may be met with. I should have thought there was not much to complain of in our present manner of life—if you will allow me to include you in our tiny microcosm. It is not exciting; it is simple, and wholesome; and I hope not altogether base and gross. And as regards Maisrie, surely you and she have enough of each other's society even as matters stand. Let well alone, my young friend; let well alone; that is my advice to you. And I may say there are especial and important reasons why I should not wish her to be bound by any pledge. You know that I do not care to waste much thought on what may lie ahead of us; but still, at the same time, there might at any moment happen certain things which would make a great difference in Maisrie's circumstances—"

Vincent had been listening in a kind of absent and hopeless way; but these few words instantly aroused his attention: perhaps this was the real reason why the old man wished Maisrie to remain free?

"A great and marvellous change indeed," he continued, with some increase of dignity in his manner and in his mode of speech. "A change which would affect me also, though that would be of little avail now. But as regards my granddaughter, she might be called upon to fill a position very different from that she occupies at present; and I should not wish her to be hampered by anything pertaining to her former manner of life. Not that she would ever prove forgetful of past kindness; that is not in her nature; but in these new circumstances she might find herself confronted by other duties. Enough said, I hope, on that point. And well I know," he added, with something of a grand air, "that in whatever sphere Maisrie Bethune may be placed, she will act worthily of her name and of the obligations it entails."

He suddenly paused. There was a poorly-clad woman going by, carrying in one arm a baby, while with the other hand she half dragged along a small boy of five or six. She did not look like a professional London beggar, nor yet like a country tramp; but of her extreme wretchedness there could be no doubt; while there was a pinched look as of hunger in her cheeks.

"Wait a bit!—where are you going?" old George Bethune said to her, in blunt and ready fashion.

The woman turned round startled and afraid.

"I am making for home, sir," she said, timidly.

"Where's that?" he demanded.

"Out Watford way, sir—Abbot's Langley it is."

"Where have you come from?"

"From Leatherhead, sir."

"On foot all the way?"

"Yes, indeed, sir," she said, with a bit of a sigh.

"And with very little food, I warrant?" said he.

"Little indeed, sir."

"Have you any money?"

"Yes, sir—a matter of a few coppers left. I gave what I had to my old mother—she thought she was dying, and sent for me to bring the two little boys to see her—but she's better, sir, and now I'm making for home again."

"Oh, you gave what you had to your mother? Well," said he, deliberately, "I don't know whether what I have will amount to as much, but whatever it is you are welcome to it."

He dived into his trousers pockets and eventually produced about half a handful of shillings and pence; then he searched a small waistcoat-pocket and brought forth two sovereigns. It was all his wealth.

"Here, take that, and in God's name get yourself some food, woman!" said he, unconsciously lapsing into a pronounced Scotch accent. "You look starved. And this bit of a laddie, here—buy him some sweet things as well as bread and butter when you get up to the shops. And then when you're outside the town, you'll just give some honest fellow a shilling, and you'll get a cast of an empty cart to help you on your road. Well, good-day to ye—no, no, take what there is, I tell ye, woman!—bless me, you'll need most of it before you get to your own fireside. On your ways, now!—and when you reach the shops, don't forget the barley-sugar for this young shaver."

So he turned away, leaving the poor woman so overwhelmed that she had hardly a word of thanks; and when he had gone for some little distance all he said was—with something of a rueful laugh—

"There went my luncheon; for I promised Maisrie I should not return home till near dinner-time."

"And you have left yourself without a farthing?" the young man exclaimed. "Well, that's all right—I can lend you a few sovereigns."

"No, no," said old George Bethune, with a smile, and he held up his hand in deprecation. "I am well pleased now; and if I should suffer any pangs of starvation during the day, I shall be glad to think that I can endure them better than that poor creature with the long tramp before her. To-night," said he, rubbing his palms together with much satisfaction, "to-night, when we meet at Mentavisti's, I shall be all the hungrier and all the happier. Ah, must you go now?—good-bye, then! We shall see you at half-past six, I suppose; and meantime, my friend, dismiss from your mind those cares and anxious thoughts about the future. 'To the gods belongs to-morrow!'"

Now this little incident that had just happened in Hyde Park comforted Vin-

cent exceedingly. Here was something definite that he could proudly set against the vague and unworthy suspicions of Mrs. Ellison. Surely the man was no plausible impostor, no charlatan, no crafty schemer, who could so readily empty his pockets, and look forward to a day's starvation, in order to help a poor and unknown vagrant-woman? No doubt it was but part and parcel of his habitual and courageous disregard of consequences, his yielding to the generous impulse of the moment; but, if the truth must be told, Master Vin was at times almost inclined to envy old George Bethune his splendid audacity and self-confidence. Why should the younger man be the one to take forethought for the morrow; while the venerable gray beard was gay as a lark, delighted with the present hour, and defiant of anything that might happen? And what if the younger man were to follow the precepts of the elder, and lapse into a careless content? Their way of living, as George Bethune had pointed out, was simple, happy, and surely harmless. There were those three forming a little coterie all by themselves; enjoying each other's society; interested in each other's pursuits. The hours of the daytime were devoted to individual work; then came the glad reunion of the evening and the sallying forth to this or the other restaurant; thereafter the little dinner in the corner, with its glimpses of foreign folk, and its gay talk filled with patriotism and poetry and reminiscences of other lands; finally the hushed enchantment of that little parlour, with Maisrie and her violin, with dominoes, and discussions literary and political, while always and ever there reigned a perfect frankness and good-fellowship. Yes, it seemed a happy kind of existence, for these three. And was not old George Bethune in the right in thinking that the young people should not hamper themselves by any too grave responsibilities? A boyish and girlish attachment (as he deemed it to be) was a pretty and amusing and engaging thing; quite a little idyll, in fact—but not to be taken too seriously. And where the future was all so uncertain, was it not better to leave it alone?

Specious representations, indeed! But this young man, who had his own views and ways of thinking, remained stubbornly unconvinced. It was because the future was so vague that he wanted it made more definite; and as he thought of Maisrie, and of what might befall her when she was alone in the world, and as he thought of his own far-reaching resolves and purposes, he did not in the least consider the relationship now existing between him and her as being merely a pretty little pastoral episode, that would lead to nothing. No doubt their present way of living had many charms and fascinations, if only it would last. But it would not last; it was impossible it should last. Looking back over these past months, Vincent was surely grateful enough for all the pleasant and intimate companionship he had enjoyed; but his temperament was not like that of George Bethune; the passing moment was not everything to him. He had an old head on young shoulders; and it needed no profound reflection to tell him that life could

not always consist of the Restaurant Mentavisti and *La Claire Fontaine*.

CHAPTER II.

BY NORTHERN SEAS.

Here, in front of the great, square, old-fashioned Scotch mansion, which was pleasantly lit up by the morning sun, stood the family waggonette which had just been filled by those of the house-party who were bound for church; and here, too, in the spacious porch, was Mrs. Ellison, smiling her adieux with rather a sad air.

"Good-bye, dear," said her kindly hostess. "I hope you will have got rid of your headache by the time we get back." And therewith the carriage was driven away along the pebbled pathway, through an avenue of magnificent wide-spreading elms.

Then the tall and graceful young widow, who carried a book in her hand, glanced around her. There was no living thing near except a white peacock that was solemnly stalking across the lawn. Mrs. Ellison strolled towards a hammock slung between two maples, and stood there for a moment, and considered. Should she attempt it? There was no onlooker, supposing some slight accident befell. Finally, however, her courage gave way; she returned to the front of the house; and took possession of a long, low lounging-chair, where she could sit in the sun, and yet have the pages of her book in shadow.

There was a footfall behind her: Lord Musselburgh made his appearance, smoking a cigarette.

"Why," said she, with a prettily affected surprise, "haven't you gone to church? I made sure you had walked on."

"How could I leave you all by yourself," said the young man, with tender sympathy, "and you suffering from a headache?"

Then she professed to be vexed and impatient.

"Oh, do go away to church!" she said. "You can be in plenty of time, if you walk fast enough. If you stop here you know what will go on at lunch. Those Drexel girls can look more mischief than any other twenty girls could say or do."

"Oh, no," said he, plaintively, "don't send me away! Let us go for a walk rather. You know, a woman's headache is like her hat—she can put it on or off when she likes. Come!"

"I consider you are very impertinent," said she, with something of offended dignity. "Do you think I shammed a headache in order to stay behind?"

"I don't think anything," said he, discreetly.

"You will be saying next that it was to have this meeting with you?"

"Why, who could dare to imagine such a thing!"

"Oh, very well, very well," said she, with a sudden change to good-nature, as she rose from the chair. "I forgive you. And I will be with you in a second."

She was hardly gone a couple of minutes; but in that brief space of time she had managed to make herself sufficiently picturesque; for to the simple and neat grey costume which clad her tall and slim and elegant figure she had added a bold-sweeping hat of black velvet and black feathers, while round her neck she had wound a black boa, its two long tails depending in front. Thus there was no colour about her, save what shone in her perfect complexion, and in the light and expression of her shrewd, and dangerous, and yet grave and demure blue eyes.

"And really and frankly," said she, as they left the house together, "I am not sorry to have a chance of a quiet talk with you; for I want to tell you about my nephew; I am sure you are almost as much interested in him as I am; and you would be as sorry as I could be if anything were to happen to him. And I am afraid something is going to happen to him. His letters to me have entirely changed of late. You know how proud Vin is by nature—and scornful, too, when you don't act up to his lofty standard; and when I ventured to hint that he might keep his eyes open in dealing with that old mountebank and his pretty granddaughter, oh! the tempestuous indignation of my young gentleman! He seemed to think that a creature such as I—filled with such base suspicions—was not fit to live. Well, I did not quarrel with my handsome boy; in fact, I rather admired his rage and disdain of me; it was part of the singleness of his nature; for he believes everybody to be as straightforward and sincere as himself; and he has a very fine notion of loyalty towards his friends. And vindictive, too, the young villain was; I can tell you I was made to feel the enormity of my transgression; I was left to wallow in that quagmire of unworthy doubt in which I had voluntarily plunged myself. So matters went on; and I could only hope for one of two things—either that he might find out something about those people that would sever his connection with them, or that his passing fancy for the girl would gradually fade away. I made sure he would tire of that oracular old humbug; or else he would discover there was nothing at all behind the mysterious eyes and the tragic solemnity of that artful young madam. Oh, mind you," she continued, as they walked along under the over-branching maples, amid a rustle of withered October leaves, "mind you, I don't suspect her quite as much as I suspect the venerable Druid; and I don't recall anything that I said about her. I admit that she beglamoured me with her singing of a French Canadian song;

but what is that?—what can you tell of any one's moral or mental nature from a trick of singing—the thrill of a note—some peculiar quality of voice? Why, the greatest wretch of a man I ever knew had the most beautiful, innocent, honest brown eyes—they could make you believe anything—all the women said he was so good, and so different from other men—well, I will tell you that story some other time—I found out what the honesty of the clear brown eyes was worth.”

Here she was interrupted by his having to open an iron gate for her. When they passed through, they came in sight of a solitary little bay of cream-white sand, touched here and there with russet weed, and ending in a series of projecting rocky knolls covered with golden bracken; while before them lay the wide plain of the sea, ruffled into the intensest blue by a brisk breeze from the north. Still further away rose the great mountains of Mull, and the long stretch of the Morven hills, all of a faint, ethereal crimson-brown in the sunlight, with every glen and water-course traced in lines of purest ultramarine. They had all this shining world to themselves; and there was an absolute silence save for the continuous whisper of the ripples that broke along the rocks; whilst the indescribable murmur—the strange inarticulate voices—of the greater deep beyond seemed to fill all the listening air.

”And I might have known I was mistaken in Vin's case,” she went on, absently. ”He was never the one to be caught by a pretty face, and be charmed with it for a time, and pass on and forget. He always kept aloof from that kind of thing—perhaps with a touch of impatient scorn. No; I might have known it was something more serious: so serious, indeed, is it, that he has at last condescended to appeal to me—fancy that!—fancy Vin coming down from his high horse, and appealing to me to be reasonable, to be considerate, and to stand his friend. And the pages he writes to persuade me! Really, if you were to believe him, you would think this old man one of the most striking and interesting figures the world has ever seen—so fearless in his pride, so patient in his poverty, so stout-hearted in his old age. Then his splendid enthusiasm about fine things in literature; his magnanimity over the wrongs he has suffered; his pathetic affection for his granddaughter and his tender care of her—why, you would take him to be one of the grandest human creatures that ever breathed the breath of life! Then about the girl: don't I remember *La Claire Fontaine*? Oh, yes, I remember *La Claire Fontaine*—and little else! You see, that is just where the trouble comes in as regards my nephew. Hard-headed as he is, and brusque of speech—sometimes, not always—he is just stuffed full of Quixotism; and I daresay it is precisely because this girl is shy and reserved, and has rather appealing eyes, that he imagines all kinds of wonderful things about her, and has made a saint of her, to be worshipped. A merry lass, with a saucy look and a clever tongue, would have no chance with Vin; he would stare at her—perhaps only half-disguising his con-

tempt; and then, if you asked him what he thought of her he would probably say, with a curl of the lip, 'Impertinent tomboy!' But when he comes to speak of this one, why, you would think that all womanhood had undergone some process of deification in her solitary self. Come here, and by this divine lamp you shall read and understand whatever has been great and noble and pure and beautiful in all the song and story of the world! And yet perhaps it is not altogether absurd," the pretty Mrs. Ellison continued, with a bit of a sigh. "It is pathetic, rather. I wish there were a few more such men as that; the world could get on very well with a few more of them. But they don't seem to exist nowadays."

"Ah, if you only knew! Perhaps your experience has been unfortunate," her companion said, wistfully: whereupon the young widow, without turning her head towards him, perceptibly sniggered.

"Oh, *you!*" she exclaimed, in derision. "You! You needn't pretend to come into that exalted category—no, indeed—"

"I suppose people have been saying things about me to you," said he, with a certain affectation of being hurt. "But you needn't have believed them all the same."

"People!" she said. "People! Why, everybody knows what you are! A professional breaker of poor young innocent girls' hearts. Haven't we all heard of you? Haven't we all heard how you went on in America? No such stories came home about Vin, I can assure you. Oh, we all know what you are!"

"You may have heard one story," said he, somewhat stiffly; "but if you knew what it really was, you would see that it was nothing to joke about. Some time I will tell you. Some other time when you are in a more friendly, a more believing and sympathetic, mood."

"Oh, yes," she said, laughing. "A very heart-rending story, no doubt! And you were deeply injured, of course, being so extremely innocent! You forget that I have seen you in a good many houses; you forget that I have been watching your goings-on with Louie Drexel, in this very place. Do you think I can't recognise the old hand—the expert—the artist? Lord Musselburgh, you can't deceive me."

"Probably not," said he, sharply. "If all tales be true you have acquired some experience yourself."

"Oh, who said that about me!" she demanded, with indignation (but her eyes were not indignant, they were rather darkly amused, if only he had made bold to look at them.) "Who dared to say such a thing? And of course you listened without a word of protest: probably you assented! What it is to have friends! But perhaps some day I, also, may have a little story to tell you; and then you may understand me a little better."

Here there was another farm-gate for him to open, so that their talk was again interrupted. Then they passed under a series of lofty grey crags hung with

birch, and hazel, and rowan, all in their gorgeous autumnal tints; until they came in sight of another secluded little bay, with silver ripples breaking along the sand, and with small outlying islands covered with orange seaweed where they were not white with gulls. And here was a further stretch of that wind-swept, dark blue, striated sea, with the lonely hills of Morven and Kingairloch, sun-dappled and cloud-dappled, rising into the fair turquoise sky. There was a scent of dew-wet grass mingling with the stronger odour of the seaweed the breeze was blowing freshly in. And always there came to them the long, unceasing, multitudinous murmur of those moving waters, that must have sounded to them so great and vast a thing beside the small trivialities of their human speech.

"Have you read Vin's article in the *Imperial Review*?" said Mrs. Ellison, flicking at a thistle with her sun-shade.

"Not yet. But I saw it announced. About American State Legislatures, isn't it, or something of that kind?"

"It seemed to me very ably and clearly written," she said. "But that is not the point. I gather that Vin has been contemplating all kinds of contingencies; and that he is now trying to qualify for the post of leader-writer on one of the daily newspapers. What does that mean?—it means that he is determined to marry this girl, and that he thinks it probable there may be a break between himself and his father in consequence. There may be?—there will be, I give you my word! My amiable brother-in-law's theories of Socialism and Fraternity and Universal Equality are very pretty toys to play with—and they have even gained him a sort of reputation through his letters to the *Times*; but he doesn't bring them into the sphere of actual life. Of course, Vin has his own little money; and I, for one, why, I shouldn't see him starve in any case; but I take it that he is already making provision for the future and its responsibilities. Now isn't that dreadful? I declare to you, Lord Musselburgh, that when I come down in the morning and find a letter from him lying on the hall-table, my heart sinks—just as if I heard the men on the stair bringing down a coffin. Because I know if he is captured by those penniless adventurers, it will be all over with my poor lad; he will be bound to them; he will have to support them; he will have to sacrifice friends and fortune, and a future surely such as never yet lay before any young man. Just think of it! Who ever had such possibilities before him? Who ever had so many friends, all expecting great things of him? Who ever was so petted and caressed and admired by those whose slightest regard is considered by the world at large an honour; and—I will say this for my boy—who ever deserved it more, or remained all through it so unspoiled, and simple, and manly? Oh, you don't know what he has been to me—what I have hoped for him—as if he were my only brother, and one to be proud of! His father is well known, no doubt; he has got a sort of academic reputation; but he is not liked; people don't talk about him as if—as if they cared for him.

But Vincent could win hearts as well as fame: ah, do you think I don't know?—trust a woman to know! There is a strange kind of charm and fascination about him: I would put the most accomplished lady-killer in England in a drawing-room, and I know where the girls' eyes would go the moment my Vin made his appearance: perhaps it is because he is so honestly indifferent to them all. And it isn't women only; it isn't merely his good looks; every one, young and old, man and woman, is taken with him; there is about him a sort of magic and glamour of youth—and—and bright promise—and straightforward intention—oh, I can't tell you what!—but—but—it's something that makes me love him!”

”That is clear enough,” said he; and indeed there was a ring of sincerity in her tone, sometimes even a tremor in her voice—perhaps of pride.

”Well,” she resumed, as they strolled along under the beetled crags that were all aflame with golden-yellow birch and blood-red rowan, ”I am not going to stand aside and see all that fair promise lost. I own I am a selfish woman; and hitherto I have kept aloof, as I did not want to get myself into trouble. I am going to hold aloof no longer. The more I hear the more I am convinced that Vin has fallen into the hands of an unscrupulous sharper—perhaps a pair of them; and I mean to have his eyes opened. Here is this new revelation about that American book, which simply means that you were swindled out of £50——”

”One moment,” her companion said hastily, and there was a curious look of mortification on his face. ”I had no right to tell you that story. I broke confidence: I am ashamed of myself. And I assure you I was not swindled out of any £50. When the old man came to me, with his Scotch accent, and his Scotch patriotism, and his Scotch plaid thrown over his shoulder—well, ’my heart warmed to the tartan’; and I was glad of the excuse for helping him. I did not want any book; and I certainly did not want the money back. But when Vin came to me, and made explanations, and finally handed me a cheque for £50, there was something in his manner that told me I dared not refuse. It was something like ’Refuse this money, and you doubt the honour of the woman I am going to marry.’ But seeing that I did take it, I have now nothing to say. My mouth is shut—ought to have been shut, rather, only you and I have had some very confidential chats since we came up here.”

”All the same, it was a downright swindle,” said she, doggedly; ”and the fact that Vin paid you back the money makes it none the less a swindle. Now I will tell you what I am about to do. I must be cruel to be kind. I am going to enlist the services of George Morris——”

”Sir George?” he asked.

”No, no; George Morris, the solicitor—his wife and I are very great friends—and I know he would do a great deal for me. Very well; he must get to know simply everything about this old man—his whole history—and if it turns out to

be what I imagine, then some of us will have to go to Vin and tell him the truth. It won't be a pleasant duty; but duty never is pleasant. I know I shall be called a traitor for my share in it. Here is Vin appealing to me to be his friend—as if I were not his friend!—begging me to come and take this solitary and friendless girl by the hand, and all the rest of it; and instead of that I go behind his back and try to find out what will destroy his youthful romance for ever. But it's got to be done," said the young widow, with a sigh. "It will be a wrench at first; then six months' despair; and a life-time of thankfulness thereafter. And of course I must give George Morris all the help I can. He must make enquiries, for one thing, at the office of the *Edinburgh Chronicle*: I remember at Henley the old gentleman spoke of the proprietor as a friend of his. Then the man you know in New York, who gave Mr. Bethune a letter of introduction to you: what is his name and address?"

"Oh, no," said Lord Musselburgh, shrinking back, as it were. "No; I don't want to take part in it. Of course, you may be acting quite rightly; no doubt you are acting entirely in Vin's interests; but—but I would rather have nothing to do with it."

"And yet you call yourself Vin's friend! Come, tell me!" she said, coaxingly. Again he refused.

"Mind you, I believe I could find out for myself," she went on. "I know that he is the editor of a newspaper in New York—a Scotch newspaper: come, Lord Musselburgh, give me his name, or the name of the newspaper!"

He shook his head.

"No—not fair," he said.

Then she stopped, and faced him, and regarded him with arch eyes.

"And yet it was on this very pathway, only yesterday morning, that you swore that there was nothing in the world that you wouldn't do for me!"

"That was different," said he, with some hesitation. "I meant as regards myself. This concerns some one else."

"Oh, very well," said she, and she walked on proudly. "I dare say I can find out."

He touched her arm to detain her.

"Have you a note-book?" he asked.

She took from her pocket a combined purse and note-book; and without a word—or a smile—she pulled out the pencil.

"Hugh Anstruther, *Western Scotsman* Office, New York," said he, rather shamefacedly.

"There, that is all right!" she said, blithely, and she put the note-book in her pocket again. "That is as far as we can go in that matter at present; and now we can talk of something else. What is the name of this little bay?"

"Little Ganovan, I believe."

"And the other one we passed?"

"Port Bàn."

"What is the legend attached to the robber's cave up there in the rocks?"

"The legend? Oh, some one told me the gardener keeps his tools in that cave."

"What kind of a legend is that!" she said, impatiently; and then she went on with her questions. "Why doesn't anybody ever come round this way?"

"I suppose because they know we want the place to ourselves."

"And why should we want the place to ourselves?"

This was unexpected. He paused.

"Ah," said he, "what is the use of my telling you? All your interest is centred on Vin. I suppose a woman can only be interested in one man at any one time."

"Well, I should hope so!" the young widow said, cheerfully. "Shall we go round by the rocks or through the trees?"

For they were now come to a little wood of birch and larch and pine; and without more ado he led the way, pushing through the outlying tall bracken and getting in underneath the branches.

"I suppose," said he, in a rather rueful tone, "that you don't know what is the greatest proof of affection that a man can show to a woman? No, of course you don't!"

"What is it, then?" she demanded, as she followed him stooping.

"Why, it's going first through a wood, and getting all the spider's-webs on his nose."

But presently they had come to a clearer space, where they could walk together, their footfalls hushed by the carpet of withered fir-needles; while here and there a rabbit would scurry off, and again they would catch a glimpse of a hen-pheasant sedately walking down a glade between the trees. And now their talk had become much more intimate and confidential; it had even assumed a touch of more or less affected sadness.

"It's very hard," he was saying, "that you should understand me so little. You think I am cold, and cynical, and callous. Well, perhaps I have reason to be. I have had my little experience of womankind—of one woman, rather. I sometimes wonder whether the rest are anything like her, or are capable of acting as she did."

"Who was she?" his companion asked, timidly.

And therewith, as they idly and slowly strolled through this little thicket, he told his tragic tale, which needs not to be set down here: it was all about the James river, Virginia, and a pair of southern eyes, and betrayal, and farewell, and black night. His companion listened in the deep silence of sympathy; and when he had finished she said, in a low voice, and with downcast eyes—

"I am sorry—very sorry. But at least there was one thing spared you: you did not marry out of spite."

He glanced at her quickly.

"Oh, yes," she said, and she raised her head, and spoke with a proud and bitter air, "I have my story too! I do not tell it to everyone. Perhaps I have not told it to anyone. But the man I loved was separated from me by lies—by lies; and I was fool and idiot enough to believe them! And the one I told you about—the one with the beautiful, clear, brown eyes—so good and noble he was, as everyone declared!—it was he who came to me with those falsehoods; and I believed them—I believed them—like the fool I was! Oh, yes," she said, and she held her head high, for her breast was heaving with real emotion this time, "it is easy to say that every mistake meets with its own punishment; but I was punished too much—too much; a life-long punishment for believing what lying friends had said to me!" She furtively put the tips of her fingers to her eyes, to wipe away the tears that lay along the lashes. "And then I was mad; I was out of my senses; I would have married anybody to show that—that I cared nothing for—for the other one; and—and I suppose he was angry too—he would not speak—he stood aside, and knew that I was going to kill my life, and never a single word! That was his revenge—to say nothing—when he saw me about to kill my life! Cruel, do you call it? Oh, no!—what does it matter? A woman's heart broken—what is that? But now you know why I think so of men—and—and why I laugh at them—"

Well, her laughing was strange: she suddenly burst into a violent fit of crying and sobbing, and turned away from him, and hid her face in her handkerchief. What could he do? This was all unlike the gay young widow who seemed so proud of her solitary estate and so well content. Feeble words of comfort were of small avail. And then, again, it hardly seemed the proper occasion for offering her more substantial sympathy—though that was in his mind all the while, and very nearly on the tip of his tongue. So perforce he had to wait until her weeping was over; and indeed it was she herself who ended the scene by exclaiming impatiently—

"There—enough of that! I did not intend to bother you with my small troubles when I stayed behind for you this morning. Come, shall we go out on to the rocks, and round by the little bay? What do you call it—Ganovan?"

"Yes; I think they call it Little Ganovan," he said, absently, as he and she together emerged from the twilight of larch and pine, and proceeded, leisurely and in silence, to cross the semicircular sweep of yellow sand.

When they got to the edge of the rocks, they sat down there: apparently they had nothing to do on this idle morning but to contemplate that vast, far-murmuring, dark blue plain—touched here and there with a sharp glimmer of

white—and the range upon range of the Kingairloch hills, deepening in purple gloom, or shining rose-grey and yellow-grey in the sun. In this solitude they were quite alone save for the sea-birds that had wheeled into the air, screaming and calling, at their approach; but the terns and curlews were soon at peace again; a cloud of gulls returned to one of the little islands just in front of them; while a slow-flapping heron winged its heavy flight away to the north. All once more was silence; and the world was to themselves.

And yet what was he to say to this poor suffering soul whose tragic sorrows and experiences had been thus unexpectedly disclosed? He really wished to be sympathetic; and, if he dared, he would have reminded her that

'Whispering tongues can poison truth;
And constancy lives in realms above;
And life is thorny; and youth is vain;
And to be wroth with one we love
Doth work like madness in the brain.'

only he knew how difficult it is to quote poetry without making one's self ridiculous; and also he knew that the pretty young widow's eyes had a dangerous trick of sudden laughter. However, it was she who first spoke.

"I wonder what those who have gone to church will say when they discover that we have spent all the morning here?"

"They may say what they like," he made answer, promptly. "There are things one cannot speak about in drawing-rooms, among a crowd. And how could I ever have imagined that you, with your high spirits and merry temperament, and perpetual good-humour, had come through such trials? I wonder that people never think of the mischief that is done by intermeddling—"

"Intermeddling?" said she proudly. "It wasn't of intermeddling I had to complain: it was a downright conspiracy—it was false stories—I was deceived by those who professed to be my best friends. There is intermeddling and intermeddling. You might say I was intermeddling in the case of my nephew. But what harm can come of that? It is not lies, it is the truth, I want to have told him. And even if it causes him some pain, it will be for his good. Don't you think I am right?"

He hesitated.

"I hope so," he said. "But you know things wear such a different complexion according to the way you look at them—"

"But facts, Lord Musselburgh, facts," she persisted. "Do you think a man like George Morris would be affected by any sentimental considerations one way or the other? Won't he find out just the truth? And that is all I honestly want Vin

to know—the actual truth: then let him go on with his eyes open if he chooses. Facts, Lord Musselburgh: who can object to facts?” Then she said—as she gave him her hand that he might assist her to rise—

“We must be thinking of getting back home now, for if we are late for lunch, those Drexel girls will be grinning at each other like a couple of fiends.”

Rather reluctantly he rose also, and accompanied her. They made their way across a series of rough, bracken-covered knolls projecting into the sea until they reached the little bay that is known as Port Bân; and here, either the beauty and solitude of the place tempted them, or they were determined to defy sarcasm, for instead of hastening home, they quietly strolled up and down the smooth cream-white beach, now and again picking up a piece of rose-red seaweed, or turning over a limpet-shell, or watching a sandpiper making his quick little runs alongside the clear, crisp-curling ripples. They did not speak; they were as silent as the transparent blue shadows that their figures cast on the soft-yielding surface on which they walked. And sometimes Lord Musselburgh seemed inclined to write something, with the point of his stick, on that flawless sand; and then again he desisted; and still they continued silent.

She took up a piece of pink seaweed, and began pulling it to shreds. He was standing by, looking on.

“Don’t you think,” said he at last, “that there should be a good deal of sympathy—a very unusual sympathy—between two people who have come through the same suffering?”

“Oh, I suppose so,” she said, with affected carelessness—her eyes still bent on the seaweed.

“Do you know,” said he, again, “that I haven’t the least idea what your name is!”

“My name? Oh, my name is Madge,” she answered.

“Madge?” said he. “I wonder if you make the capital M this way?” and therewith he traced on the sand an ornamental *M* in the manner of the last century.

“No, I don’t,” she said, “but it is very pretty. How do you write the rest?”

Thus encouraged, he made bold to add the remaining letters, and seemed rather to admire his handiwork when it was done.

“By the way,” she said, “I don’t know your Christian name either!”

“Hubert.”

“Can you write that in the same fashion?” she suggested, with a simple ingenuousness.

So, grown still bolder, he laboriously inscribed his name immediately underneath her own. But that was not all. When he had ended he drew a circle right round both names.

"That is a ring to enclose them," said he: and he turned from the scored names to regard her downcast face. "But—but I know a much smaller ring that could bring them still closer together. Will you let me try—Madge?"

He took her hand.

"Yes," she said, in a low voice.

And then—Oh, very well, then: then—but after a reasonable delay—then they left those creamy sands, and went up by the edge of the blue-green turnip-field to the pathway, and so to the iron gate; and as he opened the gate for her, she said—

"Oh, I don't know what happened down there, and what I've pledged myself to; but at all events there will now be one more on my side, to help me about Vin, and get him out of all this sad trouble. You will help me, won't you—Hubert?"

Of course he was eager to promise anything.

"And you say he is sure to get in for Mendover? Why, just think of him now, with everything before him; and how nice it would be for all of us if he had a smart and clever wife, who would hold her own in society, and do him justice, and make us all as proud and fond of her as we are of him. And just fancy the four of us setting out on a winter-trip to Cairo or Jerusalem: wouldn't it be simply too delicious? The four of us—only the four of us—all by ourselves. Louie Drexel is rather young, to be sure; yet she knows her way about; she's sharp; she's clever; she will have some money; and she has cheek enough for anything. And by the way—Hubert—" said she (and always with a pretty little hesitation when she came to his Christian name) "I must really ask you—with regard to Louie Drexel—well—you know—you have been—just a little——"

He murmured something about the devotion of a lifetime—the devotion which he had just promised to her—being a very different thing from trivial drawing-room dallyings; whereupon she observed—

"Oh, yes, men say so by way of excuse——"

"How many men have said so to you?" he demanded, flaring up.

"I did not say they had said so to me," she answered sweetly. "Don't go and be absurdly jealous without any cause whatever. If any one has a right to be jealous, it is I, considering the way you have been going on with Louie Drexel. But of course if there's nothing in it, that's all well and done with; and I am of a forgiving disposition, when I'm taken the right way. Now about Vin: can you see anybody who would do better for him than Louie Drexel?"

Be sure it was not of Vin Harris, much as he was interested in him, that Lord Musselburgh wished to talk at this moment; but, on the other hand, in the first flush of his pride and gratitude, any whim of hers was law to him; and perhaps it was a sufficient and novel gratification to be able to call her Madge.

"I'm afraid," said he, "that Vin is not the kind of person to have his life

arranged for him by other people. And besides you must remember, Madge, dear, that you are assuming a great deal. You are assuming that you can show Vin that this old man is an impostor—”

”Oh, can there be any doubt of it!” she exclaimed. ”Isn’t the story you have told me yourself enough?”

Lord Musselburgh looked rather uncomfortable; he was a good-natured kind of person, and liked to think the best of everybody.

”I had no right to tell you that story,” said he.

”But now I have the right to know about that and everything else, haven’t I—Hubert?” said she, with a pretty coyness.

”And besides,” he continued, ”Vin has a perfect explanation of the whole affair. There is no doubt the old man was just full of this subject, and believed he could write about it better than anyone else, even supposing the idea had occurred to some other person; he was anxious above all things that his poetical countrymen over there in the States and Canada should be done justice to; and when he heard that the volume was actually published he immediately declared that he would do everything in his power to help it—”

”But what about the £50—Hubert?”

”Oh, well,” her companion said, rather uneasily, ”I have told you that that was a gift from me to him. I did not stipulate for the publication of any book.”

She considered for a moment: then she said, with some emphasis—

”And you think it no shame—you think it no monstrous thing—that our Vin should marry a girl who has been in the habit of going about with her grandfather while he begged money, and accepted money, from strangers? Is that the fate you wish for your friend?”

”No, I don’t wish anything of the kind,” said he, ”if—if matters were so. But Vin and you look at these things in a very different light; and I can hardly believe that he has been so completely imposed on. I confess I liked the old man: I liked his splendid enthusiasm, his magnificent self-reliance, yes, and his Scotch plaid; and I thought the girl was remarkably beautiful—and more than that—refined and distinguished-looking—something unusual about her somehow—”

”Oh, yes, you are far too generous, Hubert,” his companion said. ”You accept Vin’s representations without a word. But I see more clearly. And that little transaction about the book and the £50 gives me a key to the whole situation. You may depend on it, George Morris will find out what kind of person your grandiloquent old Scotchman is like. And then, when Vin’s eyes are opened—”

”Yes, when Vin’s eyes are opened?” her companion repeated.

”Then he will see into what a terrible pit he was nearly falling.”

”Are you so sure of that?” Musselburgh said. ”I know Vin a little. It isn’t merely a pretty face that has taken his fancy, as you yourself admit. If he has

faith in that girl, it may not be easy to shake it."

"I should not attempt to shake it," she made answer at once, "if the girl was everything she ought to be, and of proper upbringing and surroundings. But even if it turned out that she was everything she should be, wouldn't it be too awful to have Vin dragged down into an alliance with that old—that old—oh, I don't know what to call him!—"

"Madge, dear," said he, "don't call him anything, until you learn more about him. And in the meantime," he continued, rather plaintively, "don't you think we might talk a little about ourselves, considering what has just happened?"

"There is such a long time before us to talk about ourselves," said she. "And you know—Hubert—you've come into our family, as it were; and you must take a share in our troubles."

They were nearing the house: five minutes more would bring them in sight of the open lawn.

"Wait a minute, Madge, dear," said he, and he halted by the side of a little bit of plantation. "Don't be in such a hurry. I wish to speak to you about—"

"About what?" she asked, with a smile.

"Oh, a whole heap of things! For example, do you want the Somervilles to know?"

"I don't particularly want them to know," she answered him, "but I fear they will soon find out."

"I should like you to tell Mrs. Somerville, anyway."

"Very well."

"Indeed, I don't care if all the people in the house knew!" said he, boldly.

"Hubert, what are you saying!" she exclaimed, with a fine simulation of horror. "My life would be made a burden to me! Fancy those Drexel girls: they would shriek with joy at the chance of torturing me! I should have to fly from the place. I should take the first train for the South to-morrow morning!"

"Really!" said he, with considerable coolness. "For I have been thinking that those names we printed on the sands—"

"That you printed, you mean!"

"—were above high-water mark. Consequently they will remain there for some little time. Now it is highly probable that some of our friends may be walking along to Port Bân this afternoon; and if they were to catch sight of those hieroglyphics—"

"Hubert," said she, with decision. "You must go along immediately after luncheon and score them out. I would not for the world have those Drexel girls suspect what has happened!"

"Won't you come with me, Madge, after luncheon?"

"Oh, we can't be haunting those sands all day like a couple of sea-gulls!"

"But I think you might come!" he pleaded.

"Very well," said she, "I suppose I must begin with obedience."

And yet they seemed in no hurry to get on to the house. A robin perched himself on the wire fence not four yards away, and jerked his head, and watched them with his small, black, lustrous eye. A weasel came trotting down the road, stopped, looked, and glided noiselessly into the plantation. Two wood-pigeons went swiftly across an opening in the trees; a large hawk soared far overhead. On this still Sunday morning there seemed to be no one abroad; and then these two had much to say about a ring, and a locket, and similar weighty matters. Moreover, there was the assignation about the afternoon to be arranged.

But at length they managed to tear themselves away from this secluded place; they went round by the front of the big grey building; and in so doing had to pass the dining-room window.

"Oh my gracious goodness!" Mrs. Ellison exclaimed—and in no stimulated horror this time. "They're all in at lunch, every one of them, and I don't know how long they mayn't have been in! What shall I do!"

And then a sudden thought seemed to strike her.

"Hubert, my headache has come back! I'm going up to my room. Will you give my excuses to Mrs. Somerville? I'd a hundred times rather starve than—than be found out."

"Oh, that is all nonsense!" said he—but in an undertone, for they were now in the spacious stone-paved hall. "Go to your room, if you like; and I'll tell Mrs. Somerville, and she'll send you up something. You mustn't starve, for you're going round with me to Port Bân in the afternoon."

And, of course, the gentle hostess was grieved to hear that her friend had not yet got rid of her headache; and she herself went forthwith to Mrs. Ellison's room, to see what would most readily tempt the appetite of the poor invalid. The poor invalid was at her dressing-table, taking off her bonnet. She wheeled round.

"I am so sorry, dear, about your headache—" her hostess was beginning, when the young widow went instantly to the door and shut it. Then she came back; and there was a most curious look—of laughter, perhaps—in her extremely pretty eyes.

"Never mind about the headache!" she said to her astonished friend, who saw no cause for this amused embarrassment, nor yet for the exceedingly affectionate way in which both her hands had been seized. "The headache is gone. I've—I've something else to tell you—oh, you'd never guess it in the world! My dear, my dear," she cried in a whisper, and her tell-tale eyes were full of confusion as well as laughter. "You'd never guess—but—but I've gone and made a fool of

myself for the second time!"

CHAPTER III. "HOLY PALMER'S KISS."

This was a bright and cheerful afternoon in November; and old George Bethune and his granddaughter were walking down Regent-street. A brilliant afternoon, indeed; and the scene around them was quite gay and animated; for the wintry sunlight was shining on the big shop-fronts, and on the busy pavements, and on the open carriages that rolled by with their occupants gorgeous in velvet and silk and fur. Nor was George Bethune moved to any spirit of envy by all this display of luxury and wealth; no more than he was oppressed by any sense of solitariness amid this slow-moving, murmuring crowd. He walked with head erect; he paid but little heed to the passers-by; he was singing aloud, and that in a careless and florid fashion—

"The boat rocks at the pier o' Leith,
Fu' loud the wind blows frae the ferry,
The ship rides by the Berwick Law,
And I maun leave my bonnie Mary."

But suddenly he stopped: his attention had been caught by a window, or rather a series of windows, containing all sorts of Scotch articles and stuffs.

"Maisrie," said he, as his eye ran over these varied wares and fabrics, "couldn't you—couldn't you buy some little bit of a thing?"

"Why, grandfather?" she asked.

"Oh, well," he answered, with an air of lofty indifference, "it is but a trifle—but a trifle; only I may have told you that my friend Carmichael is a good Scot—good friend and good Scot are synonymous terms, to my thinking—and—and as you are going to call on him for the first time, you might show him you are not ashamed of your country. Isn't there something there, Maisrie?" he continued, still regarding the articles in the window. "Some little bit of tartan ribbon—something you could put round your neck—whatever you like—merely to show that you fly your country's colours, and are not ashamed of them—"

"But why should I pretend to be Scotch, grandfather, when I am not Scotch?" she said.

He was not angry: he was amused.

"You—not Scotch? You, of all people in the world, not Scotch? What are you, then? A Bethune of Balloray—ay, and if justice were done, the owner and mistress of Balloray, Ballingean, and Cadzow—and yet you are not Scotch? Where got you your name? What is your lineage—your blood—your right and title to the lands of Balloray and Ballingean? And I may see you there yet, Maisrie; I may see you there yet. Stranger things have happened. But come away now—we need not quarrel about a bit of ribbon—and I know Mr. Carmichael will receive you as his countrywoman even if you have not a shred of tartan about you."

Indeed he had taken no offence: once more he was marching along, with fearless eye and undaunted front, while he had resumed his gallant singing—

"But it's not the roar o' sea or shore
Wad mak' me langer wish to tarry,
Nor shouts o' war that's heard afar—
It's leaving thee, my bonnie Mary!"

They went down to one of the big hotels in Northumberland Avenue; asked at the office for Mr. Carmichael; and after an immeasurable length of waiting were conducted to his room. Here Maisrie was introduced to a tall, fresh-coloured, angular-boned man, who had shrewd grey eyes that were also good-humoured. Much too good-humoured they were in Maisrie's estimation, when they chanced to regard her grandfather: they seemed to convey a sort of easy patronage, almost a kind of good-natured pity, that she was quick to resent. But how could she interfere? These were business matters that were being talked of; and she sat somewhat apart, forced to listen, but not taking any share in the conversation.

Presently, however, she heard something that startled her out of this apathetic concurrence, and set all her pulses flying. The tall, raw-boned, newspaper proprietor, eyeing this proud-featured old man with a not unkindly scrutiny, was referring to the volume on the Scottish Poets in America which George Bethune had failed to bring out in time; and his speech was considerate.

"It is not the first case of forestalling I have known," said he; "and it must just be looked on as a bit of bad luck. Better fortune next time. By the way, there is another little circumstance connected with that book—perhaps I should not mention it—but I will be discreet. No names; and yet you may like to hear that you have got another friend somewhere—somewhere in the background—"

It was at this point that Maisrie began to listen, rather breathlessly.

"Oh, yes, your friend—your unknown friend—wanted to be generous enough," Mr. Carmichael continued. "He wrote to me saying he understood that I had advanced a certain sum towards the publication of the work; and he went on to explain that as certain things had happened to prevent your bringing it out, he wished to be allowed to refund the money. Oh, yes, a very generous offer; for all was to be done in the profoundest secrecy; you were not to know anything about it, lest you should be offended. And yet it seemed to me you should be glad to learn that there was someone interesting himself in your affairs."

The two men were not looking at the girl: they could not see the pride and gratitude that were in her eyes. "And Vincent never told me a word," she was saying to herself, with her heart beating warm and fast. But that was not the mood in which old George Bethune took this matter. A dark frown was on his shaggy eyebrows.

"I do not see what right anyone has to intermeddle," said, he, in tones that fell cruelly on Maisrie's ear, "still less to pay money for me on the assumption that I had forgotten, or was unwilling to discharge, a just debt—"

"Come, come, come, Mr. Bethune," said the newspaper proprietor, with a sort of condescending good-nature, "you must not take it that way. To begin with, he did not pay any money at all. I did not allow him. I said 'Thank you; but this is a private arrangement between Mr. Bethune and myself; and if he considers there is any indebtedness, then he can wipe that off by contributions to the *Chronicle*.' So you see you have only to thank him for the intention—"

"Oh, very well," said the old man, changing his tone at once. "No harm in that. No harm whatever. Misplaced intention—but—but creditable. And now," he continued, in a still lighter strain, "since you mention the *Chronicle*, Mr. Carmichael, I must tell you of a scheme I have had for some time in mind. It is a series of papers on the old ballads of Scotland—or rather the chief of them—taking one for each weekly article, giving the different versions, with historical and philological notes. What do you think of that, now? Look at the material—the finest in the world!—the elemental passions, the tragic situations that are far removed from any literary form or fashion, that go straight to the heart and the imagination. Each of them a splendid text!" he proceeded, with an ever-increasing enthusiasm. "Think of Edom o' Gordon, and the Wife of Usher's Well, and the Baron o' Brackla; Annie of Lochryan, Hynde Etin, the piteous cry of 'Helen of Kirkconnell,' and the Rose of Yarrow seeking her slain lover by bank and brae. And what could be more interesting than the collation of the various versions of those old ballads, showing how they have been altered here and there as they were said or sung, and how even important passages may have been dropped out in course of time and transmission. Look, for example, at 'Barbara Allan.' The version in Percy's Reliques is as bad and stupid as it can be; but it is

worse than that: it is incomprehensible. Who can believe that the maiden came to the bedside of her dying lover only to flout and jeer, and that for no reason whatever? And when she sees his corpse

'With scornful eye she looked downe,
Her cheek with laughter swellin'—

"Well, I say that is not true," he went on vehemently; "it never was true: it contradicts human nature; it is false, and bad, and impossible. But turn to our Scottish version! When Sir John Graeme o' the West Countrie, lying sore sick, sends for his sweetheart, she makes no concealment of the cause of the feud that has been between them—of the wrong that is rankling at her heart:

'O dinna ye mind, young man,' said she,
'When the red wine ye were filling,
That ye made the healths gae round and round,
And slighted Barbara Allan?'

And proud and indignant she turns away. There is no sham laughter here; no impossible cruelty; but a quarrel between two fond lovers that becomes suddenly tragic, when death steps in to prevent the possibility of any reconciliation.

He turned his face unto the wa',
And death was with him dealing:
'Adieu, adieu, my dear friends a',
Be kind to Barbara Allan!'

Can anything be more simple, and natural, and inexpressibly sad as well? It is the story of a tragic quarrel between two true lovers: it is not the impossible and preposterous story of a giggling hoyden grinning at a corpse!"

And here it was probable that old George Bethune, having warmed to his subject, and being as usual wildly enamoured of his latest scheme, would have gone on to give further instances of the value of collation and comparison, but that Mr. Carmichael was forced to interrupt. The proprietor of the *Edinburgh Chronicle* was a busy man during his brief visits to town.

"Very well, Mr. Bethune," said he. "I think your idea a very good one—an excellent one, in fact, for the weekly edition of a Scotch paper; and I will give you *carte blanche* as to the number of articles. Who knows," he added, with a condescending smile, "but that they may grow to a book—to take the place of the one that was snatched out of your hands?"

And again, as his visitors were leaving, he said in the same good-humoured way—

"I presume it is not necessary for us to discuss the question of terms, especially before a young lady. If you have been satisfied with us so far—"

"I am quite content to leave that with you: quite," interposed the old man, with some little dignity.

"I was only going to say," Mr. Carmichael resumed, "that a series of articles such as you suggest may require a good deal of research and trouble: so that, when the reckoning comes, I will see you are put on the most favoured nation scale. And not a word more about the American book: we were disappointed—that is all."

This latter admonition was wholly unnecessary. When George Bethune got out into the street again, with Maisrie as his sole companion and confidante, it was not of that lost opportunity he was talking, it was all of this new project that had seized his imagination. They had to make one or two calls, in the now gathering dusk; but ever, as they came out again into the crowded thoroughfares, he returned to the old ballads and the opportunities they presented for a series of discursive papers. And Maisrie was about as eager in anticipation as himself.

"Oh, yes, grandfather," she said, "you could not have thought of a happier subject. And you will begin at once, grandfather, won't you? Do you think I shall be able to help you in the very least way?—it would please me so much if I could search out things for you, or copy, or help you in the smallest way. And I know it will be a labour of love for you; it will be a constant delight; and all the more that the days are getting short now, and we shall have to be more indoors. And then you heard what Mr. Carmichael said, grandfather; and if he is going to pay you well for these articles, you will soon be able to give him back the money he advanced to you about that unfortunate book—"

"Oh, don't you bother about such things!" he said, with an impatient frown. "When I am planning out an important work, I don't want to be reminded that it will result in merely so many guineas. That is not the spirit in which I enter upon such an undertaking. When I write, it is not with an eye to the kitchen. Unless some nobler impulse propels, then be sure the result will be despicable. However, I suppose women are like that; when you are thinking of the literature of your native land—of perhaps adding some little tributary wreath—they are looking towards grocers' bills. The kitchen—the kitchen is before them—not the dales and vales of Scotland, where lovers loved, and were broken-hearted. The kitchen—"

But Maisrie was not disconcerted by this rebuke.

"And you will begin at once, grandfather," she said, cheerfully. "Oh, I know it will be so delightful an occupation for you. And I don't wonder that Mr.

Carmichael was glad to have such a chance. Then it won't involve any expense of travelling, like the other book you thought of, about the Scotland of Scotch songs. The winter evenings won't be so dull, grandfather, when you have this to occupy you; you will forget it is winter altogether, when you are busy with those beautiful scenes and stories. And will you tell Vincent this evening, grandfather? he will be so interested: it will be something to talk of at dinner."

But Vincent was to hear of this great undertaking before then. When Maisrie and her grandfather reached the door of their lodgings, he said to her—

"You can go in now, Maisrie, and have the gas lit. I must walk along to the library, and see what books they have; but I'm afraid I shall have to get Motherwell, and Pinkerton, and Allan Cunningham, and the rest of them from Scotland. Aytoun they are sure to have, I suppose."

So they parted for the moment; and Maisrie went upstairs and lit the gas in the little parlour. Then, without taking off her bonnet, she sate down and fell into a reverie—not a very sad one, as it seemed. She was sitting thus absorbed in silent fancies, when a familiar sound outside startled her into attention; she sprang to her feet; the next instant the door was opened; the next again she was advancing to the tall and handsome young stranger who stood somewhat diffidently there, and both her hands were outstretched, and a light of joy and gratitude was shining in her eyes.

"Oh, Vincent, I am so glad you have come over!" she said, in a way that was far from usual with her, and she held both his hands for more than a second or two, and her grateful eyes were fixed on his without any thought of embarrassment. "I was thinking of you. You have been so kind—so generous! I wanted to thank you, and I am so glad to have the chance—"

"But what is it, Maisrie?—I'm sure there is nothing you have to thank me for!" said he, as he shut the door behind him, and came forward, and took a seat not very far away from her. He was a little bewildered. In her sudden access of gratitude, when she took both his hands in hers, she had come quite close to him; and the scent of a sandal-wood necklace that she wore seemed to touch him as with a touch of herself. He knew those fragrant beads; more than once he had perceived the slight and subtle odour, as she passed him, or as he helped her on with her cloak; and he had come to associate it with her, as if it were part of her, some breathing thing, that could touch, and thrill. And this time it had come so near—

But that bewilderment of the senses lasted only for a moment. Maisrie Bethune was not near to him at all: she was worlds and worlds away. It was not a mere whiff of perfume that could bring her near to him. Always to him she appeared to be strangely unapproachable and remote. Perhaps it was the loneliness of her position, perhaps it was the uncertainty of her future, and those

vague possibilities of which her grandfather had spoken, or perhaps it was the reverence of undivided and unselfish love on his part; but at all events she seemed to live in a sort of sacred and mysterious isolation—to be surrounded by a spell which he dared not seek to break by any rude contact. And yet surely her eyes were regarding his with sufficient frankness and friendliness, and even more than friendliness, now as she spoke.

"This afternoon we called on Mr. Carmichael," said Maisrie, "Mr. Carmichael of the *Edinburgh Chronicle*. He told us someone had offered to repay the money he had advanced to my grandfather on account of that American book: and though he did not mention any name, do you think I did not know who it was, Vincent? Be sure I knew—in a moment! And you never said a word about it! I might never have known but for this accident—I might never have had the chance of thanking you—as—as I should like to do now—only—only it isn't quite easy to say everything one feels—"

"Oh, but that is nothing at all, Maisrie!" said he, coming quickly to her rescue. "You have nothing to thank me for—nothing! It is true I made the offer; but it was not accepted; and why should I say anything about it to you?"

"Ah, but the intention is enough," said she (for she knew nothing about his having paid Lord Musselburgh the £50). "And you cannot prevent my being very, very grateful to you for such thoughtfulness and kindness. To save my grandfather's self-respect—to prevent him being misunderstood by—by strangers—because—because he is so forgetful: do you think, Vincent, I cannot see your motive, and be very, very grateful? And never saying a word, too! You should have told me, Vincent! But I suppose that was still further kindness—you thought I might be embarrassed—and not able to thank you—which is just the case—"

"Oh, Maisrie, don't make a fuss about nothing!" he protested.

"I know whether it is nothing or not," said she, proudly. "And—and perhaps if you had lived as we have lived—wandering from place to place—you would set more store by an act of friendship. Friends are little to you—you have too many of them—"

"Oh, Maisrie, don't talk like that!" he said. "You make me ashamed. What have I done?—nothing! I wish there was some real thing I could do to prove my friendship for your grandfather and yourself—then you might see—"

"Haven't you proved it every day, every hour almost, since ever we have known you?" she said, in rather a low voice.

"Ah, well, perhaps there may come a chance—" said he; and then he stopped short; for here was old George Bethune, with half-a-dozen volumes under his arm, and himself all eagerness and garrulity about his new undertaking.

At the little dinner that evening in the restaurant, there was quite an unusual animation, and that not solely because this was the ninth of November,

and they were proposing to go out later on and look at the illuminations in the principal thoroughfares. Vincent thought he had never seen Maisrie Bethune appear so light-hearted and happy; and she was particularly kind to him; when she regarded him, there still seemed to be a mild gratitude shining in the clear and eloquent deeps of her eyes. Gratitude for what!—he asked himself, with a touch of scorn. It was but an ordinary act of acquaintanceship: why should this beautiful, sensitive, proud-spirited creature have to debase herself to thank him for such a trifle? He felt ashamed of himself. It was earning gratitude by false pretences. The very kindness shining there in her eyes was a sort of reproach: what had he done to deserve it? Ah, if she only knew what he was ready to do—when occasion offered!

And never before had he seen Maisrie so bravely confident about any of her grandfather's literary projects.

"You see, Vincent," she said, as if he needed any convincing, when she was satisfied! "in the end it will make a far more interesting book than the Scotch-American one; and in the meantime there will be the series of articles appearing from week to week, to attract attention to the subject. And then, although grandfather says I take a low and mercenary view of literature, all the same I am glad he is to be well-paid for the articles; and there are to be as many as he likes; and when they are completed, then comes the publication of the book, which should be as interesting to Mr. Carmichael, or Lord Musselburgh, or anyone, as the Scotch-American volume. And grandfather is going to begin at once; and I am asking him whether I cannot be of any use to him, in the humblest way. A glossary, grandfather; you must have a glossary of the Scotch words: couldn't I compile that for you?"

"I have been wondering," the old man said, absently, and without answering her question, "since I came into this room, whether it would be possible to classify them into ballads of action and ballads of the supernatural. I imagine the former belong more to the south country; and that most of the latter had their origin in the north. And yet even in the Battle of Otterburn, the Douglas says

'But I hae dreamed a dreary dream,
Ayont the Isle o' Skye,—
I saw a deid man win a fight,
And I think that man was I.'

Well, that may have been an interpolation; at all events, it is a Highland touch; the strong, brisk, matter-of-fact Border ballad has seldom anything of that kind in it. The bold Buccleuch and Kinmont Willie were too much in the saddle to have time for wraiths. You remember, Maisrie, when they brought word to 'the

bauld Keeper' that Kinmont Willie was a captive in Carlisle Castle?—

He has ta'en the table wi' his hand,
 He garred the red wine spring on hie—
 'Now a curse upon my head,' he cried,
 'But avenged on Lord Scroop I'll be!

O is my basnet a widow's curch,
 Or my lance a wand of the willow-tree,
 Or my arm a lady's lily hand,
 That an English lord should lightly me?'

That is more like the ballad of the south: sharp and vivid, full of action and spirit, and the audacious delight of life: when you want mystery and imagination and supernatural terrors you must turn to the brooding and darkened regions of the north. The Demon Lover is clearly of northern origin; its hell is the Scandinavian hell; not the fiery furnace of the eastern mind, but a desolation of cold and wet.

'O what'n a mountain's yon,' she said,
 'Sae dreary wi' frost and snow?'
 'O yon is the mountain o' hell,' he cried,
 'Where you and I maun go!'"

"The Demon Lover?" said Maisrie, inquiringly; and Vincent could not but notice how skilfully and sedulously she fanned the old man's interest in this new scheme by herself pretending to be deeply interested.

"Don't you know it, Maisrie?" said he. "It is the story of two lovers who were parted; and he returns after seven years to claim the fulfilment of her vows; and finds that in his absence she has taken someone else for her husband. It is a dangerous position—if he wishes her to go away with him; for a woman never forgets her first lover; what is more, she attributes all the natural and inevitable disillusionment of marriage to her husband, whilst the romance attaching to her first love remains undimmed. Therefore, I say let Auld Robin Gray beware!—the wife is not always so loyal to the disillusioniser as was the Jeannie of the modern song. Well, in this case, she who has been a false sweetheart, proves a false wife—

'If I was to leave my husband dear,
 And my twa babes also,
 O where is it you would tak' me to,

If I with thee should go?’

And the lover becomes the avenger; together they sail away on a strange ship, until they descry the mountains of hell; and the lover turned demon warns her of her doom.

And aye when she turned her round about,
Aye taller he seemed for to be,
Until that the tops o’ that gallant ship
Nae taller were than he.

He struck the topmast wi’ his hand,
The foremast wi’ his knee;
And he brak that gallant ship in twain,
And sank her in the sea.”

“Will there be illustrations, sir?” asked Vincent (in humble imitation of Maisrie). “And an *édition de luxe*? For that, I imagine, is where my co-operation might come in. Maisrie seems so anxious to help; and I should like to take my part too.”

“It is a far cry to the completion of such an undertaking as that,” said the old man, rather wistfully.

But Maisrie would not have him lapse into any despondent mood.

“You must not look so far ahead, grandfather,” she said, cheerfully. “You must think of your own pride and satisfaction in beginning it; and I know you will be delighted; for who can do it as well as you? And if I am so very mercenary, I can’t help it; only I shall be all the better pleased to remember that you are being properly paid for your work. Supposing the kitchen is my department?—Oh, very well!—somebody must look to that. It will be a labour of love for you, grandfather, all the way through; and then, when the book is nearing completion, just think of the pride you will have in choosing someone, some distinguished person, for the dedication. It will be far more your own work than merely giving specimens of the Scottish-American poets; indeed it will be all your own; for the ballads are only to be texts, as you say. And I think we should go home now, and you will look over some of the books. I don’t care about the illuminations—not I. What is the Lord Mayor’s Day to Vincent or me—when you might be telling us about Katherine Janfarie and May Collean?”

“No, no, Maisrie,” said he, as he rose from the table. “Give me a little time for preparation. We promised to show you the streets lit up. And mind you wrap yourself well, Maisrie, for the evenings are getting cold now.”

But little did Vincent Harris, as he helped her on with her cloak, and made ready to go out into the dusky and glaring thoroughfares, foresee what was going to befall him that night.

When they issued forth into Regent-street, there was as yet no very dense crowd, though here and there the front of a tall building flamed in yellow fire; but nevertheless Maisrie said—

“We must not get separated, grandfather. Let me go between you two; and I will take your arm on the one side and Vincent’s on the other; and if we have occasionally to go sideways, we can always keep together.”

“Oh, I shan’t let you be dragged away, Maisrie,” the younger man said. “And if you don’t mind, I think this will be a better way of holding on to you—” and therewith he made bold to pass his hand underneath the hanging sleeve of her cloak, and there he took hold of her arm from the inside—rather timidly, perhaps, but then his grasp could be tightened, if needs were.

“Yes,” said she, placidly, and she made a little movement as though she would draw both her companions closer to her. “This is very comfortable. Which way, grandfather?”

And so the little group of friends, knit together by many intimate interests and much association, adventured out into the great world of London that was all astir now with a vague and half-subdued excitement. There was no need for them to talk; they had but to look at the blazing stars, and feathers, and initial letters, and to make their way through the murmuring throng. There was no jostling; the crowd was entirely good-natured; and if these three could not always go abreast, they then went diagonally for a second or so, and were not separated. Of course, Vincent had to hold Maisrie a little more firmly now; his arm was parallel with hers, and his hand had hold of her wrist; and there was an intoxicating sense of warmth as well as of close companionship in this mutual clinging. Thus they slowly and idly passed away down Regent-street, well content with their own silence and the brilliant sights around them. Then a little incident occurred. A vehicle was coming along one of the smaller thoroughfares they had to cross; there was a brief bit of a scrimmage; and Maisrie, the better to keep hold of her companion, slipped her hand from the muff that was slung round her neck, and seized his hand, that was ready enough, be sure, to respond. They got over without further trouble; they mixed once more in this vast, slow-moving assemblage—only he retained the hand she had given him, and that with no uncertain grasp.

It was a wonderful, mysterious, secret thing to be happening in the midst of all this great, careless, dusky crowd. Her hand, that was ungloved, was soft and warm after coming out of its cosy resting-place; and it was not likely to get cold, when it was held so tight, under the concealment of the hanging sleeve. And

then—well, probably the girl did not know what she was doing; she was affected by all this excitement around her; it was "Look, grandfather, look!" from time to time; most likely she thought no more of her hand being held than if she were crossing a meadow in the spring-time with some careless girl-companion—but however that may be, what must she do but open her fingers, so that his should interclasp with hers! Nay, she opened them again, and shut them again, the better to adjust that gentle clasp; and every touch thrilled through him, so that he walked as one in a dream. He dared hardly breathe, he durst not speak, lest some stray word of his might startle her into consciousness, and shatter this miracle. She did not seem to be in the least aware: it was "Which way, grandfather?" or "Take care, grandfather!" and her eyes were turned to the brilliant and parti-coloured devices in front of the Pall Mall clubs, and not at all to the handsome lad who walked so close to her that now and again he could detect some faint trace of the odour of sandal-wood that seemed to hover around her neck and her hair. What did he see or hear of the crowd now, or of the garish lights along the houses? He walked in an enchanted land: there were only two people in it: and they were bound together, in subtle intercommunion, by this magic grasp. There was wonder as well as joy in his mind; the sensation was so new and strange. Did he remember that "palm to palm" was "holy palmer's kiss"? No, he remembered nothing; he only knew that he held Maisrie's hand interlocked with his, in this secret fashion; and that all the wild phantasmagoria around them was something unreal and visionary with which neither he nor she had any concern.

And even now his cup of bliss and bewilderment was not yet full, on this marvellous night. When at last they drew away from the crowded streets and found themselves in quieter thoroughfares on their way home, the old man drew a breath of relief.

"This is better, Maisrie," he said. "It seems as if we had been out on a roaring sea, and had at length drifted into stillness and peace."

"And we were not separated once, grandfather," said she, cheerfully. "Not once all the time."

And then it was Vincent who spoke.

"I don't see why we should ever separate," said he. "Friends are few enough in this world."

"Yes, indeed, good friends are few," Maisrie said; and therewithal—ere he could tell what was happening—she had taken his hand that she held in hers and raised it, and for one brief moment pressed it against her heart. The little impulsive movement—of gratitude perhaps; perhaps of affection; perhaps of both combined—could not have been perceived by any passer-by; and yet the young man seemed to be struck by a sudden shock of fear; he could not speak; his own heart was beating so that speech was impossible. For it appeared to him in that

swift second as if the scales had fallen from his eyes. To him she was no longer an elusive phantom—a mirage—a vision—pensive, and mysterious, and remote; now he saw her a beautiful young creature of flesh and blood, whose hands and heart were warm, who could cling for help and companionship and sympathy, who was not afraid to speak and act, when love or gratitude prompted her. No longer the strangely isolated maiden: the unapproachable had all at once come near; so near that the scent of sandalwood touched him from time to time; so near that her soft fingers were interclasped with his, pulsating there, nestling there, not relaxing their hold, nor inclined to do that. This was no piece of statuary, to be worshipped from afar: this was Maisrie Bethune, whose arm lay close and caressing against his, under the friendly shelter of that hanging sleeve, whose step went with his step as they walked together, whose breathing he could almost overhear, in the silence of this gracious night. And what had she not confessed, in that artless way?

And then amid his bewilderment and breathless exultation a horrid fancy shot across his brain. Perhaps that was no confession at all; but a quite simple, unpremeditated, even unconscious, act of mere friendliness and sympathy? Did she know that she had done it? Would she repeat it? Would she give him further assurance? Might she not herself wish to be certain that he had understood—that he had received a message that was to change all his life?

Well, he had hold of her hand. Gently and with trembling and eager touch he tried to raise it—he would have her replace his own hand where that had been for one delirious moment: perhaps to ask if her heart had still, and for ever and always, the same message to send. Alas! she did not yield to the mute invitation. Perhaps she did not comprehend it. For here they were at the corner of the little street in which they lived; and she unclasped her fingers, so that his also might be released from their too happy imprisonment; and she was talking to her grandfather when the door of the house was reached. Nor did her eyes say anything as he bade her good-bye for the night. Perhaps it was all a mistake, then?—some little involuntary act of kindness, and nothing more?

CHAPTER IV. INTERPOSITION.

Yes, she had come near—so near that she seemed to absorb his very life. He could

think of nothing but her. As he walked away down through the dark streets, he imagined her to be still by his side; he tried to fancy he could detect some faint perfume of sandal-wood in the surrounding air; his right hand tingled yet with the touch of her warm, interclasping fingers. And if at one moment his heart beat high with the assurance that she had confessed her love and given herself to him, the next he tortured himself with vague alarms, and wondered how the long night was to be got through, before he could go up to her in the morning, and challenge her to speak. All the future was filled with her; and there again he saw himself by her side, her strong and confident protector. And yet if he had mistaken that mute declaration of hers? What if, after all, it were merely a timid expression, involuntary and unpremeditated, of her friendship, her kindness, her gratitude?

Well, he knew he could get no confirmation of either his audacious hopes or his depressing fears until the next day; and as the alternation between the two moods was altogether a maddening thing, he resolved to seek relief and distraction. As soon as he got to his own room down in Grosvenor Place he took out a foolscap sheet of paper which had certain pencillings on it. These formed, in fact, an outline sketch of a lecture which he had undertaken to deliver before the Mendover Free Library Association; and it was high time he was getting on with it, for the meeting was to be held in the following week. But strange things happened with this sheet of paper. Apparently the pencilled heading was "*The Unscrupulousness of Wealth*;" but the longer he looked at the title, the more clearly did it spell out "*Maisrie Bethune*." The sub-headings, too, began to reveal hidden mysteries. Here was one which on the face of it read "*Circumstances in which the capitalist may become a tyrant in spite of himself*." But behold! that scrawl slowly disappeared, and in its place a picture grew into existence. He seemed to recognise the big grey building—was it not the mansion-house of Balloray?—and well he knew the figure of the tall young girl with the long-flowing hair who, in riding-habit, came out on to the terrace, above the wide stone steps. Is that her grandfather, proud-featured, lion-hearted, with the same undaunted demeanour as of old, come to wave her good-bye? The splendour of the morning is all around her; there is a white road outside the grounds, and an avenue of beech trees dappled with sun and shade: when she vanishes into that wonderland of foliage, she seems to take the light of the day away with her. And again, what further miracle is this? Another vision interposes, and at length becomes dominant; and this one is very different; this one is of a street in Toronto. And here also is a young girl; but now she is all in black; and she is alone—she knows not one of those passers-by. Pale and pensive she walks on; her eyes are downcast; perhaps she is thinking of wide intervening seas, and of her loneliness, and of one who used to be her friend. Tears?—but of what avail are these, here in this strange city?—they

are only a confession of helplessness—perhaps of despair...

Vincent Harris got up and walked about the room: at this rate the members of the Mendover Free Library Association were not likely to receive much instruction. And indeed he did not return to that sheet of foolscap; his brain could conjure up quite sufficient visions of the future without having recourse to any palimpsest discoveries; while as for his hand—well, perhaps the hand that Maisrie had held over her heart for one wild, startling moment, was a little too unsteady to use a pencil. If only the hours would go by! He tried to read—and could not. He got hold of a map of Scotland, and traced out the line of travel he should like to follow if Maisrie and her grandfather and himself should ever start on their long-projected tour. He turned to a map of the United States, and sought out Omaha: Maisrie's birthplace was not distinguished by any difference of type, and yet he regarded those five letters with a curious interest and fascination. He recalled his having stood on the heights of Council Bluffs, and looked across the yellow Missouri; and now he marvelled that he could have contemplated the wide, straggling city with comparative indifference. Perhaps, by diligent seeking on the morrow—for the capital of Nebraska is an important place—he might even in London discover a photograph or two to put on his mantel-shelf; and then he could stand opposite them and say, "Why, Maisrie must have passed that railway station many a time!" or "Maisrie must often have looked up to the spire of the High School, there on the hill." To think that he had been twice in Omaha—without caring—without knowing! And so his eyes rested on this little word in the middle of the big map; but his imagination was far away.

Well, the longest night must have an end; and yet the new dawn brought no surcease to his anxieties; for how was he to have an opportunity of speaking with Maisrie alone? He was up in the little Mayfair street betimes; and made some pretence of beginning work; but that was soon abandoned. He could not keep his eyes on any book or paper when there were those two windows over the way. When would she appear there to water the chrysanthemums in the little balcony? If she accidentally caught sight of him, might not some tell-tale flush reveal all he wanted to know? Or she might be coming out on some errand—so that he could quickly follow her? Or perhaps her grandfather might be going to the library, leaving her at home by herself? The door of the house opposite grew to be as fascinating as the windows; unknown possibilities might be sprung upon him at any moment.

It was quite a cheerful morning—for London in November. If pale mists hung about the thoroughfares, at least some trace of blue was discernible overhead; and on the panes of the higher windows the sunlight shone here and there a dull gleaming gold. The butcher's boy whistled loudly as he marched by; the cabman flicked at his horse out of mere good humour; the ostlers in the adjacent

mews made merry with bandied jests. It seemed too fine a morning for the colation of Scotch ballads; and so indeed it proved to be; for about eleven o'clock the door across the way was opened, and out came Mr. Bethune and his granddaughter into the wintry sunlight. Maisrie did not look up. The two were talking together as they went along the little thoroughfare and turned into Park Street. The next moment Vincent had snatched up his hat and gloves, and was off in pursuit.

But he did not seek to overtake them. On the contrary, he kept as wide a space between them and him as he had done before he had ever dared to address them; and yet the distance was not so great but that he could observe Maisrie's every gesture and the graceful motion of every step. She wore those hanging sleeves, too, that had hidden his arm on the preceding night—those hanging sleeves that had allowed her to say something in secret to him, even amid the noise and movement of a great crowd. And now that he saw her actual self instead of the vague phantom of his reveries, he plucked up courage. Yes, she must have known what she was doing. Those were flesh and blood fingers that had taken hold of his; when she raised his hand to her heart, it could not have been altogether through inadvertence. Once or twice a wild fancy got into his head that here and now he would hasten forward, and seize her arm, as if by right, and say 'Maisrie, there is no need of words between us: I am here at your side, and mean to remain here. Whatever that message meant, I claim you as mine.' And then again he drew back. What if there were some mistake? Hyde Park did not seem a fitting place for explanations. And then, her grandfather might be more than astonished.

Yet hour after hour of this terrible day went by, and brought him no nearer to the discovery he longed for. When Maisrie and her grandfather returned from their stroll through the Park, the young man went back to the sheet of foolscap on which he meant to shadow forth the outlines of his lecture. The effort was absurd. He might keep his eyes mechanically fixed on the paper; but his brain refused to act. Industry—capital—the proposed resumption by the workers of the world of the mines, factories, docks, ships, canals, railways which their labour had constructed—the impracticability of land nationalisation—and so forth: what were these but mere lifeless phrases, when his heart was listening for the smallest sound on the other side of the street? And ill-luck pursued him. She did not come once to the window. The chrysanthemums in the little balcony were quite neglected. The afternoon passed, and neither she nor her grandfather came out alone. Then, when he went over as usual about half-past six, there was no chance of his speaking to her by herself; in fact, both she and her grandfather were seated at the one table, with a heap of books and papers before them.

"Enough, Maisrie, enough," Mr. Bethune said blithely, and he rose at once.

"You have had your wish—though I don't see why you should undertake any such drudgery—"

She also rose to receive the visitor; and as she gave him her hand for a moment, and regarded him with very friendly eyes, there was not the least trace of self-consciousness in her manner.

"Yes," said she, with a bright and frank smile, "grandfather has conferred a new dignity on me. I am become his amanuensis. Not that I am the slightest real use to him, I suppose; it is only done to please me; still, I take it seriously, and pretend to be doing my share. Time to go, is it?—very well, I shall be ready in a minute."

He was amazed and mortified beyond measure by this perfect self-possession. Had nothing whatever happened the night before, then? There was no secret between them at all? She had made no confession—given him no message? And then wounded pride stepped in and spoke—with its usual violence and cruel injustice. Perhaps there were people who dispensed their caresses so freely that they thought nothing of them? What had startled him, a man, might be only a matter of course to her, a girl? Nay,—for what will not a lover say in a passion of jealous anger and disappointment?—perhaps he was not the first nor the only one who had been similarly bewildered?

He had no word for Maisrie on her return to the room. When the three of them went out into the street, he forsook his usual post by her side, and walked with her grandfather, to whom he talked exclusively. And of course, as his questions were all about the projected compilation of ballads, and as old George Bethune was always keenly enthusiastic about any new undertaking, there was no stint to their conversation. Maisrie walked on in silence and unheeded. When they reached the restaurant, and as they were taking their seats at the little table, she glanced at the young man; but his eyes did not happen to meet hers. And there was no place for her in their talk.

"No," old George Bethune was saying—and with considerable animation, for he appeared to have been looking over some of the ballads during the day, and his mind was still fired by the recollection of them, "I think they are beyond the reach of illustration, even if there should be an *édition de luxe*. I have considered your suggestion more than once; but I fear the drawing would in almost every instance be an anticlimax to the power and simplicity and pathos of the printed page. No picture could be as vivid and clear and striking as the verses themselves: why, just think of such lines as these—

"Tis not the frost that freezes fell,
 Nor blowing snaw's inclemencie;
 'Tis not sic cauld that makes me cry,

But my love's heart grown cauld to me.
 When we came in by Glasgow town,
 We were a comely sight to see;
 My love was clad i' the black velvet,
 And I myself in cramoisie.'

What picture could better that? What picture could do anything but weaken it? You remember in 'Edom o' Gordon' how the young maiden is lowered from the burning tower only to be slain by Edom o' Gordon's spear—

'They row'd her in a pair o' sheets,
 And tow'd her owre the wa';
 But on the point o' Gordon's spear
 She gat a deadly fa'.

O bonnie, bonnie was her mouth,
 And cherry were her cheeks,
 And clear, clear was her yellow hair,
 Whereon the red blood dreeps.

Then wi' his spear he turned her owre;
 O but her face was wan!
 He said, "Ye are the first that e'er
 I wish'd alive again."

He turned her owre and owre again,
 O but her skin was white!
 "I might hae spared that bonnie face
 To hae been some man's delight.

"Busk and boun, my merry men a',
 For ill dooms I do guess;—
 I cannot look on that bonnie face
 As it lies on the grass,"—

What illustration could improve on that?—why, it burns clear as flame! Then, again, take the girl who was drowned by her sister in 'the bonnie mill-dams o' Balloray'—"

At this point the silent and neglected Maisrie suddenly looked up—glancing from her grandfather to the young man in a curiously appealing way. She seemed

to say 'Grandfather, you forget: it is not Balloray, it is Binnorie;' and again 'Vincent, he has forgotten: that is all.' But neither of them took any notice of her; nay, the younger man, in his insensate indignation and disappointment, would not look her way at all; while old George Bethune, with his mind fixed on those imaginary pictures, went on in a rapt fashion to repeat certain of the verses—

”Ye couldna see her yellow hair,
 Balloray, O Balloray,
 For gowd and pearls that were sae rare,
 By the bonnie mill-dams o' Balloray.

Ye couldna see her middle sma',
 Balloray, O Balloray,
 Her gowden girdle was sae braw,
 By the bonnie mill-dams o' Balloray.

Ye couldna see her lily feet,
 Balloray, O Balloray,
 Her gowden fringes were sae deep,
 By the bonnie mill-dams o' Balloray.

'Sair will they be, whae'er they be,
 Balloray, O Balloray,
 The hearts that live to weep for thee!
 By the bonnie mill-dams o' Balloray!"

"It is like a picture by one of the pre-Raphaelites," Vincent said; and then the old man proceeded to talk of paper and type and binding, as if the new work were just ready for press.

But silence was not to reign for ever between those two. On their way home Mr. Bethune was talking of "The Demon Lover," of its alleged Italian origin, and of a suggestion he had seen somewhere that it was no forsaken sweetheart who had come to tempt the wedded wife, but a fiend adopting that disguise. When they reached the little parlour he began to search about for the volume in which "The Demon Lover" was thus treated; but could not find it; whereupon he went off upstairs, to see if it was not among his books and papers there. As soon as he had gone, Maisrie rose and came over to where the young man was standing by the fireplace.

"What have I done, Vincent?" she said.

"Oh, nothing," he made answer, avoiding her eyes.

"I have a right to know," she said, proudly.

"It is nothing," said he. "I—I made a mistake; that is all."

She looked at him in mute reproach: then she turned away, and went back to her seat. There was a paper-knife on the table beside her; she took that into her hands, and began to finger it; her eyes were downcast; he was free to go now, when he chose.

But he did not go. On the contrary, after a second or two of vacillation, he followed her.

"Maisrie," said he, in a very different tone, "perhaps it's all a mistake on my part. If so, I am sorry. I don't want to vex you—

"I don't want to vex you, Vincent," said she, in a somewhat low voice. "Tell me what it is."

"Well," said he, "I came here this afternoon thinking—hoping—there might be some more definite understanding between you and me: yes, I was hoping for much—and then—and then I found you quite careless and thoughtless, just as if nothing at all had happened last night—"

"Last night?" she repeated.

"Yes," said he, rather reproachfully. "Don't you remember what happened last night? Don't you know that you pressed my hand to your heart? But perhaps that was nothing—perhaps that meant nothing at all—"

"It meant a very great deal, Vincent," said she, warmly, looking up at him with honest eyes. "We were talking of the value of true friends—and I could not say much—yet I wished to tell you what I thought of all your goodness and kindness. Indeed, indeed it meant a great deal, Vincent—and I hoped you would understand—"

"I have understood too much," said he, and he was silent for a second. Then he went on. "I thought you had something more than that to say to me, Maisrie. For why need I tell you what you must have guessed already? You know I love you; you must have seen it all this time; there was no need for me to speak. And when the future has but the one hope for me, that some day or other you should be my wife, then perhaps I was too eager to believe it had all come true—that you were giving me a promise in that quiet way—and no need of a spoken word between us. But I was mistaken, I see. You only meant friendship. You only wanted to say 'Thank you!' to a friend—"

But by this time she had risen from her chair; and there was in her eyes the strangest look of pride, and joy, and perhaps, too, of sadness.

"Do you know what you are saying, Vincent?" she said, quite gently. "You—of all people in the world—"

She hesitated: she regarded, with admiring, and grateful, and affectionate

eyes, this handsome lad on whom fortune had shed all good things—and perhaps she could not quite confess all she thought.

”You—of all people in the world—every one making much of you—every one hoping such great things of you—and you come seeking a wife here.” She glanced round at the shabby little apartment. Then she turned her eyes towards him again; and there was a smile in them, of an unstable kind; and tears were gathering in the lashes. ”Well,” she said, ”it will be something for me to think of. It will be something for me to be proud of. There can be no harm in that. I shall be able to say to myself ’Vincent thought so well of you that he once asked you to be his wife’—”

”But I don’t know what you mean, Maisrie!” he exclaimed, and in spite of her he seized her hand and held it tight between his two. ”What do you mean? You are going to be my wife! Oh, I don’t want you to make rash promises; I don’t want to frighten you; no, I want you to be of good heart, and you will see things will turn out all right in the end. And if you don’t know your own mind yet—if you are afraid to say anything—won’t you let me guess? Surely we have not been all this time together, and seeing so much of each other, without getting to know each other pretty intimately? And if I did make a mistake last night—well, that is a trifling matter—and I was too presumptuous—”

She managed to release her hand.

”Sit down, Vincent, and let me talk to you,” she said. ”Perhaps I may not have another chance; and I do not wish you ever to look back and say I was ungrateful, or unreasonable, or cold-hearted. Cold-hearted?—not that—not that—towards you!” And then she went on in rather a sad way, ”I think the time has about come that we should part. It has been a pleasant companionship: I am not likely ever to forget it. But your future is so important, and ours so uncertain, that I am sure the sooner we go separate ways the better. And I am anxious to make a change now. I think if my grandfather and I went away somewhere where we could live more cheaply—where there would be fewer temptations towards the spending of money—I could do something to support him, and leave him the luxury of his books. I am a woman now—I want to work—”

”You work? Not while I can!” he said, hotly.

She went on without heeding him.

”That is why I have been glad to see him so eager about this book of ballads. If he could only get rid of all indebtedness, to friends and others, through this book, then we should start clear; and I should ask him not to fret any more about his literary schemes. He is an old man. He has done everything for me: why should I not do something for him now? And I have no pride. The story about those Scotch estates was always a kind of fairy tale to me; I never had any real belief in the possibility of their coming to us; I was never a fine lady even in

imagination. So that it matters little to me what I turn my hand to; if what little education I have had is useless, I would take to something else; I would work about a farm-house as soon as anything—for I am a great deal stronger than you may imagine—”

”Oh, what are you talking about, Maisrie!” he said, with simulated anger. ”If you think I am going to allow any such folly, you are mistaken. There are plenty of dairymaids in the world without you. And I have the right to say something—I claim the right: I am going to interfere, whether you like it or not. When you speak of your duty towards your grandfather, that I understand. He has been everything to you: who would ask you to forsake him? But, as you say, he is an old man. If anything were to happen to him, think of your own position. You have hardly a friend in the world—a few acquaintances in Canada, perhaps—but what is that? You will want some one to protect you: give me that right! If I let you go from me now, how am I to find you again?—how am I to know what may happen? Maisrie, have courage!—be frank!—tell me that the little message of last night meant something more!”

The eloquence was not in the words, but in the vibrating tones of his voice; and there were tears in her eyes as she answered—

”Vincent, I cannot—I dare not! You don’t know how grandfather and I are situated: you are so generous, so open-minded, that—that you see everything in so favourable a light; but then other people might step in—

”Between you and me? Who?” he demanded, with set lips.

”Ah,” she said, with a sigh, ”who can tell? And besides—besides—do you not think I am as proud of you as any one?—do you not think I am looking forward to all that is expected of you?—and when I hear of you as this or that, I will say to myself ’I knew what Vincent was going to do; and now he is glad that he did not hamper himself out of—out of pity—for a friendless girl’—”

But here she broke down altogether, and covered her face with her hands, and sobbed without possibility of concealment. He was by her side in a moment; he laid his hand on the down-bent head—on the soft hair.

”Maisrie,” he said, with the utmost gentleness, ”don’t make me angry. If you have anything to say why you cannot, or will not, be my wife, tell me; but do not be unreasonable and foolish. You speak of my future: it is nothing to me without you. You talk of the expectations of my friends: I tell you that my life is my own. And why should you be any drag or hamper—you! I wish you would think of yourself a little: not of me. Surely there is something better in the world than ambition, and figuring before the public in newspapers.” Then he stopped for a second or two; and resumed in a lower and different tone. ”Of course, if you refuse me your love, that is different. That I can understand. I have done nothing to deserve it: I have come to you as a beggar. If you refuse me that, there

is nothing more to be said. I do not blame you. If I have made a mistake, so much the worse for me—”

She rose.

”Vincent,” she said, between her half-stifled sobs, ”you are not very kind. But it is better so—much better. Now I must go and help grandfather to find that book. And as this is to be the last word—well, then—dear friend—don’t be so ungenerous to me when in after years you look back—”

But he was not likely to let her go like that. He interposed between her and the door; nay, he drew her towards him, and took her head between his hands, and pushed back the hair from her brow, as though he would read down to the very depths of those beautiful, tear-dimmed eyes.

”You have not refused me your love, Maisrie—because you dare not!” he said. ”And what do I care whether you say it or not—when I know?” And there-with he kissed her on the mouth—and again—and again. ”Now you are mine. You dare not deny your love—and I claim you as my wife—”

She struggled backward to be free from him, and said almost wildly—

”No, no—Vincent, you do not understand—I have not been frank with you—I cannot ever be your wife!—some day I will tell you—”

There was no chance for any further entreaty or explanation, for at this moment there was the sound of a footstep outside, the door was opened, and old George Bethune appeared, carrying in his hands some half-dozen books. When he saw those two standing opposite to each other, the young man pale and agitated, the girl also pale and with her eyes streaming over with tears, he glanced from the one to the other in silence. Then he walked deliberately forward to the table, and laid down the books. Maisrie escaped from the room. Vincent returned to the fireplace, too bewildered by her last words to care much what construction might be placed upon this scene by her grandfather. But he had to recall himself: for the old man, just as if he had observed nothing, just as if nothing had happened, but yet with a certain measured precision in his tones, resumed his discussion of ”The Demon Lover,” and proceeded to give his reasons for thinking that the story had migrated from the far north to the south.

But presently Mr. Bethune had turned from those books, and was staring into the fire, as he said with a certain slow and significant emphasis—

”It will be an interesting subject; and yet I must guard against being wholly absorbed by it. And that for my granddaughter’s sake. I imagine we have been living a much too monotonous life for some time back; and that is not well for anyone, especially for a young girl. A limitation of interests; that is not wholesome. The mind becomes morbid; and exaggerates trifles. And in the case of Maisrie, she has been used to change and travel; I should think the unvarying routine of our life of late, both as regards our employments and amusements,

extremely prejudicial to her health and spirits—”

”Why, she seems very well!” Vincent said, anxiously—for he knew not what all this might mean.

”A change will do her good—will do all of us good, perhaps,” said the old man. ”Everyone knows that it is not wise for people to see too much of each other; it puts too heavy a strain on friendship. Companionship should be a volunteered thing—should be a reward, indeed, for previous isolation and work—”

Vincent’s forehead flushed; and the natural man within him was crying out ’Oh, very well, then; I don’t press any further acquaintance on you!’ But for Maisrie’s sake he curbed his pride. He said, as quickly as might be—

”In our case I thought that was precisely how our companionship stood—a little relaxation after the labours of the day. However, if you think there has been too much of that—”

”I was speaking of general principles,” Mr. Bethune said, with equanimity. ”At the same time I confess that, as regards Maisrie, I think that some alteration in our mode of existence might be beneficial. Her life of late has been much too monotonous.”

”Again and again she has told me that she delights in the quietude of it!” the young man protested—for it suddenly occurred to him that Maisrie was to be dragged away from England altogether. ”Surely she has had enough of travel?”

”Travel? That is not what I have in mind,” old George Bethune said. ”We have neither the time nor the means. I should merely propose to pack up a few books and things, and take Maisrie down to some sea-side place—Brighton, perhaps, as being the most convenient.”

The young man’s face flashed instant relief; Brighton—that was something different from what he had been dreading. Brighton—Brighton was not Toronto nor Montreal; there was going to be no wide Atlantic between him and her; a trivial matter of an hour’s railway journey or something of the kind!

”Oh, Brighton?” said he, quite gladly. ”Yes, that will be very pleasant for her. Brighton is brisk and lively enough at this time of the year; and if there is any sunlight going, you are sure to get it there. I am afraid you will find the hotels full—”

”We shall not trouble the hotels,” Mr. Bethune said, with grave dignity. ”Some very humble lodgings will suffice. And perhaps we might get rooms in a house on the hill at the back of the town; that would give me seclusion and quiet for my work. Yes, I think the change will be wholesome; and the sooner we set about it the better.”

Well, to Vincent it did not seem that this proposal involved any great alteration in their mode of life, except that he himself was obviously and unmistakeably excluded; nevertheless, he was so glad to find that the separation from

Maisrie was of a mild and temporary nature that he affected to give a quite cordial approval. He even offered to engage the services of his aunt, Mrs. Ellison, in securing them apartments; but Mr. Bethune answered that Maisrie and he were old travellers, and would be able to shift for themselves. And when did they propose to go? Well, to-morrow, if his granddaughter were content.

While they were yet talking, Maisrie made her appearance. She had bathed her eyes in water, and there was not much trace of her recent agitation, though she was still somewhat pale. And Vincent—to show her that he refused to be alarmed by her parting words—to show her that he was quite confident as to the future—preserved his placid, not to say gay, demeanour.

"Do you know what your grandfather is going to do with you, Maisrie?" said he. "He is going to take you down to Brighton for a time. Yes, and at once—to-morrow, if you care to go."

She glanced quickly from one to the other, as if fearing some conspiracy between them.

"And you, Vincent?" she asked, turning to him.

He did not meet her look.

"I? Oh, I must keep to work; I can't afford to go away down and idle among those fashionable folk. My Mendover lecture isn't half sketched out yet. And then, again, you remember the article I told you about?—before beginning it I ought really to run down to Scotland, or at least to Yorkshire, and see one of those Municipal Lodging-houses in actual operation. They seem to me marvellous institutions," continued this consummate hypocrite (as if the chief thought in his mind at this moment was the housing of the industrious poor!), "and of the greatest importance to the country at large; worked at a profit, too, that is the amazing thing! Fancy at Huddersfield; threepence a day includes use of cooking and table utensils, a smoking-room, reading-room, and conversation-room, and then a bed at night—all for threepence! Belonging to the rate-payers, themselves—under the management of the Corporation—and paying a profit so that you can go on improving and extending. Why, every big town in the kingdom ought to have a Municipal Lodginghouse, or half a dozen of them; and it only needs to be shown how they are worked for the example to be copied everywhere—"

"And when do you go, Vincent?" she asked, with downcast eyes.

"Oh, I am not sure yet," he made answer cheerfully. "Of course, I ought in duty to go; but it will cost me half what I shall get for the article. However, that is neither here nor there. But if this is to be our last night together for a little while, Maisrie," he went on, to keep up his complacent acquiescence in this temporary separation, "you might give us a little music—won't you?—you haven't had the violin out of its case for a long time."

She was very obedient. She went and got the violin—though she was in no

playing or singing mood.

"What, then, grandfather?" she said when she was ready.

"Whatever you please."

Then she began, and very slowly and tenderly she played the air of a Scotch song—"Annie's Tryst." It is a simple air, and yet pathetic in its way; and indeed so sensitive and skilful was her touch that the violin seemed to speak; any one familiar with the song might have imagined he could hear the words interpenetrating those vibrant notes—

"Your hand is cauld as snaw, Annie,
 Your cheek is wan and white;
 What gars ye tremble sae, Annie,
 What maks your e'e sae bright?
 The snaw is on the ground, Willie,
 The frost is cauld and keen,
 But there's a burnin' fire, Willie,
 That sears my heart within.

* * * * *

Oh, will ye tryst wi' me, Annie,
 Oh, will ye tryst me then?
 I'll meet ye by the burn, Annie,
 That wimples down the glen.
 I daurna tryst wi' you, Willie,
 I daurna tryst ye here,
 But we'll hold our tryst in heaven, Willie,
 In the springtime o' the year."

"That is too sad, Maisrie," her grandfather said, fretfully. "Why don't you sing something?"

She turned to Vincent: there was a mute question in her eyes.

"Will you sing the *Claire Fontaine*, Maisrie?" said he.

She seemed a little surprised: it was a strange song to ask for on a night of farewell; but she did as she was bidden. She went and got the book and placed it open before her on the table: then she drew her bow across the strings.

But hardly had she begun to sing the little ballad than it became evident that there was something added to the pure, clear tones of her voice—some quality of an indefinable nature—some alien influence that might at any moment prove too

strong for her self-control.

Sur la plus haute tranche—

this was the point at which she began—

*Le rossignol chantait;
Chante, rossignol, chante,
Toi qui as le coeur gai—*

And so far all was well; but at the refrain

*Lui ya longtemps que je t'aime,
Jamais je ne t'oublierai*

her voice shook a little, and her lips were tremulous. Vincent cursed his folly a hundred times over: why had he asked her to sing the *Claire Fontaine*? But still she held bravely on:

*Chante, rossignol, chante,
Toi qui as le coeur gai;
Tu as le coeur à rire,
Moi je l' ai-t-à pleurer—*

And here she could go no further for those choking tears in her voice; she stood for a moment all uncertain, trying to master herself; then she laid the violin on the table, and with a broken "Good-night, Vincent—and good-bye!" she turned and left the room, her hands hiding her face, her frame shaken by the violence of her sobbing.

There was an instant of silence.

"Yes, it is time she was taken away," old George Bethune said, with a deep frown on his shaggy eyebrows. "Her nerves are all wrong. Why should she make such a to-do about leaving London for a fortnight?"

But Vincent Harris knew better than that. It was not this unexpected departure that was in Maisrie's mind: it was the words that he had spoken to her, and she to him, earlier in the evening. It was of no fortnight's absence she was

thinking, but of a far wider and longer farewell.

CHAPTER V. THE GNAWING FOX.

But he was not disheartened by those ominous words of hers, not even on the following morning, when he found the little thoroughfare so strangely silent and empty, and the two windows over the way become vacant and devoid of charm. He had the high courage and impetuous will of youth; seeing no difficulties or dangers ahead, he refused to believe in any; Maisrie had not denied him her love, therefore she must be his wife; and all the future shone fair. And so he set to work on his Mendover lecture; and made good progress, even if his thoughts went sometimes flying away down to Brighton. As for the lecture itself—well, perhaps certain of its contentions and illustrations would have surprised and even shocked that Communist-capitalist, his father; but the young man was accustomed to think for himself.

Yes, this little street was terribly empty, and those windows indescribably blank. And the room was lonely, work or no work. But as he was standing looking out, cigarette in hand, after his frugal luncheon, a happy inspiration sprang into his head; for here was Hobson, the husband of the landlady across the way, coming along the pavement; and would it not be a comforting thing to have him in to talk about the two lodgers who had just left? Vincent opened the window a bit, and said into the street (there was no need to call)—

"Hobson!"

The man looked up.

"Yes, sir?"

"I want you for a moment."

Then Vincent went himself downstairs and opened the door; and here was the shabby-genteel ex-butler, obsequiously waiting, with an excess of imbecile amiability in his weak, prominent, nervous eyes.

"Come in and have a smoke, Hobson," the young man said. "You must be lonely over there now. Makes a difference, doesn't it?"

"Wonderful, sir, wonderful;" and the docile Hobson obediently followed up the stairs, and accepted a big cigar, and was prevailed on to draw in a chair to the fire. Vincent took a seat opposite him, and lit another cigarette—in a quite

friendly fashion.

"You've seen a good deal of Mr. Bethune since he came to live in your house?" the young man began, in a sort of tentative and encouraging way. And Hobson responded with instant enthusiasm—

"Ah, yes, indeed, sir, and proud of the same. A great man, sir—oh, a very great man—and how he came to be where he is, sir, well, that beats me, sir. And that haffable, sir!—if he ave somethink on the table, he'll say, 'Hobson, bring two tumblers'—yes, sir—'Hobson, bring two tumblers'—and I must take a seat, just as kind and condescending as you are, sir. 'Fill your glass, Hobson,' he says, just that haffable like—"

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Vincent, looking guiltily towards his vacant sideboard. "The fact is, I haven't anything of the kind in these rooms; but I can send out. Which would you like, gin or whiskey?"

"Whichever you please," said Hobson, complacently, "being so kind as to think of it, sir."

The necessary fluid was soon procured; and Hobson was liberally helped. And when at length he began to expatiate on the character and the wonderful attainments and abilities of Maisrie's grandfather, there may have been a little exaggeration (for gin tends towards exaggeration) in his speech; but his aim and admiration were genuine enough at the core. He grovelled in the dust before that impressive old man. He spoke in almost a breathless way of his haffability. Why, that a great personage in literature should condescend to read his, Hobson's, poor little verses was extraordinary; but that he should give advice, too, and encouragement, that was overwhelming. And as for the young lady—but here Hobson's language failed him. With tears in his eyes he declared that she was a hangel of sweetness—which did not convey much to Vincent's eager-listening ears. But when he went on to tell about all sorts of little acts of kindness and consideration—when he spoke of her patience with the old gentleman's temper, of her cheerfulness over small disappointments happening to herself, of her gentleness, and sunniness, and invariable good humour—here he was on more intelligible ground; and his delighted and grateful audience was not slow to press on him another cigar, which was not refused. Indeed, what with so much courtesy shown him, and what with the stimulating influence of the gin and water, Hobson grew valiant; and began to broach wild and iconoclastic theories about filthy lucre, and to describe in dark colours the character of any one—presumably his own wife—who could be so base as to take every farthing of her rent, fortnight after fortnight, from a grand and noble old gentleman and a beautiful young lady both of whom seemed to have known better days.

"Do you know how long they are to be away?" Vincent asked.

"Well, sir, the old gentleman, sir, he says perhaps two weeks and perhaps

three.”

”I see you’ve put up a notice that the rooms are to be let.”

”Yes, sir; but that ain’t much use, not for so short a time, sir.”

And here another sudden fancy struck the young man.

”But I know how you can get them let,” said he.

”How, sir?”

”You can let them to me.”

”Law, sir!”

There was a doubtful look about Hobson’s big, vacuous eyes: being of a poetic and sensitive nature he did not like jokes, and was suspicious. However, the young gentleman, to judge by his manner, seemed fair and honest and above-board.

”I will take them,” said Vincent, ”until Mr. Bethune and his granddaughter come back. Not to occupy them myself, you understand; but I don’t want any stranger to be going into these rooms, you see—that is all.”

”How kind, sir—how thoughtful!” Hobson said, in a pathetic way. ”That it is to have good, kind friends!”

”And as the rooms are now mine, I suppose I might go over and look at them—if you will finish up your tumbler?”

”Certainly, sir, certainly,” Hobson said, jumping to his feet with alacrity, and hastily draining his glass. ”They’re all tidied up, sir, against the chance of a lodger. And won’t the missus be surprised!—for the women, sir, the women, you see, sir, they likes to haggle and bargain, but with men, sir, begging your pardon, sir, it’s a word and done!”

Indeed he seemed quite proud of the promptitude with which he had conducted and concluded this negotiation; and it was with an unusual air of authority and importance that he led the way upstairs and showed Vincent into the little parlour, with which he was already abundantly familiar. There were few alterations. The old man’s books, Maisrie’s music, and similar personal belongings, had disappeared; and a hideous purple vase stood for ornament in the middle of the table. The pallid lithographs were still on the walls; Maisrie’s chrysanthemums were out there in the little iron balcony.

”Would you like to see the rooms upstairs, sir?”

The young man hesitated for a second.

”Oh, very well.”

Hobson led the way up to the next landing; and there the first door he came to he flung wide open.

”The young lady’s room, sir.”

But Vincent did not accept the implied invitation. He hung shamefacedly back.

"Oh, yes, that's all right," said he. "I—I only wished to—to have it kept for her."

And yet he lingered for another second at the door of this chamber—that seemed so sacred—that seemed to shut him out. He could see the dressing-table, the chest of drawers, the neatly folded bed, the rather dingy window.

"Look here, Hobson," said he, "if I were to get a few things to make the room a little more cheerful, I suppose that could be done without letting Miss Bethune know who sent them? The looking-glass there—you know, that is not the right kind of thing at all; there should be a pretty mirror on the dressing-table, with some lace round the top of it—"

Here he ventured in half a step or so, and rather timidly looked round.

"That one gas-jet can't be half enough, when Miss Bethune is dressing to go out in the evening," he said, complainingly—perhaps to conceal his incomprehensible diffidence and shyness. "She must have candles—one on each side of the mirror, for example. And that screen across the window, why, it is so common!—it ought to be a piece of pale silk—to let the light through."

He ventured a few inches further, and again looked round.

"What do you call that thing?—the coverlet—the counterpane—isn't it? Well, it shouldn't be white, and cold, and cheerless like that; it should be a deep crimson satin—and there should be pretty things at the head of the bed—loops and bows of ribbon—my goodness, what is Mrs. Hobson about!—a young lady's room shouldn't be like a cell in a prison!"

"Law, sir, I'm very sorry," Hobson said, in a bewildered way: a crimson satin coverlet sounded a grand thing; but it also meant a heap of money.

"But come away out and I will talk to you," Vincent said, just as if they were in a mysteriously sacred shrine, where the discussion of business affairs was a sort of profanation. Or perhaps he resented the intrusion of the amiable but gin-odorous Hobson? At all events, he did not resume the conversation until they were both downstairs again in the parlour.

"You understand, then," he said, and there was no more timidity about his speech now, "I am willing to get a number of things for the room, and to make you and Mrs. Hobson a present of them, on the distinct condition that Miss Bethune is kept in absolute ignorance how they came there. One word to her—and out they come again, every rag and stick. Why, you can easily invent excuses! You can tell them you took the opportunity of their absence to brighten up the place a bit. It is in your own interest to keep the rooms smart: it doesn't imply any favour conferred on your lodgers. Don't you see?"

"Yes, sir. Very kind of you, sir, indeed," said Hobson, who seemed a little confused. "And what did you want me to do?"

"Do? I want you to do nothing: and I want you to say nothing. Don't you

understand? I am going to send in a few things to smarten up that room; and they are yours so long as not any one of you hints to Miss Bethune where they came from. Isn't that simple enough?"

But far less simple was his own part in this transaction, as he was speedily to discover. For when he went outside again, and made away towards Regent-street, thinking he would go to a famous shop there, and buy all sorts of pretty things, it gradually dawned on him that he had undertaken a task entirely beyond his knowledge. For example, he could purchase any quantity of crimson satin; but how or where was he going to get it made up into a coverlet, or counterpane, or quilt, or whatever the thing was called? Then supposing he had the mirror and the lace, who was going to put the lace round the top of the mirror?—he could not do that for himself. A little set of ornamental book-shelves he could buy, certainly; but how was he going to ask for the bows of ribbon, or the silk drapery, or whatever it was that ought to adorn the brass rods at the head of the bed? The more he considered the matter the more clearly he saw that he must consult a woman, and the only woman he could consult in confidence was his aunt, Mrs. Ellison, who had now returned to Brighton. And perhaps he strove to conceal from himself what it was that so easily and naturally drew his thoughts to Brighton; perhaps he was hardly himself aware how this secret hunger of the soul was minute by minute and hour by hour increasing in its demands. Maisrie had not been so long away; but already he felt that one brief glimpse of her, no matter at what distance, would be a priceless thing. And then again it would not be breaking any compact. He would not seek to go near her, if there was this understanding that these two were for the present separated the one from the other. She would not even know he was in the town. And surely it would be a new and wonderful experience to look at Maisrie from afar off, as if she were a stranger.

So instead of going to Regent-street, he went to the nearest post-office and telegraphed to Mrs. Ellison, asking if she could take him in for a day or two. Then he walked on home; and by the time he had reached Grosvenor Place, the answer was there awaiting him; he was to go down at once. He put a few things in his bag; jumped into a hansom and drove to Victoria-station; caught the four-thirty train; and eventually arrived at Brunswick Terrace about six. He guessed that his aunt's afternoon visitors would be gone; and he would have ample opportunity of a long talk with her before dinner.

His anticipations proved correct. When he was shown into the big drawing-room—which looked very snug and warm amid its magnificence—he found the tall and bright-eyed young widow in sole possession; and she came forward to welcome him with great complaisance.

"Very sensible of you, Vin. You know I can always make room for you, no

matter who is in the house.”

”If I had gone to a hotel, aunt, you would have made an awful row; and I don’t want to quarrel with you just at present: the fact is, I have come to you for advice and help,” said he. ”But first—my congratulations! I was hardly surprised when I got your letter; and I am sure no one can wish you more happiness than I do—”

”Oh, be quiet,” she said; and she took a seat at a little distance from the fire, by the side of a small table, and put a fan between her eyes and the crimson-shaded lamp. ”Congratulations? Well, I suppose there are no fools like old fools. But if grown-up people will play at being children, and amuse themselves by writing things in the sand—did I tell you how it all happened?—they must take the consequences. And I, who used to be so content! Haven’t I often told you? Perhaps I boasted too much—”

”Oh, yes, pretend you regret it!” said he. ”And you talk of your being so old—you!—why, what girl of all your acquaintance has half your life and spirit, or half your good looks, either—”

”Vincent Harris,” said she, and she turned round and faced him, ”what do you want?”

He laughed.

”It is a very simple matter, aunt.”

And then he began to tell her of the little predicament in which he was placed; and to beseech her help. Would she come and choose the things for him? There were plenty of bric-à-brac shops in Brighton: she would know what was most appropriate: her own house was evidence of her taste. But his ingenuous flattery was of no avail. Mrs. Ellison’s face grew more and more serious, until at length she exclaimed—

”Why, Vin, this is the very madness of infatuation! And I had been hoping for far other things. I had imagined from the tone of your last letter that perhaps there might be a change—that your eyes had been opened at last. So this is going on just the same as ever?”

”It is going on, as you call it, aunt; and is likely to go on—so long as I live.”

”Then I, for one, wish to have nothing to do with it,” she said, sharply. ”And this last proposal is really too audacious. What business have you with that girl’s room?—what right have you to go into it?”

He was rather taken aback—for a moment.

”Business?—oh, none of course. None whatever—that is to say—oh, yes, I have, though!—I have a perfect right to go into it. The room is not hers. It is mine. I have paid for it. When she comes back it will be hers; and where is the harm of her finding it a little prettier?—that is all.”

”I must say, Vin,” she continued, in a very reserved fashion, ”that the in-

fatuation of a young man may excuse a good deal; but this is a little—a little too much. Do you consider it quite nice—quite becoming? A satin counterpane! I wonder what the girl would think herself—if she has any refinement of feeling—if she has any delicacy—”

His face grew very pale.

”If she has any refinement of feeling—if she has any delicacy;” he repeated. Then he rose.

”It is useless to say anything further, aunt; there is an end this time.”

But she had risen too. He tried to pass her—and failed; nay, she went to the door, and stood with her back against it, and faced him.

”No, you shall not go,” she said. ”Why should there be any dissension? You are my own dear boy; I would do anything for you—except in this one direction—”

”Except in this one direction!” he repeated, scornfully.

”Why cannot we remain friends,” she said, with appealing eyes, ”good and true friends—and agree to leave this one subject alone?”

”This one subject—that is my life!” he said, vehemently. ”What folly you talk! You wish to cut away the very thing I live for; the very thing that is my life; and to continue your friendship with what remains—a senseless stick or stone! And why? Because of your insensate prejudice, your cruel and baseless suspicions. Why do you talk to me as if I were a boy? I have seen twice as much of the world as you have; I have had better opportunities of learning how to judge strangers. But you—you live in a narrow groove—you have your maid to talk to—your acquaintances to call in the afternoon—your friends to dinner—and what besides? That is your world. What do you know of the human beings outside it? Must they all be dishonest—because they have not been heard of by your handful of a set? Must they all be thieves and swindlers—because they are not in the Court Directory? But it is little matter. If this subject is debarred, then all is debarred, as between you and me. You can go your own way, and I mine. I did expect, now that you have your own happiness secured, you might show some little generosity, some little sympathy; but I see it is different; and I will not allow one who is dearer to me than all the world to be treated with such enmity, while I am supposed to stand by and accept it as a natural condition of affairs. I do not; I have had enough; and so here is an end, as between you and me; and I hope you will have more happiness than you seem to wish for other people.”

Well, Mrs. Ellison was not used to giving way; but she was very fond of this proud and handsome boy; and she gave just one sob, and tears gathered in her eyes.

”You are not very kind, Vin,” she said.

And what marvellous thing was this that instantaneously smote his heart?

Why, Maisrie had made use of this very expression on the preceding afternoon! And all of a sudden he seemed to recognise that his adversary here was a woman; she was akin to his beloved—and therefore to be treated gently; Maisrie's voice and eyes seemed to be pleading for her: surely that was enough? He hesitated for a moment: then he said—

"Very well; let it be as you wish. We shall see how we get on, with the one thing that is of more importance to me than anything else shut out from mention. But I must say this to you, aunt: I do not see I am doing anything that the most fastidious person can object to if I put a few pretty things into the room of the girl who is to be my wife."

"How do you know that she is to be your wife, Vin?" she said, rather sadly.

"I know," he made answer.

"My poor boy!" she said; and then she took him by the hand and led him back to the little table at which they had been sitting; and there they had some further conversation about more or less indifferent things, with the one all-important subject carefully avoided. And then it was time for them to go away and dress for dinner.

Lord Musselburgh dined with them that evening, and remained some time after the other guests had gone. To Vincent it seemed a puzzling thing that two betrothed people should make so merry. They appeared so well content with their present estate; they were so assured as to the future; no anxieties; no conflicting hopes and fears; they were in the happiest mood. Next morning, too, Lord Musselburgh again made his appearance; and the three of them went out for a stroll along the promenade. All the world was shining fair and clear; Mrs. Ellison was looking her best, and seemed to know it; her fiancé was in a gay humour. Why, they were almost like the 'lover and his lass' of whom Thomas Morley sang nigh three hundred years ago—those 'pretty country folks' who lived in a perpetual spring-time, with birds singing hey-ding-a-ding-a-ding to them through all the jocund hours. The tall and elegant young widow blushed and laughed like a maid; her eyes were sarcastic, playful, amused, according to her varying mood; the sunlight touched her pretty brown hair. There was, indeed, a sort of audacity of comeliness about her, that set Vincent thinking of a very different kind of beauty—the beauty that seems to be dowered with a divine and angelic sadness. He was walking with these two; but he did not take part in their frolic talk; nor did he pay much attention to the crowd of people, the butterflies of fashion, who had come out into the pleasant sunshine. He seemed to see before him a face that, with all its youth, and its touch of colour, and its grace of outline, was strangely pensive and wistful. And again he asked himself, as many a time he had asked himself, what that expression meant: whether it had been brought there by experience of the many vicissitudes of life, or by loneliness, or whether it was not

something more tragic still—the shadow of an impending fate. There was more than that he could not understand: her curious resignation, her hopelessness as to the future, her wish to get away. And what was it she had concealed from him? And why had she declared she could not ever be his wife?

"You are very silent, Vin," his fair neighbour said, turning her merry eyes towards him at last. "Here is Lord Musselburgh declaring that if he were a Jew he would turn dentist, to have it out with the Christians for what they did in the Middle Ages. A horrid revenge, wouldn't it be?—and so mean—under pretence of affording relief. Oh, look at that girl over there—I do believe the ruff is coming back—we shall all be Elizabethans by-and-by."

"But what business had women ever with ruffs?" Lord Musselburgh interposed. "Why, when the dandies and bucks of Henry VIII.'s time began to make themselves splendid by puffing themselves out round the neck, of course it was in imitation of the stag—as the stag becomes when he is supposed to captivate the fancy of the hinds; but you don't find the hinds with any similar adornments. Such things are proper to males: why should women try to look magnificent round the back of the neck? Why should a hen covet a cockscomb? It's all wrong—it's against natural laws."

"Natural laws in a milliner's shop!" she said. "Oh, do look at those two Italian girls; what English peasant-girl could choose colour like that? I *should* like to speak to them—for a moment."

Lord Musselburgh did not seem inclined to interfere.

"I dare say they may have been long enough in England," said he, "to have picked up a little of the Italian that English ladies speak. You may try them."

But she refrained; for at this moment one of the girls began to play a few bars of *Funiculi-funicula* evidently as an introduction to the singing of her companion; whereupon Lord Musselburgh proposed that Mrs. Ellison should cross over to look at the windows of one or two jewellers' shops—in which both of them happened to be much interested just at this time.

The morning went by, and Vincent had caught no glimpse of Maisrie Bethune or her grandfather; but indeed he had not expected that; the old man would be busy with his books, and it was not likely that Maisrie would come wandering by herself through this fashionable throng. When at last the three friends got back to Brunswick Terrace, it was close on luncheon-time; though here Mrs. Ellison was much surprised to learn that Lord Musselburgh had engaged Vincent to lunch with him at the Bedford Hotel.

"What's the matter?" said she. "Business or billiards?"

"Neither," her fiancé made answer, "I only wanted to give you a little holiday, for an hour or two."

"Not longer, then," she said. "For I am going out driving at three, and I shall

expect you both.”

Soon the two young men were seated at a little window-table in the spacious and cheerful coffee-room; and again Vincent was struck by the eminently practical manner in which his companion spoke of his forthcoming marriage. It was going to be, he frankly intimated, a very useful arrangement for both Mrs. Ellison and himself; and their combined fortunes would enable them to do what hitherto had been impossible for either of them. Mrs. Ellison was fond of society; he had always looked forward to the formation of a political salon when once he got married; and now he thought he could afford to have a much bigger house, which would be necessary for that purpose, than his present one in Piccadilly. Then there were speculations as to whether he, Musselburgh, ought to accept office—some subsidiary office, of course, as befitting his years—when his party came into power again: you see, Vin Harris was being consulted now as if he were a friend of the family. But as for Vincent’s own affairs—not a word: Lord Musselburgh had received a hint; and he was discretion itself.

And yet if ever in his life the younger of those two friends had need of a confidant, it was that afternoon; for something then happened that seemed to strike at the very roots of his being. When it was about time for them to go along to keep their appointment with Mrs. Ellison, Vincent was standing in the hall of the hotel, waiting for Lord Musselburgh, who had momentarily gone upstairs; and he was idly looking out upon the passing crowd. Idly and absently; there was no one there to interest him; very different it would be (he was saying to himself) towards six or seven o’clock, when perhaps Maisrie and her grandfather would come out for a stroll before going to dine at one of the restaurants. At present he had no sort of concern with all those people who went driving and walking past, in the dull wintry sunshine. It was a pretty show; and that was all.

But of a sudden his heart stood still; and his startled vision beheld what seemed incredible, and yet was there, and actual, and beyond any doubt. Ere he was aware, a vehicle had driven by—a tall dog-cart, with two figures in front and one behind; but another glance revealed to him that the one behind was old George Bethune: who could mistake at any distance the powerful and striking head, the shaggy eyebrows, the flowing white hair? And the two in front?—one was a young man, to Vincent unknown: the other—a terrible misgiving told him that was Maisrie, though they were now some way off. What did it all mean? He had never heard of their knowing anyone in Brighton. They had come down for seclusion, for work; yet here they were in the midst of the fashionable crowd; and a young man—a stranger—was making ostentatious display of his acquaintance with them. A thousand wild surmises, the offspring of a very madness of jealousy, sprang into his brain. Why had the old man so clearly intimated to him that he was not wanted—that they wished to go to Brighton by themselves? And who

was this person who was making such open parade of his intimacy with them? Alas! there was no answer to these burning and bewildering questions; and he stood there breathless, alarmed, yet not daring to ask the cause of his alarm.

Lord Musselburgh came along the hall.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Vin—"

"Oh, don't mind that," the young man said, striving to conceal his agitation.

"The fact is—I—I don't think I will go driving this afternoon: will you make my excuses to my aunt—?"

"What's the matter?" said Musselburgh, regarding him. "You look as if you had seen a ghost or a creditor: what is it, man?"

"Never mind—never mind—it is nothing," Vin said, hastily. "I will see you later on. Will you make my excuses—thanks!"

The hall porter swung the door open; and before his astonished companion could remonstrate, he had passed out and down the stone steps. He crossed over, to lose himself in the throng on the opposite promenade. The dog-cart would be coming by again: he would see who this new friend was. Could he not hide somewhere?—he felt like a spy, like a traitor, with all those dire imaginings surging through his brain. And sudden wrath, too: he would demand to know by what right any stranger was allowed to make Maisrie Bethune so conspicuous. Why, it was too public!—it was a boast; and hardly decent, either; ought not respect for age and white hair to have placed the old man in front, instead of inviting all the world to witness the flattering of a young girl? And as for Maisrie—well, even in his wildest and blackest surmises he could think no serious harm of Maisrie; but she was too yielding; she was too generous with her favours; she ought to make distinctions; she ought not to permit this great, idle crowd to draw false conclusions. It was ill done of her—behind his back: had she so soon forgotten that he had pledged his life to her not so very many hours ago?

By-and-bye he knew rather than saw that they were returning. He was on the seaward side of the road; there were a good many people passing to and fro; moreover, he was partly concealed by an open fly that stood close to the railings. The tall dog-cart came swiftly along: an unprejudiced spectator would have said that the young man who was driving was rather a good-looking young fellow, of the pink and white type, with a small yellow moustache carefully waxed at the ends, and clear grey eyes. He wore a buff-coloured coat, with a velvet collar of similar hue; he had a flower in his button-hole. Then, again, his turn-out was faultless—a neatly-appointed cart—a beautiful, high-stepping roan. All this was visible at a glance.

But it was on Maisrie Bethune that Vincent's gaze was bent; and as she drew near, his heart was smitten at once with remorse and with gratitude. Had he expected, then, that she would be smirking and smiling and coquetting with

this new acquaintance? On the contrary, Maisrie sat there grave and silent and reserved; her eyes were neither observant nor conscious: once or twice they were turned towards the sea. To Vincent she seemed so distinguished-looking, so refined, and noble, and self-possessed, as contrasted with that fresh-complexioned country clown who had the monstrous audacity to claim her as his companion! Then, as the dog-cart went by, he caught sight of George Bethune. He was sitting rather side-ways, to permit of his addressing an occasional remark to the young gentleman who was driving: no doubt that was why Maisrie was allowed to remain silent. Perhaps she was thinking—of someone whom she thought to be far away—?

Strangely enough, as soon as they had disappeared from view, his doubts and imaginings grew black again. For a moment, that vision of Maisrie's sweet face had charmed him out of himself; but now these hideous questions rushed back upon him, demanding an answer where there was no answer. He did not attempt to reason himself out of this paroxysm of jealousy; that would have been useless; he could but submit to this gnawing torture of anxiety and suspense, while walking up and down, and waiting, and fearing to find them coming within sight once more.

They did not return. Shortly after four the dusk began to fall; by half-past five black night had enveloped sky and sea, and the town was all ablaze with golden stars. There were hardly any carriages now; the people had betaken themselves to the other side of the road, to look in at the glaring shop-windows on their way home. Vincent found himself more alone than ever; and knew not what to do or which way to turn. In his present frame of mind he dared not go near the house in Brunswick Terrace; he could not submit to cross-examining eyes. It would drive him mad to talk, while those rankling conjectures were busy at his heart. He wanted to see Maisrie again; and yet dreaded to see her, lest he should find her once more in the society of that man.

But about half-past six his aimless perambulation of the streets became circumscribed. He drew nearer to the neighbourhood of the restaurants. If old George Bethune had brought his London habits down with him, as many people did, would not he soon make his appearance, along with his granddaughter? Here in East-street, for example, were *cafés*, both French and Italian, where they could have a foreign dinner if they chose. Would he venture to address them? Would he confess he had seen them driving—in the hope they might volunteer information for which he dared not ask? He could not tell; his brain was in a bewilderment of anxiety and unreasoning misery; and this grew worse, indeed, as the slow minutes went by, and there was no sign of the two figures for whom he was so eagerly watching.

And then a sickening thought occurred to him. What if those two had

been invited to dine at a hotel by the country clod—by the young man from the plough—by the rustic dandy with the velvet collar? At the Old Ship, most likely—a private room—a profusion of flowers—plenty of champagne—Hodge Junior gay and festive—cigarettes between the courses—Arry having learnt so much from the cheap society journals; and will not Miss Bethune be persuaded to join? Ah, well, perhaps after dinner, when the liqueurs come to be handed round? There is a piano in the room: will Miss Bethune oblige with an accompaniment?—here is a smart little thing—“Kiss me on the sly, Johnnie!”—the latest draw at the music halls....

Seven by the big clock over the stationer’s shop; and still no sign of them. Clearly they were not coming to any restaurant hereabouts. So at length he left East Street, and went down to the King’s-road, and wandered slowly along, glancing furtively into this or that hotel—especially where some coffee-room window happened to have been left with the blind up. It was a vain quest, and he was aware of it; but something, he knew not what, drew him on. And meanwhile his mind was busy with pictures—of a private room, and flowers, and three figures seated at table. *Ach weh! mein Liebchen war die Braut!*

At a quarter to eight, Lord Musselburgh was shown into Mrs. Ellison’s drawing-room.

“Haven’t you seen anything of Vin?” she said, with astonished eyes.

“No—nor you?”

“Nothing at all—and now he won’t have time to dress for dinner.”

“I shouldn’t wonder if he did not turn up for dinner,” Musselburgh said. “Something very peculiar happened to him to-day—I could not precisely gather what—but he was obviously upset.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Ellison, and her face was graver than its wont. “Something has indeed happened to him to-day—though he himself is not aware of it as yet.”

She went to a little cabinet, and took from it two letters.

“I thought you ought to see both of these,” said she. “One is from my brother-in-law; I got it just a minute or two after you left. The other is my answer; I will have it posted as soon as you have read it.”

He took the first letter, which was from Vincent’s father, and read it carefully through, without a word of comment. Then he took the other, which ran as follows:—

”DEAR HARLAND,

”It is very terrible; but I half suspected as much; and terrible as it is there is nothing to be done but to tell Vin the whole truth, and at once. Telegraph for

him to-morrow morning—on business of importance; if he wants to come down again, I shall be ready with such consolation as I can think of. I fancy from one or two things that those people are here in Brighton just now: all the more reason why you should summon him home at once. Poor boy, it will be a sad awakening. But he is young; he will get over it; and perhaps be none the worse in the end for this cruel experience of the deceit and wickedness of the world. Let me know how he takes it.

”Yours affectionately, ”MADGE.”

No, Vincent did not come in to dinner that evening. He was still walking up and down the King’s-road, glancing now and again, but with a sort of hopelessness, at any little group of people that might appear at the hall-door of this or that hotel; and all the while there was a fire eating at his heart.

CHAPTER VI. PUT TO THE PROOF.

To say that Vin Harris’s jealousy was unreasoning, ungovernable, and the cause of cruel and incessant torture to himself, is merely to say that it was jealousy; but by an unhappy coincidence this was the very moment chosen by his father to make a disclosure which, for a startled second or so, seemed to recall and confirm the young man’s wildest suspicions. When Vincent, in obedience to the telegraphic summons, arrived at the house in Grosvenor Place, he found his father in the library, standing with his back to the fire. On this occasion the great capital-denouncing capitalist did not wear the suit of hodden grey which, at dinner in his own house, was designed to show his contempt for conventionality; no; when this interview was over, he meant to lunch at the Athenæum Club, and with a view to that solemn rite he had donned a black frock-coat which was tightly buttoned over his substantial form. A stiff upstanding collar and a satin tie added to the rigidity of his appearance; while his manner was, as usual, pompous and cold. With a roll of paper in his hand, he would have looked as if he were going to deliver an afternoon lecture at some public institution.

”I have sent for you, Vin,” he began, ”because I have something of impor-

tance to say to you, and the sooner it is said the better. You are aware that I have never sought to interfere with your way of life. Indeed I have seen no cause to do so. Your line of study I approve; your ambitions I would encourage; and as for the amusements and pleasures natural to your years, I can trust you to remember your own self-respect. But in one direction I confess I am disappointed. My chief aim in your education has been that you should see and know the world; that you should understand men; and by contact learn to cope with them, and hold your own. Yes, I confess I am disappointed; for if I am not misinformed—and I have taken the greatest trouble not to be misinformed—here are you, after all your travel and experience of the world, become the dupe of two common begging-letter impostors.”

The young man looked up quickly; but he held his peace. Now this somewhat disconcerted Harland Harris, for he had expected an instant and indignant protest, which would have justified a little judicious warmth on his side in production of proofs. But Vincent sat calm and collected, listening with apparent respect.

”Yes, deeply disappointed,” his father continued, with a little more animation, ”for this old charlatan who seems to have got hold of you is altogether too bare-faced and preposterous. Did you ever ask yourself how he lived; what was his business or profession; where he got the money to go from one country to another? Well, if you have not, I have; I have made enquiries; I have had him traced; I can tell you his story, and a very pretty story it is. Would you like to hear it?”

”I don’t know that it concerns me much,” said Vincent, with composure.

”Oh, it does not?” said the gentleman with the pompous professional air, upon whom this indifference seemed to have a somewhat irritating effect. ”Well, there’s nothing very grand about it—except the magnificent and wholesale lying! And perhaps also the incredible simplicity of the people who allowed themselves to be imposed on. Why, in Canada he called himself Lord Bethune!—was there no second-hand copy of Burke anywhere about to show them there was no such peerage in existence? Lord Bethune haunting newspaper-offices, and borrowing money right and left, because of his Scotch name, and his bogus literary schemes! His sham estates—his sham lineage—his sham coat of arms: did nobody think of turning up a book? ’Stand Fast, Craig-Royston!’ Craig-Royston!—”

He crossed the room and took down a volume from one of the shelves.

”There,” he said, putting the book on the table, ”there is Black’s Guide to Scotland. Can you find out where Craig-Royston is? Turn up the index.”

Mechanically and carelessly Vincent did as he was bid.

”No, I don’t see it there,” he said.

”I should think not! Nor Balloray either: can you find Balloray? An easy

thing to claim estates that don't exist; and wear armorial bearings of your own invention! Cadzow—oh, yes, Cadzow you will find—Cadzow undoubtedly exists; but most people thought that Cadzow belonged to the Duke of Hamilton. Or does Lord Bethune claim to be Marquis of Douglas and Earl of Angus as well?"

He paused; so Vincent was bound to answer.

"I don't know that it concerns me much," the young man said, repeating his former phrase. "Even if all you say is true, what then? You sent me out to see the world, and take people as I found them. Well, I found a good many liars; and one more or less doesn't matter much, does it?"

But Harland Harris was no fool; he instantly divined wherein lay the secret of Vincent's real or assumed indifference.

"Ah, I understand," said he. "I understand. You don't care so much about him. You are willing to let him go. You think you can dissociate him from his granddaughter. He may be a swindler—but you fancy she manages to keep aloof—"

The young man grew somewhat pale.

"Take care," said he, and he held up his hand as if he would enjoy silence. "Words that are said cannot be unsaid."

His father regarded him for a second, and then he endeavoured to bring a little more friendliness and consideration into his manner.

"I have heard of this infatuation," he said. "And if you had been like other young men, Vin, I should have said nothing. I should have left you to find out for yourself. But, you see, you have the misfortune to imagine other people to be as straightforward and honourable as yourself; you do not suspect; and you are inclined to trust your own judgment. But even if this girl were all you think she is, what madness it would be for you to contemplate marrying her! Look at her position—and at yours: look at her upbringing and present surroundings—and at yours; think of what is expected of you; what chances you have; what an alliance with a great family might do for you in public life. What good ever comes of overleaping social barriers—of Quixotism—of self-sacrifice for sentiment's sake? What does a marriage between two people in different spheres mean?—what is the inevitable result?—it is not the one that is raised—it is the other that is dragged down."

"These are strange doctrines for a socialist and a communist," Vincent observed.

"They are the doctrines of common sense," his father retorted, sharply. "However, it is unnecessary to say anything further on that score. You will abandon all this nonsense when you understand who and what this girl is; and you will thank God you have had your eyes opened in time. And indeed, if all that I am told is true—if I guess aright—if I piece the story properly together—I should

say she was by far the more dangerous of the two accomplices—”

Vincent’s lips curled: he did not put his disdain into words.

”A painful revelation?” his father continued, in more oracular fashion. ”Oh, yes, no doubt. But occasionally the truth is bitter and wholesome at the same time. What you believe about the girl is one thing; what I know about her is another: indeed I can gather that it was only through her artifice that the old man’s impostures were accepted, or tolerated, at all. What is he?—a farceur—a poseur—who would at once have been sent to the right about but for the ingenue by his side, with her innocent eyes and her sad look. When the writer of the begging-letter calls, his story might be inquired into: but no!—for here is this interesting young lady—and the hardest heart declines to cross-examine while she is standing there. And of course she must go to the newspaper-offices, to beguile the editor with her silent distress, while her grandfather is wheedling him out of a loan; or she accompanies him to the wine merchant, or the bookseller, or the tailor, so that nothing can be said about unpaid accounts while she is by; and of course there is a renewal of credit. A very simple and effective trick: even where the people know the old man to be a rogue, they are sorry for the girl; and they have a pleasing sense of virtue in allowing themselves to be further mulcted: they little suspect that she is by far the more accomplished swindler of the two—”

Here Vincent laughed, in open scorn; but the laugh was a forced one; and his eyes were lowering.

”I am glad you consider it a laughing matter,” said Mr. Harris—who found it less easy to combat this contemptuous unbelief than if he had been met with indignation and wrath. ”Perhaps, after all, the story is no revelation? Perhaps your complaisance goes further than merely tolerating the old man’s lies? Perhaps the glamour the girl has thrown over you would lead you to accept her just as she is, her hypocrisy, her craft, and all? Or perhaps you have planned out for yourself a still more brilliant future than any that had occurred to your friends? Perhaps you aim at being the old man’s successor? It is an easy way of getting through life, having a woman like that by your side, to earn your living for you. The lover of Manon Lescaut—”

Vincent leapt to his feet, his eyes aflame.

”You go too far,” he said, breathing hard. ”You go too far. I have been trying to remember you are my father: don’t make it too difficult. What do I care about this farrago of nonsense that some one has put into your head—this trash—this venomous guessing? It is nothing to me. It is idle air. I know otherwise. But when it comes to insult—well, it is all an insult; but something must be forgiven to ignorance: the people who have supplied you with this guess-work rubbish are probably as ignorant as yourself about those two. Only—no more insults,

if you please! I am your son; but—but there are limits to what you ask me to hear in patience. You talk of my madness and infatuation; it is your madness, your infatuation! What can you say of your own knowledge of that old man and his granddaughter? Why, nothing. You have never spoken to them; never seen them. And yet, without an atom of inquiry, without an atom of proof, you go and accept all this tissue of guess-work—this rubbish—this trash—as if it were gospel; and you expect me to give it a patient hearing? It is too contemptible!”

“Yes, but unfortunately,” said Mr. Harris, with great calmness—for now he felt he had the advantage on his side, “you are mistaken in supposing that I have made no inquiry, and have received no proof. The inquiry has been made for me with great skill and patience, during the past month; and the proofs seem to me sufficient. Proofs?—you yourself shall furnish one.”

This was a kind of challenge; and the young man accepted it. His eyes were fixed on his adversary.

“What, then?”

“When you find,” said his father, with deliberation, “two people wandering from town to town, without any visible means of subsistence, you naturally wonder how they manage to live. Very well. But now, if you discover they have a pretty knack of falling in with this or that rich young gentleman, and allowing him to pay for them on all occasions, isn’t the mystery partly solved? I am informed that these two people and yourself have been in the habit for a considerable time back of dining together in the evening—indeed, I have the name of the restaurant. Now I wish to ask you this question point-blank: is it not the fact that in every case you have paid?”

Vincent did not answer; he was not thinking of himself at all; nor yet of the direct question that had been put to him. A terrible wave of bewilderment had passed over him; his heart seemed to have within it but one sudden cry—‘Maisrie—Maisrie—why were you driving—with that stranger?’—and all the world grew black with a horror of doubt and despair. He thought of the young man driving along the King’s Road in Brighton: was there another paying for those two now?—had they another friend now to accompany them every evening? And Maisrie? But all this wild agony lasted only a moment. He cast this palsy of the brain behind him. His better self rose confident and triumphant—though there was still a strange look left in his eyes.

“Paid?” he said, with a kind of scornful impatience. “Who paid? Oh, I did—mostly. What about that? That is nothing—a few shillings—I found it pleasanter not to have to settle bills before a young lady; and of course she did not know who paid; I made an arrangement—”

“An arrangement by which you gave those people their dinner for nothing for months and months!”

"And what then?"

For Vincent had entirely recovered his self-command: he affected to regard this story that had been told him as quite unworthy of serious attention. It was his father who was growing exasperated.

"Have you taken leave of your senses?" Mr. Harris demanded. "Is it nothing that you yourself have shown this old man to be a pauper, getting his dinner on charity every evening? And what better was the girl? She must have known! Do you imagine she was not aware of his receiving money for bogus books that he never meant to publish; and of his inveigling soft-headed Scotchmen—I suppose there must be one here and there—into giving him a loan because of his sham patriotism? And these are the people you have chosen to consort with all this time; and this is the girl you would bring into your family—you would introduce to your friends as your wife! But you cannot be so mad! You may pretend indifference: you cannot be indifferent. You may consider it fine and heroic to disbelieve the clearest evidence: the world, on the other hand, is apt to say that it is only a fool and an idiot who keeps his eyes shut and walks into a trap blindfolded. And—and I do think, when you begin to reflect, that your own common-sense will come to your aid."

He turned to the mantel-piece, and took from it some papers.

"I have given you," he continued, "the sum and substance of the enquiries I have made, in this country and in America. I can show you here still further details; but before allowing you to examine these communications, I must exact a promise that they shall be treated as in strictest confidence."

"Thank you," said Vincent, "I will not trouble you. I can guess at the kind of creature who would accept such a task, and at his interpretation of any facts that might come across him."

Then he rose.

"And is this the important business on which you sent for me?" he asked, but quite civilly.

"You do not think it is important?" the other demanded. "But at least you have been warned. You have been advised to keep your eyes open. You have been shown what kind of people they are who have got hold of you: it is for you yourself to say whether you will be any longer their dupe."

"Very well," said the young man; and he rose and took up his hat and cane. "Oh, by the way, I presume you have come to an end of your enquiries? Because, if not, I would advise your spy—your detective, or whatever he is—not to come prowling to any restaurant or keyhole when I am along with my friends, or he might find things become very unpleasant for him. Good-morning!"

So this was the end of the interview; and Harland Harris shortly thereafter made off for the Athenæum Club, well satisfied that his narrative had produced

a far deeper impression than the young man would acknowledge. And in truth it had. When Vincent left the house, and walked away to the solitary little rooms in Mayfair, his face was no longer scornful; it was serious and troubled; for there was much for him to ponder over. Not about Maisrie. He put Maisrie aside. For one thing, he was a little vexed and angry with her at the moment—quite unreasonably, as he strove to convince himself; nevertheless, he would rather not think about her just then; and, indeed, there was no occasion, for the idea that she could be the participator in any fraud or series of frauds was simply not a thinkable thing. He knew better than that; and was content. Maisrie driving with a stranger—perhaps that was not so well done of her; but Maisrie as a skilful and accomplished professional swindler?—then you might expect to see the stars fall from their places in the midnight sky.

But as regards the old man, that was very different; and he could not deny that there were certain points in the story just told him which were corroborated by his own knowledge. He knew, for example, that George Bethune had got money for one book which, as circumstances would have it, was not produced and published; he knew that those dinners at the Restaurant were paid for by himself; he knew that he had heard Mr. Bethune speak of Cadzow as belonging to his family; and he had to confess that he could not find Craig-Royston in the index of his father's guide-book. And yet he could not give up this magnificent, this heroic old man all at once. He could not believe him to be a mean and crafty trickster. Surely his love for Scotland was sincere. Surely his passionate admiration of the old Scotch ballads was genuine enough. Surely it was not to impose on any one that old George Bethune sang aloud the songs of his youth as he walked through the crowded streets of London. There was a grandeur in his very presence, a dignity in his demeanour, that was far from the artful complaisance of a schemer. Then his undaunted courage—his proud spirit—and above all, the tender and affectionate guardianship he bestowed on his granddaughter: Vincent could not forget all these things. No, nor could he forget how he had enjoyed George Bethune's society on these many and pleasant evenings; and how he had learned more and more to respect him, his unflinching fortitude, his generous enthusiasms, and even, at times, his innocent vanity. He had had a hard life, this old man, and yet he bore no enmity. He had had many trials and misfortunes, many hopes disappointed; yet his temper was not soured. But the conclusive proof, after all, was the character of Maisrie herself—her noble sweetness, her refinement, her sympathy, her quick gratitude for the smallest of kindnesses: could such a beautiful human flower have grown up under the fostering care of an unscrupulous vagabond and knave?

When he got to his rooms, the first thing he did—but with no very definite purpose—was to take up his copy of Black's Guide to Scotland. It was a recent

edition; he had got it so that he might trace out that long wandering of which old George Bethune and Maisrie had spoken so often. And mechanically he turned to the index—with which he had been confronted in his father's library; and mechanically he glanced at the successive columns. But what was this?—why here was Craig-Royston! His eyes were not deceiving him; for he at once referred to the page indicated, and found Craig-Royston described as a district in the neighbourhood of Loch Lomond—though, to be sure, he could discover no trace of it on the map. So he had jumped to conclusions all too prematurely? He had allowed that unknown enemy of his—that dark and malignant creature in the background—too facile a triumph? He began to be ashamed of himself. 'Stand fast, Craig-Royston!' had not been his motto, as it was that of the proud old man whom he had injured by listening to those childish tales.

He returned to the index, and sought for Balloray. Well, there was no Balloray; but then Balloray was a private house; and private houses, unless of historical interest, are seldom mentioned in guide-books. And then again he bethought him: why, the old ballad!—the 'bonnie mill-dams o' Balloray': surely that was sufficient evidence of there being such a place? He could almost hear George Bethune's voice as he recalled the opening lines—

'There were twa sisters lived in a bower;
Balloray, O Balloray;
The youngest o' them, O she was a flower!
By the bonnie mill-dams o' Balloray.

There came a squire frae out the west,
Balloray, O Balloray;
He lo'ed them baith, but the youngest best,
By the bonnie mill-dams o' Balloray.'

"Why, what a fool he had been, to be disconcerted by an index—and that the index of some old and obsolete edition! He prosecuted his researches. He turned to Cadzow. Yes, here was Cadzow: Cadzow Castle and Cadzow Forest; and undoubtedly these were the property of the Duke of Hamilton. But might there not be some other property of the same name, as a sort of appanage of Balloray? It was no unusual thing, in Scotland or anywhere else, for two places to have the same name; and in this instance it was the more important one, the ducal one, that would naturally figure in the guide-book. He seemed to see old George Bethune regarding him, with something of a haughty look on his face, as though he would say 'Of what next will you accuse me?'"

Well, all this was very fine and brave; it was a manful struggling with cer-

tain phantoms; and he was trying to cheat himself into an elation of confidence. But ever and anon there came to him a consciousness of something behind; something inexplicable; and his thoughts would wander away back to Brighton. Fugitive lines of that terrible poem of Heine's would come into his brain—*Zu Tafel sassen froh die Gäst' ... und wie ich nacht dem Brautpaar schaut' ... O weh! mein Liebchen war die Braut.* He began to imagine for himself what those three had been doing this morning. The weather being so fine, no doubt Mr. Bethune had laid aside his books for the time being; and he and Maisrie would be ready to go out by half-past ten or eleven. Would their new friend call for them, or would there be some place of appointment down in the King's-road? He could see them walk out the West Pier. The old man with the firm-set figure and the flowing white locks would probably be thinking but little of what was going on around him; as likely as not he would be singing gaily to himself about the Pier o' Leith and Berwick Law, and 'leaving thee, my bonnie Mary.' Yes, and so far those two others would be left to themselves; they could talk as they chose—eyes meeting eyes. And what had the bumpkin squire to say? Oh, horses and hounds—the county balls—the famous bin of port to be opened at Christmas. Christmas was coming near now; might there not be an invitation to the two world-wanderers—to come and be hospitably entertained at the big country-house and introduced to friends? And Maisrie—would she think twice?—would she refuse? The old man would consent to anything that promised him present comfort; he accepted favours with a sort of royal complacency; it would matter little to him so long as the fire was bright, the wine good, the company cheerful, and himself allowed a fine latitude of oration. But Maisrie—?

It was nearly four o'clock now. That previous afternoon at Brighton had been a time of misery; and long into the night he had been kept awake by dull and brooding speculation, varied by bitter self-reproach. All the same he felt himself irresistibly drawn thither again; whatever was happening down there by the sea-side, he wanted to know; his imaginings were a more cruel torture than anything his eyes could tell him. And perhaps—he added to himself, with an ominous darkening of the brows—perhaps there might be a chance of his meeting this rival of his face to face, the better to measure him, and learn what both of them had to expect.

He caught the four-thirty express at Victoria, and got whirled away down. But he did not go to Mrs. Ellison's house, nor yet to the Bedford Hotel, at which his friend Musselburgh was staying; he went to the Bristol, so as to keep himself a little out of observation. He was lucky enough to get a bedroom; and that was all he required; he did not even wait to look at it; he left the hotel and went wandering down the Marine Parade, which was now a mass of darkness lit up by innumerable points of yellow fire.

Whither away then? If only he knew the street in which they had taken lodgings he could soon find out their daily habits, himself remaining unseen; but he had nothing beyond a vague recollection that they had spoken of some hill behind the town. However, Brighton, though now grown a big place, has a few leading thoroughfares in which everybody who is a visitor is pretty sure to be encountered sooner or later; and in this particular instance it was a good deal sooner than he could have dreamed of.

He was walking along the seaward side of the Parade, with but a casual glance now and again at this or that passer-by, when suddenly, on the other side, at the corner of German Place, three figures came under the glare of a gas-lamp, and these he instantly recognised. Occasionally as they went on they became indistinguishable in the dusk; then again a gas-lamp would bring them into vivid relief—the tall and slim young girl, the square-set old man with the picturesque white hair, the young gentleman with the yellow cover-coat. They were talking together, and walking quickly, for the night was cold.

"Yes," said Vincent to himself, in the bitterness of his heart, "I am displaced and superseded now. Without much difficulty, either. Quickly done. And no doubt he is taking them along to some restaurant. He will hear about the rocks and dales of Scotland—about the ballads and songs—perhaps he has subscribed for the new book. Then they will ask him to go home with them again; and Maisrie will take out her violin; and perhaps—perhaps she will sing '*C'était une frégate, mon joli coeur de rose*—perhaps she will sing that for him, or any other of the Canadian songs, except the one. But surely, surely, Maisrie will not sing '*La Claire Fontaine*'?"

And then again he said to himself, with his eyes fixed on those three, but most of all on the young girl who walked with so light and joyous a step—

"Ah, I have suffered to-day, you do not know how much, in repelling insinuations brought against you, and in silencing my own doubts; but what do you care? One restaurant is as good as another; one friend as good as another; let the absent expect to be forgotten, when it is a woman who is asked to remember. *La Claire Fontaine*?—why not *La Claire Fontaine*, for him as well as anyone else? All that past companionship has gone by; here is a new friend to be welcomed with smiles and graces. And as for the old man—what does it matter to him so long as there is someone to settle up the tavern score?"

Nay, his madness of jealousy overmastered him altogether. When they got down to East-street, they did not at once go into the restaurant, for it was yet somewhat early; they began to examine the windows of one or two of the shops, and the trinkets displayed there. And again and again Vincent was on the point of going up to his enemy, and saying "Well, why don't you buy her something? If you haven't got money, I will lend it to you!" Surely this would suffice to provoke

a quarrel?—to be settled next morning, out on the downs, and not by any pistol accident or trick of foil, but by a fair stand-up trial of strength, those two facing each other, with clenched fists and set mouth. The young man in the cover-coat was looking at some Austrian garnets: little did he know what wild beast was within springing distance of him.

At length they left the shops, and leisurely strolled along to the Italian restaurant, and entered. Vincent gave them time to get settled, and then followed. He did not wish to interfere with them; he merely wished to see. And when he went upstairs to the room on the first floor, it was with no abashment; he did not slink, he walked resolutely, to a small unoccupied table at the further end; but he was some way from them; perchance he might be able to observe without being noticed. The waiter came to him. "Anything!" was his order: gall and wormwood there were likely to be in any dish that might be brought. Wine?—oh yes, a flask of Chianti—why not a flask of Chianti?—one might fill a glass, and send a message to a faithless friend—a message to recall her to herself for a moment. You who are sitting there, will you not drink to the health of all false lovers—you who are sitting there in such joyful company—*toi qui as le coeur gai!*

He could see them well enough. There was champagne on the table: that was not of George Bethune's ordering: the booby from the swedes and mangold was clearly playing the part of host. And what was she saying to him in return? What form did her thanks take? *Je ne puis rien donner—qu' mon coeur en mariage:* that was easily said; and might mean no more than it meant in the bygone days. Women could so readily pour out, to any chance new comer, their *petit vin blanc* of gratitude.

But suddenly he became aware of some movement at the table along there; and quickly he lowered his look. Then he knew—he did not see—that someone was coming down the long room. He breathed hard, with a sort of fear—and it was not the fear of any man; he wished he had not come into this place; could he not even now escape?

"Vincent!"

The voice thrilled through him; he looked up; and here was Maisrie Bethune regarding him—regarding him with those eyes so beautiful, so shining, so tender, and reproachful!

"Did you not see us? Why should you avoid us?"

The tone in which she spoke pierced his very heart; but still—but still—there was that stranger at the table yonder.

"I thought you were otherwise engaged," said he. "I did not wish to intrude."

"You are unkind."

Then she stood for a moment uncertain. It was a brave thing for this girl

to walk down a long room to address a young man, knowing that more than one pair of eyes would be turned towards her; and here she was standing without any visible aim or errand.

"Won't you come to our table, Vincent?" she asked hesitatingly.

And then he noticed her embarrassment; and he felt he would be a craven hound not to come to her rescue, whatever the quarrel between them.

"Oh, yes, certainly, if I may," but with no sort of gladness in his consent; and then he bade the waiter fetch the things along.

She led the way. When he reached the table he shook hands with George Bethune, who appeared more surprised than pleased. Then Maisrie made a faint little kind of introduction as between the young men: Vincent—who had not caught the other's name—bowed stiffly, and took the seat that had been brought for him. And then, seeing that it was on Maisrie that all the responsibility of this new arrangement had fallen, he forced himself to talk—making apologies for disturbing them, explaining how it was he came to be in Brighton, and begging Maisrie not to take any trouble about him: it was only too kind of her to allow him to join them.

And yet it was very awkward, despite Maisrie's assiduous little attentions, and her timid efforts to propitiate everybody. The fresh-complexioned young gentleman stared at the intruder; grew sullen when he observed Maisrie's small kindnesses; and eventually turned to resume his conversation with Mr. Bethune, which had been interrupted. Vincent, who had been ready, on the smallest provocation, to break forth in flame and fury, became contemptuous; he would take no heed of this person; nay, he would make use of the opportunity to show to anyone who might choose to listen on what terms he was with Maisrie.

"Where are you living, Maisrie?" said he, and yet still with a certain stiffness.

She gave him the number in German Place.

"Then we are neighbours, or something near it," he said. "I am at the Bristol—the Bristol Hotel."

"Oh, really," she made answer. "I thought you had an aunt living in Brighton—the lady who came to see us at Henley."

"Oh, can you remember things as long ago as Henley?" said he. "I did not think a woman's memory could go so far back as that. A week—a day—I thought that was about as much as she could remember."

For a moment she was silent, and wounded; but she was too proud to betray anything to those other two; and she resumed her conversation with Vincent, though with a trifle more of dignity and reserve. As for him, he knew not what to do or say. He could perceive, he could not but perceive, that Maisrie was trying to be kind to him; and he felt himself a sort of renegade; but all the same

there was that other sitting at the table—there was an alien presence—and all things were somehow awry. And yet why should he despise that stranger? In the bucolic dandy he could see himself, as he himself was seen by certain of his friends. This other dupe, his successor, had a countrified complexion and a steely blue eye, he wore a horse-shoe pin in diamonds, and had a bit of stephanotis in his button-hole; but these points of difference were not of much account. And the old man—the old man with the grand air and the oracular speech: no wonder he thought himself entitled to call himself Lord Bethune; but why had he chosen to abate his rank and style? Oh, yes, a striking presence enough—a magnificent presence—with which to cozen shopkeepers!

For indeed this young man's mind was all unhinged. He had had a hard fight of it that day; and perhaps if Maisrie had known she would have made allowances. What she did clearly see was that her well-meant invitation had been a mistake. She strove her best to remove this embarrassment; she tried to make the conversation general; and in some slight measure she succeeded; but always there was an obvious restraint; there were dark silences and difficult pauses; and, on the part of the young men, a sullen and dangerous antagonism that might at any moment leap forth with a sudden tongue of flame—a retort—an insult.

This hapless entertainment came to an end at last; and, as Vincent had expected, while Maisrie was putting on her cloak, their new friend stepped aside and paid the bill—the bill for three, that is. And the next step? An invitation that the generous host of the evening should go along to the rooms in German Place? There would be tobacco, and Scotch whiskey, and reminiscences of travel, and dissertations on literary and philosophical subjects—and perhaps Maisrie would play for him 'The Flowers o' the Forest' or sing for him 'Isabeau s'y promène.' Perhaps the bucolic soul was penetrable by fine melody? There would be whiskey-and-soda, at any rate, and a blazing fire.

And as a matter of fact, when the four of them paused for a second at the door of the restaurant, the new acquaintance did receive that invitation—from George Bethune himself. But he declined.

"Thanks, awfully," said he, "but I can't to-night. Fact is, there's a big billiard match on this evening, and I've backed my man for £20, and I may want to hedge a bit if he isn't in his best form. Some other evening, if you'll allow me. But to-morrow morning—what are you going to do to-morrow morning? You can't stay indoors while the weather is so fine; you must leave your work until the wet comes. So I dare say I shall find you somewhere along the front about eleven to-morrow; and if I don't, why, then, I'll come along to German Place, and drag you out. For who ever knew such a glorious December?—quite warm in the sun—primroses and violets all a-growing and a-blowing—in the baskets. Good-night

to you!—good-night, Miss Bethune!—mind you bring your grandfather along tomorrow morning; or I'll have to come and drag you both out; good-night—good-night!"—and then with a brief nod to Vincent, which was frigidly returned, he departed.

"You are going our way, Vincent?" Maisrie said, timidly.

"Oh, yes," he made answer, as they set out together.

For a few seconds they walked in silence. But when they had crossed the Old Steine, and got into the Marine Parade, the moon came into view, away over there in the east; it was at the full, but rather dusky, for the north wind had blown the smoke of the town down on the sea-front.

"Did you notice how clear the moon was last night?" she said, to break this embarrassing silence.

"Yes, I did," he said. "I was walking about a good deal last night. The moonlight was beautiful on the water."

"Oh, were you down in Brighton last night?" she asked, rather anxiously.

"Yes."

That was all. She did not dare to ask what had brought him down; and he did not choose to invent an excuse. Again they walked on for a little while in silence, until they reached the corner of German Place.

"Well, good-night!" said George Bethune, holding out his hand. "Quite a surprise to meet you—quite a surprise. Hope we shall see you again before you go back."

And now it was Maisrie's turn.

"Good-night, Vincent!" she said, with her eyes seeking his in mute appeal.

"Good-night," said he; and he did not respond to that look: so these two parted.

And soon, as he walked aimlessly onward, he was away from the town altogether. To him it was a hateful place—with its contrarities, its disappointments, its distracting problems in human nature. When he turned to look at it, it was like some vast and dusky pit, with a dull, red glow shining over it from its innumerable fires. But here, as he went on again, all was peace. The silver moonlight shimmered on the water. There was not a whisper or murmur along these lofty and solitary cliffs. A cold wind blew from the north, coming over the bare uplands; but it brought no sound of any bird or beast. His shadow was his sole companion—vague and indefinite on the grass, but sharper and blacker on the grey and frosted road. He was alone, and he wished to be alone; and if certain phrases from the *Claire Fontaine* would come following and haunting him—*j'ai perdu ma maîtresse—sans l' avoir mérité—pour un bouquet de roses—que je lui refusai*—he strove to repel them; he would have none of them; nor any remembrance of what was past and gone. The world was sweet to him here, because he

was alone with the sea, and the shore, and the mystic splendour of those shining heavens; and because he seemed to have shaken himself free from the enmities and the treacheries and ingratitude that lay festering in yonder town.

CHAPTER VII.

RENEWING IS OF LOVE.

Next morning broke bright and clear, for the north wind had blown freshly all the night, and swept the smoke of the town right out to sea, where it lay along the horizon as a soft saffron-reddish cloud. Accordingly the sky overhead was of a summer-like blue; and the sea was of a shining green, save where it grew opaque and brown as it neared the shore; while the welcome sunlight was everywhere abroad, giving promise of a cheerful day, even now in December. And Vin Harris was standing at a window of the hotel, looking absently out on the wide and empty thoroughfares.

A waiter brought him a note. He glanced at the handwriting with startled eyes, then tore the envelope open. This was what he read—

”Dear Vincent, I wish to speak with you for a moment if you are not engaged. I am going down to the breakwater, and will wait there for a little while.

”MAISRIE.”

He called to the waiter.

”When did this come?”

”I found it lying on the hall table, sir—just this minute, sir.”

He did not waste time on further questions. In a couple of seconds he was outside and had crossed the road; and there, sure enough—far below him—out on the breakwater—was a solitary figure that he instantly recognised. He went quickly down the steps; he did not stay to ask what this might mean, or to prepare himself in any way; as he approached her, all his anxiety was to know if her eyes were kind—or hostile. Well, they were neither; but there was a certain pride in her tone as she spoke.

"Vincent, you were angry with me last night. Why?"

"Maisrie," said he, "why don't you put up that furred collar round your neck? It is so cold this morning. See, let me put it up for you."

She retreated an inch, declining: she waited for him to answer her question.

"Angry with you?" he said, with obvious constraint. "No, but I was vexed. I was vexed with a lot of things—that I can hardly explain. Not with you personally—at least—well, at any rate I did not mean to offend you. If I have offended you I ask your pardon—"

Here he paused: these stammering sentences were so insufficient. And then all at once he said—

"Maisrie, who was that young man?"

She looked surprised.

"Do you mean Mr. Glover?"

"Glover?—oh, that is his name. But who is he?—what is he?—how did you come to know him so intimately?—"

Perhaps she began to see a little.

"I don't know him at all, Vincent. He is a friend of my grandfather's—or rather he is the son of a friend of my grandfather's—a wine-merchant in London. We met him on the day we came here—"

"And he lost no time in showing off his acquaintance with you," said Vincent, bitterly, "—driving you up and down the King's Road, before all Brighton!"

At this she lowered her head a little.

"I did not wish to go, Vincent. Grandfather pressed me. I did not like to refuse."

"Oh," said he, "I have no right to object. It is not for me to object. If new friends are to be treated as old friends—what does it matter?"

She regarded him reproachfully.

"You know very well, Vincent, that if I had thought it would vex you, I would not have gone—no—nothing in the world would have induced me—nothing! And how cruel it is of you to speak of new friends—and to say that old friends are so quickly forgotten! Is that all you believe of what I have told you many a time? But—but if I have pained you, I am sorry," she continued, still with downcast lashes. "Tell me what you wish me to do. I will not speak to him again, if you would rather I should not. If he comes to the house, I will stay in my own room until he is gone—anything, anything rather than that you should be vexed. For you have been so kind to me!"

"No, no," said he, hastily. "No, I have been altogether wrong. Do just as you please yourself, Maisrie: that will be the right thing. I have been an ass and a fool to doubt you. But—but it made me mad to think of any man coming between you and me—"

"Vincent!"

She raised her head; and for one ineffable moment her maiden eyes were unveiled and fixed upon him—with such a tenderness and pride and trust as altogether bewildered him and entranced him beyond the powers of speech. For here was confession at last!—her soul had declared itself: no matter what might happen now, he knew she was his own! And yet, when she spoke, it was as if she had divined his thoughts, and would dissipate that too wonderful dream.

"No," she said, rather wistfully, and her eyes were averted again, "that is the last thing you need think about, Vincent; no man will ever come between you and me. No man will ever take your place in my regard—and—and esteem——"

"Is that all, Maisrie?" he said, gently; but in truth that sudden revelation had left him all trembling and overjoyed. He was almost afraid to speak to her, lest she should withdraw that unspoken avowal.

"And—and affection: why should not I say it?—I may not have another chance," she went on. "You need not fear, Vincent. No man will ever come between you and me; but a woman will—and welcome! You will marry—you will be happy—and no one will be better pleased to hear of it all than I shall. And why," she continued, with a kind of cheerfulness, "why, even in that case, should we speak of any one coming between us? We shall have the same affection, the same kind thoughts, even then, I hope——"

"Maisrie, why do you talk like that!" he protested. "You know quite well that you will be my wife—or no one."

She shook her head.

"If you do not see for yourself that it is impossible—if you do not understand, Vincent—then some day I must tell you——"

"Ah, but you have told me something far more important, and only a minute or two ago," said he. "You have told me all I want to know, this very morning! You are not aware of the confession you have made, since you came out on this breakwater? I have seen in your eyes what I never saw before; and everything else is to me as nothing. Difficulties?—I don't believe in them. I see our way as clear as daylight; and there's neither man nor woman coming between us. Oh, yes, I have discovered something this morning—that makes our way clear enough! Maisrie, do you know what wonderful eyes you have?—they can say so many things—perhaps even more than you intend. So much the better—so much the better—for I know they speak true."

She did not seem to share his joyous confidence.

"I must be going now, Vincent," she said. "Grandfather will wonder why I am so long in getting his newspapers. And I am glad to know you are no longer vexed with me. I could not bear that. And I will take care you shall have no further cause—indeed I will, Vincent."

She was for bidding him good-bye, but he detained her: a wild wish had come into his head.

"Maisrie," said he, with a little hesitation, "couldn't you—couldn't you give me some little thing to keep as a souvenir of this happy morning? Ah, you don't know all you have told me, perhaps! Only some little thing: could you give me a sandal-wood bead, Maisrie—could you cut one off your necklace?—and I will get a small gold case made for it, and wear it always and always, and when I open it, the perfume will remind me of you and of our walks together, and the evenings in that little parlour—"

But instantly she had pulled off her gloves, and with busy fingers unclasped the necklace; then she touched it with her lips, and placed the whole of the warm and scented treasure in his hand.

"I only wanted one of the beads, Maisrie," said he, with something of shamefacedness.

"Take it, Vincent—I have not many things to give," she said, simply.

"Then—then would you wear something if I gave it to you?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, if you would like that," she answered at once.

"Oh, well, I must try to get something nice—something appropriate," said he. "I wonder if a Brighton jeweller could make me a small white dove in ivory or mother-of-pearl, that you could wear just as if it had alighted on your breast—a pin, you know, for your neck—and the pin could be made of a row of rubies or sapphires—while the dove itself would be white."

"But, Vincent," she said, doubtfully, "if I were to wear that?"

"What would it mean? Is that what you ask? Shall I tell you, Maisrie? It would mean a betrothal!"

She shrank back.

"No—no," she said. "No—I could not wear that!"

"Oh, are you frightened by a word?" said he, cheerfully. "Very well—very well—it shan't mean anything of the kind! It will only serve to remind you of a morning on which you and I went for a little stroll down a breakwater at Brighton, when the Brighton people were so kind as to leave it all to ourselves. Nothing more than that, Maisrie!—if you wish it. Only you must wear the little white dove—as an emblem of peace and goodwill—and a messenger bringing you good news—and a lot of things like that, that I'm too stupid to put into words. For this is a morning not to be forgotten by either of us, all our lives long, I hope. You think you have not said anything?—then you shouldn't have such tell-tale eyes, Maisrie! And I believe them. I don't believe you when you talk about vague impossibilities. Well, I suppose I must let you go; and I suppose we cannot say good-bye—out here in the open—"

"But you are coming, too, Vincent—a little way?"

"As far as ever you will allow me," said he. "Till the end of life, if you like—and as I hope."

But that was looking too far ahead in the present circumstances.

"What are you going to do to-day, Maisrie?" he asked, as they were leaving the breakwater and making up for the Marine Parade. "Oh, I forgot: you are going out walking at eleven."

She blushed slightly.

"No, Vincent; I think I shall remain at home."

"On a morning like this?—impossible! Why, you must go out in the sunlight. Sunlight is rare in December."

Then she said, with some little embarrassment, "I do not wish to vex you any more, Vincent. If I went out with grandfather, we should meet Mr. Glover—"

"Mr. Glover?" he said, interrupting her. "Dearest Maisrie, I don't mind if you were to go walking with twenty Mr. Glovers!—I don't mind that now. It is the sunlight that is of importance; it is getting you into the sunlight that is everything. And if Mr. Glover asks you to go driving with him in the afternoon, of course you must go!—it will interest you to see the crowd and the carriages, and it will keep you in the fresh air. Oh, yes, if I'm along in the King's Road this afternoon, I shall look out for you; and if you should happen to see me, then just remember that you have given me your sandal-wood necklace, and that I am the proudest and happiest person in the whole town of Brighton. Why, of course you must go out, both morning and afternoon," he continued, in this gay and generous fashion, as they were mounting the steps towards the upper thoroughfare. "Sunlight is just all the world, for flowers, and pretty young ladies, and similar things; and now you're away from the London fogs, you must make the best of it. It is very wise of your grandfather to lay aside his work while the fine weather lasts. Now be a good, sensible girl, and go out at eleven o'clock."

"Vincent," she said, "if I do go with grandfather this morning, will you come down the town, and join us?"

"Oh, well," said he, rather hesitating, "I—I do not wish to inflict myself on anybody. But don't mistake, Maisrie: I shall be quite happy, even if I see you walking up and down with the purveyor of bad sherry. It won't vex me in the least: something you told me this morning has made me proof against all that. The important thing is that you should keep in the sunlight!"

"I ask you to come, Vincent."

"Oh, very well, certainly," said he—not knowing what dark design was in her mind.

He was soon to discover. When he left her in St. James's Street, whither she had gone to get the morning newspapers for her grandfather, he went back

to the hotel, and to his own room, to take out this priceless treasure of a necklace she had bestowed on him, and to wonder how best he could make of it a cunning talisman that he could have near his heart night and day. And also he set to work to sketch out designs for the little breast-pin he meant to have made, with its transverse row of rubies or sapphires, with its white dove in the centre. An inscription? That was hardly needed: there was a sufficient understanding between him and her. And surely this was a betrothal, despite her timid shrinking back? The avowal of that morning had been more to him than words; during that brief moment it seemed as if Heaven shone in her eyes; and as if he could see there, as in a vision, all the years to come—all the years that he and she were to be together—shining with a soft celestial radiance. And would not this small white dove convey its message of peace?—when it lay on her bosom, "so light, so light."

Then all of a sudden it occurred to him—why, he had been talking and walking with an adventuress, a begging-letter impostor, a common swindler, and had quite forgotten to be on his guard! All the solemn warnings he had received had entirely vanished from his mind when he was out there on the breakwater with Maisrie Bethune. He had looked into her eyes—and never thought of any swindling! Had this sandal-wood necklace—that was sweet with a fragrance more than its own—that seemed to have still some lingering warmth in it, borrowed from its recent and secret resting-place—been given him as a lure? The white dove—significant of all innocence, and purity, and peace—was that to rest on the heart of a traitress? Well, perhaps; but it did not appear to concern him much, as he got his hat and cane, and pulled on a fresh pair of gloves, and went out into the open air.

Nay, he was in a magnanimous mood towards all mankind. He would not even seek to interfere with Sherry, as he mentally and meanly styled his rival. If it pleased the young gentleman in the cover-coat to walk up and down the King's Road with Maisrie Bethune—very well. If he took her for a drive after luncheon, that would amuse her, and also was well. The time for jealous dread, for angry suspicions, for reproachful accusations, was over and gone. A glance from Maisrie's eyes had banished all that. Sherry might parade his acquaintanceship as much as he chose, so long as Maisrie was kept in the open air and the sunlight: that was the all-important point.

By-and-bye he went away down to the King's Road, and very speedily espied the three figures he expected to find there, though as yet they were at some distance. They were coming towards him: in a few minutes he would be face to face with them. And he had made up his mind what he meant to do. Maisrie should see that he was actuated no longer by jealous rage; that he had confidence in her; that he feared no rival now. And so it was that when they came near, he

merely gave them a general and pleasant "Good-morning!" and raised his hat to Maisrie, and was for passing on. But he had reckoned without his host—or hostess rather.

"Vincent!" said Maisrie, in expostulation.

Then he stopped.

"Aren't you coming with us? We are going along to the Chain Pier, to get out of the crowd. Won't you come?"

"Oh, yes, if I may!" said he, gladly enough—and he knew that the other young man was staring, not to say scowling, at this unwelcome intrusion.

Now Maisrie had been walking between her grandfather and young Glover; but the moment that Vincent joined the little party, she fell behind.

"Four abreast are too many," said she. "We must go two and two; grandfather, will you lead the way with Mr. Glover?"

It was done, and dexterously done, in a moment; and if the selection of the new comer as her companion was almost too open and marked, perhaps that was her intention. At all events, when the two others had moved forward, Vincent said in an undertone—

"This is very kind of you, Maisrie."

And she replied, rather proudly—

"I wished to show you that I could distinguish between old and new friends."

Then he grew humble.

"Maisrie," said he, "don't you treasure up things against me! It was only a phrase. And just remember how I was situated. I came away down to Brighton merely to catch a glimpse of you; and about the first thing I saw was this young fellow, whom I had never heard of, driving you up and down among the fashionable crowd. You see, Maisrie, you hadn't given me the sandal-wood necklace then; and what is of far more consequence, you hadn't allowed your eyes to tell me what they told me this morning. So what was I to think? No harm of you, of course; but I was miserable;—and—and I thought you could easily forget; and all the afternoon I looked out for you; and all the evening I wandered about the streets, wondering whether you would be in one of the restaurants or the hotels. If I could only have spoken a word with you! But then, you know, I had been in a kind of way shut off from you; and—and there was this new acquaintance—"

"I am very sorry, Vincent," she said also in a low voice. "It seems such a pity that one should vex one's friends unintentionally; because in looking back, you like to think of their always being pleased with you; and then again there may be no chance of making up—and you are sorry when it is too late—"

"Come, come, Maisrie," he said with greater freedom—for some people had intervened, and the other two were now a little way ahead, "I am not going to let

you talk in that way. You always speak as if you and I were to be separated—”

”Wouldn’t it be better, Vincent?” she said, simply.

”Why?”

”Why?” she repeated, in an absent kind of way. ”Well, you know nothing about us, Vincent.”

”I have been told a good deal of late, then!” he said, in careless scorn.

And the next instant he wished he had bitten his tongue out ere making that haphazard speech. The girl looked up at him with a curious quick scrutiny—as if she were afraid.

”What have you been told, Vincent?” she demanded, in quite an altered tone.

”Oh, nothing!” he said, with disdain. ”A lot of rubbish! Every one has good-natured friends, I suppose, who won’t be satisfied with minding their own business. And although you may laugh at the moment, at the mere ridiculousness of the thing, still, if it should happen that just at the same time you should see some one you are very fond of—in—in a position that you can’t explain to yourself—well, then— But what is the use of talking, Maisrie! I confess that I was jealous out of all reason, jealous to the verge of madness; but then I paid the penalty, in hours and hours of misery; and now you come along and heap coals of fire on my head, until I am so ashamed of myself that I don’t think I am fit to live. And that’s all about it; and my only excuse is that you had not told me then what your eyes told me this morning.”

She remained silent and thoughtful for a little while; but as she made no further reference to his inadvertent admission that he had heard certain things of herself and her grandfather, he inwardly hoped that that unlucky speech had gone from her memory. Moreover, they were come to the Chain Pier; and as those two in front waited for them, so that they should go through the turnstile one after the other, there was just then no opportunity for further confidential talking. But once on the Pier, old George Bethune, who was eagerly discoursing on some subject or another (with magnificent emphasis of arm and stick) drew ahead again, taking his companion with him. And Vin Harris, regarding the picturesque figure of the old man, and his fine enthusiastic manner, which at all events seemed so sincere, began to wonder whether there could be any grains of truth in the story that had been told him, or whether it was a complete and malevolent fabrication. His appearance and demeanour, certainly, were not those of a professional impostor: it was hard to understand how a man of his proud and blunt self-assertion could manage to wheedle wine merchants and tailors. Had he really called himself Lord Bethune; or was it not far more likely that some ignorant colonial folk, impressed by his talk of high lineage and by his personal dignity, had bestowed on him that title? The young man—guessing and

wondering—began to recall the various counts of that sinister indictment; and at last he said to his companion, in a musing kind of way—

"Maisrie, you know that motto your grandfather is so proud of: 'Stand Fast, Craig-Royston!' Have you any idea where Craig-Royston is?"

"I? No, not at all," she said simply.

"You have never been there?"

"Vincent!" she said. "You know I have never been in Scotland."

"Because there is such an odd thing in connection with it," he continued.

"In one edition of Black's Guide to Scotland, Craig-Royston is not mentioned anywhere; and in another it is mentioned, but only in a footnote. And I can't find it in the map. You don't know if there are any people of your name living there now?"

"I am sure I cannot say," she made answer. "Grandfather could tell you; he is always interested in such things."

"And Balloray," he went on, "I could find no mention of Balloray; but of course there must be such a place?"

"I wish there was not," she said, sadly. "It is the one bitter thing in my grandfather's life. I wish there never had been any such place. But I have noticed a change in him of late. He does not complain now as he used to complain; he is more resigned; indeed, he seldom talks of it. And when I say complain, that is hardly the word. Don't you think he bears his lot with great fortitude? I am sure it is more on my account than his own that he ever thinks of the estate that was lost. And I am sure he is happier with his books than with all the land and money that could be given to him. He seems to fancy that those old songs and ballads belong to him; they are his property; he is happier with them than with a big estate and riches."

"I could not find Balloray in the index to the Guide," Vincent resumed, "but of course there must be such a place—there is the ballad your grandfather is so fond of—'The bonnie mill-dams o' Balloray.'"

She looked up suddenly, with some distress in her face.

"Vincent, don't you understand? Don't you understand that grandfather is easily taken with a name—with the sound of it—and sometimes he confuses one with another? That ballad is not about Balloray; it is about Binnorie; it is 'The bonnie mill-dams o' Binnorie.' Grandfather forgets at times; and he is used to Balloray; and that has got into his head in connection with the ballad. I thought perhaps you knew."

"Oh, no," said he, lightly, for he did not attach any great importance to this chance confusion. "The two words are not unlike; I quite see how one might take the place of the other. Of course you will make sure that he puts in the right name when he comes to publish the volume."

And so they walked up and down the almost deserted pier, in the bright sunlight, looking out on the lapping green waters, or up to the terraced yellow houses above the tall cliffs. Sometimes, of course, the four of them came together; and more than once the horsey-looking young gentleman insidiously tried to detach Maisrie from her chosen companion—and tried in vain. At last, when it became about time for them to be going their several ways home, he made a bold stroke.

"Come, Mr. Bethune," said he, as they were successively passing through the turnstile, "I want you and Miss Bethune to take pity on a poor solitary bachelor, and come along and have a bit of lunch with me at the Old Ship. It will be a little change for you, won't it?—and we can have a private room if you prefer that."

The old gentleman seemed inclined to close with this offer; but he glanced towards Maisrie for her acquiescence first.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Glover," said she, promptly; "but I have everything arranged at our lodgings; and we must not disappoint our landlady. Some other time, perhaps, thank you! Good morning!"

Then the moment he was gone, she turned to her companion.

"Vincent, have you any engagement? No? Then, will you be very courageous and come with us and take your chance? I can promise you a biscuit at least."

"And I'm sure I don't want anything more," said he, most gratefully; for surely she was trying her best to show him that she distinguished between old and new friends.

And then again, when they reached the rooms, and when the three of them were seated at table, she waited upon him with a gentle care and assiduity that were almost embarrassing. He wished the wretched things at the bottom of the sea: why should commonplace food and drink interfere with his answering Maisrie's eyes, or thinking of her overwhelming kindness? As for old George Bethune, the sharp air and the sunlight had given him an admirable appetite; and he allowed the young people to amuse themselves with little courtesies, and attentions, and protests just as they pleased. Cheese and celery were solid and substantial things: he had no concern about a drooping eyelash, or some pretty, persuasive turn of speech.

And yet he was not unfriendly towards the young man.

"Wouldn't you like to go to the theatre this evening, Maisrie?" Vincent asked. "It is the *Squires Daughter*. I know you've seen it already; but I could go a dozen times—twenty times—the music is so delightful. And the travelling company is said to be quite as good as the London one: Miss Kate Burgoyne has changed into it, you know, and I shouldn't wonder if she sung all the better

because of the £3000 damages that Sir Percival Miles has had to pay her. Shall I go along and see if I can get a box?"

"What do you say, grandfather?" the girl asked.

"Oh, yes—very well, very well," said he, in his lofty way. "A little idleness more or less is not of much account. But we must begin to work soon, Maisrie; fresh air and sunlight are all very well; but we must begin to work—while the day is with us, though luckily one has not to say to you as yet—*jam te premet nox, falulæque Manes, et domus exilis Plutonia.*"

"Then if we go to the theatre," said Maisrie, "Vincent must come in here for a little while on his way home; and you and he will have a smoke together; and it will be quite like old times."—And Vincent looked at her, as much as to say, 'Maisrie, don't make me too ashamed: haven't you forgiven me yet for that foolish phrase?'

The afternoon passed quickly enough: to Vincent every moment was golden. Then in the evening they went to the theatre; and the young people at least were abundantly charmed with the gay costumes, the pretty music, and the fun and merriment of the bright little operetta. George Bethune seemed less interested. He sate well back in the box, his face in shadow; and although his eyes, from under those shaggy eyebrows, were fixed on the stage, it was in an absent fashion, as if he were thinking of other things. And indeed he was thinking of far other things; for when, after the piece was over, those three set out to walk home through the dark streets, Maisrie and Vincent could hear the old man, who walked somewhat apart from them, reciting to himself, and that in a proud and sustained voice. It was not the frivolity of comic opera that he had in his mind; it was something of finer and sterner stuff; as they crossed by the Old Steine, where there was a space of silence, they could make out clearly what this was—

'Thy faith and troth thou sall na get,
 And our true love sall never twin,
 Until ye tell what comes of women,
 I wot, who die in strong travailing?'

'Their beds are made in the heavens high,
 Down at the foot of our good Lord's knee,
 Weel set about wi' gillyflowers,
 I wot sweet company for to see.

'O cocks are crowing a merry midnight,
 I wot the wild-fowl are boding day;

The psalms of heaven will soon be sung,
And I, ere now, will be missed away.'

There was a curiously solemn effect about this solitary voice, here in the dark. The old man did not seem to care whether he was overheard or not; it was entirely to himself that he was repeating the lines of the old ballad. And thereafter he walked on in silence, while the two lovers, busy with their own little world, were murmuring nothings to each other.

But Maisrie, for one, was soon to be recalled to the actualities, and even grim incongruities, of every day life. When they reached their lodgings the servant girl, who opened the door to them, paused for a second and looked up and down the street.

"Yes, sir, there he is," said she.

"Who?" George Bethune demanded.

"A man who has been asking for you, sir—and said he would wait."

At the same moment there came out of the gloom a rather shabby-looking person.

"Mr. George Bethune?" he said.

"Yes, that is my name," the old man answered, impatiently: probably he suspected.

"Something for you, sir," said the stranger, handing a folded piece of paper—and therewith he left.

It was all the work of a second; and the next instant they were indoors, and in the little parlour; but in that brief space of time a great change had taken place. Indeed, Maisrie's mortification was a piteous thing to see; it seemed so hard she should have had to endure this humiliation under the very eyes of her lover; she would not look his way at all; she busied herself with putting things on the table; her downcast face was overwhelmed with confusion and shame. For surely Vincent would know what that paper was? The appearance of the man—his hanging about—her grandfather's angry frown—all pointed plainly enough. And that it should happen at the end of this long and happy day—this day of reconciliation—when she had tried so assiduously to be kind to him—when he had spoken so confidently of the future that lay before them! It was as if some cruel fate had interposed to say to him: 'Now you see the surroundings in which this girl has lived: and do you still dream of making her your wife?'

And perhaps old George Bethune noticed this shame and vexation on the part of his granddaughter, and may have wished to divert attention from it; at all events, when he had brewed his toddy, and lit his pipe, and drawn his chair in towards the fire, he set off upon one of his monologues, quite in the old garru-

lous vein; and he was as friendly towards Vincent as though this visit had been quite anticipated. Maisrie sat silent and abashed; and Vincent, listening vaguely, thought it was all very fine to have a sanguine and happy-go-lucky temperament, but that he—that is, the younger man—would be glad to have this beautiful and pensive creature of a girl removed into altogether different circumstances. He knew why she was ashamed and downcast—though, to be sure, he said to himself that the serving of a writ was no tremendous cataclysm. Such little incidents must necessarily occur in the career of any one who had such an arrogant disdain of pounds and pence as her grandfather professed. But that Maisrie should have to suffer humiliation: that was what touched him to the quick. He looked at her—at her beautiful and wistful eyes, and the sensitive lines of her profile and under-lip; and his heart bled for her. And all this following upon her outspoken avowal of that morning seemed to demand some more definite and immediate action on his part—when once the quiet of the night had enabled him to consider his position.

When he rose to leave, he asked them what they meant to do the next day. But Maisrie would hardly say anything; she seemed rather to wish him to go, so distressed and disheartened she was. And go he did, presently; but he bore away with him no hurt feeling on account of his tacit dismissal. He understood all that; and he understood her. And as he went away home through the dark, he began to recall the first occasions on which he had seen Maisrie Bethune walking in Hyde Park with her grandfather; and the curious fancies that were then formed in his own mind—that here apparently was a beautiful, and sensitive, and suffering soul that ought to be rescued and cheered and comforted, were one found worthy to be her champion and her friend. Her friend?—she had confessed he was something more than that on this very morning. Her lover, then?—well, her lover ought to be her champion too, if only the hours of the night would lend him counsel.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON THE BRINK.

Nay, he could see but the one clear and resolute way out of all these perplexities, which was that he should forthwith and without further preamble marry Maisrie Bethune: thereafter his relatives might do or say whatever it most pleased them to do or say. This would be his answer to the vague but persistent suspicions of Mrs.

Ellison, and to the more precise but none the less preposterous accusations of his father. Then as regards Maisrie herself, would not this conclusive act banish all those dim presentiments and alarms with which she seemed to regard the future? And if her present circumstances involved her in humiliation, lie would take her out of these. As for old George Bethune, ought he not to welcome this guardianship that would succeed his own? The happiness of his granddaughter seemed to be his first care; and here was a stay and bulwark for her, a protection for her when his own should be withdrawn in the natural course of things.

This solution of the difficulty seemed reasonable and simple, though sometimes his arguments would suddenly get lost in a flood of wild wonder and joy; and entrancing visions of that pretty canary-cage he meant to secure—down by Chelsea way, perhaps, or up about Campden Hill, or it might be out among some suburban gardens—would interfere with the cool and accurate representations he was preparing to lay before his friends. For after all, simple as the solution appeared, there were ways and means to be considered. Vincent was now about to discover—nay, he already perceived—that for a young man to be brought up without any definite calling meant a decided crippling of his independence. The canary-cage, charming and idyllic as it might be, would cost something, even if he went as far as Shepherd's Bush or Hammersmith; and the little fortune that had been left him did not produce much of an annual income. Then again his father: would not the great socialist (on paper) instantly withdraw the handsome allowance he had hitherto made, on hearing that his son contemplated marrying that dangerous person, that low-born adventuress, that creature of the slums? For Vincent Harris was not given to disguising things from himself. He knew that these were the phrases which his father would doubtless apply to Maisrie Bethune. Not that they or any other phrases were of much import: the capitalist-communist was welcome to invent and use as many as he chose. But his opposition to this marriage, which was almost to be counted on, might become a very serious affair for everybody concerned.

Next morning Vincent was up betimes; and at an early hour he went along to the Bedford Hotel. He was told that Lord Musselburgh was in the coffee-room; and thither he accordingly proceeded.

"Oh, yes, I'll have some breakfast, thank you," said he, as he took a seat at the small table. "Anything—anything. The fact is, Musselburgh, I want to speak to you, if you can give me a little time. Something of importance, too—to me at least—"

"Let me tell you this, Vin, first of all," said the elder of the two young men, with a smile. "You'll have to make your peace with Mrs. Ellison. She is mortally offended at the notion of your coming to Brighton, and going to a hotel. I suppose you imagined she didn't know you had come down? We saw you yesterday."

"Where?" said Vincent, quickly.

"In the Marine Parade. We followed you some little way—if you had turned round you would have seen us."

"What time?"

"Why, about one, I should think."

"Then—then you saw—"

"Yes, we saw—" said the other.

There was a moment's silence; Vin's eyes were fixed on his companion with a curious expectancy and prayer; had this friend of his, if he were a friend at all, no approving word to say about Maisrie?

Well, Lord Musselburgh was an exceedingly good-natured young man; and on this occasion he did not allow a selfish discretion to get the better of him.

"I don't know that I intended to tell you," said he. "Fact is, Mrs. Ellison hinted that I'd better follow her example; and have nothing to say on a certain subject; but really, Vin, really—I had no idea—really—"

"Yes?—what?" said Vincent, rather breathlessly.

"Well, to be candid with you, I never was so surprised in my life! Why, you remember that afternoon in Piccadilly, when I first saw them—perhaps I did not pay much attention to the girl—she seemed a slip of a thing—pretty, oh, yes, pretty enough; but yesterday—when I saw her yesterday—by George, she's grown to be one of the most beautiful creatures I ever beheld! And so distinguished-looking—and apparently so unconscious of it too! Again and again I noticed people half-turn their heads to get another glimpse of her as she went by—and no wonder—why, really, such a carriage—such an air of distinction and quiet self-possession, for all she looked so young—I never was so surprised in all my life! Oh, a most beautiful creature!—and that I must say in common honesty, whatever comes of it."

Nay, the very incoherence of his praise was proof of its sincerity; and Vincent's face burned with pleasure and pride. How could sweeter words have been poured into a lover's ears?

"Did you chance to notice her hair?—did you?" said he, eagerly. "Did you chance to see the sunlight on it? And—and you were behind her—you must have seen how she walked—the lightness and grace of her step. Mind you, Musselburgh," he went on—and his breakfast received but scant attention, now that he had found someone to whom he could talk on this enchanting and all-engrossing theme. "A light and graceful step means far more than mere youth and health—it means a perfect and supple figure as well. Did you think she was rather pale?" he asked—but only to answer his own question. "Yes, I dare say you might think she was rather pale. But that is not because she is delicate—oh, dear, no!—not in the least: it is the natural fineness of her complexion; and when brisk walking,

or a cold wind blowing, brings colour into her cheeks, then that is all the rarer and more beautiful. Of course you couldn't see her eyes at all?—she doesn't stare at people in the streets; she seems to find the sea more interesting when we are walking up and clown; but they are the clearest, the most expressive, eyes you could imagine! She hardly has to speak—she has only to look! I do think blue-grey is by far the prettiest colour of eyes; they vary so much; I've seen Maisrie Bethune's eyes quite distinctly blue—that is when she is very strong and well, and out in the open air. I don't suppose it possible that any reflection from the sky or sea can affect the colour of the eyes; it must be simply that she is in the fresh air, and stimulated with exercise and happy—” He paused for a second. ”Is there anything so very amusing?”

”To tell you the truth, Vin,” his companion admitted, ”I was thinking that when you came in you announced you had something of importance to say—”

”Instead of which I have been talking about Miss Bethune,” Vincent said, without taking any offence. ”But who began? I thought it was you who introduced the subject—and you seemed interested in her appearance—”

”Oh, yes, of course, of course,” the young nobleman said, goodnaturedly. ”I beg your pardon. And I understand how the subject may be of importance to you—”

”Well, yes, it is,” said Vincent, calmly. ”For I propose to marry Miss Bethune, and at once, if she will consent.”

Lord Musselburgh looked up quickly, and his face was grave enough now.

”You don't mean that, Vin?”

”That is precisely what I do mean,” the young man said.

”I thought—I had fancied—that certain things had been found out,” his friend stammered, and then stopped; for it was a hazardous topic.

”Oh, you have been told too?” Vincent said, with a careless disdain. ”Well, when I heard those charges brought against Miss Bethune's grandfather, I did not choose to answer them; but speaking about him to you is another thing; and I may say to you, once for all, that more preposterous trash was never invented. I won't deny,” he continued, with a perfectly simple frankness, ”that there are one or two things about Mr. Bethune that I cannot quite explain—that I rather shut my eyes to; and perhaps there are one or two things that one might wish altered—for who is perfect? But the idea that this old man, with his almost obtrusively rugged individuality, his independence, his self-will and pride, should be a scheming impostor and swindler—it is too absurd! To my mind—and I think I know him pretty intimately—he appears to be one of the finest and grandest characters it is possible to imagine; a personality you could never forget, once you had learned to know him even a little; and that this man, of all men, should be suspected of being a fawning and wheedling writer of begging-letters—it is

too laughable! I admit that he has little or no money—if that is a crime. They live in straitened circumstances, no doubt. And of course there are many unpleasant things connected with poverty that one would rather hide from the eyes of a young lady, and that can't well be hidden: though I don't know that her nature, if she has a fine and noble nature, need suffer from that. For example, it isn't nice for her to see her grandfather served with a writ; but many excellent people have been served with writs; it doesn't follow that Mr. Bethune must be a thief because he has no money—or perhaps because he has been negligent about some debt or other. But even supposing that he was a questionable person—even supposing that he was in the habit of using doubtful means to supplement his precarious income; isn't that all the greater reason why such a girl should be taken away from such circumstances?"

Lord Musselburgh did not reply to this question. He had heard from Mrs. Ellison that the granddaughter was suspected, or more than suspected, of being an accomplice; and although, of course, he could not in the least say whether there was any truth in this allegation, he deemed it wiser to hold his tongue.

"Now you may put all that aside," Vincent went on. "That is all rubbish and trash—a pack of old wives' stories. And what I want of you, Musselburgh, is to give me your honest opinion on a certain point. I ask for your advice. I want you to tell me what you think would happen in a possible case. And the main question is this: assuming that I could persuade Miss Bethune to marry me at once, and assuming also that her grandfather approved—when the marriage had actually taken place, what would my relatives say? Or rather, that is not the question: the question is what they would do. I know what they would say. They would be wild enough. Their heads are full of these foolish fancies and suspicions; and beside that, I gather that they want me to marry some noble damsel whose family would have political influence. Yes, they would be wild enough, no doubt; but when they found the thing actually settled, what would they do? Would my father make a deadly quarrel of it and cut me off with a shilling, like something out of a play; or would he exercise a little common-sense, and make the best of it, seeing the thing was done?"

"Really," said Musselburgh, who seemed more concerned than one might have expected from his half-cynical, half-careless temperament, "you ask me what I can't answer. And giving advice is a perilous business. All I can say is this, Vin—you seem to me to have got into a devilish awkward position, and I wish to goodness you were out of it."

"You think I regret anything that has happened?" Vincent said. "Not I! I would not go back—not for all the world. But as for this monetary difficulty, there it is; and it has to be faced. You see, I have been brought up to do nothing; and consequently I am in a measure dependent on my father. My own little in-

come doesn't amount to much. Then again, if I were to marry Maisrie Bethune, I should have to leave her grandfather whatever small fund they have—I don't quite understand about it—anyhow, I couldn't take that away, for I imagine the old gentleman's earnings from newspaper work are not very substantial or regular. Now what do you think my father would do?"

"Wouldn't it be the simplest thing to go and ask him—to go and ask him now?" said Lord Musselburgh, who clearly did not wish to assume any responsibility in this serious matter.

"I can tell myself what he would say now," Vincent made answer; "the question is what he would say then."

"After the marriage?"

"Yes."

His companion across the little table hesitated for a second or two.

"You see, Vin, it isn't only in plays that fathers get angry—unfortunately, it sometimes happens in real life; and occasionally they get very angry indeed. According to your own showing, if your father refused to acknowledge this marriage—if he declared he would have nothing further to do with you—you would find yourself in rather desperate straits. Why should you, with your eyes open, walk into any such straits? You know what may happen. And then—with a young wife—with next to no resources—what would you do? Let us come to one definite and immediate thing, that I hope is not far off now; who would pay your election expenses at Mendover?"

"You yourself, Musselburgh, in the interests of the party!"

"I am glad you can make a jest of the situation, Vin——"

"No, really, I don't," Vincent said, more seriously. "But if I were to ask for my father's consent I should not get it—I know that quite well; and meanwhile this girl is supposed to be—oh, I need not name the things! You don't understand! She is my dearest in all the world; how can I stand by and allow these base accusations to be brought against her, without protest? And that would be my protest! That would show them what I thought of their mean suspicions and their preposterous charges."

"And thereafter?" said Lord Musselburgh.

"Thereafter? Well, as I say, my father might show some common sense and accept the thing, seeing it was done. I can tell you it isn't very pleasant to find myself so dependent on any other human being's reasonableness. I haven't been used to it. I dare say I have been spoiled—things made too easy for me. And now when I look round and wonder what I could turn to, I suppose I am simply in the position of a thousand others, who haven't had any special training. The few articles I have written have paid me well enough; but at present I don't see anything substantial and permanent in that direction. If you were in office I

should ask you for a private secretaryship—”

”Why not ask someone who is in office?”

”I could not change my coat quite so quickly as that.”

”Ah, you haven’t had much experience in practical politics,” Lord Musselburgh observed. ”Well, now, Vin, look here: it seems to me you are on the brink of a tremendous catastrophe. You have asked for my advice; I will give it you frankly. For goodness sake, don’t marry that girl! She may be everything you say; her grandfather may be everything you say; but don’t do anything rash—don’t do anything irrevocable. And consider this: if your relations should look on such a marriage with disfavour, it is in your own interest; it is no selfish wish on their part that you should marry well—marry in your own sphere—marry some one who would do you credit and be a fit companion for you. Mind you, I say nothing against Miss Bethune—nothing; I would not even if I could—I am not such a fool—for I should simply anger you without convincing you; but just consider for a moment what her experiences must have been. You know what Mrs. Ellison so frequently talks about—the sentimental fallacy of supposing that there is anything intrinsically noble or beautiful about poverty. I’m afraid she’s right. I am afraid that poverty is altogether a debasing and brutalising thing, destroying self-respect, stunting the mind as well as the body.”

”Yes,” said Via Harris, rather scornfully, ”I am quite aware that is the opinion of poverty held by the rich. They show it. They profess to believe what the Sermon on the Mount says about the Kingdom of Heaven being reserved for the poor; but catch any single man-jack of them putting aside his riches in order to secure that other inheritance! Not much! He prefers the Kingdom he has got—in consols.”

”I was only wondering,” Musselburgh said, with a little hesitation, ”what influence those—those associations might have had on Miss Bethune herself. Not the best training for a young girl, perhaps?”

”If she had been brought up in a thieves’ den,” said Vincent, hotly, ”she would have remained the pure and beautiful-souled creature that she is now. But I see there is no use talking. I have asked for your advice—for your opinion; and you have given it to me. I thank you, and there’s an end.”

He rose. But his friend also rose at the same moment.

”No, no, Vin, you’re not going to quarrel with me. Come into the smoking-room, and we’ll have a cigarette.”

Nor did he wish to quarrel. They left the coffee-room together. But as luck would have it, in crossing the hall, he chanced to look towards the front door; and behold! all the outer world was shining in clear sunlight. It suddenly occurred to this young man that he had been sitting plunged in gloom, listening to coward counsels, regarding the future as something dark; while there—out there—the

golden pavements, and the far-shimmering sea, and the wide white skies spoke only of hope, and seemed to say that Maisrie would soon be coming along, proud and tall and sweet. Why, it was to her that he ought to have appealed—not to any timorous, vacillating temporiser; it was her hands he ought to have taken and held, that he might read the future in her true eyes. And so, with some brief words of apology and thanks, he left Lord Musselburgh, and made his way into the outer air: this was to breathe more freely—this was to have the natural courage of youth mounting into the brain.

He walked away along the King's Road; and unconsciously to himself he held his head erect; as if in imitation of the stout-hearted old man who, despite his threescore years and ten, could still bear himself so bravely in face of all the world. Moreover, there were some lines in one of Maisrie's songs haunting him; but not in any sad way; nay, he found himself dwelling on the *r*'s, as if to recall her soft pronunciation:—

Elle fit un' rencontre
De trente matelots,
De trente matelots
Sur le bord de l' île.

He had thrust aside those pusillanimous counsels: out here was the sunlight and the fresh-blowing wind; his soul felt freer; he would gain new courage from Maisrie's eyes. This was the kind of morning to bring a touch of crimson to the transparent pallor of her cheek; her teeth would glisten when she laughed; her graceful step would be lighter, more buoyant, than ever. *Sursum corda!* Nay, he could have found it in his heart to adopt the proud-sounding 'Stand Fast, Craig-Royston!'—if only to fling it back in the face of those who had brought those monstrous accusations.

His long and swinging stride soon carried him to the house in German Place, where he found George Bethune and his granddaughter just making ready to come out.

"This will not do, Maisrie," said old George Bethune, in his gay, emphatic fashion. "Too much idleness. Too much idleness. Fresh air is all very well; but we must not become its slaves. Remember Horace's warning. '*Tu, nisi ventis debes ludibrium, cave.*'"

"Why, who could keep at work on a morning like this!" Vincent protested. "A west wind and brilliant sunlight are not so common in December. It makes it hard for me that I've to go away to-morrow."

"Are you going away to-morrow, Vincent?" said Maisrie, regarding him.

"Yes," said he. "I have to go down to Mendover on Thursday, to deliver

a sort of address—a lecture—and I've only got the heads and divisions sketched out as yet. I wish I could escape it altogether; but I dare not play any tricks at present; I'm on my best behaviour. And this time at least I don't mean to drag Lord Musselburgh down with me; I'm going alone."

"And after that you return to London?" she asked.

He hardly knew what to say. A single word of encouragement from either of them, and he would at once and gladly have promised to come back to Brighton at the earliest possible moment; but he had not forgotten the implied understanding on which Maisrie and her grandfather had come away from their lodgings in Mayfair.

"Yes, to London," he replied vaguely. "But I have no definite plans at present. I dare say my aunt, Mrs. Ellison, will want me to come down here at Christmas."

When they were outside, and had gone on to the Parade, he besought his two companions, instead of taking their accustomed stroll into the town, to come away out into the country. The Downs, he said, would be looking very cheerful on so pleasant a morning. And of course it mattered little to them whither they went. They acceded at once; and by-and-bye they had left the wide thoroughfare and the houses behind them, and were walking along the soft turf, alone with the cliffs, and the sea, and the smooth, faintly-coloured uplands. The spring-time was not yet; but there were hues of green and red in those far-stretching breadths of soil; and the sky was of a cloudless blue.

And how strange it was that out here in the open, in the clear sunlight, those dark imaginings of the Private Inquiry Offices seemed to fall helplessly away from these two friends of his, and they themselves stood sharply defined just as he had always known them—the two solitary and striking figures that his fancy had invested with so pathetic an interest. Mentally he addressed Lord Musselburgh: 'Come and see them here—in the white light of day—and ask yourself whether you can believe in those midnight things you have heard of them. Look at this girl: you say yourself she is of extraordinary beauty; but is there not a still stranger fascination—is there not something that wins the heart to sympathy, and pity, and respect? Look at the pensive character of her mouth—look at the strange resignation in the beautiful eyes: perhaps her life has not been altogether too happy?—and is that to be brought as a charge against her? Then this old man—look at his proud bearing—look at the resolute set of his head—his straight glance—the courage of his firm mouth: has he the appearance, the demeanour, of a sharper, of a plausible and specious thief?' At this moment, at all events, it did not seem as if George Bethune's mind was set upon any swindling scheme. As he marched along, with head erect, and with eyes fixed absently on the far horizon, he was reciting to himself, in sonorous tones, the metrical version

of the Hundredth Psalm—

'O enter then His gates with praise,
 Approach with joy his courts unto;
 Praise, laud, and bless His name always,
 For it is seemly so to do.
 For why? the Lord our God is good,
 His mercy is for ever sure;
 His truth at all times firmly stood,
 And shall from age to age endure.'

No doubt it was some reminiscence of his youthful days—perhaps a Saturday night's task—that had lain dormant in his memory for sixty years or more.

The two young folk were mostly silent; they had plenty to think about—especially in view of Vincent's departure on the morrow. As for him, his one consuming desire was to make sure of Maisrie, now that she had disclosed her heart to him; he wished for some closer bond, some securer tie, so that, whatever might happen, Maisrie should not be taken away from him. For he seemed to know as if by some inscrutable instinct that a crisis in his life was approaching. And it was not enough that her eyes had spoken; that she had given him the sandal-wood necklace; that she had striven with an almost pathetic humility to show her affection and esteem. He wished for some clearer assurance with regard to the future. Those people in the background who had pieced together that malignant story: were they not capable of further and more deadly mischief? He had affected to scorn them as mere idle and intermeddling fools; but they might become still more aggressive—enemies striking at him and at his heart's desire from the dim phantom-world that enshrouded them. Anyhow, he meant to act now, on his own discretion. Lord Musselburgh's advice was no doubt worldly-wise enough and safe; but it was valueless in these present circumstances. Vincent felt that his life was his own, and that the moment had come when he must shape it towards a certain end—for good or ill, as the years might show.

After a pretty long walk along the cliffs, they returned to the town (on the Parade they met Sherry, who cheerfully informed them that he was on the point of starting for Monte Carlo, and hoped they would wish him good luck) and Vincent was easily persuaded by Maisrie to share their modest luncheon with them. Thereafter, when tobacco was produced, she begged to be excused for a little while, as she had some sewing to do in her own room; and thus it was that Vincent, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, found himself presented with an opportunity of approaching the old man on the all-important theme. But on this occasion he was much more precise and urgent in his prayer; for he had thought

the whole matter clearly out, through many a sleepless hour; and his plans lay fixed and definite before him.

"You yourself," he went on, "have often hinted that your future movements were uncertain—you might have to go away—and—and then I don't say that either Maisrie or I would forget—only I am afraid of absence. There appear to be certain people who don't wish you well; there might be more stories; who can tell what might not happen? Indeed," said he, regarding the old man a little anxiously, "I have been thinking that—that if Maisrie would consent—our getting married at once would be the safest and surest tie of all. I have not spoken of it to her—I thought I would put it before you first—"

Here he paused, in something of anxious uncertainty.

"Married at once?" George Bethune repeated, slowly. There was no expression of surprise or resentment; the old man waited calmly and courteously for further elucidation of these plans; his eyes were observant and attentive—but quite inscrutable.

"And I want to show you how I am situated," Vincent went on (but not knowing what to make of that perfectly impassive demeanour). "I hope there is no need to conceal anything—indeed, I should think you were pretty well acquainted with my circumstances by this time. You know my father is a rich man. I am his only son; and I suppose I shall inherit his fortune. I have a little money of my own—not much of an annual income, to be sure; and I have some friends who would help me if the worst came to the worst, but I don't see how that necessity should arise. For myself, I have unfortunately been brought up to no profession; I was trained for public life—for politics—if for anything: it has never been considered necessary that I should learn some method of making my own living. That is a misfortune—I can see that now; but at least I have been trying to do something of late; and I have got some encouragement; if there were any need, I fancy I could earn a modest income by writing for the newspapers. You have seen one or two of those articles—and I have been offered introductions, as you know. Well, now—"

And again he paused. All this had been more or less of plain sailing: now he was approaching a much more delicate matter.

"Well—the fact is—there has been some envious tittle-tattle—wretched stuff—not worth mentioning—except for this: that if I went to my father and told him I wished to marry your granddaughter, he would be opposed to it. Yes, that is the truth. He does not know you; he has never even seen Maisrie; and of course he goes by what he hears—absolute folly as it is. However," Vincent continued, with some effort at cheerfulness (for he was glad to get away from that subject without being questioned), "the main point is this: if Maisrie and I were to get married, at once—as we have the right to do—we are surely of suffi-

cient age—we know our own minds—I am quite certain my father would accept the whole affair good-naturedly and reasonably, and all would be well. Then see what it would be for Maisrie to have an assured position like that! She would be able to give up her share in the small income you once spoke of; that would be altogether yours; and surely you would be glad to know that her future was safe, whatever might happen. There would practically be no separation between you and her; it isn't as if she were moving into another sphere—among pretentious people; in fact, all the advantages are on her side; if we have plenty of money, she has birth and name and family; and then again, when Maisrie and I took up house for ourselves, there would be no more welcome guest than her grandfather. I think I can promise that.”

There was silence for a moment—an ominous silence.

”Has Maisrie,” said George Bethune, with slow and measured enunciation, and he regarded the young man from under his shaggy eyebrows, ”has Maisrie intimated to you her wish for that—that arrangement?”

”No,” said Vincent, eagerly. ”How could she? I thought I was bound to speak to you first; for of course she will do nothing without your approval. But don't you think she has had enough of a wandering life—enough of precarious circumstances; and then if her heart says yes too—?”

Well, if this venerable impostor had at last succeeded in entrapping a rich man's son—in getting him to propose marriage to his granddaughter—he did not seem to be in a hurry to secure his prey.

”Maisrie has said nothing?” George Bethune asked again, in that curiously impassive fashion.

”No——”

”Has expressed no wish?”

”No—I have not spoken to her about this immediate proposal.”

”Then, until she has,” said the old man, calmly, ”I must refuse any consent of mine. I think you have described the whole situation very fairly—clearly and honestly, as I imagine; but I do not see any reason for departing from what I said to you before, that I would rather my granddaughter was not bound by any formal tie or pledge—much less by such a marriage as you propose. For one thing, she may have a future before her that she little dreams of. Of course, if her happiness were involved, if she came to me and said that only by such and such an arrangement could her peace of mind be secured, then I might alter my views: at present I see no cause to do so. You are both young: if you care for each other, you should be content to wait. Years are a valuable test. After all, according to your own showing, you are dependent on your father's caprice: some angry objection on his part—and where would the fortunes of the young married couple be?”

But Vincent was too impetuous to be easily discouraged.

"Even then I should not be quite helpless," he urged. "And is my willingness to work to count for nothing? However, that is not the immediate question. Supposing Maisrie's happiness *were* concerned?—supposing she were a little tired of the uncertainty of her life?—supposing she were willing to trust herself to me—what then? Why, if she came to you, and admitted as much, I know you would consent. Is not that so?—I know it is so!—you would consent—for Maisrie's sake!"

The old man's eyes were turned away now—fixed on the slumbering coals in the grate.

"I had dreamed of other things," he said, almost to himself.

"Yes; but if Maisrie came to you?" Vincent said, with the same eagerness—almost, indeed, with some trace of joyous assurance—"She would not have long to plead, I think! And then again, at any moment, my circumstances might be so altered as to give you all the guarantee for the future which you seem to think necessary. A word from my father to-morrow might settle that: if I went to him, and could get him to understand what Maisrie really was. Or I might obtain some definite post: I have some good friends: I am going up to London to-morrow, and could begin to make inquiries. In the meantime," he added hastily—for he heard someone on the stair—"do you object to my telling Maisrie what you have said?"

"What I have said? I dare say she knows," old George Bethune made answer, in an absent sort of way—and at this moment Maisrie entered the room, bringing her sewing with her, and further speech was impossible.

It was on this same afternoon that Lord Musselburgh carried along to his fair fiancée a report of the interview he had had with Vincent in the morning. The young widow was dreadfully alarmed.

"Oh, my goodness!" she exclaimed, and she began to pace up and down the room in her agitation. "Marry the girl at once? Why, it is destruction! Fancy what all our plans and interests, all our lives, would be—with Vin cut out! It cannot be—it shall not be—it must be prevented at any cost! He would be dead—worse than dead—we should be pitying him always, and knowing where he was, and not able to go near him. You don't mean to say he is definitely resolved?" she demanded in her desperation.

"Indeed, there is no doubt about it—he spoke as plainly as you could wish," said Lord Musselburgh. "And he has argued the thing out; his head is clear enough, for all this wild infatuation of his. He sees that his father will not consent—beforehand; so he means to marry, and then hope for reconciliation when the whole affair is past praying for. That's the programme, you may depend on it."

"Harland must know at once," said Mrs. Ellison, going instantly to her writing-desk. "This must and shall be prevented. I am not going to have my

boy's life ruined by a pack of begging-letter swindlers and cheats!"

CHAPTER IX.

"AND HAST THOU PLAYED ME THIS!"

And now in this time of urgency the appeal was to Maisrie herself; and how could he doubt what her answer would be, in spite of all those strange and inexplicable forebodings that seemed to haunt her mind?

But when he got up next morning he found to his dismay that a sudden change in the weather was like to interfere in a very practical manner with his audacious plans. During the night the wind had backed to the south-west, accompanied by a sharp fall of the barometer; and now a stiff gale was blowing, and already a heavy sea was thundering in on the beach. There was as yet no rain, it is true; but along the southern horizon the louring heavens were even darker than the wind-driven waters; and an occasional shiver of white sunlight that swept across the waves spoke clearly enough of coming wet. Was it not altogether too wild and stormy a morning to hope that Maisrie would venture forth? And yet he was going away that day—with great uncertainty as to the time of his return; and how could he go without having some private speech with her? Nor was there any prospect of a lightening up of the weather outside; the gale seemed to be increasing in fury; and he ate his breakfast in silence, listening to the long, dull roar and reverberation of the heavy-breaking surf.

Nevertheless here was a crisis; and something had to be done; so about half-past ten he went along to the lodging-house in German Place. The servant-maid greeted this handsome young man with an approving glance; and informed him that both Mr. and Miss Bethune were in the parlour upstairs.

"No, thank you," said he, in answer to this implied invitation, "I won't go up. I want to see Miss Bethune by herself: would you ask her if she would be so kind as to come downstairs for just a moment—I won't detain her——"

The girl divined the situation in an instant; and proved herself friendly. Without more ado she turned the handle of a door near her.

"Won't you step in there, sir?—the gentleman 'as gone out."

Vincent glanced into the little parlour. Here, indeed, was a refuge from the storm; but all the same he did not like to invade the privacy of a stranger's apartments.

"Oh, no, thanks," he said. "I will wait here, if Miss Bethune will be so kind as to come down for a minute. Will you ask her, please?"

The girl went upstairs; returned with the message that Miss Bethune would be down directly; then she disappeared, and Vincent was left alone in this little lobby. It was not a very picturesque place, to be sure, for an interview between two lovers: still, it would serve—especially if the friendly chambermaid were out of earshot, and if no prying landlady should come along. The gale outside was so violent that all the doors and windows of the house were shaking and rattling: he could not ask Maisrie to face such a storm.

But in a second or so here was Maisrie herself, all ready appalled—hat, muff, gloves, boa, and the furred collar of her jacket turned up.

"Why, Maisrie," he said, "you don't mean you are going out on such a morning—it is far too wild and stormy!—"

"That is of no consequence," she made answer, simply. "I have something to say to you, Vincent, before you go."

"And I have something to say to you, Maisrie. Still," he continued, with some little hesitation (for he was accustomed to take charge of her and guard her from the smallest harms), "I don't want you to get wet and blown about—"

"What does that matter?" she said: it was not of a shower of rain that she was thinking.

"Oh, very well," said he at last. "I'll tell you what we'll do; we'll fight our way down to the sea-front, and then go out to the end of the Chain Pier. There are some places of shelter out there; and there won't be a living soul anywhere about on such a morning. For I am going to ask you to make a promise, Maisrie," he added in a lower voice, "and the sea and the sky will be quite sufficient witnesses."

And truly this was fighting their way, as they discovered the moment they had left the house; for the gusts and squalls that came tearing along the street were like to choke them. She clung to his arm tightly; but her skirts were blown about her and impeded her; the two ends of her boa went flying away over her shoulders; while her hair was speedily in a most untoward state—though her companion thought it was always prettier that way than any other. Nevertheless they leant forward against the wind, and drove themselves through it, and eventually got down to the sea-front. Here, again, they were almost stunned by the terrific roar; for the tide was full up; and the huge, brown, concave, white-crested waves, thundering down on the shelving shingle, filled all the thick air with spray; while light balls of foam went sailing away inland, tossed hither and thither up into the purple-darkened sky. So far the driving squalls had brought no rain; but the atmosphere was surcharged with a salt moisture; more than once Vincent stopped for a second and took his handkerchief to dry Maisrie's lashes and eyebrows, and to push back from her forehead the fine wet threads of her

glistening hair.

But soon they had got away from this roar of water and grinding pebbles, and were out on the pier, that was swaying sinuously before these fierce trusts, and that trembled to its foundations under each successive shock of the heavy surge. And now they could get a better view of the wide and hurrying sea—a sea of a tawny-brownish hue melting into a vivid green some way further out, and always and everywhere showing swift flashes of white, that seemed to gleam all the more suddenly and sharply where the weight of the purple skies darkened down to the horizon.

"What a shame it is," he said to her (perhaps with some affectation of cheerfulness, for she seemed curiously preoccupied), "What a shame it is to drag you out on such a morning!"

"I do not mind it," she made answer. "It will be something to remember."

When they reached the end of the pier, which was wholly deserted, he ensconced her snugly in a corner of one of the protected seats; and he was not far away from her when he sate down. Her lips had grown pale with the buffeting of the wind; the outside threads and plaits of her hair were damp and disordered; and her eyes were grave even to sadness; and yet never had the strange witchery of her youthful beauty so entirely entranced him. Perhaps it was the dim fear of losing her, that dwelt as a sort of shadow in his mind even when he was most buoyed up by the radiant confidence of four-and-twenty; perhaps it was the knowledge that, for a time at least, this was to be farewell; at all events he sate close to her, and held her hand tight, as though to make sure she should not be stolen away from him.

"Maisrie," said he, "do you know that I spoke to your grandfather yesterday?"

"Yes," she answered. "He told me."

"And what did he say?"

"At first," she said, with a bit of a sigh, "he talked of Balloray. I was sorry that came up again; he is happier when he does not think of it. And, indeed, I have noticed that of late he has almost given up speaking of the possibility of a great change in our condition. What chance is there of any such thing? We have no money to go to law, even if the law had not already decided against us. Then grandfather's idea that the estates might come to us through some accident, or series of accidents—what is that but a dream? I am sure he is far more content when he forgets what might have been; when he trusts entirely to his own courage and self-reliance; when he is thinking, not of lost estates, but of some ballad he means to write about in the *Edinburgh Chronicle*. Poor grandfather!—and yet, who can help admiring his spirit—the very gaiety of his nature—in spite of all his misfortunes?"

"Yes, Maisrie—but—but what did he say about you?"

"About me?" the girl repeated. "Well, it was his usual kindness. He said I was only to think of what would tend to my own happiness. Happiness?" she went on, rather sadly. "As if this world was made for happiness!"

It was a strange speech for one so young—one who, so far as he could make out, had been so gently nurtured and cared for.

"What do you mean, Maisrie?" said he in his astonishment. "Why should you not have happiness, as well as another? Who can deserve it more than you—you who are so generous and well-wishing to everyone—"

"I would rather not speak of myself at all, Vincent," she said. "That is nothing. I want to speak of you. I want you to consider—what is best for you. And I understand your position—perhaps more clearly than you imagine. You have made me think, of late, about many things; and now that you are going away, I must speak frankly. It will be difficult. Perhaps—perhaps, if you were more considerate, Vincent—?"

"Yes?" said he. That Maisrie should have to beg for consideration!

"There might be no need of speaking," she went on, after that momentary pause. "If you were to go away now, and never see us any more, wouldn't that be the simplest thing? There would be no misunderstanding—no ill-feeling of any kind. You would think of the time we knew you in London—and I'm sure I should always think of it—as a pleasant time: perhaps something too good to last. I have told you before: you must remember what your prospects are—what all your friends expect of you—and you will see that no good could come of hampering yourself—of introducing someone to your family who would only bring difficulty and trouble—"

"Yes, I understand!" he said—and he threw away her hand from him. "I understand now. But why not tell the truth at once—that you do not love me—as I had been fool enough to think you did!"

"Yes, perhaps I do not love you," she said in a low voice. "And yet I was not thinking of myself. I was trying to think of what was best for you—"

Her voice broke a little, and there were tears gathering on her eyelashes: seeing which made him instantly contrite. He caught her hand again.

"Maisrie, forgive me! I don't know why you should talk like that! If I have your love I do not fear anything that may happen in the future. There is nothing to fear. When I spoke to your grandfather yesterday afternoon, I told him precisely how I was situated; and I showed him that, granting there were some few little difficulties, the best way to meet them would be for you and me to get married at once: then everything would come right of its own accord—for one must credit one's relatives with a little common sense. Now that is my solution of all this trouble—oh, yes, I confess there has been a little trouble; but

here is my solution of it—if you have courage, Maisrie. Maisrie, will you give me your promise—will you be my wife?”

She looked at him for a second; then lowered her eyes.

“Vincent,” she said slowly, “you don’t know what you ask. And I have wished that you would understand, without my having to speak. I have wished that you would understand—and go away—and make our friendship a memory, something to think over in after years. For how can I tell you clearly without seeming cruel and ungrateful to one who has through my whole life been kindness and goodness to me?—no!—no!”

She withdrew her hand; she turned away from him altogether.

“Maisrie,” said he, “I don’t want you to say anything, except that you love me, and will be my wife.”

“Your wife, Vincent—your wife!” she exclaimed, in a piteous sort of way. “How can you ask any one to be your wife who has led the life that I have led? Can you not guess—Vincent—without my having to speak?”

He was astounded—but not alarmed: never had his faith in her flinched for a single instant.

“The life you have led?” said he, rather breathlessly; “Why—a—a beautiful life—an idyllic life—constant travel—and always treated with such kindness and care and affection—an ideal life—why, who would not envy you?”

She was sobbing—with her head averted.

“Don’t, Vincent, don’t! I cannot—I will not—tell you,” she said, in a kind of despair. “What is the use? But it is you who have made me think—it is you who have shown me clearly what I have been. I—I was young—I was only a child; my grandfather was everything to me; whatever he did was right. And now I have become a woman since I knew you—I can see myself—and I know that never, never can I be your wife.”

“Maisrie!”

But she paid no heed. She was strangely excited. She rose to her feet: and for a moment he thought he saw a look of her grandfather in her face.

“And yet even in my degradation—my degradation,” she said, repeating the words with cruel emphasis, “I have some pride. I know what your friends think of me: or I can guess. Perhaps they are right. Perhaps the stories you spoke of were all to be believed. That is neither here nor there now. But, at least, they need not be afraid that I am coming to them as a suppliant. I will not bring shame upon them; they have nothing to fear from me.”

He regarded her with astonishment, and with something of reproach also: these proud tones did not sound like Maisrie’s voice. And all of a sudden she changed.

“Why, Vincent, why,” she said, “should you put yourself in opposition to

your friends? Why give up all the splendid future that is before you? Why disappoint all the hopes that have been formed of you—?”

”If need were, for the sake of your love, Maisrie,” he said.

”My love?” she said. ”But you have that, Vincent—and—and you shall have that always!”

And here she burst into a passionate fit of weeping; and in vain he tried to soothe her. Nay, she would not have him speak.

”Let this be the last,” she said, through her bitter sobs. ”Only—only, Vincent, don’t go away with any doubt about that in your mind. I love you!—I shall love you always!—I will give my life to thinking of you—when you are far too occupied—ever to think of me. Will you believe me, Vincent!—Will you believe, always, that I loved you—that I loved you too well to do what you ask—to become a drag on you—and a shame.” The tears were running down her cheeks; but she kept her eyes fixed bravely and piteously on him, as she uttered her wild, incoherent sentences. ”My dearest—my dearest in all the world—will you remember—will you believe that always? Will you say to yourself, ’Wherever Maisrie is at this moment, she loves me—she is thinking of me.’ Promise me, Vincent, that you will never doubt that! No—you need not put it into words: your heart tells you that it is true. And now, Vincent, kiss me!—kiss me, Vincent!—and then good-bye!”

She held up her face. He kissed her lips, that were salt with the sea-foam. The tangles of her wind-blown hair touched his cheek—and thrilled him.

He did not speak for a moment. He was over-awed. This pure confession of a maiden soul had something sacred about it: how could he reply with commonplace phrases about his friends and the future? And yet, here was Maisrie on the point of departure; she only waited for a word of good-bye; and her eyes, that were now filled with a strange sadness and hopelessness, no longer regarded him. The farewell had been spoken—on her side.

”And you think I will let you go, after what you have just confessed?” he said to her—and his calm and restrained demeanour was a sort of answer to her trembling vehemence and her despair. ”You give me the proudest possession a man may have on this earth: and I am to stand idly by, and let it be taken away from me. Is that a likely thing?”

He took her hand, and put her back into the sheltered corner.

”Sit down there, Maisrie, out of the wind. I want to talk to you. I was a fool when I mentioned those stories the other day: I could have cut my tongue out the next moment. And indeed I thought you took no notice. Why should you take any notice? Insensate trash! And who escapes such things?—and who is so childish as to heed them? Then again I remember your saying that I knew nothing about your grandfather or yourself. Do you think that is so? Do you think I have

been all this time constantly in your society—watching you—studying you—yes, and studying you with the anxiety that goes with love—for, of course, you want the one you love to be perfect—do you imagine, after all this that I do not know you and understand you? Degradation!—very well, I accept that degradation: I welcome all the degradation that is likely to be associated with you. If I were to wash my hands in that sort of degradation, I think they would come out a little whiter! I know you to be as pure and noble as the purest and noblest woman alive; and what do I care about your—your circumstances?”

“Don’t, Vincent!—don’t be kind to me, Vincent!” she said, piteously. “It will be all the harder to think of when—when we are separated—and far away from each other.”

“Yes, but we are not going to separate,” said he briefly. “Your grandfather has left you to decide for yourself; and surely after what you have said to me this morning, surely I have the right to decide for you. I tell you, we are not going to separate, Maisrie—except for a few days. When I am up in London I mean to look round and see what dispositions can be made with regard to the future. Oh, I assure you I am going to be very prudent and circumspect; and I am ready to turn my hand to anything. Then, in another direction, Maisrie, you might give me a hint,” he went on, with much cheerfulness, but watching her to see how she would take it. “What part of London do you think you would like best to live in? If we could get a small house with a garden up somewhere about Campden Hill—that would be pleasant; and of course there must be a library for your grandfather, for we should want the privacy of the morning-room for ourselves.”

She shook her head.

“Dreams, Vincent, dreams!” she murmured.

“But sometimes dreams come true,” said he, for he was not to be daunted. “And you will see how much dream-work there will be about it when I get things put into trim in London. Now I’m not going to keep you here any longer, Maisrie; for I fancy there is some rain coming across; and you mustn’t be caught. I will go in and say good-bye to your grandfather, if I may; and the next you will hear of me will be when I send you some news from town. In the meantime, hearts up, Maisrie!—surely the granddaughter of your grandfather should show courage!”

When, that afternoon, Vincent arrived in London, he did not go to his temporary lodgings (what charm had the slummy little street in Mayfair for him now?) but to Grosvenor Place, where he shut himself up in his own room, and managed to get on somehow with that detested lecture. And next day he went down to Mendover: and next evening he made his appearance before the Mendover Liberal Association; and there were the customary votes of thanks to wind up the proceedings. There was nothing in all this worthy of note: what was of importance happened after, when the President of the Association, who had oc-

cupied the chair in the absence of Lord Musselburgh, accompanied Vincent home to the Red Lion. This Mr. Simmons was a solicitor, and a great political power in Mendover; so, when he hinted that the Red Lion had a certain bin of port that was famous all over the county—and, indeed, was powerful enough to draw many a hunt-dinner to this hostelry by its own influence alone—be sure that Master Vin was not long in having a decanter of the wine placed on the table of the private parlour he had engaged. Mr. Simmons, who was a sharp, shrewd-looking little man, with a pale face and intensely black hair and short-cropped whiskers, suggested a cigar, and took the largest he could find in his host's case. Then he proceeded to make himself important and happy—with his toes on the fender, and his shoulders softly cushioned in an easy chair.

"Yes," said he, complacently, when the cigar was going well, "I think I can predict some good fortune for you, and that without having my hand crossed with a shilling. I hope I am breaking no confidence; we lawyers are supposed to be as mum as a priest after confessional; but of course what is said between gentlemen will go no further than the four walls of this room."

"I think you may trust me for that," Vincent said.

"Very well, then," continued Mr. Simmons, with an air of bland consequence. "I will say this at least—that in January you may fairly expect to be offered a very pretty New Year's present."

"Oh, really," said Vincent, without being much impressed: he fancied the Liberal Association were perhaps going to pass a vote of thanks—possibly inscribed on vellum—with the names of all the officials writ large.

"A very pretty present: the representation of Mendover."

But at this he pricked up his ears; and Mr. Simmons smiled.

"Mr. Richard Gosford is my client, as I think you know," the black-a-vised little lawyer went on, "but what I am telling you does not come direct from him to me. I need not particularise my sources of information. But from what I can gather I am almost certain that he means to resign at the end of the year—he did talk of waiting for the next General Election, as Lord Musselburgh may have told you; but his imaginary troubles have grown on him; and as far as I can see there will be nothing for you but to slip easily and quietly into his shoes next January. A very pretty New Year's present!"

"But of course there will be a contest!" Vincent exclaimed.

"Not a bit," Mr. Simmons made answer, regarding the blue curls of smoke from the cigar. "The snugest little seat in England. Everybody knows you are Lord Musselburgh's nominee; and Lord Musselburgh has promised to do everything for our public park that Mr. Gosford ought to have done when he presented the ground. See? No bribery on your part. Simple as daylight. We'll run you in as if you were an infant on a wheelbarrow."

"It's very kind of you, I'm sure," said Vincent. "Is there anything you would recommend me to do—?"

"Yes; I would recommend you to go and call on old Gosford to-morrow, before you leave for town."

"Wouldn't that look rather like undue haste in seizing a dead man's effects?" Vincent ventured to ask.

"A dead man?" said Mr. Simmons, helping himself to another glass of port. "He is neither dead nor dying, any more than you or I. And that's what you've got to remember to-morrow, when you go to see him. For goodness' sake, don't tell him he's looking well—as you've got to say to most invalids. Tell him he's looking very poorly. Be seriously concerned. Then he'll be off to bed again—and delighted. For what he suffers from is simply incurable laziness—and nervous timidity; and so long as he can hide himself under the blankets, and read books, he's happy."

"But what excuse am I to make for calling on him?" Vincent asked again.

"Oh," said Mr. Simmons, carelessly, "one public character visiting another. You were here delivering a lecture; and of course you called on the sitting member. You won't want any excuse if you will tell him he should take extraordinary care of himself in this changeable weather."

"And should I say anything about the seat?" Vincent asked further.

"I must leave that to your own discretion. Rather ticklish. Perhaps better say nothing—unless he introduces the subject: then you can talk about the overcrowding of the House, and the late hours, and the nervous wear and tear of London. But you needn't suggest to him, in set terms, that as he is retiring from business he might as well leave you the goodwill: perhaps that would be a little too outspoken."

As luck would have it, a day or two after Vin's return to town, Mr. Ogden came to dine at Grosvenor Place. It was a man's dinner—a dinner of political extremists and faddists; but so far from Master Vincent retiring to his own room and his books, as he sometimes did, he joined the party, and even stipulated for a place next the great electioneer and wire-puller of the North. Further than that, he made himself most agreeable to Mr. Ogden: was most meek and humble and good-humoured (for to what deeps of hypocrisy will not a young man descend when he is madly in love?), and seemed to swallow wholesale the long-resounding list of Reforms—Reforms Administrative, Reforms Electoral, Reforms Fiscal, Reforms Social and Political. For all the while he was saying within himself: 'My dear sir, perhaps what you say is quite true: and we're all going head-long to the devil—with the caucus for drag. And I could wish you to have a few more A's: still, many excellent men have lived and died without them. The main point is this—if one might dare to ask—Is your Private Secretaryship still open;

and, if so, what salary would you propose to give?’ But, of course, he could not quite ask those questions at his own father’s dinner-table; besides, he was in no hurry; he wanted a few more days to look round.

The guests of this evening did not go up to the drawing-room; they remained in the dining-room, smoking, until it was time for them to leave: then Harland Harris and his son found themselves alone together. Now the relations between father and son had been very considerably strained since the morning on which the former had brought his allegations against old George Bethune and his granddaughter; but on this occasion Vincent was in a particularly amiable and generous mood. He was pleased with himself for having paid court to Mr. Ogden; he looked forward with some natural gratification to this early chance of getting into Parliament; and, again, what was the use of attaching any importance to those preposterous charges? So he lit another cigarette; stretched out his legs before the fire; and told his father—but with certain reservations, for on one or two points he was pledged to silence—what had happened down at Mendover.

”I am heartily glad to hear it,” said the communist-capitalist, with a certain cold severity of tone. ”I am glad to hear that you begin to realise what are the serious interests of life. You are a very fortunate young man. If you are returned for Mendover, it will be by a concurrence of circumstances such as could not easily have been anticipated. At the same time I think it might be judicious if you went down again and hinted to Mr.—what did you say?—Simmons?—Mr. Simmons that in the event of everything turning out well, there would be no need to wait for Lord Musselburgh’s contribution towards the completion of the public park. What Lord Musselburgh is going to gain by that passes my comprehension. I can hardly suppose that he made such a promise in order to secure your election: that, indeed, would be a wild freak of generosity—so wild as to be incredible. However,” continued Mr. Harris, in his pedantic and sententious manner, ”it is unnecessary to seek for motives. We do not need to be indebted to him. I consider that it is of the greatest importance that you should enter Parliament at an early age; and I am willing to pay. Mendover ought to be a secure seat, if it is kept warm. Promise them what you like—I will see to the rest. There are other things besides a park, if they prefer to keep Lord Musselburgh to his promise: a free library, for example—if they have one already, another one: a clubhouse for the football club—a pavilion for the cricketers—a refreshment tent for the tennis ground—a band to play on the summer evenings—a number of things of that kind that you could discover from your friend the solicitor.”

Vincent could have laughed, had he dared. Here he was invited to play the part of a great local magnate, plutocrat, and benefactor; and it was less than half-an-hour ago that he had been anxiously wondering whether £200 a year, or £250 a year, would be the probable salary of Mr. Ogden’s private secretary. Harland

Harris went on:

"It is so rarely that such an opportunity occurs—in England at least—that one must not be niggardly in welcoming it. Simmons—did you say Simmons? is clearly of importance: if you make him your agent in these negotiations, that will be enough for him—he will look after himself. And he will keep you safe: the elected member may steal a horse, whereas as a candidate he daren't look over the hedge. And once you are embarked on a career of public usefulness—"

"Bribery, do you mean?" said Vincent, meekly.

"I refer to the House of Commons: once you have your career open to you, you will be able to show whether the training you have undergone has been the right one, or whether the ordinary scholastic routine—mixed up with monkish traditions—would have been preferable. At all events you have seen the world. You have seen men, and their interests, and occupations: not a parcel of grown-up schoolboys playing games." And therewithal he bade his son good-night.

A day or two passed: Vincent was still making discreet inquiries as to how a young man, with some little knowledge of the world, and a trifle of capital at his back, but with no specific professional training, could best set to work to earn a moderate income for himself; and also he was sounding one or two editors for whom he had done some occasional work as to whether employment of a more permanent kind might be procurable. Moreover, he had ordered the little brooch for Maisrie—a tiny white dove this was, in mother-of-pearl, on a transverse narrow band of rubies; and besides that he had picked up a few things with which to make her room a little prettier, when she should return to town. Some of the latter, indeed, which were fit for immediate installation, he had already sent home; and one afternoon he thought he might as well go up and see what Mrs. Hobson had done with them.

It was the landlady's husband who opened the door; and even as he ushered the young man up to the parlour, he had begun his story, which was so confused and disconnected and inclined to tears that Vincent instantly suspected gin.

"Lor bless ye, sir, we ev bin in such a sad quandary, to be sure, and right glad I am to see you, sir, with them things a comin ome, and you was so particular about not a word to be said, and there was the missis, a angin of em up, and the beautiful counterpane, all spread out so neat and tidy, 'why,' says she, 'the Queen on the throne she aint got nothin more splendid, which he is the most generous young genelman, and jest as good as he's ansome'—beggin' your pardon, sir, for women will talk, and then in the middle of it hall, here comes the old genelman as we were not expecting of im, sir—ah, sir, a great man, a wonderful man, sir, in sorrowful sikkumstances—and the young lady, too, and hall to be settled up reglar—oh, heverythink, sir—like a genelman—"

"What the mischief are you talking about?" said Vincent, in his bewilder-

ment. "Do you mean to say that Mr. Bethune and Miss Bethune have been in London?"

"Yesterday, sir, yesterday, more's the pity, sir, to give up their rooms for good and hall, for never again shall we 'ev sich lodgers in this poor ouse. A honour, sir, as was least knowed when it was most appreciated, as one might say, sir, a man like that, sir, a great man, sir, though awaitin his time, like many others, and oldin is ead igh against fate and fortune whatever the world might say. And the young lady—beautiful she was, as you know, sir—as you know, sir—and as good as gold—well, never again—in this poor ouse—"

"Look here," said Vincent, impatiently—for this rigmarole threatened at any moment to dissolve in maudlin weeping, "will you answer me one question: am I to understand that Mr. Bethune and his granddaughter are not coming back here?"

"Indeed, no, sir, more's the pity, sir, it was a honour to this pore ouse, and heverythink paid up like a genelman, though many's the time I was sayin to the missis as she needn't be so ard—"

"Where have they gone, then?" the younger man demanded, peremptorily.

"Lor bless ye, sir, it took me all of a suddent—they didn't say nothin about that, sir—and I was that upset, sir—"

Vincent glanced at his watch: five minutes past four was the time.

"Oh, I see," he said, with a fine carelessness (for there were wild and alarming suspicions darting through his brain). "They're going to remain in Brighton, I dare say. Well, good-bye, Hobson! About those bits of things I sent up—you keep them for yourself—tell Mrs. Hobson I make her a present of them—you needn't say anything about them to anybody."

He left the house. He quickly crossed the street, and went up to his own rooms: the table there was a blank—he had almost expected as much. Then he went out again, hailed a hansom, drove down to Victoria-station, and caught the four-thirty train to Brighton. When he reached the lodging-house in German Place, he hardly dared knock: he seemed to know already what was meant by this hurried and stealthy departure. His worst fears were immediately confirmed. Mr. Bethune—Miss Bethune—had left the previous morning. And did no one know whither they had gone? No one. And there was no message—no letter—for any one who might call? There was no message—no letter.

The young man turned away. It was raining; he did not seem to care. Out there in the dark was the solitary light at the end of the pier: why, how many days had gone by since she had said to him, with tears running down her cheeks—'Vincent, I love you!—I love you!—you are my dearest in all the world!—remember that always!' And what was this that she had done?—for that it was of her doing; he had no manner of doubt. Enough: his heart, that had many a

time been moved to pity by her solitariness, her friendlessness, had no more pity now. Pride rose in its place—pride, and reproach, and scorn. There was but the one indignant cry ringing in his ears—”False love—false love—and traitress!”

END OF VOL. II.

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