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RHODA FLEMING

By George Meredith

BOOK 4.

- XXX. THE EXPIATION
- XXXI. THE MELTING OF THE THOUSAND
- XXXII. LA QUESTION D'ARGENT
- XXXIII. EDWARD'S RETURN
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CHAPTER XXX

Those two in the open carriage, one of whom had called out Sedgett's name, were Robert and Major Waring. When the cab had flown by, they fell back into their seats, and smoked; the original stipulation for the day having been that no harassing matter should be spoken of till nightfall.

True to this, Robert tried to think hard on the scene of his recent enjoyment. Horses were to him what music is to a poet, and the glory of the Races he had witnessed was still quick in heart, and partly counteracted his astonishment at the sight of his old village enemy in company with Algernon Blancove.

It was not astonishing at all to him that they should have quarrelled and come to blows; for he knew Sedgett well, and the imperative necessity for fighting him, if only to preserve a man's self-respect and the fair division of peace, when once he had been allowed to get upon terms sufficiently close to assert his black nature; but how had it come about? How was it that a gentleman could consent to appear publicly with such a fellow? He decided that it meant something, and something ominous--but what? Whom could it affect? Was Algernon Blancove such a poor creature that, feeling himself bound by certain dark dealings with Sedgett to keep him quiet, he permitted the bullying dog to hang to his coat-tail? It seemed improbable that any young gentleman should be so weak, but it might be the case; and "if so," thought Robert, "and I let him know I bear him no ill-will for setting Sedgett upon me, I may be doing him a service."

He remembered with pain Algernon's glance of savage humiliation upward, just before he turned to follow Sedgett into the cab; and considered that he ought in kindness to see him and make him comfortable by apologizing, as if he himself had no complaint to make.

He resolved to do it when the opportunity should come. Meantime, what on earth brought them together?

"How white the hedges are!" he said.

"There's a good deal of dust," Major Waring replied.

"I wasn't aware that cabs came to the races."

"They do, you see."

Robert perceived that Percy meant to fool him if he attempted a breach of the bond; but he longed so much for Percy's opinion of the strange alliance between Sedgett and Algernon Blancove, that at any cost he was compelled to say, "I can't get to the bottom of that."

"That squabble in the road?" said Percy. "We shall see two or three more before we reach home."

"No. What's the meaning of a gentleman consorting with a blackguard?" Robert persisted.

"One or the other has discovered an assimilation, I suppose," Percy gave answer. "That's an odd remark on returning from Epsom. Those who jump into the same pond generally come out the same colour."

Robert spoke low.

"Has it anything to do with the poor girl, do you think?"

"I told you I declined to think till we were home again. Confound it, man, have you no idea of a holiday?"

Robert puffed his tobacco-smoke.

"Let's talk of Mrs. Lovell," he said.

"That's not a holiday for me," Percy murmured but Robert's mind was too preoccupied to observe the tone, and he asked,--

"Is she to be trusted to keep her word faithfully this time?"

"Come," said Percy, "we haven't betted to-day. I'll bet you she will, if you like. Will you bet against it?"

"I won't. I can't nibble at anything. Betting's like drinking."

"But you can take a glass of wine. This sort of bet is much the same. However, don't; for you would lose."

"There," said Robert; "I've heard of being angry with women for fickleness, changeableness, and all sorts of other things. She's a lady I couldn't understand being downright angry with, and here's the reason--it ain't a matter of reason at all--she fascinates me. I do, I declare, clean forget Rhoda; I forget the girl, if only I see Mrs. Lovell at a distance. How's that? I'm not a fool, with nonsensical fancies of any kind. I know what loving a woman is; and a man in my position might be ass enough to--all sorts of things. It isn't that; it's fascination. I'm afraid of her. If she talks to me, I feel something like having gulped a bottle of wine. Some women you have a respect for; some you

like or you love; some you despise: with her, I just feel I'm intoxicated."

Major Waring eyed him steadily. He said: "I'll unriddle it, if I can, to your comprehension. She admires you for what you are, and she lets you see it; I dare say she's not unwilling that you should see it. She has a worship for bravery: it's a deadly passion with her."

Robert put up a protesting blush of modesty, as became him. "Then why, if she does me the honour to think anything of me, does she turn against me?"

"Ah! now you go deeper. She is giving you what assistance she can; at present: be thankful, if you can be satisfied with her present doings. Perhaps I'll answer the other question by-and-by. Now we enter London, and our day is over. How did you like it?"

Robert's imagination rushed back to the downs.

"The race was glorious. I wish we could go at that pace in life; I should have a certainty of winning. How miserably dull the streets look; and the people creep along--they creep, and seem to like it. Horseback's my element."

They drove up to Robert's lodgings, where, since the Winter, he had been living austere and recklessly; exiled by his sensitiveness from his two homes, Warbeach and Wrexby; and seeking over London for Dahlia--a pensioner on his friend's bounty; and therein had lain the degrading misery to a man of his composition. Often had he thought of enlisting again, and getting drafted to a foreign station. Nothing but the consciousness that he was subsisting on money not his own would have kept him from his vice. As it was, he had lived through the months between Winter and Spring, like one threading his way through the tortuous lengths of a cavern; never coming to the light, but coming upon absurd mishaps in his effort to reach it. His adventures in London partook somewhat of the character of those in Warbeach, minus the victim; for whom two or three gentlemen in public thoroughfares had been taken. These misdemeanours, in the face of civil society, Robert made no mention of in his letters to Percy.

But there was light now, though at first it gave but a faint glimmer, in a lady's coloured envelope, lying on the sitting-room table. Robert opened it hurriedly, and read it; seized Dahlia's address, with a brain on fire, and said:

"It's signed 'Margaret Lovell.' This time she calls me 'Dear Sir.'"

"She could hardly do less," Percy remarked.

"I know: but there is a change in her. There's a summer in her writing now. She has kept her word, Percy. She's the dearest lady in the world. I don't ask why she didn't help me before."

"You acknowledge the policy of mild measures," said Major Waring.

"She's the dearest lady in the world," Robert repeated. He checked his enthusiasm. "Lord in heaven! what an evening I shall have."

The thought of his approaching interview with Dahlia kept him dumb.

As they were parting in the street, Major Waring said, "I will be here at twelve. Let me tell you this, Robert: she is going to be married; say nothing to dissuade her; it's the best she can do; take a manly view of it. Good-bye."

Robert was but slightly affected by the intelligence. His thoughts were on Dahlia as he had first seen her, when in her bloom, and the sister of his darling; now miserable; a thing trampled to earth! With him, pity for a victim soon became lost in rage at the author of the wrong, and as he walked along he reflected contemptuously on his feeble efforts to avenge her at Warbeach. She lived in a poor row of cottages, striking off from one of the main South-western suburb roads, not very distant from his own lodgings, at which he marvelled, as at a cruel irony. He could not discern the numbers, and had to turn up several of the dusky little strips of garden to read the numbers on the doors. A faint smell of lilac recalled the country and old days, and some church bells began ringing. The number of the house where he was to find Dahlia was seven. He was at the door of the house next to it, when he heard voices in the garden beside him.

A man said, "Then I have your answer?"

A woman said, "Yes; yes."

"You will not trust to my pledged honour?"

"Pardon me; not that. I will not live in disgrace."

"When I promise, on my soul, that the moment I am free I will set you right before the world?"

"Oh! pardon me."

"You will?"

"No; no! I cannot."

"You choose to give yourself to an obscure dog, who'll ill-treat you, and for whom you don't care a pin's-head; and why? that you may be fenced from gossip, and nothing more. I thought you were a woman above that kind of meanness. And this is a common countryman. How will you endure that kind of life? You were made for elegance and happiness: you shall have it. I met you before your illness, when you would not listen to me: I met you after. I knew you at once. Am I changed? I swear to you I have dreamed of you ever since, and love you. Be as faded as you like; be hideous, if you like; but come with me. You know my name, and what I

am. Twice I have followed you, and found your name and address; twice I have written to you, and made the same proposal. And you won't trust to my honour? When I tell you I love you tenderly? When I give you my solemn assurance that you shall not regret it? You have been deceived by one man: why punish me? I know--I feel you are innocent and good. This is the third time that you have permitted me to speak to you: let it be final. Say you will trust yourself to me--trust in my honour. Say it shall be to-morrow. Yes; say the word. To-morrow. My sweet creature--do!"

The man spoke earnestly, but a third person and extraneous hearer could hardly avoid being struck by the bathetic conclusion. At least, in tone it bordered on a fall; but the woman did not feel it so.

She replied: "You mean kindly to me, sir. I thank you indeed, for I am very friendless. Oh! pardon me: I am quite--quite determined. Go--pray, forget me."

This was Dahlia's voice.

Robert was unconscious of having previously suspected it. Heartily ashamed of letting his ears be filled with secret talk, he went from the garden and crossed the street.

He knew this to be one of the temptations of young women in London.

Shortly after, the man came through the iron gateway of the garden. He passed under lamplight, and Robert perceived him to be a gentleman in garb.

A light appeared in the windows of the house. Now that he had heard her voice, the terrors of his interview were dispersed, and he had only plain sadness to encounter. He knocked at the door quietly. There was a long delay after he had sent in his name; but finally admission was given.

"If I had loved her!" groaned Robert, before he looked on her; but when he did look on her, affectionate pity washed the selfish man out of him. All these false sensations, peculiar to men, concerning the soiled purity of woman, the lost innocence; the brand of shame upon her, which are commonly the foul sentimentalism of such as can be too eager in the chase of corruption when occasion suits, and are another side of pruriency, not absolutely foreign to the best of us in our youth--all passed away from him in Dahlia's presence.

The young man who can look on them we call fallen women with a noble eye, is to my mind he that is most nobly begotten of the race, and likeliest to be the sire of a noble line. Robert was less than he; but Dahlia's aspect helped him to his rightful manliness. He saw that her worth survived.

The creature's soul had put no gloss upon her sin. She had sinned, and her suffering was manifest.

She had chosen to stand up and take the scourge of God; after which the stones cast by men are not painful.

By this I mean that she had voluntarily stripped her spirit bare of evasion, and seen herself for what she was; pleading no excuse. His scourge is the Truth, and she had faced it.

Innumerable fanciful thoughts, few of them definite, beset the mind at interviews such as these; but Robert was distinctly impressed by her look. It was as that of one upon the yonder shore. Though they stood close together, he had the thought of their being separate--a gulf between.

The colourlessness of her features helped to it, and the odd little close-fitting white linen cap which she wore to conceal the stubborn-twisting clipped curls of her shorn head, made her unlike women of our world. She was dressed in black up to the throat. Her eyes were still luminously blue, and she let them dwell on Robert one gentle instant, giving him her hand humbly.

"Dahlia!--my dear sister, I wish I could say; but the luck's against me," Robert began.

She sat, with her fingers locked together in her lap, gazing forward on the floor, her head a little sideways bent.

"I believe," he went on--"I haven't heard, but I believe Rhoda is well."

"She and father are well, I know," said Dahlia.

Robert started: "Are you in communication with them?"

She shook her head. "At the end of some days I shall see them."

"And then perhaps you'll plead my cause, and make me thankful to you for life, Dahlia?"

"Rhoda does not love you."

"That's the fact, if a young woman's to be trusted to know her own mind, in the first place, and to speak it, in the second."

Dahlia, closed her lips. The long-lined underlip was no more very red. Her heart knew that it was not to speak of himself that he had come; but she was poor-witted, through weakness of her blood, and out of her own immediate line of thought could think neither far nor deep. He entertained her with talk of his notions of Rhoda, finishing:

"But at the end of a week you will see her, and I dare say she'll give you her notions of me. Dahlia! how happy this'll make them. I do say thank God! from my soul, for this."

She pressed her hands in her lap, trembling. "If you will, please, not

Speak of it, Mr. Robert."

"Say only you do mean it, Dahlia. You mean to let them see you?"

She shivered out a "Yes."

"That's right. Because, a father and a sister--haven't they a claim? Think a while. They've had a terrible time. And it's true that you've consented to a husband, Dahlia? I'm glad, if it is; and he's good and kind. Right soul-glad I am."

While he was speaking, her eyelids lifted and her eyes became fixed on him in a stony light of terror, like a creature in anguish before her executioner. Then again her eyelids dropped. She had not moved from her still posture.

"You love him?" he asked, in some wonderment.

She gave no answer.

"Don't you care for him?"

There was no reply.

"Because, Dahlia, if you do not I know I have no right to fancy you do not. How is it? Tell me. Marriage is an awful thing, where there's no love. And this man, whoever he is--is he in good circumstances? I wouldn't speak of him; but, you see, I must, as your friend--and I'm that. Come: he loves you? Of course he does. He has said so. I believe it. And he's a man you can honour and esteem? You wouldn't consent without, I'm sure. What makes me anxious--I look on you as my sister, whether Rhoda will have it so or not; I'm anxious because--I'm anxious it should be over, for then Rhoda will be proud of the faith she had in you, and it will lighten the old man's heart."

Once more the inexplicable frozen look struck over him from her opened eyes, as if one of the minutes of Time had yawned to show him its deep, mute, tragic abyss, and was extinguished.

"When does it take place, Dahlia?"

Her long underlip, white almost as the row of teeth it revealed, hung loose.

"When?" he asked, leaning forward to hear, and the word was "Saturday," uttered with a feeble harshness, not like the gentle voice of Dahlia.

"This coming Saturday?"

"No."

"Saturday week?"

She fell into a visible trembling.

"You named the day?"

He pushed for an indication of cheerful consent to the act she was about to commit, or of reluctance.

Possibly she saw this, for now she answered, "I did." The sound was deep in her throat.

"Saturday week," said Robert. "I feel to the man as a brother, already. Do you live--you'll live in the country?"

"Abroad."

"Not in Old England? I'm sorry for that. But--well! Things must be as they're ordered. Heigho! I've got to learn it."

Dahlia smiled kindly.

"Rhoda will love you. She is firm when she loves."

"When she loves. Where's the consolation to me?"

"Do you think she loves me as much--as much"

"As much as ever? She loves her sister with all her heart--all, for I haven't a bit of it."

"It is because," said Dahlia slowly, "it is because she thinks I am--"

Here the poor creature's bosom heaved piteously.

"What has she said of me? I wish her to have blamed me--it is less pain."

"Listen," said Robert. "She does not, and couldn't blame you, for it's a sort of religion with her to believe no wrong of you. And the reason why she hates me is, that I, knowing something more of the world, suspected, and chose to let her know it--I said it, in fact--that you had been deceived by a--But this isn't the time to abuse others. She would have had me, if I had thought proper to think as she thinks, or play hypocrite, and pretend to. I'll tell you openly, Dahlia; your father thinks the worst. Ah! you look the ghost again. It's hard for you to hear, but you give me a notion of having got strength to hear it. It's your father's way to think the worst. Now, when you can show him your husband, my dear, he'll lift his head. He's old English. He won't dream of asking questions. He'll see a brave and honest young man who must love you, or--he does love you, that's settled. Your father'll shake his hand, and as for Rhoda, she'll triumph. The only person to speak out to, is the man who marries you, and that you've done."

Robert looked the interrogation he did not utter.

"I have," said Dahlia.

"Good: if I may call him brother, some day, all the better for me. Now, you won't leave England the day you're married."

"Soon. I pray that it may be soon."

"Yes; well, on that morning, I'll have your father and Rhoda at my lodgings, not wide from here: if I'd only known it earlier!--and you and your husband shall come there and join us. It'll be a happy meeting at last."

Dahlia stopped her breathing.

"Will you see Rhoda?"

"I'll go to her to-morrow, if you like."

"If I might see her, just as I am leaving England! not before."

"That's not generous," said Robert.

"Isn't it?" she asked like a child.

"Fancy!--to see you she's been longing for, and the ship that takes you off, perhaps everlastingly, as far as this world's concerned!"

"Mr. Robert, I do not wish to deceive my sister. Father need not be distressed. Rhoda shall know. I will not be guilty of falsehoods any more--no more! Will you go to her? Tell her--tell Rhoda what I am. Say I have been ill. It will save her from a great shock."

She covered her eyes.

"I said in all my letters that my husband was a gentleman."

It was her first openly penitential utterance in his presence, and her cheeks were faintly reddened. It may have been this motion of her blood which aroused the sunken humanity within her; her heart leaped, and she cried "I can see her as I am, I can. I thought it impossible. Oh! I can. Will she come to me? My sister is a Christian and forgives. Oh! let me see her. And go to her, dear Mr. Robert, and ask her--tell her all, and ask her if I may be spared, and may work at something--anything, for my livelihood near my sister. It is difficult for women to earn money, but I think I can. I have done so since my illness. I have been in the hospital with brain fever. He was lodging in the house with me before. He found me at the hospital. When I came out, he walked with me to support me: I was very weak. He read to me, and then asked me to marry him. He asked again. I lay in bed one night, and with my eyes open, I saw the dangers of women, and the trouble of my father and sister; and pits of wickedness. I saw like places full of snakes. I had such a yearning for protection. I gave him my word I would be his wife,

if he was not ashamed of a wife like me. I wished to look once in father's face. I had fancied that Rhoda would spurn me, when she discovered my falsehood. She--sweet dear! would she ever? Go to her. Say, I do not love any man. I am heart-dead. I have no heart except for her. I cannot love a husband. He is good, and it is kind: but, oh! let me be spared. His face!--"

She pressed her hands tight into the hollow of her eyes.

"No; it can't be meant. Am I very ungrateful? This does not seem to be what God orders. Only if this must be! only if it must be! If my sister cannot look on me without! He is good, and it is unselfish to take a moneyless, disgraced creature: but, my misery!--If my sister will see me, without my doing this!--Go to her, Mr. Robert. Say, Dahlia was false, and repents, and has worked with her needle to subsist, and can, and will, for her soul strives to be clean. Try to make her understand. If Rhoda could love you, she would know. She is locked up--she is only ideas. My sweet is so proud. I love her for her pride, if she will only let me creep to her feet, kiss her feet. Dear Mr. Robert, help me! help me! I will do anything she says. If she says I am to marry him, I will. Don't mind my tears--they mean nothing now. Tell my dear, I will obey her. I will not be false any more to her. I wish to be quite stripped. And Rhoda may know me, and forgive me, if she can. And--Oh! if she thinks, for father's sake, I ought, I will submit and speak the words; I will; I am ready. I pray for mercy."

Robert sat with his fist at his temples, in a frowning meditation.

Had she declared her reluctance to take the step, in the first moments of their interview, he might have been ready to support her: but a project fairly launched becomes a reality in the brain--a thing once spoken of attracts like a living creature, and does not die voluntarily. Robert now beheld all that was in its favour, and saw nothing but flighty flimsy objections to it. He was hardly moved by her unexpected outburst.

Besides, there was his own position in the case. Rhoda would smile on him, if he brought Dahlia to her, and brought her happy in the world's eye. It will act as a sort of signal for general happiness. But if he had to go and explain matters base and mournful to her, there would be no smile on her face, and not much gratitude in her breast. There would be none for a time, certainly. Proximity to her faded sister made him conceive her attainable, and thrice precious by contrast.

He fixed his gaze on Dahlia, and the perfect refinement of her simplicity caused him to think that she might be aware of an inappropriateness in the contemplated union.

"Is he a clumsy fellow? I mean, do you read straight off that he has no pretension to any manners of a gentleman--nothing near it?"

To this question, put with hesitation by Robert, Dahlia made answer, "I respect him."

She would not strengthen her prayer by drawing the man's portrait. Speedily she forgot how the doing so would in any way have strengthened her prayer. The excitement had left her brain dull. She did little more than stare mildly, and absently bend her head, while Robert said that he would go to Rhoda on the morrow, and speak seriously with her.

"But I think I can reckon her ideas will side with mine, that it is to your interest, my dear, to make your feelings come round warm to a man you can respect, and who offers you a clear path," he said.

Whereat Dahlia quietly blinked her eyes.

When he stood up, she rose likewise.

"Am I to take a kiss to Rhoda?" he said, and seeing her answer, bent his forehead, to which she put her lips.

"And now I must think all night long about the method of transferring it. Good-bye, Dahlia. You shall hear from your sister the morning after to-morrow. Good-bye!"

He pressed her hand, and went to the door.

"There's nothing I can do for you, Dahlia?"

"Not anything."

"God bless you, my dear!"

Robert breathed with the pleasant sense of breathing, when he was again in the street. Amazement, that what he had dreaded so much should be so easily over, set him thinking, in his fashion, on the marvels of life, and the naturalness in the aspect of all earthly things when you look at them with your eyes.

But in the depths of his heart there was disquiet.

"It's the best she can do; she can do no better," he said; and said it more frequently than it needed by a mind established in the conviction. Gradually he began to feel that certain things seen with the eyes, natural as they may then appear and little terrible, leave distinct, solid, and grave impressions. Something of what our human tragedy may show before high heaven possessed him. He saw it bare of any sentiment, in the person of the girl Dahlia. He could neither put a halo of imagination about her, nor could he conceive one degraded thought of the creature. She stood a naked sorrow, haunting his brain.

And still he continued saying, "It's the best she can do: it's best for all. She can do nothing better."

He said it, unaware that he said it in self-defence.

The pale nun-like ghostly face hung before him, stronger in outline the

farther time widened between him and that suffering flesh.

CHAPTER XXXI

The thousand pounds were in Algernon's hands at last. He had made his escape from Boyne's Bank early in the afternoon, that he might obtain the cheque and feel the money in his pocket before that day's sun was extinguished. There was a note for five hundred; four notes for a hundred severally; and two fifties. And all had come to him through the mere writing down of his name as a recipient of the sum!

It was enough to make one in love with civilization. Money, when it is once in your pocket, seems to have come there easily, even if you have worked for it; but if you have done no labour whatever, and still find it there, your sensations (supposing you to be a butterfly youth--the typical child of a wealthy country) exult marvellously, and soar above the conditions of earth.

He knew the very features of the notes. That gallant old Five Hundred, who might have been a Thousand, but that he had nobly split himself into centurions and skirmishers, stood in his imaginative contemplation like a grand white-headed warrior, clean from the slaughter and in court-ruffles--say, Blucher at the court of the Waterloo Regent. The Hundreds were his Generals; the Fifties his captains; and each one was possessed of unlimited power of splitting himself into serviceable regiments, at the call of his lord, Algernon.

He scarcely liked to make the secret confession that it was the largest sum he had ever as yet carried about; but, as it heightened his pleasure, he did confess it for half an instant. Five Hundred in the bulk he had never attained to. He felt it as a fortification against every mishap in life.

To a young man commonly in difficulties with regard to the paying of his cabman, and latterly the getting of his dinner, the sense of elevation imparted by the sum was intoxicating. But, thinking too much of the Five Hundred waxed dangerous for the fifties; it dwarfed them to such insignificance that it made them lose their self-respect. So, Algernon, pursuing excellent tactics, set his mind upon some stray shillings that he had a remainder of five pounds borrowed from old Anthony, when he endeavoured to obtain repayment of the one pound and interest dating from the night at the theatre. Algernon had stopped his mouth on that point, as well as concerning his acquaintance with Dahlia, by immediately attempting to borrow further, whenever Anthony led the way for a word in private. A one-pound creditor had no particular terrors for him, and he manoeuvred the old man neatly, saying, as previously, "Really, I don't know the young person you allude to: I happened to meet her, or some one like her, casually," and dropping his voice, "I'm rather short--what do you think? Could you?--a trifling accommodation?" from which Anthony fled.

But on the day closing the Epsom week he beckoned Anthony secretly to follow him out of the office, and volunteered to give news that he had just heard of Dahlia.

"Oh," said Anthony, "I've seen her."

"I haven't," said Algernon, "upon my honour."

"Yes, I've seen her, sir, and sorry to hear her husband's fallen a bit low." Anthony touched his pocket. "What they calls 'nipp' tides, ain't it?"

Algernon sprang a compliment under him, which sent the vain old fellow up, whether he would or not, to the effect that Anthony's tides were not subject to lunar influence.

"Now, Mr. Blancove, you must change them notions o' me. I don't say I shouldn't be richer if I'd got what's owing to me."

"You'd have to be protected; you'd be Bullion on two legs," said Algernon, always shrewd in detecting a weakness. "You'd have to go about with sentries on each side, and sleep in an iron safe!"

The end of the interview was a visit to the public-house, and the transferring of another legal instrument from Algernon to Anthony. The latter departed moaning over his five pounds ten shillings in paper; the former rejoicing at his five pounds in gold. That day was Saturday. On Monday, only a few shillings of the five pounds remained; but they were sufficient to command a cab, and, if modesty in dining was among the prescriptions for the day, a dinner. Algernon was driven to the West.

He remembered when he had plunged in the midst of the fashionable whirlpool, having felt reckless there formerly, but he had become remarkably sedate when he stepped along the walks. A certain equipage, or horse, was to his taste, and once he would have said: "That's the thing for me;" being penniless. Now, on the contrary, he reckoned the possible cost, grudgingly, saying "Eh?" to himself, and responding "No," faintly, and then more positively, "Won't do."

He was by no means acting as one on a footing of equality with the people he beholds. A man who is ready to wager a thousand pounds that no other man present has that amount in his pocket, can hardly feel unequal to his company.

Charming ladies on horseback cantered past. "Let them go," he thought. Yesterday, the sight of one would have set him dreaming on grand alliances. When you can afford to be a bachelor, the case is otherwise. Presently, who should ride by but Mrs. Lovell! She was talking more earnestly than was becoming, to that easy-mannered dark-eyed fellow; the man who had made him savage by entering the opera-box.

"Poor old Ned!" said Algernon; "I must put him on his guard." But, even

the lifting of a finger--a hint on paper--would bring Edward over from Paris, as he knew; and that was not in his scheme; so he only determined to write to his cousin.

A flood of evening gold lay over the Western park.

"The glory of this place," Algernon said to himself, "is, that you're sure of meeting none but gentlemen here;" and he contrasted it with Epsom Downs.

A superstitious horror seized him when, casting his eyes ahead, he perceived Sedgett among the tasteful groups--as discordant a figure as could well be seen, and clumsily aware of it, for he could neither step nor look like a man at ease. Algernon swung round and retraced his way; but Sedgett had long sight.

"I'd heard of London"--Algernon soon had the hated voice in his ears,--"and I've bin up to London b'fore; I came here to have a wink at the fash'nables--hang me, if ever I see such a scrumptious lot. It's worth a walk up and down for a hour or more. D' you come heer often, sir?"

"Eh? Who are you? Oh!" said Algernon, half mad with rage. "Excuse me;" and he walked faster.

"Fifty times over," Sedgett responded cheerfully. "I'd pace you for a match up and down this place if you liked. Ain't the horses a spectacle? I'd rather be heer than there at they Races. As for the ladies, I'll tell you what: ladies or no ladies, give my young woman time for her hair to grow; and her colour to come, by George! if she wouldn't shine against e'er a one--smite me stone blind, if she wouldn't! So she shall! Australia'll see. I owe you my thanks for interdoocin' me, and never fear my not remembering."

Where there was a crowd, Algernon could elude his persecutor by threading his way rapidly; but the open spaces condemned him to merciless exposure, and he flew before eyes that his imagination exaggerated to a stretch of supernatural astonishment. The tips of his fingers, the roots of his hair, pricked with vexation, and still, manoeuvre as he might, Sedgett followed him.

"Call at my chambers," he said sternly.

"You're never at home, sir."

"Call to-morrow morning, at ten."

"And see a great big black door, and kick at it till my toe comes through my boot. Thank ye."

"I tell you, I won't have you annoying me in public; once for all."

"Why, sir; I thought we parted friends, last time. Didn't you shake my hand, now, didn't you shake my hand, sir? I ask you, whether you shook

my hand, or whether you didn't? A plain answer. We had a bit of a scrimmage, coming home. I admit we had; but shaking hands, means 'friends again we are.' I know you're a gentleman, and a man like me shouldn't be so bold as fur to strike his betters. Only, don't you see, sir, Full-o'-Beer's a hasty chap, and up in a minute; and he's sorry for it after."

Algernon conceived a brilliant notion. Drawing five shillings from his pocket, he held them over to Sedgett, and told him to drive down to his chambers, and await his coming. Sedgett took the money; but it was five shillings lost. He made no exhibition of receiving orders, and it was impossible to address him imperiously without provoking observations of an animated kind from the elegant groups parading and sitting.

Young Harry Latters caught Algernon's eye; never was youth more joyfully greeted. Harry spoke of the Friday's race, and the defection of the horse Tenpenny Nail. A man passed with a nod and "How d' ye do?" for which he received in reply a cool stare.

"Who's that?" Algernon asked.

"The son of a high dignitary," said Harry.

"You cut him."

"I can do the thing, you see, when it's a public duty."

"What's the matter with him?"

"Merely a black-leg, a grec, a cheat, swindler, or whatever name you like," said Harry. "We none of us nod to the professionals in this line; and I won't exchange salutes with an amateur. I'm peculiar. He chose to be absent on the right day last year; so from that date; I consider him absent in toto; "none of your rrrrr--m reckonings, let's have the rrrrr--m toto;"--you remember Suckling's story of the Yankee fellow? Bye-bye; shall see you the day after to-morrow. You dine with me and Suckling at the club."

Latters was hailed by other friends. Algernon was forced to let him go. He dipped under the iron rail, and crossed the row at a run; an indecorous proceeding; he could not help it. The hope was that Sedgett would not have the like audacity, or might be stopped, and Algernon's reward for so just a calculation was, that on looking round, he found himself free. He slipped with all haste out of the Park. Sedgett's presence had the deadening power of the torpedo on the thousand pounds.

For the last quarter of an hour, Algernon had not felt a motion of it. A cab, to make his escape certain, was suggested to his mind; and he would have called a cab, had not the novel apparition of economy, which now haunted him, suggested that he had recently tossed five shillings into the gutter. A man might dine on four shillings and sixpence, enjoying a modest half-pint of wine, and he possessed that sum. To pinch himself and deserve well of Providence, he resolved not to drink wine, but beer,

that day. He named the beverage; a pint-bottle of ale; and laughed, as a royal economist may, who punishes himself to please himself.

"Mighty jolly, ain't it, sir?" said Sedgett, at his elbow.

Algernon faced about, and swore an oath from his boots upward; so vehement was his disgust, and all-pervading his amazement.

"I'll wallop you at that game," said Sedgett.

"You infernal scoundrel!"

"If you begin swearing," Sedgett warned him.

"What do you want with me?"

"I'll tell you, sir. I don't want to go to ne'er a cock-fight, nor betting hole."

"Here, come up this street," said Algernon, leading the way into a dusky defile from a main parade of fashion. "Now, what's your business, confound you!"

"Well, sir, I ain't goin' to be confounded: that, I'll--I'll swear to. The long and the short is, I must have some money 'fore the week's out."

"You won't have a penny from me."

"That's blunt, though it ain't in my pocket," said Sedgett, grinning. "I say, sir, respectful as you like, I must. I've got to pay for passengerin' over the sea, self and wife; and quick it must be. There's things to buy on both sides. A small advance and you won't be bothered. Say, fifty. Fifty, and you don't see me till Saturday, when, accordin' to agreement, you hand to me the cash, outside the church door; and then we parts to meet no more. Oh! let us be joyful--I'll sing."

Algernon's loathing of the coarseness and profanity of villany increased almost to the depth of a sentiment as he listened to Sedgett.

"I do nothing of the sort," he said. "You shall not have a farthing. Be off. If you follow me, I give you into custody of a policeman."

"You durst n't." Sedgett eyed him warily.

He could spy a physical weakness, by affinity of cowardice, as quickly as Algernon a moral weakness, by the same sort of relationship to it.

"You don't dare," Sedgett pursued. "And why should you, sir? there's ne'er a reason why. I'm civil. I asks for my own: no more 'n my own, it ain't. I call the bargain good: why sh'd I want fur to break it? I want the money bad. I'm sick o' this country. I'd like to be off in the first ship that sails. Can't you let me have ten till to-morrow? then t' other forty. I've got a mortal need for it, that I have. Come, it's

no use your walking at that rate; my legs are's good as yours."

Algernon had turned back to the great thoroughfare. He was afraid that ten pounds must be forfeited to this worrying demon in the flesh, and sought the countenance of his well-dressed fellows to encourage him in resisting. He could think of no subterfuge; menace was clearly useless: and yet the idea of changing one of the notes and for so infamous a creature, caused pangs that helped him further to endure his dogging feet and filthy tongue. This continued until he saw a woman's hand waving from a cab. Presuming that such a signal, objectionable as it was, must be addressed to himself, he considered whether he should lift his hat, or simply smile as a favoured, but not too deeply flattered, man. The cab drew up, and the woman said, "Sedgett." She was a well-looking woman, strongly coloured, brown-eyed, and hearty in appearance.

"What a brute you are, Sedgett, not to be at home when you brought me up to London with all the boxes and bedding--my goodness! It's a Providence I caught you in my eye, or I should have been driving down to the docks, and seeing about the ship. You are a brute. Come in, at once."

"If you're up to calling names, I've got one or two for you," Sedgett growled.

Algernon had heard enough. Sure that he had left Sedgett in hands not likely to relinquish him, he passed on with elastic step. Wine was greatly desired, after his torments. Where was credit to be had? True, he looked contemptuously on the blooming land of credit now, but an entry to it by one of the back doors would have been convenient, so that he might be nourished and restored by a benevolent dinner, while he kept his Thousand intact. However, he dismissed the contemplation of credit and its transient charms. "I won't dine at all," he said.

A beggar woman stretched out her hand--he dropped a shilling in it.

"Hang me, if I shall be able to," was his next reflection; and with the remaining three and sixpence, he crossed the threshold of a tobacconist's shop and bought cigars, to save himself from excesses in charity. After gravely reproaching the tobacconist for the growing costliness of cigars, he came into the air, feeling extraordinarily empty. Of this he soon understood the cause, and it amused him. Accustomed to the smell of tobacco always when he came from his dinner, it seemed, as the fumes of the shop took his nostril, that demands were being made within him by an inquisitive spirit, and dissatisfaction expressed at the vacancy there.

"What's the use? I can't dine," he uttered argumentatively. "I'm not going to change a note, and I won't dine. I've no Club. There's not a fellow I can see who'll ask me to dine. I'll lounge along home. There is some Sherry there."

But Algernon bore vividly in mind that he did not approve of that Sherry.

"I've heard of fellows frying sausages at home, and living on something like two shillings a day," he remarked in meditation; and then it struck

him that Mrs. Lovell's parcel of returned jewels lay in one of his drawers at home--that is, if the laundress had left the parcel untouched.

In an agony of alarm, he called a cab, and drove hotly to the Temple. Finding the packet safe, he put a couple of rings and the necklace with the opal in his waistcoat pocket. The cabman must be paid, of course; so a jewel must be pawned. Which shall it be? diamond or opal? Change a dozen times and let it be the trinket in the right hand--the opal; let it be the opal. How much would the opal fetch? The pawnbroker can best inform us upon that point. So he drove to the pawnbroker; one whom he knew. The pawnbroker offered him five-and-twenty pounds on the security of the opal.

"What on earth is it that people think disgraceful in your entering a pawnbroker's shop?" Algernon asked himself when, taking his ticket and the five-and-twenty pounds, he repelled the stare of a man behind a neighbouring partition.

"There are not many of that sort in the kingdom," he said to the pawnbroker, who was loftily fondling the unlucky opal.

"Well--h'm; perhaps there's not;" the pawnbroker was ready to admit it, now that the arrangement had been settled.

"I shan't be able to let you keep it long."

"As quick back as you like, sir."

Algernon noticed as he turned away that the man behind the partition, who had more the look of a dapper young shopman than of a needy petitioner for loans or securities, stretched over the counter to look at the opal; and he certainly heard his name pronounced. It enraged him; but policy counselled a quiet behaviour in this place, and no quarrelling with his pawnbroker. Besides, his whole nature cried out for dinner. He dined and had his wine; as good, he ventured to assert, as any man could get for the money; for he knew the hotels with the venerable cellars.

"I should have made a first-rate courier to a millionaire," he said, with scornful candour, but without abusing the disposition of things which had ordered his being a gentleman. Subsequently, from his having sat so long over his wine without moving a leg, he indulged in the belief that he had reflected profoundly; out of which depths he started, very much like a man who has dozed, and felt a discomfort in his limbs and head.

"I must forget myself," he said. Nor was any grave mentor by, to assure him that his tragic state was the issue of an evil digestion of his dinner and wine. "I must forget myself. I'm under some doom. I see it now. Nobody cares for me. I don't know what happiness is. I was born under a bad star. My fate's written." Following his youthful wisdom, this wounded hart dragged his slow limbs toward the halls of brandy and song.

One learns to have compassion for fools, by studying them: and the fool,

though Nature is wise, is next door to Nature. He is naked in his simplicity; he can tell us much, and suggest more. My excuse for dwelling upon him is, that he holds the link of my story. Where fools are numerous, one of them must be prominent now and then in a veracious narration. There comes an hour when the veil drops on him, he not being always clean to the discreeter touch.

Algernon was late at the Bank next day, and not cheerful, though he received his customary reprimand with submission. This day was after the pattern of the day preceding, except that he did not visit the Park; the night likewise.

On Wednesday morning, he arose with the conviction that England was no place for him to dwell in. What if Rhoda were to accompany him to one of the colonies? The idea had been gradually taking shape in his mind from the moment that he had possessed the Thousand. Could she not make butter and cheeses capitally, while he rode on horseback through space? She was a strong girl, a loyal girl, and would be a grateful wife.

"I'll marry her," he said; and hesitated. "Yes, I'll marry her." But it must be done immediately.

He resolved to run down to Wrexby, rejoice her with a declaration of love, astound her with a proposal of marriage, bewilder her little brain with hurrying adjectives, whisk her up to London, and in little more than a week be sailing on the high seas, new born; nothing of civilization about him, save a few last very first-rate cigars which he projected to smoke on the poop of the vessel, and so dream of the world he left behind.

He went down to the Bank in better spirits, and there wrote off a straightforward demand of an interview, to Rhoda, hinting at the purpose of it. While at his work, he thought of Harry Latters and Lord Suckling, and the folly of his dining with men in his present position. Settling-day, it or yesterday might be, but a colonist is not supposed to know anything of those arrangements. One of his fellow-clerks reminded him of a loan he had contracted, and showed him his name written under obligatory initials. He paid it, ostentatiously drawing out one of his fifties. Up came another, with a similar strip of paper. "You don't want me to change this, do you?" said Algernon; and heard a tale of domestic needs--and a grappling landlady. He groaned inwardly: "Odd that I must pay for his landlady being a vixen!" The note was changed; the debt liquidated. On the door-step, as he was going to lunch, old Anthony waylaid him, and was almost noisily persistent in demanding his one pound three and his five pound ten. Algernon paid the sums, ready to believe that there was a suspicion abroad of his intention to become a colonist.

He employed the luncheon hour in a visit to a colonial shipping office, and nearly ran straight upon Sedgett at the office-door. The woman who had hailed him from the cab, was in Sedgett's company, but Sedgett saw no one. His head hung and his sullen brows were drawn moodily. Algernon escaped from observation. His first inquiry at the office was as to the business of the preceding couple, and he was satisfied by hearing that

Sedgett wanted berths for himself and wife.

"Who's the woman, I wonder!" Algernon thought, and forgot her.

He obtained some particular information, and returning to the Bank, was called before his uncle, who curtly reckoned up his merits in a contemptuous rebuke, and confirmed him in his resolution to incur this sort of thing no longer. In consequence, he promised Sir William that he would amend his ways, and these were the first hopeful words that Sir William had ever heard from him.

Algernon's design was to dress, that evening, in the uniform of society, so that, in the event of his meeting Harry Latters, he might assure him he was coming to his Club, and had been compelled to dine elsewhere with his uncle, or anybody. When he reached the door of his chambers, a man was standing there, who said,--

"Mr. Algernon Blancove?"

"Yes," Algernon prolonged an affirmative, to diminish the confidence it might inspire, if possible.

"May I speak with you, sir?"

Algernon told him to follow in. The man was tall and large-featured, with an immense blank expression of face.

"I've come from Mr. Samuels, sir," he said, deferentially.

Mr. Samuels was Algernon's chief jeweller.

"Oh," Algernon remarked. "Well, I don't want anything; and let me say, I don't approve of this touting for custom. I thought Mr. Samuels was above it."

The man bowed. "My business is not that, sir. Ahem! I dare say you remember an opal you had from our house. It was set in a necklace."

"All right; I remember it, perfectly," said Algernon; cool, but not of the collected colour.

"The cost of it was fifty-five pounds, sir."

"Was it? Well, I've forgotten."

"We find that it has been pawned for five-and-twenty."

"A little less than half," said Algernon. "Pawnbrokers are simply cheats."

"They mayn't be worse than others," the man observed.

Algernon was exactly in the position where righteous anger is the proper

weapon, if not the sole resource. He flushed, but was not sure of his opportunity for the explosion. The man read the flush.

"May I ask you, did you pawn it, sir? I'm obliged to ask the question."

"I?--I really don't--I don't choose to answer impudent questions. What do you mean by coming here?"

"I may as well be open with you, sir, to prevent misunderstandings. One of the young men was present when you pawned it. He saw the thing done."

"Suppose he did?"

"He would be a witness."

"Against me? I've dealt with Samuels for three-four years."

"Yes, sir; but you have never yet paid any account; and I believe I am right in saying that this opal is not the first thing coming from our house that has been pledged--I can't say you did it on the other occasions."

"You had better not," rejoined Algernon.

He broke an unpleasant silence by asking, "What further?"

"My master has sent you his bill."

Algernon glanced at the prodigious figures.

"Five hun--!" he gasped, recoiling; and added, "Well, I can't pay it on the spot."

"Let me tell you, you're liable to proceedings you'd better avoid, sir, for the sake of your relations."

"You dare to threaten to expose me to my relatives?" Algernon said haughtily, and immediately perceived that indignation at this point was a clever stroke; for the man, while deprecating the idea of doing so, showed his more established belief in the possible virtue of such a threat.

"Not at all, sir; but you know that pledging things not paid for is illegal, and subject to penalties. No tradesman likes it; they can't allow it. I may as well let you know that Mr. Samuels--"

"There, stop!" cried Algernon, laughing, as he thought, heartily. "Mr. Samuels is a very tolerable Jew; but he doesn't seem to understand dealing with gentlemen. Pressure comes;" he waved his hand swimmingly; "one wants money, and gets it how one can. Mr. Samuels shall not go to bed thinking he has been defrauded. I will teach Mr. Samuels to think better of us Gentiles. Write me a receipt."

"For what amount, sir?" said the man, briskly.

"For the value of the opal--that is to say, for the value put upon it by Mr. Samuels. Con! hang! never mind. Write the receipt."

He cast a fluttering fifty and a fluttering five on the table, and pushed paper to the man for a receipt.

The man reflected, and refused to take them.

"I don't think, sir," he said, "that less than two-thirds of the bill will make Mr. Samuels easy. You see, this opal was in a necklace. It wasn't like a ring you might have taken off your finger. It's a lady's ornament; and soon after you obtain it from us; you make use of it by turning it into cash. It's a case for a criminal prosecution, which, for the sake of your relations, Mr. Samuels wouldn't willingly bring on. The criminal box is no place for you, sir; but Mr. Samuels must have his own. His mind is not easy. I shouldn't like, sir, to call a policeman."

"Hey!" shouted Algernon; "you'd have to get a warrant."

"It's out, sir."

Though inclined toward small villainies, he had not studied law, and judging from his own affrighted sensations, and the man's impassive face, Algernon supposed that warrants were as lightly granted as writs of summons.

He tightened his muscles. In his time he had talked glibly of Perdition; but this was hot experience. He and the man measured the force of their eyes. Algernon let his chest fall.

"Do you mean?" he murmured.

"Why, sir, it's no use doing things by halves. When a tradesman says he must have his money, he takes his precautions."

"Are you in Mr. Samuels' shop?"

"Not exactly, sir."

"You're a detective?"

"I have been in the service, sir."

"Ah! now I understand." Algernon raised his head with a strain at haughtiness. "If Mr. Samuels had accompanied you, I would have discharged the debt: It's only fair that I should insist upon having a receipt from him personally, and for the whole amount."

With this, he drew forth his purse and displayed the notable Five hundred.

His glow of victory was short. The impassive man likewise had something to exhibit.

"I assure you, sir," he said, "Mr. Samuels does know how to deal with gentlemen. If you will do me the honour, sir, to run up with me to Mr. Samuels' shop? Or, very well, sir; to save you that annoyance here is his receipt to the bill."

Algernon mechanically crumpled up his note.

"Samuels?" ejaculated the unhappy fellow. "Why, my mother dealt with Samuels. My aunt dealt with Samuels. All my family have dealt with him for years; and he talks of proceeding against me, because--upon my soul, it's too absurd! Sending a policeman, too! I'll tell you what--the exposure would damage Mister Samuels most materially. Of course, my father would have to settle the matter; but Mister--Mister Samuels would not recover so easily. He'd be glad to refund the five hundred--what is it?--and twenty-five--why not, 'and sixpence three farthings?' I tell you, I shall let my father pay. Mr. Samuels had better serve me with a common writ. I tell you, I'm not going to denude myself of money altogether. I haven't examined the bill. Leave it here. You can tear off the receipt. Leave it here."

The man indulged in a slight demonstration of dissent.

"No, sir, that won't do."

"Half the bill," roared Algernon; "half the bill, I wouldn't mind paying."

"About two-thirds, sir, is what Mr. Samuels asked for, and he'll stop, and go on as before."

"He'll stop and he'll go on, will he? Mr. Samuels is amazingly like one of his own watches," Algernon sneered vehemently. "Well," he pursued, in fancied security, "I'll pay two-thirds."

"Three hundred, sir."

"Ay, three hundred. Tell him to send a receipt for the three hundred, and he shall have it. As to my entering his shop again, that I shall have to think over."

"That's what gentlemen in Mr. Samuels' position have to run risk of, sir," said the man.

Algernon, more in astonishment than trepidation, observed him feeling at his breast-pocket. The action resulted in an exhibition of a second bill, with a legal receipt attached to it, for three hundred pounds.

"Mr. Samuels is anxious to accommodate you in every way, sir. It isn't the full sum he wants; it's a portion. He thought you might prefer to discharge a portion."

After this exhibition of foresight on the part of the jeweller, there was no more fight in Algernon beyond a strenuous "Faugh!" of uttermost disgust.

He examined the bill and receipt in the man's hand with great apparent scrupulousness; not, in reality, seeing a clear syllable.

"Take it and change it," he threw his Five hundred down, but recovered it from the enemy's grasp; and with a "one, two, three," banged his hundreds on the table: for which he had the loathsome receipt handed to him.

"How," he asked, chokingly, "did Mr. Samuels know I could--I had money?"

"Why, sir, you see," the man, as one who throws off a mask, smiled cordially, after buttoning up the notes; "credit 'd soon give up the ghost, if it hadn't its own dodges,' as I may say. This is only a feeler on Mr. Samuels' part. He heard of his things going to pledge. Halloa! he sings out. And tradesmen are human, sir. Between us, I side with gentlemen, in most cases. Hows'-ever, I'm, so to speak, in Mr. Samuels' pay. A young gentleman in debt, give him a good fright, out comes his money, if he's got any. Sending of a bill receipted's a good trying touch. It's a compliment to him to suppose he can pay. Mr. Samuels, sir, wouldn't go issuing a warrant: if he could, he wouldn't. You named a warrant; that set me up to it. I shouldn't have dreamed of a gentleman supposing it otherwise. Didn't you notice me show a wall of a face? I shouldn't ha' dared to have tried that on an old hand--begging your pardon; I mean a real--a scoundrel. The regular ones must see features: we mustn't be too cunning with them, else they grow suspicious: they're keen as animals; they are. Good afternoon to you, sir."

Algernon heard the door shut. He reeled into a chair, and muffling his head in his two arms on the table, sobbed desperately; seeing himself very distinctly reflected in one of the many facets of folly. Daylight became undesirable to him. He went to bed.

A man who can, in such extremities of despair, go premeditatingly to his pillow, obeys an animal instinct in pursuit of oblivion, that will befriend his nerves. Algernon awoke in deep darkness, with a delicious sensation of hunger. He jumped up. Six hundred and fifty pounds of the money remained intact; and he was joyful. He struck a light to look at his watch: the watch had stopped;--that was a bad sign. He could not forget it. Why had his watch stopped? A chilling thought as to whether predestination did not govern the world, allayed all tumult in his mind. He dressed carefully, and soon heard a great City bell, with horrid gulfs between the strokes, tell him that the hour was eleven toward midnight. "Not late," he said.

"Who'd have thought it?" cried a voice on the landing of the stairs, as he went forth.

It was Sedgett.

Algernon had one inclination to strangle, and another to mollify the wretch.

"Why, sir, I've been lurking heer for your return from your larks. Never guessed you was in."

"It's no use," Algernon began.

"Ay; but it is, though," said Sedgett, and forced his way into the room. "Now, just listen. I've got a young woman I want to pack out o' the country. I must do it, while I'm a--a bachelor boy. She must go, or we shall be having shindies. You saw how she caught me out of a cab. She's sure to be in the place where she ain't wanted. She goes to America. I've got to pay her passage, and mine too. Here's the truth: she thinks I'm off with her. She knows I'm bankrup' at home. So I am. All the more reason for her thinking me her companion. I get her away by train to the vessel, and on board, and there I give her the slip.

"Ship's steaming away by this time t'morrow night. I've paid for her-- and myself too, she thinks. Leave it to me. I'll manage all that neatly enough. But heer's the truth: I'm stumped. I must, and I will have fifty; I don't want to utter ne'er a threat. I want the money, and if you don't give it, I break off; and you mind this, Mr. Blancove: you don't come off s' easy, if I do break off, mind. I know all about your relations, and by--! I'll let 'em know all about you. Why, you're as quiet heer, sir, as if you was miles away, in a wood cottage, and ne'er a dog near."

So Algernon was thinking; and without a light, save the gas lamp in the square, moreover.

They wrangled for an hour. When Algernon went forth a second time, he was by fifty pounds poorer. He consoled himself by thinking that the money had only anticipated its destination as arranged, and it became a partial gratification to him to reflect that he had, at any rate, paid so much of the sum, according to his bond in assuming possession of it.

And what were to be his proceedings? They were so manifestly in the hands of fate, that he declined to be troubled on that head.

Next morning came the usual short impatient scrawl on thin blue paper from Edward, scarce worthy of a passing thought. In a postscript, he asked: "Are there, on your oath, no letters for me? If there are, send them immediately--every one, bills as well. Don't fail. I must have them."

Algernon was at last persuaded to pack up Dahlia's letters, saying: "I suppose they can't do any harm now." The expense of the postage afflicted him; but "women always cost a dozen to our one," he remarked. On his way to the City, he had to decide whether he would go to the Bank, or take the train leading to Wrexby. He chose the latter course, until, feeling that he was about to embark in a serious undertaking, he said to himself, "No! duty first;" and postponed the expedition for the day

following.

CHAPTER XXXII

Squire Blancove, having business in town, called on his brother at the Bank, asking whether Sir William was at home, with sarcastic emphasis on the title, which smelt to him of commerce. Sir William invited him to dine and sleep at his house that night.

"You will meet Mrs. Lovell, and a Major Waring, a friend of hers, who knew her and her husband in India," said the baronet.

"The deuce I shall," said the squire, and accepted maliciously.

Where the squire dined, he drank, defying ladies and the new-fangled subserviency to those fluttering teabodies. This was understood; so, when the Claret and Port had made a few rounds, Major Waring was permitted to follow Mrs. Lovell, and the squire and his brother settled to conversation; beginning upon gout. Sir William had recently had a touch of the family complaint, and spoke of it in terms which gave the squire some fraternal sentiment. From that, they fell to talking politics, and differed. The breach was healed by a divergence to their sons. The squire knew his own to be a scamp.

"You'll never do anything with him," he said.

"I don't think I shall," Sir William admitted.

"Didn't I tell you so?"

"You did. But, the point is, what will you do with him?"

"Send him to Jericho to ride wild jackasses. That's all he's fit for."

The superior complacency of Sir William's smile caught the squire's attention.

"What do you mean to do with Ned?" he asked.

"I hope," was the answer, "to have him married before the year is out."

"To the widow?"

"The widow?" Sir William raised his eyebrows.

"Mrs. Lovell, I mean."

"What gives you that idea?"

"Why, Ned has made her an offer. Don't you know that?"

"I know nothing of the sort."

"And don't believe it? He has. He's only waiting now, over there in Paris, to get comfortably out of a scrape--you remember what I told you at Fairly--and then Mrs. Lovell's going to have him--as he thinks; but, by George, it strikes me this major you've got here, knows how to follow petticoats and get in his harvest in the enemy's absence."

"I think you're quite under a delusion, in both respects," observed Sir William.

"What makes you think that?"

"I have Edward's word."

"He lies as naturally as an infant sucks."

"Pardon me; this is my son you are speaking of."

"And this is your Port I'm drinking; so I'll say no more."

The squire emptied his glass, and Sir William thrummed on the table.

"Now, my dog has got his name," the squire resumed. "I'm not ambitious about him. You are, about yours; and you ought to know him. He spends or he don't spend. It's not the question whether he gets into debt, but whether he does mischief with what he spends. If Algy's a bad fish, Ned's a bit of a serpent; damned clever, no doubt. I suppose, you wouldn't let him marry old Fleming's daughter, now, if he wanted to?"

"Who is Fleming?" Sir William thundered out.

"Fleming's the father of the girl. I'm sorry for him. He sells his farm-land which I've been looking at for years; so I profit by it; but I don't like to see a man like that broken up. Algy, I said before, 's a bad fish. Hang me, if I think he'd have behaved like Ned. If he had, I'd have compelled him to marry her, and shipped them both off, clean out of the country, to try their luck elsewhere.

"You're proud; I'm practical. I don't expect you to do the same. I'm up in London now to raise money to buy the farm--Queen's Anne's Farm; it's advertized for sale, I see. Fleeting won't sell it to me privately, because my name's Blancove, and I'm the father of my son, and he fancies Algy's the man. Why? he saw Algy at the theatre in London with this girl of his;--we were all young fellows once!--and the rascal took Ned's burden on his shoulders. So, I shall have to compete with other buyers, and pay, I dare say, a couple of hundred extra for the property. Do you believe what I tell you now?"

"Not a word of it," said Sir William blandly.

The squire seized the decanter and drank in a fury.

"I had it from Algy."

"That would all the less induce me to believe it."

"H'm!" the squire frowned. "Let me tell you--he's a dog--but it's a damned hard thing to hear one's own flesh and blood abused. Look here: there's a couple. One of them has made a fool of a girl. It can't be my rascal--stop a minute--he isn't the man, because she'd have been sure to have made a fool of him, that's certain. He's a soft-hearted dog. He'd aim at a cock-sparrow, and be glad if he missed. There you have him. He was one of your good boys. I used to tell his poor mother, 'When you leave off thinking for him, he'll go to the first handy villain--and that's the devil.' And he's done it. But, here's the difference. He goes himself; he don't send another. I'll tell you what: if you don't know about Mr. Ned's tricks, you ought. And you ought to make him marry the girl, and be off to New Zealand, or any of the upside-down places, where he might begin by farming, and soon, with his abilities, be cock o' the walk. He would, perhaps, be sending us a letter to say that he preferred to break away from the mother country and establish a republic. He's got the same political opinions as you. Oh! he'll do well enough over here; of course he will. He's the very fellow to do well. Knock at him, he's hard as nails, and 'll stick anywhere. You wouldn't listen to me, when I told you about this at Fairly, where some old sweetheart of the girl mistook that poor devil of a scapegoat, Algy, for him, and went pegging at him like a madman."

"No," said Sir William; "No, I would not. Nor do I now. At least," he struck out his right hand deprecatingly, "I listen."

"Can you tell me what he was doing when he went to Italy?"

"He went partly at my suggestion."

"Turns you round his little finger! He went off with this girl: wanted to educate her, or some nonsense of the sort. That was Mr. Ned's business. Upon my soul, I'm sorry for old Fleming. I'm told he takes it to heart. It's done him up. Now, if it should turn out to be Ned, would you let him right the girl by marrying her? You wouldn't!"

"The principle of examining your hypothesis before you proceed to decide by it, is probably unknown to you," Sir William observed, after bestowing a considerate smile on his brother, who muffled himself up from the chilling sententiousness, and drank.

Sir William, in the pride of superior intellect, had heard as good as nothing of the charge against his son.

"Well," said the squire, "think as you like, act as you like; all's one to me. You're satisfied; that's clear; and I'm some hundred of pounds out of pocket. This major's paying court to the widow, is he?"

"I can't say that he is."

"It would be a good thing for her to get married."

"I should be glad."

"A good thing for her, I say."

"A good thing for him, let us hope."

"If he can pay her debts."

Sir William was silent, and sipped his wine.

"And if he can keep a tight hand on the reins. That's wanted," said the squire.

The gentleman whose road to happiness was thus prescribed stood by Mrs. Lovell's chair, in the drawing-room. He held a letter in his hand, for which her own was pleadingly extended.

"I know you to be the soul of truth, Percy," she was saying.

"The question is not that; but whether you can bear the truth."

"Can I not? Who would live without it?"

"Pardon me; there's more. You say, you admire this friend of mine; no doubt you do. Mind, I am going to give you the letter. I wish you simply to ask yourself now, whether you are satisfied at my making a confidant of a man in Robert Eccles's position, and think it natural and just--you do?"

"Quite just," said Mrs. Lovell; "and natural? Yes, natural; though not common. Eccentric; which only means, hors du commun; and can be natural. It is natural. I was convinced he was a noble fellow, before I knew that you had made a friend of him. I am sure of it now. And did he not save your life, Percy?"

"I have warned you that you are partly the subject of the letter."

"Do you forget that I am a woman, and want it all the more impatiently?"

Major Waring suffered the letter to be snatched from his hand, and stood like one who is submitting to a test, or watching the effect of a potent drug.

"It is his second letter to you," Mrs. Lovell murmured. "I see; it is a reply to yours."

She read a few lines, and glanced up, blushing. "Am I not made to bear more than I deserve?"

"If you can do such mischief, without meaning any, to a man who is in

love with another woman--," said Percy.

"Yes," she nodded, "I perceive the deduction; but inferences are like shadows on the wall--they are thrown from an object, and are monstrous distortions of it. That is why you misjudge women. You infer one thing from another, and are ruled by the inference."

He simply bowed. Edward would have answered her in a bright strain, and led her on to say brilliant things, and then have shown her, as by a sudden light, that she had lost herself, and reduced her to feel the strength and safety of his hard intellect. That was the idea in her brain. The next moment her heart ejected it.

"Petty, when I asked permission to look at this letter, I was not aware how great a compliment it would be to me if I was permitted to see it. It betrays your friend."

"It betrays something more," said he.

Mrs. Lovell cast down her eyes and read, without further comment.

These were the contents:--

"My Dear Percy,--Now that I see her every day again, I am worse than ever; and I remember thinking once or twice that Mrs. L. had cured me. I am a sort of man who would jump to reach the top of a mountain. I understand how superior Mrs. L. is to every woman in the world I have seen; but Rhoda cures me on that head. Mrs. Lovell makes men mad and happy, and Rhoda makes them sensible and miserable. I have had the talk with Rhoda. It is all over. I have felt like being in a big room with one candle alight ever since. She has not looked at me, and does nothing but get by her father whenever she can, and takes his hand and holds it. I see where the blow has struck her: it has killed her pride; and Rhoda is almost all pride. I suppose she thinks our plan is the best. She has not said she does, and does not mention her sister. She is going to die, or she turns nun, or marries a gentleman. I shall never get her. She will not forgive me for bringing this news to her. I told you how she coloured, the first day I came; which has all gone now. She just opens her lips to me. You remember Corporal Thwaites--you caught his horse, when he had his foot near wrenched off, going through the gate--and his way of breathing through the under-row of his teeth--the poor creature was in such pain--that's just how she takes her breath. It makes her look sometimes like that woman's head with the snakes for her hair. This bothers me--how is it you and Mrs. Lovell manage to talk together of such things? Why, two men rather hang their heads a bit. My notion is, that women--ladies, in especial, ought never to hear of sad things of this sort. Of course, I mean, if they do, it cannot harm them. It only upsets me. Why are ladies less particular than girls in Rhoda's place?"

("Shame being a virtue," was Mrs. Lovell's running comment.)

"She comes up to town with her father to-morrow. The farm is ruined. The poor old man had to ask me for a loan to pay the journey. Luckily, Rhoda has saved enough with her pennies and two-pences. Ever since I left the farm, it has been in the hands of an old donkey here, who has worked it his own way. What is in the ground will stop there, and may as well.

"I leave off writing, I write such stuff; and if I go on writing to you, I shall be putting these things '!--!--!' The way you write about Mrs. Lovell, convinces me you are not in my scrape, or else gentlemen are just as different from their inferiors as ladies are from theirs. That's the question. What is the meaning of your 'not being able to leave her for a day, for fear she should fall under other influences'? Then, I copy your words, you say, 'She is all things to everybody, and cannot help it.' In that case, I would seize my opportunity and her waist, and tell her she was locked up from anybody else. Friendship with men--but I cannot understand friendship with women, and watching them to keep them right, which must mean that you do not think much of them."

Mrs. Lovell, at this point, raised her eyes abruptly from the letter and returned it.

"You discuss me very freely with your friend," she said.

Percy drooped to her. "I warned you when you wished to read it."

"But, you see, you have bewildered him. It was scarcely wise to write other than plain facts. Men of that class." She stopped.

"Of that class?" said he.

"Men of any class, then: you yourself: if any one wrote to you such things, what would you think? It is very unfair. I have the honour of seeing you daily, because you cannot trust me out of your sight? What is there inexplicable about me? Do you wonder that I talk openly of women who are betrayed, and do my best to help them?"

"On the contrary; you command my esteem," said Percy.

"But you think me a puppet?"

"Fond of them, perhaps?" his tone of voice queried in a manner that made her smile.

"I hate them," she said, and her face expressed it.

"But you make them."

"How? You torment me."

"How can I explain the magic? Are you not making one of me now, where I stand?"

"Then, sit."

"Or kneel?"

"Oh, Percy! do nothing ridiculous."

Inveterate insight was a characteristic of Major Waring; but he was not the less in Mrs. Lovell's net. He knew it to be a charm that she exercised almost unknowingly. She was simply a sweet instrument for those who could play on it, and therein lay her mighty fascination. Robert's blunt advice that he should seize the chance, take her and make her his own, was powerful with him. He checked the particular appropriating action suggested by Robert.

"I owe you an explanation," he said. "Margaret, my friend."

"You can think of me as a friend, Percy?"

"If I can call you my friend, what would I not call you besides? I did you a great and shameful wrong when you were younger. Hush! you did not deserve that. Judge of yourself as you will; but I know now what my feelings were then. The sublime executioner was no more than a spiteful man. You give me your pardon, do you not? Your hand?"

She had reached her hand to him, but withdrew it quickly.

"Not your hand, Margaret? But, you must give it to some one. You will be ruined, if you do not."

She looked at him with full eyes. "You know it then?" she said slowly; but the gaze diminished as he went on.

"I know, by what I know of you, that you of all women should owe a direct allegiance. Come; I will assume privileges. Are you free?"

"Would you talk to me so, if you thought otherwise?" she asked.

"I think I would," said Percy. "A little depends upon the person. Are you pledged at all to Mr. Edward Blancove?"

"Do you suppose me one to pledge myself?"

"He is doing a base thing."

"Then, Percy, let an assurance of my knowledge of that be my answer."

"You do not love the man?"

Despise him, say!"

"Is he aware of it?"

"If clear writing can make him."

"You have told him as much?"

"To his apprehension, certainly."

"Further, Margaret, I must speak:--did he act with your concurrence, or knowledge of it at all, in acting as he has done?"

"Heavens! Percy, you question me like a husband."

"It is what I mean to be, if I may."

The frame of the fair lady quivered as from a blow, and then her eyes rose tenderly.

"I thought you knew me. This is not possible."

"You will not be mine? Why is it not possible?"

"I think I could say, because I respect you too much."

"Because you find you have not the courage?"

"For what?"

"To confess that you were under bad influence, and were not the Margaret I can make of you. Put that aside. If you remain as you are, think of the snares. If you marry one you despise, look at the pit. Yes; you will be mine! Half my love of my country and my profession is love of you. Margaret is fire in my blood. I used to pray for opportunities, that Margaret might hear of me. I knew that gallant actions touched her; I would have fallen gladly; I was sure her heart would leap when she heard of me. Let it beat against mine. Speak!"

"I will," said Mrs. Lovell, and she suppressed the throbs of her bosom. Her voice was harsh and her face bloodless. "How much money have you, Percy?"

This sudden sluicing of cold water on his heat of passion petrified him.

"Money," he said, with a strange frigid scrutiny of her features. As in the flash of a mirror, he beheld her bony, worn, sordid, unacceptable. But he was fain to admit it to be an eminently proper demand for enlightenment.

He said deliberately, "I possess an income of five hundred a year, extraneous, and in addition to my pay as major in Her Majesty's service."

Then he paused, and the silence was like a growing chasm between them.

She broke it by saying, "Have you any expectations?"

This was crueller still, though no longer astonishing. He complained in his heart merely that her voice had become so unpleasant.

With emotionless precision, he replied, "At my mother's death--"

She interposed a soft exclamation.

"At my mother's death there will come to me by reversion, five or six thousand pounds. When my father dies, he may possibly bequeath his property to me. On that I cannot count."

Veritable tears were in her eyes. Was she affecting to weep sympathetically in view of these remote contingencies?

"You will not pretend that you know me now, Percy," she said, trying to smile; and she had recovered the natural feminine key of her voice. "I am mercenary, you see; not a mercenary friend. So, keep me as a friend-- say you will be my friend."

"Nay, you had a right to know," he protested.

"It was disgraceful--horrible; but it was necessary for me to know."

"And now that you do know?"

"Now that I know, I have only to say--be as merciful in your idea of me as you can."

She dropped her hand in his, and it was with a thrill of dismay that he felt the rush of passion reanimating his frozen veins.

"Be mercenary, but be mine! I will give you something better to live for than this absurd life of fashion. You reckon on what our expenditure will be by that standard. It's comparative poverty; but--but you can have some luxuries. You can have a carriage, a horse to ride. Active service may come: I may rise. Give yourself to me, and you must love me, and regret nothing."

"Nothing! I should regret nothing. I don't want carriages, or horses, or luxuries. I could live with you on a subaltern's pay. I can't marry you, Percy, and for the very reason which would make me wish to marry you."

"Charade?" said he; and the contempt of the utterance brought her head close under his.

"Dearest friend, you have not to learn how to punish me."

The little reproach, added to the wound to his pride, required a healing medicament; she put her lips to his fingers.

Assuredly the comedy would not have ended there, but it was stopped by an intrusion of the squire, followed by Sir William, who, while the squire--

full of wine and vindictive humours--went on humming, "Ah! h'm--m--m! Soh!" said in the doorway to some one behind him: "And if you have lost your key, and Algernon is away, of what use is it to drive down to the Temple for a bed? I make it an especial request that you sleep here tonight. I wish it. I have to speak with you."

Mrs. Lovell was informed that the baronet had been addressing his son, who was fresh from Paris, and not, in his own modest opinion, presentable before a lady.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Once more Farmer Fleming and Rhoda prepared for their melancholy journey up to London. A light cart was at the gateway, near which Robert stood with the farmer, who, in his stiff brown overcoat, that reached to his ankles, and broad country-hat, kept his posture of dumb expectation like a stalled ox, and nodded to Robert's remarks on the care which the garden had been receiving latterly, the many roses clean in bud, and the trim blue and white and red garden beds. Every word was a blow to him; but he took it, as well as Rhoda's apparent dilatoriness, among the things to be submitted to by a man cut away by the roots from the home of his labour and old associations. Above his bowed head there was a board proclaiming that Queen Anne's Farm, and all belonging thereunto, was for sale. His prospect in the vague wilderness of the future, was to seek for acceptance as a common labourer on some kind gentleman's property. The phrase "kind gentleman" was adopted by his deliberate irony of the fate which cast him out. Robert was stamping fretfully for Rhoda to come. At times, Mrs. Sumfit showed her head from the window of her bed-room, crying, "D'rectly!" and disappearing.

The still aspect of the house on the shining May afternoon was otherwise undisturbed. Besides Rhoda, Master Gammon was being waited for; on whom would devolve the driving of the cart back from the station. Robert heaped his vexed exclamations upon this old man. The farmer restrained his voice in Master Gammon's defence, thinking of the comparison he could make between him and Robert: for Master Gammon had never run away from the farm and kept absent, leaving it to take care of itself. Gammon, slow as he might be, was faithful, and it was not he who had made it necessary for the farm to be sold. Gammon was obstinate, but it was not he who, after taking a lead, and making the farm dependent on his lead, had absconded with the brains and energy of the establishment. Such reflections passed through the farmer's mind.

Rhoda and Mrs. Sumfit came together down the trim pathway; and Robert now had a clear charge against Master Gammon. He recommended an immediate departure.

"The horse 'll bring himself home quite as well and as fast as Gammon will," he said.

"But for the shakin' and the joltin', which tells o' sovereigns and silver," Mrs. Sumfit was observing to Rhoda, "you might carry the box-- and who would have guessed how stout it was, and me to hit it with a poker and not break it, I couldn't, nor get a single one through the slit;--the sight I was, with a poker in my hand! I do declare I felt azactly like a housebreaker;--and no soul to notice what you carries. Where you hear the gold, my dear, go so"--Mrs. Sumfit performed a methodical "Ahem!" and noised the sole of her shoe on the gravel "so, and folks 'll think it's a mistake they made."

"What's that?"--the farmer pointed at a projection under Rhoda's shawl.

"It is a present, father, for my sister," said Rhoda.

"What is it?" the farmer questioned again.

Mrs. Sumfit fawned before him penitently--"Ah! William, she's poor, and she do want a little to spend, or she will be so nipped and like a frost-bitten body, she will. And, perhaps, dear, haven't money in her sight for next day's dinner, which is--oh, such a panic for a young wife! for it ain't her hunger, dear William--her husband, she thinks of. And her cookery at a stand-still! Thinks she, 'he will charge it on the kitchen;' so unreasonable's men. Yes," she added, in answer to the rigid dejection of his look, "I said true to you. I know I said, 'Not a penny can I get, William,' when you asked me for loans; and how could I get it? I can't get it now. See here, dear!"

She took the box from under Rhoda's shawl, and rattled it with a down turn and an up turn.

"You didn't ask me, dear William, whether I had a money-box. I'd ha' told you so at once, had ye but asked me. And had you said, "Gi' me your money-box," it was yours, only for your asking. You do see, you can't get any of it out. So, when you asked for money I was right to say, I'd got none."

The farmer bore with her dreary rattling of the box in demonstration of its retentive capacities. The mere force of the show stopped him from retorting; but when, to excuse Master Gammon for his tardiness, she related that he also had a money-box, and was in search of it, the farmer threw up his head with the vigour of a young man, and thundered for Master Gammon, by name, vehemently wrathful at the combined hypocrisy of the pair. He called twice, and his face was purple and red as he turned toward the cart, saying,--

"We'll go without the old man."

Mrs. Sumfit then intertwisted her fingers, and related how that she and Master Gammon had one day, six years distant, talked on a lonely evening over the mischances which befel poor people when they grew infirm, or met with accident, and what "useless clays" they were; and yet they had their feelings. It was a long and confidential talk on a summer evening; and, at the end of it, Master Gammon walked into Wrexby, and paid a visit to

Mr. Hammond, the carpenter, who produced two strong saving-boxes excellently manufactured by his own hand, without a lid to them, or lock and key: so that there would be no getting at the contents until the boxes were full, or a pressing occasion counselled the destruction of the boxes. A constant subject of jest between Mrs. Sumfit and Master Gammon was, as to which first of them would be overpowered by curiosity to know the amount of their respective savings; and their confessions of mutual weakness and futile endeavours to extract one piece of gold from the hoard.

"And now, think it or not," said Mrs. Sumfit, "I got that power over him, from doctorin' him, and cookin' for him, I persuaded him to help my poor Dahly in my blessed's need. I'd like him to do it by halves, but he can't."

Master Gammon appeared round a corner of the house, his box, draped by his handkerchief, under his arm. The farmer and Robert knew, when he was in sight, that gestures and shouts expressing extremities of the need for haste, would fail to accelerate his steps, so they allowed him to come on at his own equal pace, steady as Time, with the peculiar lopping bend of knees which jerked the moveless trunk regularly upward, and the ancient round eyes fixed contemplatively forward. There was an affectingness in this view of the mechanical old man bearing his poor hoard to bestow it.

Robert said out, unawares, "He mustn't be let to part with h' old pennies."

"No; the farmer took him up; "nor I won't let him."

"Yes, father!" Rhoda intercepted his address to Master Gammon. "Yes, father!" she hardened her accent. "It is for my sister. He does a good thing. Let him do it."

"Mas' Gammon, what ha' ye got there?" the farmer sung out.

But Master Gammon knew that he was about his own business. He was a difficult old man when he served the farmer; he was quite unmanageable in his private affairs.

Without replying, he said to Mrs. Sumfit,--

"I'd gummed it."

The side of the box showed that it had been made adhesive, for the sake of security, to another substance.

"That's what's caused ye to be so long, Mas' Gammon?"

The veteran of the fields responded with a grin, designed to show a lively cunning.

"Deary me, Mas' Gammon, I'd give a fortnight's work to know how much you'm saved, now, I would. And, there! Your comfort's in your heart.

And it shall be paid to you. I do pray heaven in mercy to forgive me," she whimpered, "if ever knowin'ly I hasted you at a meal, or did deceive you when you looked for the pickings of fresh-killed pig. But if you only knew how--to cookit spoils the temper of a woman! I'd a aunt was cook in a gentleman's fam'ly, and daily he dirtied his thirteen plates-- never more nor never less; and one day--was ever a woman punished so! her best black silk dress she greased from the top to the bottom, and he sent down nine clean plates, and no word vouchsafed of explanation. For gentlefolks, they won't teach themselves how it do hang together with cooks in a kitchen--"

"Jump up, Mas' Gammon," cried the farmer, wrathful at having been deceived by two members of his household, who had sworn to him, both, that they had no money, and had disregarded his necessity. Such being human nature!

Mrs. Sumfit confided the termination of her story to Rhoda; or suggested rather, at what distant point it might end; and then, giving Master Gammon's box to her custody, with directions for Dahlia to take the boxes to a carpenter's shop--not attempting the power of pokers upon them--and count and make a mental note of the amount of the rival hoards, she sent Dahlia all her messages of smirking reproof, and delighted love, and hoped that they would soon meet and know happiness.

Rhoda, as usual, had no emotion to spare. She took possession of the second box, and thus laden, suffered Robert to lift her into the cart. They drove across the green, past the mill and its flashing waters, and into the road, where the waving of Mrs. Sumfit's desolate handkerchief was latest seen.

A horseman rode by, whom Rhoda recognized, and she blushed and had a boding shiver. Robert marked him, and the blush as well.

It was Algernon, upon a livery-stable hack. His countenance expressed a mighty disappointment.

The farmer saw no one. The ingratitude and treachery of Robert, and of Mrs. Sumfit and Master Gammon, kept him brooding in sombre disgust of life. He remarked that the cart jolted a good deal.

"If you goes in a cart, wi' company o' four, you expects to be jolted," said Master Gammon.

"You seem to like it," Robert observed to the latter.

"It don't disturb my in'ards," quoth the serenest of mankind.

"Gammon," the farmer addressed him from the front seat, without turning his head: "you'll take and look about for a new place."

Master Gammon digested the recommendation in silence. On its being repeated, with, "D' ye hear?" he replied that he heard well enough.

"Well, then, look about ye sharp, or maybe, you'll be out in the cold," said the farmer.

"Na," returned Master Gammon, "ah never frets till I'm pinched."

"I've given ye notice," said the farmer.

"No, you ha'n't," said Master Gammon.

"I give ye notice now."

"No, you don't."

"How d' ye mean?"

"Cause I don't take ne'er a notice."

"Then you'll be kicked out, old man."

"Hey! there y' have me," said Master Gammon. "I growed at the farm, and you don't go and tell ne'er a tree t' walk."

Rhoda laid her fingers in the veteran's palm.

"You're a long-lived family, aren't you, Master Gammon?" said Robert, eyeing Rhoda's action enviously.

Master Gammon bade him go to a certain churchyard in Sussex, and inspect a particular tombstone, upon which the ages of his ancestry were written. They were more like the ages of oaks than of men.

"It's the heart kills," said Robert.

"It's damned misfortune," murmured the farmer.

"It is the wickedness in the world," thought Rhoda.

"It's a poor stomach, I reckon," Master Gammon ruminated.

They took leave of him at the station, from which eminence it was a notable thing to see him in the road beneath, making preparations for his return, like a conqueror of the hours. Others might run, and stew, if they liked: Master Gammon had chosen his pace, and was not of a mind to change it for anybody or anything. It was his boast that he had never ridden by railway: "nor ever means to, if I can help it," he would say. He was very much in harmony with universal nature, if to be that is the secret of human life.

Meantime, Algernon retraced his way to the station in profound chagrin: arriving there just as the train was visible. He caught sight of the cart with Master Gammon in it, and asked him whether all his people were going up to London; but the reply was evidently a mile distant, and had not started; so putting a sovereign in Master Gammon's hand, together

with the reins of his horse, Algernon bade the old man conduct the animal to the White Bear Inn, and thus violently pushing him off the tramways of his intelligence, left him stranded.

He had taken a first-class return-ticket, of course, being a gentleman. In the desperate hope that he might jump into a carriage with Rhoda, he entered one of the second-class compartments; a fact not only foreign to his tastes and his habits, but somewhat disgraceful, as he thought. His trust was, that the ignoble of this earth alone had beheld him: at any rate, his ticket was first class, as the guard would instantly and respectfully perceive, and if he had the discomforts, he had also some of the consolations of virtue.

Once on his way, the hard seat and the contemptible society surrounding him, assured his reflective spirit that he loved: otherwise, was it in reason that he should endure these hardships? "I really love the girl," he said, fidgeting for cushions.

He was hot, and wanted the window up, to which his fellow-travellers assented. Then, the atmosphere becoming loaded with offence to his morbid sense of smell, he wanted the windows down; and again they assented. "By Jove! I must love the girl," ejaculated Algernon inwardly, as cramp, cold, and afflicted nostrils combined to astonish his physical sensations. Nor was it displeasing to him to evince that he was unaccustomed to bare boards.

"We're a rich country," said a man to his neighbour; "but, if you don't pay for it, you must take your luck, and they'll make you as uncomfortable as they can."

"Ay," said the other. "I've travelled on the Continent. The second-class carriages there are fit for anybody to travel in. This is what comes of the worship of money--the individual is not respected. Pounds alone!"

"These," thought Algernon, "are beastly democrats."

Their remarks had been sympathetic with his manifestations, which had probably suggested them. He glowered out of the window in an exceedingly foreign manner. A plainly dressed woman requested that the window should be closed. One of the men immediately proceeded to close it. Algernon stopped him.

"Pardon me, sir," said the man; "it's a lady wants it done;" and he did it.

A lady! Algernon determined that these were the sort of people he should hate for life. "Go among them and then see what they are," he addressed an imaginary assembly of anti-democrats, as from a senatorial chair set in the after days. Cramp, cold, ill-ordered smells, and eternal hatred of his fellow-passengers, convinced him, in their aggregation, that he surmounted not a little for love of Rhoda.

The train arrived in London at dusk. Algernon saw Rhoda step from a carriage near the engine, assisted by Robert; and old Anthony was on the platform to welcome her; and Anthony seized her bag, and the troop of passengers moved away. It may be supposed that Algernon had angry sensations at sight of Robert; and to a certain extent this was the case; but he was a mercurial youth, and one who had satisfactorily proved superior strength enjoyed a portion of his respect. Besides, if Robert perchance should be courting Rhoda, he and Robert would enter into another field of controversy; and Robert might be taught a lesson.

He followed the party on foot until they reached Anthony's dwelling-place, noted the house, and sped to the Temple. There, he found a telegraphic message from Edward, that had been awaiting him since the morning.

"Stop It," were the sole words of the communication brief, and if one preferred to think so, enigmatic.

"What on earth does he mean?" cried Algernon, and affected again and again to see what Edward meant, without success. "Stop it?--stop what?--Stop the train? Stop my watch? Stop the universe? Oh! this is rank humbug." He flung the paper down, and fell to counting the money in his possession. The more it dwindled, the more imperative it became that he should depart from his country.

Behind the figures, he calculated that, in all probability, Rhoda would visit her sister this night. "I can't stop that," he said: and hearing a clock strike, "nor that" a knock sounded on the door; "nor that." The reflection inspired him with fatalistic views.

Sedgett appeared, and was welcome. Algernon had to check the impulse of his hand to stretch out to the fellow, so welcome was he: Sedgett stated that everything stood ready for the morrow. He had accomplished all that had to be done.

"And it's more than many'd reckon," he said, and rubbed his hands, and laughed. "I was aboard ship in Liverpool this morning, that I was. That ere young woman's woke up from her dream", (he lengthened the word inexpressibly) "by this time, that she is. I had to pay for my passage, though;" at which recollection he swore. "That's money gone. Never mind: there's worse gone with it. Ain't it nasty--don't you think, sir--to get tired of a young woman you've been keepin' company with, and have to be her companion, whether you will, or whether you won't? She's sick enough now. We travelled all night. I got her on board; got her to go to her bed; and, says I, I'll arrange about the luggage. I packs myself down into a boat, and saw the ship steam away a good'n. Hanged if I didn't catch myself singin'. And haven't touched a drop o' drink, nor will, till tomorrow's over. Don't you think "Daehli"'s a very pretty name, sir? I run back to her as hard as rail 'd carry me. She's had a letter from her sister, recommending o' her to marry me: 'a noble man,' she calls me--ha, ha! that's good. 'And what do you think, my dear?' says I; and, bother me, if I can screw either a compliment or a kiss out of her. She's got fine lady airs of her own. But I'm fond of her, that

I am. Well, sir, at the church door, after the ceremony, you settle our business, honour bright--that's it, en't it?"

Algernon nodded. Sedgett's talk always produced discomfort in his ingenuous bosom.

"By the way, what politics are you?" he asked.

Sedgett replied, staring, that he was a Tory, and Algernon nodded again, but with brows perturbed at the thought of this ruffian being of the same political persuasion as himself.

"Eh?" cried Sedgett; "I don't want any of your hustings pledges, though. You'll be at the door tomorrow, or I'll have a row--mind that. A bargain's a bargain. I like the young woman, but I must have the money. Why not hand it over now?"

"Not till the deed's done," said Algernon, very reasonably.

Sedgett studied his features, and as a result remarked: "You put me up to this: I'll do it, and trust you so far, but if I'm played on, I throw the young woman over and expose you out and out. But you mean honourable?"

"I do," Algernon said of his meaning.

Another knock sounded on the door. It proved to be a footman in Sir William's livery, bearing a letter from Edward; an amplification of the telegram

"Dear Algy, Stop it. I'm back, and have to see my father. I may be down about two, or three, or four, in the morning. No key; so, keep in. I want to see you. My whole life is changed. I must see her. Did you get my telegram? Answer, by messenger; I shall come to you the moment my father has finished his lecture.

"Yours,
"E.B."

Algernon told Sedgett to wait while he dressed in evening uniform, and gave him a cigar to smoke.

He wrote:--

"Dear Ned, Stop what? Of course, I suppose there's only one thing, and how can I stop it? What for? You ridiculous old boy! What a changeable old fellow you are!--Off, to see what I can do. After eleven o'clock to-morrow, you'll feel comfortable.--If the Governor is sweet, speak a word for the Old Brown; and bring two dozen in a cab, if you can. There's no encouragement to keep at home in this place. Put that to him. I, in your place, could do it. Tell him it's a matter of markets. If I get better wine at hotels, I go to hotels, and I spend twice--ten times the money. And say, we intend

to make the laundress cook our dinners in chambers, as a rule. Old B. an inducement.

"Yours aff.

"A.B."

This epistle he dispatched by the footman, and groaned to think that if, perchance, the Old Brown Sherry should come, he would, in all probability, barely drink more than half-a-dozen bottles of that prime vintage. He and Sedgett, soon after, were driving down to Dahlia's poor lodgings in the West. On the way, an idea struck him:

Would not Sedgett be a noisier claimant for the thousand than Edward? If he obeyed Edward's direction and stopped the marriage, he could hand back a goodly number of hundreds, and leave it to be supposed that he had advanced the remainder to Sedgett. How to do it? Sedgett happened to say: "If you won't hand the money now, I must have it when I've married her. Swear you'll be in the vestry when we're signing. I know all about marriages. You swear, or I tell you, if I find I'm cheated, I will throw the young woman over slap."

Algernon nodded: "I shall be there," he said, and thought that he certainly would not. The thought cleared an oppression in his head, though it obscured the pretty prospect of a colonial but and horse, with Rhoda cooking for him, far from cares. He did his best to resolve that he would stop the business, if he could. But, if it is permitted to the fool to create entanglements and set calamity in motion, to arrest its course is the last thing the Gods allow of his doing.

CHAPTER XXXIV

In the shadowy library light, when there was dawn out of doors, Edward sat with his father, and both were silent, for Edward had opened his heart, and his father had breathed some of the dry stock of wisdom on it. Many times Edward rose to go; and Sir William signalled with his finger that he should stay: an impassive motion, not succeeded by speech. And, in truth, the baronet was revolving such a problem as a long career of profitable banking refreshed by classical exercitations does not help us to solve. There sat the son of his trust and his pride, whose sound and equal temperament, whose precocious worldly wit, whose precise and broad intelligence, had been the visionary comfort of his paternal days to come; and his son had told him, reiterating it in language special and exact as that of a Chancery barrister unfolding his case to the presiding judge, that he had deceived and wronged an under-bred girl of the humbler classes; and that, after a term of absence from her, he had discovered her to be a part of his existence, and designed "You would marry her?" Sir William asked, though less forcibly than if he could have put on a moral amazement.

"That is my intention, sir, with your permission," Edward replied firmly,

and his father understood that he had never known this young man, and dealt virtually with a stranger in his son--as shrewd a blow as the vanity which is in paternal nature may have to endure.

He could not fashion the words, "Cerritus fuit," though he thought the thing in both tenses: Edward's wits had always been too clearly in order: and of what avail was it to repeat great and honoured prudential maxims to a hard-headed fellow, whose choice was to steer upon the rocks? He did remark, in an undertone,--

"The 'misce stultitiam' seems to be a piece of advice you have adopted too literally. I quote what you have observed of some one else."

"It is possible, sir," said Edward. "I was not particularly sparing when I sat in the high seat. 'Non eadem est aetas, non mens.' I now think differently."

"I must take your present conduct as the fruit of your premature sagacity, I suppose. By the same rule, your cousin Algernon may prove to be some comfort to his father, in the end."

"Let us hope he will, sir. His father will not have deserved it so well as mine."

"The time is morning," said Sir William, looking at his watch, and bestowing, in the bitterness of his reflections, a hue of triumph on the sleep of his brother upstairs. "You are your own master, Edward. I will detain you no more."

Edward shook his limbs, rejoicing.

"You prepare for a life of hard work," Sir William resumed, not without some instigation to sternness from this display of alacrity. "I counsel you to try the Colonial Bar."

Edward read in the first sentence, that his income would be restricted; and in the second, that his father's social sphere was no longer to be his.

"Exactly, sir; I have entertained that notion myself," he said; and his breast narrowed and his features grew sharp.

"And, if I may suggest such matters to you, I would advise you to see very little company for some years to come."

"There, sir, you only anticipate my previously formed resolution. With a knavery on my conscience, and a giddy-pated girl on my hands, and the doors of the London world open to me, I should scarcely have been capable of serious work. The precious metal, which is Knowledge, sir, is only to be obtained by mining for it; and that excellent occupation necessarily sends a man out of sight for a number of years. In the meantime, 'mea virtute me involvo.'"

"You need not stop short," said his father, with a sardonic look for the concluding lines.

"The continuation is becoming in the mouth of a hero; but humbler persons must content themselves not to boast the patent fact, I think." Edward warmed as he spoke. "I am ready to bear it. I dislike poverty; but, as I say, I am ready to bear it. Come, sir; you did me the honour once to let me talk to you as a friend, with the limits which I have never consciously overstepped; let me explain myself plainly and simply."

Sir William signified, "Pray speak," from the arms of his chair! and Edward, standing, went on: "After all, a woman's devotion is worth having, when one is not asked for the small change every ten minutes. I am aware of the philosophic truth, that we get nothing in life for which we don't pay. The point is, to appreciate what we desire; and so we reach a level that makes the payment less--" He laughed. Sir William could hardly keep back the lines of an ironical smile from his lips.

"This," pursued the orator, "is not the language for the Colonial Bar. I wish to show you that I shall understand the character of my vocation there. No, sir; my deeper wish is that you may accept my view of the sole course left to a man whose sense of honour is of accord with the inclination of his heart, and not in hostility to his clearer judgement."

"Extremely forensic," said Sir William, not displeased by the promise of the periods.

"Well, sir, I need not remark to you that rhetoric, though it should fail to convey, does not extinguish, or imply the absence of emotion in the speaker; but rather that his imagination is excited by his theme, and that he addresses more presences than such as are visible. It is, like the Roman mask, fashioned for large assemblages."

"By a parity of reasoning, then,"--Sir William was seduced into colloquy,--"an eternal broad grin is not, in the instance of a dialogue, good comedy."

"It may hide profound grief." Edward made his eyes flash. "I find I can laugh; it would be difficult for me to smile. Sir, I pray that you will listen to me seriously, though my language is not of a kind to make you think me absolutely earnest in what I say, unless you know me."

"Which, I must protest, I certainly do not," interposed Sir William.

"I will do my best to instruct you, sir. Until recently, I have not known myself. I met this girl. She trusted herself to me. You are aware that I know a little of men and of women; and when I tell you that I respect her now even more than I did at first--much more--so thoroughly, that I would now put my honour in her hands, by the counsel of my experience, as she, prompted by her instinct and her faith in me, confided hers to mine,--perhaps, even if you persist in accusing me of rashness, you will allow that she must be in the possession of singularly feminine and estimable qualities. I deceived her. My object in doing so

was to spare you. Those consequences followed which can hardly fail to ensue, when, of two living together, the woman is at a disadvantage, and eats her heart without complaining. I could have borne a shrewish tongue better, possibly because I could have answered it better. It is worse to see a pale sad face with a smile of unalterable tenderness. The very sweetness becomes repugnant."

"As little boys requiring much medicine have anticipated you by noting in this world," observed Sir William.

"I thank you for the illustration." Edward bowed, but he smarted. "A man so situated lives with the ghost of his conscience."

"A doubtful figure of speech," Sir William broke in. "I think you should establish the personality before you attempt to give a feature to the essence. But, continue."

Edward saw that by forfeiting simplicity, in order to catch his father's peculiar cast of mind, he had left him cold and in doubt as to the existence of the powerful impulse by which he was animated. It is a prime error in the orator not to seize the emotions and subdue the humanity of his hearers first. Edward perceived his mistake. He had, however, done well in making a show of the unabated vigour of his wits. Contempt did not dwell in the baronet's tone. On the contrary, they talked and fenced, and tripped one another as of old; and, considering the breach he had been compelled to explode between his father and himself, Edward understood that this was a real gain.

He resumed: "All figures of speech must be inadequate--"

"Ah, pardon me," said Sir William, pertinaciously; "the figure I alluded to was not inadequate. A soap-bubble is not inadequate."

"Plainly, sir, in God's name, hear me out," cried Edward. "She--what shall I call her? my mistress, my sweetheart, if you like--let the name be anything 'wife' it should have been, and shall be--I left her, and have left her and have not looked on her for many months. I thought I was tired of her--I was under odd influences--witchcraft, it seems. I could believe in witchcraft now. Brutal selfishness is the phrase for my conduct. I have found out my villany. I have not done a day's sensible work, or had a single clear thought, since I parted from her. She has had brain-fever. She has been in the hospital. She is now prostrate with misery. While she suffered, I--I can't look back on myself. If I had to plead before you for more than manly consideration, I could touch you. I am my own master, and am ready to subsist by my own efforts; there is no necessity for me to do more than say I abide by the choice I make, and my own actions. In deciding to marry her, I do a good thing--I do a just thing. I will prove to you that I have done a wise thing.

"Let me call to your recollection what you did me the honour to remark of my letters from Italy. Those were written with her by my side. Every other woman vexed me. This one alone gives me peace, and nerve to work. If I did not desire to work, should I venture to run the chances of an

offence to you? Your girls of society are tasteless to me. And they don't make wives to working barristers. No, nor to working Members.

"They are very ornamental and excellent, and, as I think you would call them, accomplished. All England would leap to arms to defend their incontestible superiority to their mothers and their duties. I have not the wish to stand opposed to my countrymen on any question, although I go to other shores, and may be called upon to make capital out of opposition. They are admirable young persons, no doubt. I do not offer you a drab for your daughter-in-law, sir. If I rise, she will be equal to my station. She has the manners of a lady; a lady, I say; not of the modern young lady; with whom, I am happy to think, she does not come into competition. She has not been sedulously trained to pull her way, when she is to go into harness with a yokefellow.

"But I am laying myself open to the charge of feeling my position weak, seeing that I abuse the contrary one. Think what you will of me, sir, you will know that I have obeyed my best instinct and my soundest judgement in this matter; I need not be taught, that if it is my destiny to leave England I lose the association with him who must ever be my dearest friend. And few young men can say as much of one standing in the relation of father."

With this, Edward finished; not entirely to his satisfaction; for he had spoken with too distinct a sincerity to please his own critical taste, which had been educated to delight in acute antithesis and culminating sentences--the grand Biscayan billows of rhetorical utterance, in comparison wherewith his talk was like the little chopping waves of a wind-blown lake. But he had, as he could see, produced an impression. His father stood up.

"We shall be always friends; I hope," Sir William said. "As regards a provision for you, suitable to your estate, that will be arranged. You must have what comforts you have been taught to look to. At the same time, I claim a personal freedom for my own actions."

"Certainly, sir," said Edward, not conceiving any new development in these.

"You have an esteem for Mrs. Lovell, have you not?"

Edward flushed. "I should have a very perfect esteem for her, if--" he laughed slightly--"you will think I want everybody to be married and in the traces now; she will never be manageable till she is married."

"I am also of that opinion," said Sir William. "I will detain you no longer. It is a quarter to five in the morning. You will sleep here, of course."

"No, I must go to the Temple. By the way, Algy prefers a petition for Sherry. He is beginning to discern good wine from bad, which may be a hopeful augury."

"I will order Holmes to send some down to him when he has done a week's real duty at the Bank."

"Sooner or later, then. Good morning, sir."

"Good morning." Sir William shook his son's hand.

A minute after, Edward had quitted the house. "That's over!" he said, sniffing the morning air gratefully, and eyeing certain tinted wisps of cloud that were in a line of the fresh blue sky.

CHAPTER XXXV

A shy and humble entreaty had been sent by Dahlia through Robert to Rhoda, saying that she wished not to be seen until the ceremony was at an end; but Rhoda had become mentally stern toward her sister, and as much to uphold her in the cleansing step she was about to take, as in the desire to have the dear lost head upon her bosom, she disregarded Dahlia's foolish prayer, and found it was well that she had done so; for, to her great amazement, Dahlia, worn, shorn, sickened, and reduced to be a mark for the scorn of the cowardice which is in the world, through the selfishness of a lying man, loved the man still, and wavered, or rather shrank with a pitiful fleshly terror from the noble husband who would wipe the spot of shame from her forehead.

When, after their long separation, the sisters met, Dahlia was mistress of herself, and pronounced Rhoda's name softly, as she moved up to kiss her. Rhoda could not speak. Oppressed by the strangeness of the white face which had passed through fire, she gave a mute kiss and a single groan, while Dahlia gently caressed her on the shoulder. The frail touch of her hand was harder to bear than the dreary vision had been, and seemed not so real as many a dream of it. Rhoda sat by her, overcome by the awfulness of an actual sorrow, never imagined closely, though she had conjured up vague pictures of Dahlia's face. She had imagined agony, tears, despair, but not the spectral change, the burnt-out look. It was a face like a crystal lamp in which the flame has died. The ghastly little skull-cap showed forth its wanness rigidly. Rhoda wondered to hear her talk simply of home and the old life. At each question, the then and the now struck her spirit with a lightning flash of opposing scenes. But the talk deepened. Dahlia's martyrdom was near, and their tongues were hurried into plain converse of the hour, and then Dahlia faltered and huddled herself up like a creature swept by the torrent; Rhoda learnt that, instead of hate or loathing of the devilish man who had deceived her, love survived. Upon Dahlia's lips it was compassion and forgiveness; but Rhoda, in her contempt for the word, called it love. Dahlia submitted gladly to the torture of interrogation; "Do you, can you care for him still?" and sighed in shame and fear of her sister, not daring to say she thought her harsh, not daring to plead for escape, as she had done with Robert.

"Why is there no place for the unhappy, who do not wish to live, and cannot die?" she moaned.

And Rhoda cruelly fixed her to the marriage, making it seem irrevocable, and barring all the faint lights to the free outer world, by praise of her--passionate praise of her--when she confessed, that half inanimate after her recovery from the fever, and in the hope that she might thereby show herself to her father, she had consented to devote her life to the only creature who was then near her to be kind to her. Rhoda made her relate how this man had seen her first, and how, by untiring diligence, he had followed her up and found her. "He--he must love you," said Rhoda; and in proportion as she grew more conscious of her sister's weakness, and with every access of tenderness toward her, she felt that Dahlia must be thought for very much as if she were a child.

Dahlia tried to float out some fretting words for mercy, on one or other of her heavy breathings; but her brain was under lead. She had a thirst for Rhoda's praise in her desolation; it was sweet, though the price of it was her doing an abhorred thing. Abhorred? She did not realize the consequences of the act, or strength would have come to her to wrestle with the coil: a stir of her blood would have endued her with womanly counsel and womanly frenzy; nor could Rhoda have opposed any real vehemence of distaste to the union on Dahlia's part. But Dahlia's blood was frozen, her brain was under lead. She clung to the poor delight in her sister's praise, and shuddered and thirsted. She caught at the minutes, and saw them slip from her. All the health of her thoughts went to establish a sort of blind belief that God; having punished her enough, would not permit a second great misery to befall her. She expected a sudden intervention, even though at the altar. She argued to herself that misery, which follows sin, cannot surely afflict us further when we are penitent, and seek to do right: her thought being, that perchance if she refrained from striving against the current, and if she suffered her body to be borne along, God would be the more merciful. With the small cunning of an enfeebled spirit, she put on a mute submissiveness, and deceived herself by it sufficiently to let the minutes pass with a lessened horror and alarm.

This was in the first quarter of the night. The dawn was wearing near. Sedgett had been seen by Rhoda; a quiet interview; a few words on either side, attention paid to them by neither. But the girl doated on his ugliness; she took it for plain proof of his worthiness; proof too that her sister must needs have seen the latter very distinctly, or else she could not have submitted.

Dahlia looked at the window-blinds and at the candlelight. The little which had been spoken between her and her sister in such a chasm of time, gave a terrible swiftness to the hours. Half shrieking, she dropped her head in Rhoda's lap. Rhoda, thinking that with this demonstration she renounced the project finally, prepared to say what she had to say, and to yield. But, as was natural after a paroxysm of weakness, Dahlia's frenzy left no courage behind it.

Dahlia said, as she swept her brows, "I am still subject to nervous

attacks."

"They will soon leave you," said Rhoda, nursing her hand.

Dahlia contracted her lips. "Is father very unforgiving to women?"

"Poor father!" Rhoda interjected for answer, and Dahlia's frame was taken with a convulsion.

"Where shall I see him to-morrow?" she asked; and, glancing from the beamless candle to the window-blinds "Oh! it's day. Why didn't I sleep! It's day! where am I to see him?"

"At Robert's lodgings. We all go there."

"We all go?--he goes?"

"Your husband will lead you there."

"My heaven! my heaven! I wish you had known what this is, a little--just a little."

"I do know that it is a good and precious thing to do right," said Rhoda.

"If you had only had an affection, dear! Oh I how ungrateful I am to you."

"It is only, darling, that I seem unkind to you," said Rhoda.

"You think I must do this? Must? Why?"

"Why?" Rhoda pressed her fingers. "Why, when you were ill, did you not write to me, that I might have come to you?"

"I was ashamed," said Dahlia.

"You shall not be ashamed any more, my sister."

Dahlia seized the window-blind with her trembling finger-tips, and looked out on the day. As if it had smitten her eyeballs, she covered her face, giving dry sobs.

"Oh! I wish--I wish you had known what this is. Must I do it? His face! Dear, I am very sorry to distress you. Must I do it? The doctor says I am so strong that nothing will break in me, and that I must live, if I am not killed. But, if I might only be a servant in father's house--I would give all my love to a little bed of flowers."

"Father has no home now," said Rhoda.

"I know--I know. I am ready. I will submit, and then father will not be ashamed to remain at the Farm. I am ready. Dear, I am ready. Rhoda, I am ready. It is not much." She blew the candle out. "See. No one will

do that for me. We are not to live for ourselves. I have done wrong, and I am going to be humble; yes, I am. I never was when I was happy, and that proves I had no right to be happy. All I ask is for another night with you. Why did we not lie down together and sleep? We can't sleep now--it's day."

"Come and lie down with me for a few hours, my darling," said Rhoda.

While she was speaking, Dahlia drew the window-blind aside, to look out once more upon the vacant, inexplicable daylight, and looked, and then her head bent like the first thrust forward of a hawk's sighting quarry; she spun round, her raised arms making a cramped, clapping motion.

"He is there."

CHAPTER XXXVI

At once Rhoda perceived that it was time for her to act. The name of him who stood in the street below was written on her sister's face. She started to her side, got possession of her hands, murmuring,--

"Come with me. You are to come with me. Don't speak. I know. I will go down. Yes; you are to obey, and do what I tell you."

Dahlia's mouth opened, but like a child when it is warned not to cry, she uttered a faint inward wailing, lost her ideas, and was passive in a shuddering fit.

"What am I to do?" she said supplicatingly, as Rhoda led her to her bedroom.

"Rest here. Be perfectly quiet. Trust everything to me. I am your sister."

Leaving her under the spell of coldly-spoken words, Rhoda locked the door on her. She was herself in great agitation, but nerved by deeper anger there was no faltering in her movements. She went to the glass a minute, as she tied her bonnet-strings under her chin, and pinned her shawl. A night's vigil had not chased the bloom from her cheek, or the swimming lustre from her dark eyes. Content that her aspect should be seemly, she ran down the stairs, unfastened the bolts, and without hesitation closed the door behind her. At the same instant, a gentleman crossed the road. He asked whether Mrs. Ayrton lived in that house? Rhoda's vision danced across his features, but she knew him unerringly to be the cruel enemy.

"My sister, Dahlia Fleming, lives there," she said.

"Then, you are Rhoda?"

"My name is Rhoda."

"Mine--I fear it will not give you pleasure to hear it--is Edward
Blancove. I returned late last night from abroad."

She walked to a distance, out of hearing and out of sight of the house,
and he silently followed. The streets were empty, save for the solitary
footing of an early workman going to his labour.

She stopped, and he said, "I hope your sister is well."

"She is quite well."

"Thank heaven for that! I heard of some illness."

"She has quite recovered."

"Did she--tell me the truth--did she get a letter that I sent two days
ago, to her? It was addressed to 'Miss Fleming, Wrexby, Kent, England.'
Did it reach her?"

"I have not seen it."

"I wrote," said Edward.

His scrutiny of her features was not reassuring to him. But he had a
side-thought, prompted by admiration of her perfect build of figure, her
succinct expression of countenance, and her equable manner of speech: to
the effect, that the true English yeomanry can breed consummate women.
Perhaps--who knows? even resolute human nature is the stronger for an
added knot--it approved the resolution he had formed, or stamped with a
justification the series of wild impulses, the remorse, and the returned
tenderness and manliness which had brought him to that spot.

"You know me, do you not?" he said.

"Yes," she answered shortly.

"I wish to see Dahlia."

"You cannot."

"Not immediately, of course. But when she has risen later in the
morning. If she has received my letter, she will, she must see me."

"No, not later; not at all," said Rhoda.

"Not at all? Why not?"

Rhoda controlled the surging of her blood for a vehement reply; saying
simply, "You will not see her."

"My child, I must."

"I am not a child, and I say what I mean."

"But why am I not to see her? Do you pretend that it is her wish not to see me? You can't. I know her perfectly. She is gentleness itself."

"Yes; you know that," said Rhoda, with a level flash of her eyes, and confronting him in a way so rarely distinguishing girls of her class, that he began to wonder and to ache with an apprehension.

"She has not changed? Rhoda--for we used to talk of you so often! You will think better of me, by-and-by.

"Naturally enough, you detest me at present. I have been a brute. I can't explain it, and I don't excuse myself. I state the fact to you--her sister. My desire is to make up for the past. Will you take a message to her from me?"

"I will not."

"You are particularly positive."

Remarks touching herself Rhoda passed by.

"Why are you so decided?" he said more urgently. "I know I have deeply offended and hurt you. I wish, and intend to repair the wrong to the utmost of my power. Surely it's mere silly vindictiveness on your part to seek to thwart me. Go to her; say I am here. At all events, let it be her choice not to see me, if I am to be rejected at the door. She can't have had my letter. Will you do that much?"

"She knows that you are here; she has seen you."

"Has seen me?" Edward drew in his breath sharply. "Well? and she sends you out to me?"

Rhoda did not answer. She was strongly tempted to belie Dahlia's frame of mind.

"She does send you to speak to me," Edward insisted.

"She knows that I have come."

"And you will not take one message in?"

"I will take no message from you."

"You hate me, do you not?"

Again she controlled the violent shock of her heart to give him hard speech. He went on:--

"Whether you hate me or not is beside the matter. It lies between Dahlia and me. I will see her. When I determine, I allow of no obstacles, not

even of wrong-headed girls. First, let me ask, is your father in London?"

Rhoda threw a masculine meaning into her eyes.

"Do not come before him, I advise you."

"If," said Edward, with almost womanly softness, "you could know what I have passed through in the last eight-and-forty hours, you would understand that I am equal to any meeting; though, to speak truth, I would rather not see him until I have done what I mean to do. Will you be persuaded? Do you suppose that I have ceased to love your sister?"

This, her execrated word, coming from his mouth, vanquished her self-possession.

"Are you cold?" he said, seeing the ripple of a trembling run over her.

"I am not cold. I cannot remain here." Rhoda tightened her intertwisting fingers across under her bosom. "Don't try to kill my sister outright. She's the ghost of what she was. Be so good as to go. She will soon be out of your reach. You will have to kill me first, if you get near her. Never! you never shall. You have lied to her brought disgrace on her poor head. We poor people read our Bibles, and find nothing that excuses you. You are not punished, because there is no young man in our family. Go."

Edward gazed at her for some time. "Well, I've deserved worse," he said, not sorry, now that he saw an opponent in her, that she should waste her concentrated antagonism in this fashion, and rejoiced by the testimony it gave him that he was certainly not too late.

"You know, Rhoda, she loves me."

"If she does, let her pray to God on her knees."

"My good creature, be reasonable. Why am I here? To harm her? You take me for a kind of monster. You look at me very much, let me say, like a bristling cat. Here are the streets getting full of people, and you ought not to be seen. Go to Dahlia. Tell her I am here. Tell her I am come to claim her for good, and that her troubles are over. This is a moment to use your reason. Will you do what I ask?"

"I would cut my tongue out, if it did you a service," said Rhoda.

"Citoyenne Corday," thought Edward, and observed: "Then I will dispense with your assistance."

He moved in the direction of the house. Rhoda swiftly outstripped him. They reached the gates together. She threw herself in the gateway. He attempted to parley, but she was dumb to it.

"I allow nothing to stand between her and me," he said, and seized her

arm. She glanced hurriedly to right and left. At that moment Robert appeared round a corner of the street. He made his voice heard, and, coming up at double quick, caught Edward Blancove by the collar, swinging him off. Rhoda, with a sign, tempered him to muteness, and the three eyed one another.

"It's you," said Robert, and, understanding immediately the tactics desired by Rhoda, requested Edward to move a step or two away in his company.

Edward settled the disposition of his coat-collar, as a formula wherewith to regain composure of mind, and passed along beside Robert, Rhoda following.

"What does this mean?" said Robert sternly.

Edward's darker nature struggled for ascendancy within him. It was this man's violence at Fairly which had sickened him, and irritated him against Dahlia, and instigated him, as he remembered well, more than Mrs. Lovell's witcheries, to the abhorrent scheme to be quit of her, and rid of all botheration, at any cost.

"You're in some conspiracy to do her mischief, all of you," he cried.

"If you mean Dahlia Fleming," said Robert, "it'd be a base creature that would think of doing harm to her now."

He had a man's perception that Edward would hardly have been found in Dahlia's neighbourhood with evil intentions at this moment, though it was a thing impossible to guess. Generous himself, he leaned to the more generous view.

"I think your name is Eccles," said Edward. "Mr. Eccles, my position here is a very sad one. But first, let me acknowledge that I have done you personally a wrong. I am ready to bear the burden of your reproaches, or what you will. All that I beg is, that you will do me the favour to grant me five minutes in private. It is imperative."

Rhoda burst in--"No, Robert!" But Robert said, "It is a reasonable request;" and, in spite of her angry eyes, he waved her back, and walked apart with Edward.

She stood watching them, striving to divine their speech by their gestures, and letting her savage mood interpret the possible utterances. It went ill with Robert in her heart that he did not suddenly grapple and trample the man, and so break away from him. She was outraged to see Robert's listening posture. "Lies! lies!" she said to herself, "and he doesn't know them to be lies." The window-blinds in Dahlia's sitting-room continued undisturbed; but she feared the agency of the servant of the house in helping to release her sister. Time was flowing to dangerous strands. At last Robert turned back singly. Rhoda fortified her soul to resist.

"He has fooled you," she murmured, inaudibly, before he spoke.

"Perhaps, Rhoda, we ought not to stand in his way. He wishes to do what a man can do in his case. So he tells me, and I'm bound not to disbelieve him. He says he repents--says the word; and gentlemen seem to mean it when they use it. I respect the word, and them when they're up to that word. He wrote to her that he could not marry her, and it did the mischief, and may well be repented of; but he wishes to be forgiven and make amends--well, such as he can. He's been abroad, and only received Dahlia's letters within the last two or three days. He seems to love her, and to be heartily wretched. Just hear me out; you'll decide; but pray, pray don't be rash. He wishes to marry her; says he has spoken to his father this very night; came straight over from France, after he had read her letters. He says--and it seems fair--he only asks to see Dahlia for two minutes. If she bids him go, he goes. He's not a friend of mine, as I could prove to you; but I do think he ought to see her. He says he looks on her as his wife; always meant her to be his wife, but things were against him when he wrote that letter. Well, he says so; and it's true that gentlemen are situated--they can't always, or think they can't, behave quite like honest men. They've got a hundred things to consider for our one. That's my experience, and I know something of the best among 'em. The question is about this poor young fellow who's to marry her to-day. Mr. Blancove talks of giving him a handsome sum--a thousand pounds--and making him comfortable--"

"There!" Rhoda exclaimed, with a lightning face. "You don't see what he is, after that? Oh!--" She paused, revolted.

"Will you let me run off to the young man, wherever he's to be found, and put the case to him--that is, from Dahlia? And you know she doesn't like the marriage overmuch, Rhoda. Perhaps he may think differently when he comes to hear of things. As to Mr. Blancove, men change and change when they're young. I mean, gentlemen. We must learn to forgive. Either he's as clever as the devil, or he's a man in earnest, and deserves pity. If you'd heard him!"

"My poor sister!" sighed Rhoda. The mentioning of money to be paid had sickened and weakened her, as with the very physical taste of degradation.

Hearing the sigh, Robert thought she had become subdued. Then Rhoda said: "We are bound to this young man who loves my sister--bound to him in honour: and Dahlia must esteem him, to have consented. As for the other..." She waved the thought of his claim on her sister aside with a quick shake of her head. "I rely on you to do this:--I will speak to Mr. Blancove myself. He shall not see her there." She indicated the house. "Go to my sister; and lose no time in taking her to your lodgings. Father will not arrive till twelve. Wait and comfort her till I come, and answer no questions. Robert," she gave him her hand gently, and, looking sweetly, "if you will do this!"

"If I will!" cried Robert, transported by the hopeful tenderness. The servant girl of the house had just opened the front door, intent on

scrubbing, and he passed in. Rhoda walked on to Edward.

CHAPTER XXXVII

A profound belief in the efficacy of his eloquence, when he chose to expend it, was one of the principal supports of Edward's sense of mastery; a secret sense belonging to certain men in every station of life, and which is the staff of many an otherwise impressible and fluctuating intellect. With this gift, if he trifled, or slid downward in any direction, he could right himself easily, as he satisfactorily conceived. It is a gift that may now and then be the ruin of promising youths, though as a rule they find it helpful enough. Edward had exerted it upon his father, and upon Robert. Seeing Rhoda's approach, he thought of it as a victorious swordsman thinks of his weapon, and aimed his observation over her possible weak and strong points, studying her curiously even when she was close up to him. With Robert, the representative of force, to aid her, she could no longer be regarded in the light of a despicable hindrance to his wishes. Though inclined strongly to detest, he respected her. She had decision, and a worthy bearing, and a marvellously blooming aspect, and a brain that worked withal. When she spoke, desiring him to walk on by her side, he was pleased by her voice, and recognition of the laws of propriety, and thought it a thousand pities that she likewise should not become the wife of a gentleman. By degrees, after tentative beginnings, he put his spell upon her ears, for she was attentive, and walked with a demure forward look upon the pavement; in reality taking small note of what things he said, until he quoted, as against himself, sentences from Dahlia's letters; and then she fixed her eyes on him, astonished that he should thus heap condemnation on his own head. They were most pathetic scraps quoted by him, showing the wrestle of love with a petrifying conviction of its hopelessness, and with the stealing on of a malady of the blood. They gave such a picture of Dahlia's reverent love for this man, her long torture, her chastity of soul and simple innocence, and her gathering delirium of anguish, as Rhoda had never taken at all distinctly to her mind. She tried to look out on him from a mist of tears.

"How could you bear to read the letters?" she sobbed.

"Could any human being read them and not break his heart for her?" said he.

"How could you bear to read them and leave her to perish!"

His voice deepened to an impressive hollow: "I read them for the first time yesterday morning, in France, and I am here!"

It was undeniably, in its effect on Rhoda, a fine piece of pleading artifice. It partially excused or accounted for his behaviour, while it filled her with emotions which she felt to be his likewise, and therefore she could not remain as an unsympathetic stranger by his side.

With this, he flung all artifice away. He told her the whole story, saving the one black episode of it--the one incomprehensible act of a desperate baseness that, blindly to get free, he had deliberately permitted, blinked at, and had so been guilty of. He made a mental pause as he was speaking, to consider in amazement how and by what agency he had been reduced to shame his manhood, and he left it a marvel. Otherwise, he in no degree exonerated himself. He dwelt sharply on his vice of ambition, and scorned it as a misleading light. "Yet I have done little since I have been without her!" And then, with a persuasive sincerity, he assured her that he could neither study nor live apart from Dahlia. "She is the dearest soul to me on earth; she is the purest woman. I have lived with her, I have lived apart from her, and I cannot live without her. I love her with a husband's love. Now, do you suppose I will consent to be separated from her? I know that while her heart beats, it's mine. Try to keep her from me--you kill her."

"She did not die," said Rhoda. It confounded his menaces.

"This time she might," he could not refrain from murmuring.

"Ah!" Rhoda drew off from him.

"But I say," cried he, "that I will see her."

"We say, that she shall do what is for her good."

"You have a project? Let me hear it. You are mad, if you have."

"It is not our doing, Mr. Blancove. It was--it was by her own choice. She will not always be ashamed to look her father in the face. She dare not see him before she is made worthy to see him. I believe her to have been directed right."

"And what is her choice?"

"She has chosen for herself to marry a good and worthy man."

Edward called out, "Have you seen him--the man?"

Rhoda, thinking he wished to have the certainty of the stated fact established, replied, "I have."

"A good and worthy man," muttered Edward. "Illness, weakness, misery, have bewildered her senses. She thinks him a good and worthy man?"

"I think him so."

"And you have seen him?"

"I have."

"Why, what monstrous delusion is this? It can't be! My good creature,

you're oddly deceived, I imagine. What is the man's name? I can understand that she has lost her will and distinct sight; but you are clear-sighted, and can estimate. What is the man's name?"

"I can tell you," said Rhoda; "his name is Mr. Sedgett."

"Mister--!" Edward gave one hollow stave of laughter. "And you have seen him, and think him--"

"I know he is not a gentleman," said Rhoda. "He has been deeply good to my sister, and I thank him, and do respect him."

"Deeply!" Edward echoed. He was prompted to betray and confess himself: courage failed.

They looked around simultaneously on hearing an advancing footstep.

The very man appeared--in holiday attire, flushed, smiling, and with a nosegay of roses in his hand. He studied the art of pleasing women. His eye struck on Edward, and his smile vanished. Rhoda gave him no word of recognition. As he passed on, he was led to speculate from his having seen Mr. Edward instead of Mr. Algernon, and from the look of the former, that changes were in the air, possibly chicanery, and the proclaiming of himself as neatly diddled by the pair whom, with another, he heartily hoped to dupe.

After he had gone by, Edward and Rhoda changed looks. Both knew the destination of that lovely nosegay. The common knowledge almost kindled an illuminating spark in her brain; but she was left in the dark, and thought him strangely divining, or only strange. For him, a horror cramped his limbs. He felt that he had raised a devil in that abominable smirking ruffian. It may not, perhaps, be said that he had distinctly known Sedgett to be the man. He had certainly suspected the possibility of his being the man. It is out of the power of most wilful and selfish natures to imagine, so as to see accurately, the deeds they prompt or permit to be done. They do not comprehend them until these black realities stand up before their eyes.

Ejaculating "Great heaven!" Edward strode some steps away, and returned.

"It's folly, Rhoda!--the uttermost madness ever conceived! I do not believe--I know that Dahlia would never consent--first, to marry any man but myself; secondly, to marry a man who is not a perfect gentleman. Her delicacy distinguishes her among women."

"Mr. Blancove, my sister is nearly dead, only that she is so strong. The disgrace has overwhelmed her, it has. When she is married, she will thank and honour him, and see nothing but his love and kindness. I will leave you now."

"I am going to her," said Edward.

"Do not."

"There's an end of talking. I trust no one will come in my path. Where am I?"

He looked up at the name of the street, and shot away from her. Rhoda departed in another direction, firm, since she had seen Sedgett pass, that his nobleness should not meet with an ill reward. She endowed him with fair moral qualities, which she contrasted against Edward Blancove's evil ones; and it was with a democratic fervour of contempt that she dismissed the superior outward attractions of the gentleman.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

This neighbourhood was unknown to Edward, and, after plunging about in one direction and another, he found that he had missed his way. Down innumerable dusky streets of dwarfed houses, showing soiled silent window-blinds, he hurried and chafed; at one moment in sharp joy that he had got a resolution, and the next dismayed by the singular petty impediments which were tripping him. "My dearest!" his heart cried to Dahlia, "did I wrong you so? I will make all well. It was the work of a fiend." Now he turned to right, now to left, and the minutes flew. They flew; and in the gathering heat of his brain he magnified things until the sacrifice of herself Dahlia was preparing for smote his imagination as with a blaze of the upper light, and stood sublime before him in the grandeur of old tragedy. "She has blinded her eyes, stifled her senses, eaten her heart. Oh! my beloved! my wife! my poor girl! and all to be free from shame in her father's sight!" Who could have believed that a girl of Dahlia's class would at once have felt the shame so keenly, and risen to such pure heights of heroism? The sacrifice flouted conception; it mocked the steady morning. He refused to believe in it, but the short throbs of his blood were wiser.

A whistling urchin became his guide. The little lad was carelessly giving note to a popular opera tune, with happy disregard of concord. It chanced that the tune was one which had taken Dahlia's ear, and, remembering it and her pretty humming of it in the old days, Edward's wrestling unbelief with the fatality of the hour sank, so entirely was he under the sovereignty of his sensations. He gave the boy a big fee, desiring superstitiously to feel that one human creature could bless the hour. The house was in view. He knocked, and there came a strange murmur of some denial. "She is here," he said, menacingly.

"She was taken away, sir, ten minutes gone, by a gentleman," the servant tied to assure him.

The landlady of the house, coming up the kitchen stairs, confirmed the statement. In pity for his torpid incredulity she begged him to examine her house from top to bottom, and herself conducted him to Dahlia's room.

"That bed has not been slept in," said the lawyer, pointing his finger to

it.

"No, sir; poor thing! she didn't sleep last night. She's been wearying for weeks; and last night her sister came, and they hadn't met for very long. Two whole candles they burnt out, or near upon it."

"Where?--" Edward's articulation choked.

"Where they're gone to, sir? That I do not know. Of course she will come back."

The landlady begged him to wait; but to sit and see the minutes--the black emissaries of perdition--fly upon their business, was torture as big as to endure the tearing off of his flesh till the skeleton stood out. Up to this point he had blamed himself; now he accused the just heavens. Yea! is not a sinner their lawful quarry? and do they not slip the hounds with savage glee, and hunt him down from wrong to evil, from evil to infamy, from infamy to death, from death to woe everlasting? And is this their righteousness?--He caught at the rusty garden rails to steady his feet.

Algernon was employed in the comfortable degustation of his breakfast, meditating whether he should transfer a further slice of ham or of Yorkshire pie to his plate, or else have done with feeding and light a cigar, when Edward appeared before him.

"Do you know where that man lives?"

Algernon had a prompting to respond, "Now, really! what man?" But passion stops the breath of fools. He answered, "Yes."

"Have you the thousand in your pocket?"

Algernon nodded with a sickly grin.

"Jump up! Go to him. Give it up to him! Say, that if he leaves London on the instant, and lets you see him off--say, it shall be doubled. Stay, I'll write the promise, and put my signature. Tell him he shall, on my word of honour, have another--another thousand pounds--as soon as I can possibly obtain it, if he holds his tongue, and goes with you; and see that he goes. Don't talk to me on any other subject, or lose one minute."

Algernon got his limbs slackly together, trying to think of the particular pocket in which he had left his cigar-case. Edward wrote a line on a slip of note-paper, and signed his name beneath. With this and an unsatisfied longing for tobacco Algernon departed, agreeing to meet his cousin in the street where Dahlia dwelt.

"By Jove! two thousand! It's an expensive thing not to know your own mind," he thought.

"How am I to get out of this scrape? That girl Rhoda doesn't care a

button for me. No colonies for me. I should feel like a convict if I went alone. What on earth am I to do?"

It seemed preposterous to him that he should take a cab, when he had not settled upon a scheme. The sight of a tobacconist's shop charmed one of his more immediate difficulties to sleep. He was soon enabled to puff consoling smoke.

"Ned's mad," he pursued his soliloquy. "He's a weather-cock. Do I ever act as he does? And I'm the dog that gets the bad name. The idea of giving this fellow two thousand--two thousand pounds! Why, he might live like a gentleman."

And that when your friend proves himself to be distraught, the proper friendly thing to do is to think for him, became eminently clear in Algernon's mind.

"Of course, it's Ned's money. I'd give it if I had it, but I haven't; and the fellow won't take a farthing less; I know him. However, it's my duty to try."

He summoned a vehicle. It was a boast of his proud youth that never in his life had he ridden in a close cab. Flinging his shoulders back, he surveyed the world on foot. "Odd faces one sees," he meditated. "I suppose they've got feelings, like the rest; but a fellow can't help asking--what's the use of them? If I inherit all right, as I ought to--why shouldn't I?--I'll squat down at old Wrexby, garden and farm, and drink my Port. I hate London. The squire's not so far wrong, I fancy."

It struck him that his chance of inheriting was not so very obscure, after all. Why had he ever considered it obscure? It was decidedly next to certain, he being an only son. And the squire's health was bad!

While speculating in this wise he saw advancing, arm-in-arm, Lord Suckling and Harry Latters. They looked at him, and evidently spoke together, but gave neither nod, nor smile, nor a word, in answer to his flying wave of the hand. Furious, and aghast at this signal of exclusion from the world, just at the moment when he was returning to it almost cheerfully in spirit, he stopped the cab, jumped out, and ran after the pair.

"I suppose I must say Mr. Latters," Algernon commenced.

Harry deliberated a quiet second or two. "Well, according to our laws of primogeniture, I don't come first, and therefore miss a better title," he said.

"How are you?" Algernon nodded to Lord Suckling, who replied, "Very well, I thank you."

Their legs were swinging forward concordantly. Algernon plucked out his purse. "I have to beg you to excuse me," he said, hurriedly; "my cousin Ned's in a mess, and I've been helping him as well as I can--bothered--"

not an hour my own. Fifty, I think?" That amount he tendered to Harry Latters, who took it most coolly.

"A thousand?" he queried of Lord Suckling.

"Divided by two," replied the young nobleman, and the Blucher of bank-notes was proffered to him. He smiled queerly, hesitating to take it.

"I was looking for you at all the Clubs last night," said Algernon.

Lord Suckling and Latters had been at theirs, playing whist till past midnight; yet is money, even when paid over in this egregious public manner by a nervous hand, such testimony to the sincerity of a man, that they shouted a simultaneous invitation for him to breakfast with them, in an hour, at the Club, or dine with them there that evening. Algernon affected the nod of haste and acquiescence, and ran, lest they should hear him groan. He told the cabman to drive Northward, instead of to the South-west. The question of the thousand pounds had been decided for him--"by fate," he chose to affirm. The consideration that one is pursued by fate, will not fail to impart a sense of dignity even to the meanest. "After all, if I stop in England," said he, "I can't afford to lose my position in society; anything's better than that an unmitigated low scoundrel like Sedgett should bag the game." Besides, is it not somewhat sceptical to suppose that when Fate decides, she has not weighed the scales, and decided for the best? Meantime, the whole energy of his intellect was set reflecting on the sort of lie which Edward would, by nature and the occasion, be disposed to swallow. He quitted the cab, and walked in the Park, and au diable to him there! the fool has done his work.

It was now half-past ten. Robert, with a most heavy heart, had accomplished Rhoda's commands upon him. He had taken Dahlia to his lodgings, whither, when free from Edward, Rhoda proceeded in a mood of extreme sternness. She neither thanked Robert, nor smiled upon her sister. Dahlia sent one quivering look up at her, and cowered lower in her chair near the window.

"Father comes at twelve?" Rhoda said.

Robert replied: "He does."

After which a silence too irritating for masculine nerves filled the room.

"You will find, I hope, everything here that you may want," said Robert. "My landlady will attend to the bell. She is very civil."

"Thank you; we shall not want anything," said Rhoda. "There is my sister's Bible at her lodgings."

Robert gladly offered to fetch it, and left them with a sense of relief that was almost joy. He waited a minute in the doorway, to hear whether

Dahlia addressed him. He waited on the threshold of the house, that he might be sure Dahlia did not call for his assistance. Her cry of appeal would have fortified him to stand against Rhoda; but no cry was heard. He kept expecting it, pausing for it, hoping it would come to solve his intense perplexity. The prolonged stillness terrified him; for, away from the sisters, he had power to read the anguish of Dahlia's heart, her frozen incapacity, and the great and remorseless mastery which lay in Rhoda's inexorable will.

A few doors down the street he met Major blaring, on his way to him. "Here's five minutes' work going to be done, which we may all of us regret till the day of our deaths," Robert said, and related what had passed during the morning hours.

Percy approved Rhoda, saying, "She must rescue her sister at all hazards. The case is too serious for her to listen to feelings, and regrets, and objections. The world against one poor woman is unfair odds, Robert. I come to tell you I leave England in a day or two. Will you join me?"

"How do I know what I shall or can do?" said Robert, mournfully: and they parted.

Rhoda's unflickering determination to carry out, and to an end, this tragic struggle of duty against inclination; on her own sole responsibility forcing it on; acting like a Fate, in contempt of mere emotions,--seemed barely real to his mind: each moment that he conceived it vividly, he became more certain that she must break down. Was it in her power to drag Dahlia to the steps of the altar? And would not her heart melt when at last Dahlia did get her voice? "This marriage can never take place!" he said, and was convinced of its being impossible. He forgot that while he was wasting energy at Fairly, Rhoda had sat hiving bitter strength in the loneliness of the Farm; with one vile epithet clapping on her ears, and nothing but unavailing wounded love for her absent unhappy sister to make music of her pulses.

He found his way to Dahlia's room; he put her Bible under his arm, and looked about him sadly. Time stood at a few minutes past eleven. Flinging himself into a chair, he thought of waiting in that place; but a crowd of undefinable sensations immediately beset him. Seeing Edward Blancove in the street below, he threw up the window compassionately, and Edward, casting a glance to right and left, crossed the road. Robert went down to him.

"I am waiting for my cousin." Edward had his watch in his hand. "I think I am fast. Can you tell me the time exactly?"

"Why, I'm rather slow," said Robert, comparing time with his own watch. "I make it four minutes past the hour."

"I am at fourteen," said Edward. "I fancy I must be fast."

"About ten minutes past, is the time, I think."

"So much as that!"

"It may be a minute or so less."

"I should like," said Edward, "to ascertain positively."

"There's a clock down in the kitchen here, I suppose," said Robert.

"Safer, there's a clock at the church, just in sight from here."

"Thank you; I will go and look at that."

Robert bethought himself suddenly that Edward had better not. "I can tell you the time to a second," he said. "It's now twelve minutes past eleven."

Edward held his watch balancing. "Twelve," he repeated; and, behind this mask of common-place dialogue, they watched one another--warily, and still with pity, on Robert's side.

"You can't place any reliance on watches," said Edward.

"None, I believe," Robert remarked.

"If you could see the sun every day in this climate!" Edward looked up.

"Ah, the sun's the best timepiece, when visible," Robert acquiesced.

"Backwoodsmen in America don't need watches."

"Unless it is to astonish the Indians with them."

"Ah! yes!" hummed Robert.

"Twelve--fifteen--it must be a quarter past. Or, a three quarters to the next hour, as the Germans say."

"Odd!" Robert ejaculated. "Foreigners have the queerest ways in the world. They mean no harm, but they make you laugh."

"They think the same of us, and perhaps do the laughing more loudly."

"Ah! let them," said Robert, not without contemptuous indignation, though his mind was far from the talk.

The sweat was on Edward's forehead. "In a few minutes it will be half-past--half-past eleven! I expect a friend; that makes me impatient. Mr. Eccles"--Edward showed his singular, smallish, hard-cut and flashing features, clear as if he had blown off a mist--"you are too much of a man to bear malice. Where is Dahlia? Tell me at once. Some one seems to be cruelly driving her. Has she lost her senses? She has--or else she is coerced in an inexplicable and shameful manner."

"Mr. Blancove," said Robert, "I bear you not a bit of malice--couldn't if I would. I'm not sure I could have said guilty to the same sort of

things, in order to tell an enemy of mine I was sorry for what I had done, and I respect you for your courage. Dahlia was taken from here by me."

Edward nodded, as if briefly assenting, while his features sharpened.

"Why?" he asked.

"It was her sister's wish."

"Has she no will of her own?"

"Very little, I'm afraid, just now, sir."

"A remarkable sister! Are they of Puritan origin?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"And this father?"

"Mr. Blancove, he is one of those sort--he can't lift up his head if he so much as suspects a reproach to his children."

Edward brooded. "I desire--as I told you, as I told her sister, as I told my father last night--I desire to make her my wife. What can I do more? Are they mad with some absurd country pride? Half-past eleven!--it will be murder if they force her to it! Where is she? To such a man as that! Poor soul! I can hardly fear it, for I can't imagine it. Here--the time is going. You know the man yourself."

"I know the man?" said Robert. "I've never set eyes on him--I've never set eyes on him, and never liked to ask much about him. I had a sort of feeling. Her sister says he is a good, and kind, honourable young fellow, and he must be."

"Before it's too late," Edward muttered hurriedly--"you know him--his name is Sedgett."

Robert hung swaying over him with a big voiceless chest.

"That Sedgett?" he breathed huskily, and his look was hard to meet.

Edward frowned, unable to raise his head.

"Lord in heaven! some one has something to answer for!" cried Robert. "Come on; come to the church. That foul dog?--Or you, stay where you are. I'll go. He to be Dahlia's husband! They've seen him, and can't see what he is!--cunning with women as that? How did they meet? Do you know?--can't you guess?"

He flung a lightning at Edward and ran off. Bursting into the aisle, he saw the minister closing the Book at the altar, and three persons moving toward the vestry, of whom the last, and the one he discerned, was Rhoda.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Ashamed of letting his ears be filled with secret talk
Full-o'-Beer's a hasty chap
Gravely reproaching the tobacconist for the growing costliness of cigars
He lies as naturally as an infant sucks
I would cut my tongue out, if it did you a service
Inferences are like shadows on the wall
Marriage is an awful thing, where there's no love
One learns to have compassion for fools, by studying them
Principle of examining your hypothesis before you proceed to decide by it
Rhoda will love you. She is firm when she loves
Sort of religion with her to believe no wrong of you
The unhappy, who do not wish to live, and cannot die
You choose to give yourself to an obscure dog

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