Seeing that Rhoda would not sit down, Miss Barfoot rose and stood by the fireplace.

"I can't bear reproaches," said the former; "least of all when they are irrational and undeserved."

"If I reproached you, it was in a tone which should never have given you offence. One would think that I had rated you like a disobedient servant."

"If *that* had been possible," answered Rhoda, with a faint smile, "I should never have been here. You said that you bitterly repented having given way to me on a certain occasion. That was unreasonable; in giving way, you declared yourself convinced. And the reproach I certainly didn't deserve, for I had behaved conscientiously."

"Isn't it allowed me to disapprove of what your conscience dictates?"

"Not when you have taken the same view, and acted upon it. I don't lay claim to many virtues, and I haven't that of meekness. I could never endure anger; my nature resents it."

"I did wrong to speak angrily, but indeed I hardly knew what I was saying. I had suffered a terrible shock. I loved that poor girl; I loved her all the more for what I had seen of her since she came to implore my help. Your utter coldness—it seemed to me inhuman—I shrank from you. If your face had shown ever so little compassion——"

"I *felt* no compassion."

"No. You have hardened your heart with theory. Guard yourself, Rhoda! To work for women one must keep one's womanhood. You are becoming—you are wandering as far from the true way—oh, much further than Bella did!"

"I can't answer you. When we argued about our differences in a friendly spirit, all was permissible; now

if I spoke my thought it would be mere harshness and cause of embitterment. I fear all is at an end between us. I should perpetually remind you of this sorrow."

There was a silence of some length. Rhoda turned away, and stood in reflection.

"Let us do nothing hastily," said Miss Barfoot. "We have more to think of than our own feelings."

"I have said that I am quite willing to go on with my work, but it must be on a different footing. The relation between us can no longer be that of equals. I am content to follow your directions. But your dislike of me will make this impossible."

"Dislike? You misunderstand me wretchedly. I think rather it is you who dislike me, as a weak woman with no command of her emotions."

Again they ceased from speech. Presently Miss Barfoot stepped forward.

"Rhoda, I shall be away all to-morrow; I may not return to London until Monday morning. Will you think quietly over it all? Believe me, I am not angry with you, and as for disliking you—what nonsense are we talking! But I can't regret that I let you see how painfully your behaviour impressed me. That hardness is not natural to you. You have encouraged yourself in it, and you are warping a very noble character."

"I wish only to be honest. Where you felt compassion I felt indignation."

"Yes; we have gone through all that. The indignation was a forced, exaggerated sentiment. You can't see it in that light perhaps. But try to imagine for a moment that Bella had been your sister——"

"That is confusing the point at issue," Rhoda exclaimed irritably. "Have I ever denied the force of such feelings? My grief would have blinded me to all larger considerations, of course. But she was happily

not my sister, and I remained free to speak the simple truth about her case. It isn't personal feeling that directs a great movement in civilization. If you were right, I also was right. You should have recognized the inevitable discord of our opinions at that moment."

"It didn't seem to me inevitable."

"I should have despised myself if I could have affected sympathy."

"Affected—yes."

"Or have really felt it. That would have meant that I did not know myself. I should never again have dared to speak on any grave subject."

Miss Barfoot smiled sadly.

"How young you are! Oh, there is far more than ten years between our ages, Rhoda! In spirit you are a young girl, and I an old woman. No, no; we *will not* quarrel. Your companionship is far too precious to me, and I dare to think that mine is not without value for you. Wait till my grief has had its course; then I shall be more reasonable and do you more justice."

Rhoda turned towards the door, lingered, but without looking back, and so left the room.

Miss Barfoot was absent as she had announced, returning only in time for her duties in Great Portland Street on Monday morning. She and Rhoda then shook hands, but without a word of personal reference. They went through the day's work as usual.

This was the day of the month on which Miss Barfoot would deliver her four o'clock address. The subject had been announced a week ago: "Woman as an Invader." An hour earlier than usual work was put aside, and seats were rapidly arranged for the small audience; it numbered only thirteen—the girls already on the premises and a few who came specially. All were aware of the tragedy in which Miss Barfoot had recently been con-

cerned; her air of sadness, so great a contrast to that with which she was wont to address them, they naturally attributed to this cause.

As always, she began in the simplest conversational tone. Not long since she had received an anonymous letter, written by some clerk out of employment, abusing her roundly for her encouragement of female competition in the clerkly world. The taste of this epistle was as bad as its grammar, but they should hear it; she read it all through. Now, whoever the writer might be, it seemed pretty clear that he was not the kind of person with whom one could profitably argue; no use in replying to *him*, even had he given the opportunity. For all that, his uncivil attack had a meaning, and there were plenty of people ready to urge his argument in more respectable terms. "They will tell you that, in entering the commercial world, you not only unsex yourselves, but do a grievous wrong to the numberless men struggling hard for bare sustenance. You reduce salaries, you press into an already overcrowded field, you injure even your own sex by making it impossible for men to marry, who, if they earned enough, would be supporting a wife." To-day, continued Miss Barfoot, it was not her purpose to debate the economic aspects of the question. She would consider it from another point of view, repeating, perhaps, much that she had already said to them on other occasions, but doing so because these thoughts had just now very strong possession of her mind.

This abusive correspondent, who declared that he was supplanted by a young woman who did his work for smaller payment, doubtless had a grievance. But, in the miserable disorder of our social state, one grievance had to be weighed against another, and Miss Barfoot held that there was much more to be urged on behalf of

women who invaded what had been exclusively the men's sphere, than on behalf of the men who began to complain of this invasion.

"They point to half a dozen occupations which are deemed strictly suitable for women. Why don't we confine ourselves to this ground? Why don't I encourage girls to become governesses, hospital nurses, and so on? You think I ought to reply that already there are too many applicants for such places. It would be true, but I don't care to make use of the argument, which at once involves us in a debate with the out-crowded clerk. No; to put the truth in a few words, I am not chiefly anxious that you should *earn money*, but that women in general shall become *rational and responsible human beings*.

"Follow me carefully. A governess, a nurse, may be the most admirable of women. I will dissuade no one from following those careers who is distinctly fitted for them. But these are only a few out of the vast number of girls who must, if they are not to be despicable persons, somehow find serious work. Because I myself have had an education in clerkship, and have most capacity for such employment, I look about for girls of like mind, and do my best to prepare them for work in offices. And (here I must become emphatic once more) I am *glad* to have entered on this course. I am *glad* that I can show girls the way to a career which my opponents call unwomanly.

"Now see why. Womanly and womanish are two very different words; but the latter, as the world uses it, has become practically synonymous with the former. A womanly occupation means, practically, an occupation that a man disdains. And here is the root of the matter. I repeat that I am not first of all anxious to keep you supplied with daily bread. I am a troublesome, aggres-

sive, revolutionary person. I want to do away with that common confusion of the words womanly and womanish, and I see very clearly that this can only be effected by an armed movement, an invasion by women of the spheres which men have always forbidden us to enter. I am strenuously opposed to that view of us set forth in such charming language by Mr. Ruskin—for it tells on the side of those men who think and speak of us in a way the reverse of charming. Were we living in an ideal world, I think women would not go to sit all day in offices. But the fact is that we live in a world as far from ideal as can be conceived. We live in a time of warfare, of revolt. If woman is no longer to be womanish, but a human being of powers and responsibilities, she must become militant, defiant. She must push her claims to the extremity.

"An excellent governess, a perfect hospital nurse, do work which is invaluable; but for our cause of emancipation they are no good—nay, they are harmful. Men point to them, and say, Imitate these, keep to your proper world. Our proper world is the world of intelligence, of honest effort, of moral strength. The old types of womanly perfection are no longer helpful to us. Like the Church service, which to all but one person in a thousand has become meaningless gabble by dint of repetition, these types have lost their effect. They are no longer educational. We have to ask ourselves, What course of training will wake women up, make them conscious of their souls, startle them into healthy activity?"

"It must be something new, something free from the reproach of womanliness. I don't care whether we crowd out the men or not. I don't care *what* results, if only women are made strong and self-reliant and nobly independent! The world must look to its concerns.

Most likely we shall have a revolution in the social order greater than any that yet seems possible. Let it come, and let *us* help its coming. When I think of the contemptible wretchedness of women enslaved by custom, by their weakness, by their desires, I am ready to cry, Let the world perish in tumult rather than things go on in this way!"

For a moment her voice failed. There were tears in her eyes. The hearers, most of them, understood what made her so passionate; they exchanged grave looks.

"Our abusive correspondent shall do as best he can. He suffers for the folly of men in all ages. We can't help it. It is very far from our wish to cause hardship to any one, but we ourselves are escaping from a hardship that has become intolerable. We are educating ourselves. There must be a new type of woman, active in every sphere of life: a new worker out in the world, a new ruler of the home. Of the old ideal virtues we can retain many, but we have to add to them those which have been thought appropriate only in men. Let a woman be gentle, but at the same time let her be strong; let her be pure of heart, but none the less wise and instructed. Because we have to set an example to the sleepy of our sex, we must carry on an active warfare—must be invaders. Whether woman is the equal of man I neither know nor care. We are not his equal in size, in weight, in muscle, and, for all I can say, we may have less power of brain. That has nothing to do with it. Enough for us to know that our natural growth has been stunted. The mass of women have always been paltry creatures, and their paltriness has proved a curse to men. So, if you like to put it in this way, we are working for the advantage of men as well as for our own. Let the responsibility for disorder rest on those who have made us despise our old selves. At any

cost—at any cost—we will free ourselves from the heritage of weakness and contempt!"

The assembly was longer than usual in dispersing. When all were gone, Miss Barfoot listened for a footstep in the other room. As she could detect no sound, she went to see if Rhoda was there or not.

Yes; Rhoda was sitting in a thoughtful attitude. She looked up, smiled, and came a few paces forward.

"It was very good."

"I thought it would please you."

Miss Barfoot drew nearer, and added,—

"It was addressed to you. It seemed to me that you had forgotten how I really thought about these things."

"I have been ill-tempered," Rhoda replied. "Obstinacy is one of my faults."

"It is."

Their eyes met.

"I believe," continued Rhoda, "that I ought to ask your pardon. Right or wrong, I behaved in an unmannerly way."

"Yes, I think you did."

Rhoda smiled, bending her head to the rebuke.

"And there's the last of it," added Miss Barfoot "Let us kiss and be friends."

CHAPTER XIV.

MOTIVES MEETING.

When Barfoot made his next evening call Rhoda did not appear. He sat for some time in pleasant talk with his cousin, no reference whatever being made to Miss Nunn; then at length, beginning to fear that he would not see her, he inquired after her health. Miss Nunn was very well, answered the hostess, smiling.

"Not at home this evening?"

"Busy with some kind of study, I think."

Plainly, the difference between these women had come to a happy end, as Barfoot foresaw that it would. He thought it better to make no mention of his meeting with Rhoda in the gardens.

"That was a very unpleasant affair that I saw your name connected with last week," he said presently.

"It made me very miserable—ill indeed for a day or two."

"That was why you couldn't see me?"

"Yes."

"But in your reply to my note you made no mention of the circumstances."

Miss Barfoot kept silence; frowning slightly, she looked at the fire near which they were both sitting, for the weather had become very cold.

"No doubt," pursued Everard, glancing at her, "you refrained out of delicacy—on my account, I mean."

"Need we talk of it?"

"For a moment, please. You are very friendly with me nowadays, but I suppose your estimate of my character remains very much the same as years ago?"

"What is the use of such questions?"

"I ask for a distinct purpose. You can't regard me with any respect?"

"To tell you the truth, Everard, I know nothing about you. I have no wish to revive disagreeable memories, and I think it quite possible that you may be worthy of respect."

"So far so good. Now, in justice, please answer me another question. How have you spoken of me to Miss Nunn?"

"How can it matter?"

"It matters a good deal. Have you told her any scandal about me?"

"Yes, I have?"

Everard looked at her with surprise.

"I spoke to Miss Nunn about you," she continued, "before I thought of your ever coming here. Frankly, I used you as an illustration of the evils I abominate."

"You are a courageous and plain-spoken woman, cousin Mary," said Everard, laughing a little. "Couldn't you have found some other example?"

There was no reply.

"So," he proceeded, "Miss Nunn regards me as a proved scoundrel?"

"I never told her the story. I made known the general grounds of my dissatisfaction with you, that was all."

"Come, that's something. I'm glad you didn't amuse her with that unedifying bit of fiction."

"Fiction?"

"Yes, fiction," said Everard bluntly. "I am not

going into details; the thing's over and done with, and I chose my course at the time. But it's as well to let you know that my behaviour was grossly misrepresented. In using me to point a moral you were grievously astray. I shall say no more. If you can believe me, do; if you can't, dismiss the matter from your mind."

There followed a silence of some moments. Then, with a perfectly calm manner, Miss Barfoot began to speak of a new subject. Everard followed her lead. He did not stay much longer, and on leaving asked to be remembered to Miss Nunn.

A week later he again found his cousin alone. He now felt sure that Miss Nunn was keeping out of his way. Her parting from him in the gardens had been decidedly abrupt, and possibly it signified more serious offence than at the time he attributed to her. It was so difficult to be sure of anything in regard to Miss Nunn. If another woman had acted thus he would have judged it coquetry. But perhaps Rhoda was quite incapable of anything of that kind. Perhaps she took herself so very seriously that the mere suspicion of banter in his talk had moved her to grave resentment. Or again, she might be half ashamed to meet him after confessing her disagreement with Miss Barfoot; on recovery from ill-temper (unmistakable ill-temper it was), she had seen her behaviour in an embarrassing light. Between these various conjectures he wavered whilst talking with Mary. But he did not so much as mention Miss Nunn's name.

Some ten days went by, and he paid a call at the hour sanctioned by society, five in the afternoon; it being Saturday. One of his reasons for coming at this time was the hope that he might meet other callers, for he felt curious to see what sort of people visited the house. And this wish was gratified. On entering the drawing-

room, whither he was led by the servant straightway, after the manner of the world, he found not only his cousin and her friend, but two strangers, ladies. A glance informed him that both of these were young and good-looking, one being a type that particularly pleased him—dark, pale, with very bright eyes.

Miss Barfoot received him as any hostess would have done. She was her cheerful self once more, and in a moment introduced him to the lady with whom she had been talking—the dark one, by name Mrs. Widdowson. Rhoda Nunn, sitting apart with the second lady, gave him her hand, but at once resumed her conversation.

With Mrs. Widdowson he was soon chatting in his easy and graceful way, Miss Barfoot putting in a word now and then. He saw that she had not long been married; a pleasant diffidence and the maidenly glance of her bright eyes indicated this. She was dressed very prettily, and seemed aware of it.

"We went to hear the new opera at the Savoy last night," she said to Miss Barfoot, with a smile of remembered enjoyment.

"Did you? Miss Nunn and I were there."

Everard gazed at his cousin with humorous incredulity.

"Is it possible?" he exclaimed. "You were at the Savoy?"

"Where is the impossibility? Why shouldn't Miss Nunn and I go to the theatre?"

"I appeal to Mrs. Widdowson. She also was astonished."

"Yes, indeed I was, Miss Barfoot!" exclaimed the younger lady, with a merry little laugh. "I hesitated before speaking of such a frivolous entertainment."

Lowering her voice, and casting a smile in Rhoda's direction, Miss Barfoot replied,—

"I have to make a concession occasionally on Miss

Nunn's account. It would be unkind never to allow her a little recreation."

The two at a distance were talking earnestly, with grave countenances. In a few moments they rose, and the visitor came towards Miss Barfoot to take her leave. Thereupon Everard crossed to Miss Nunn.

"Is there anything very good in the new Gilbert and Sullivan opera?" he asked.

"Many good things. You really haven't been yet?"

"No—I'm ashamed to say."

"Do go this very evening, if you can get a seat. Which part of the theatre do you prefer?"

His eye rested on hers, but he could detect no irony.

"I'm a poor man, you know. I have to be content with the cheap places. Which do you like best, the Savoy operas or the burlesques at the Gaiety?"

A few more such questions and answers, of laboured commonplace or strained flippancy, and Everard, after searching his companion's face, broke off with a laugh.

"There now," he said, "we have talked in the approved five o'clock way. Precisely the dialogue I heard in a drawing-room yesterday. It goes on day after day, year after year, through the whole of people's lives."

"You are on friendly terms with such people?"

"I am on friendly terms with people of every kind." He added, in an undertone, "I hope I may include you, Miss Nunn?"

But to this she paid no attention. She was looking at Monica and Miss Barfoot, who had just risen from their seats. They approached, and presently Barfoot found himself alone with the familiar pair.

"Another cup of tea, Everard?" asked his cousin.

"Thank you. Who was the young lady you didn't introduce me to?"

"Miss Haven—one of our pupils."

"Does she think of going into business?"

"She has just got a place in the publishing department of a weekly paper."

"But really—from the few words of her talk that fell upon my ear I should have thought her a highly educated girl."

"So she is," replied Miss Barfoot. "What is your objection?"

"Why doesn't she aim at some better position?"

Miss Barfoot and Rhoda exchanged smiles.

"But nothing could be better for her. Some day she hopes to start a paper of her own, and to learn all the details of such business is just what she wants. Oh, you are still very conventional, Everard. You meant she ought to take up something graceful and pretty—something ladylike."

"No, no. It's all right. I thoroughly approve. And when Miss Haven starts her paper, Miss Nunn will write for it."

"I hope so," assented his cousin.

"You make me feel that I am in touch with the great movements of our time. It's delightful to know you. But come now, isn't there any way in which I could help?"

Mary laughed.

"None whatever, I'm afraid."

"Well,—'They also serve who only stand and wait.'"

If Everard had pleased himself he would have visited the house in Queen's Road every other day. As this might not be, he spent a good deal of his time in other society, not caring to read much, or otherwise occupy his solitude. Starting with one or two acquaintances in London, people of means and position, he easily extended his social sphere. Had he cared to marry, he might, notwithstanding his poverty, have wooed with

fair chance in a certain wealthy family, where two daughters, the sole children, plain but well-instructed girls, waited for the men of brains who should appreciate them. So rare in society, these men of brains, and, alas! so frequently deserted by their wisdom when it comes to choosing a wife. It being his principle to reflect on every possibility, Barfoot of course asked himself whether it would not be reasonable to approach one or other of these young women—the Miss Brissendens. He needed a larger income; he wanted to travel in a more satisfactory way than during his late absence. Agnes Brissenden struck him as a very calm and sensible girl; not at all likely to marry any one but the man who would be a suitable companion for her, and probably disposed to look on marriage as a permanent friendship, which must not be endangered by feminine follies. She had no beauty, but mental powers above the average —superior, certainly, to her sister's.

It was worth thinking about, but in the meantime he wanted to see much more of Rhoda Nunn. Rhoda he was beginning to class with women who are attractive both physically and mentally. Strange how her face had altered to his perception since the first meeting. He smiled now when he beheld it—smiled as a man does when his senses are pleasantly affected. He was getting to know it so well, to be prepared for its constant changes, to watch for certain movements of brows or lips when he had said certain things. That forcible holding of her hand had marked a stage in progressive appreciation; since then he felt a desire to repeat the experiment.

> "Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
> Imprison her soft hand, and let her rave——"

The lines occurred to his memory, and he understood

them better than heretofore. It would delight him to enrage Rhoda, and then to detain her by strength, to overcome her senses, to watch her long lashes droop over the eloquent eyes. But this was something very like being in love, and he by no means wished to be seriously in love with Miss Nunn.

It was another three weeks before he had an opportunity of private talk with her. Trying a Sunday afternoon, about four, he found Rhoda alone in the drawing-room; Miss Barfoot was out of town. Rhoda's greeting had a frank friendliness which she had not bestowed upon him for a long time; not, indeed, since they met on her return from Cheddar. She looked very well, readily laughed, and seemed altogether in a coming-on disposition. Barfoot noticed that the piano was open.

"Do you play?" he inquired. "Strange that I should still have to ask the question."

"Oh, only a hymn on Sunday," she answered off-hand.

"A hymn?"

"Why not? I like some of the old tunes very much. They remind me of the golden age."

"In your own life, you mean?"

She nodded.

"You have once or twice spoken of that time as if you were not quite happy in the present."

"Of course I am not quite happy. What woman is? I mean, what woman above the level of a petted pussy-cat?"

Everard was leaning towards her on the head of the couch where he sat. He gazed into her face fixedly.

"I wish it were in my power to remove some of your discontents. I would, more gladly than I can tell you."

"You abound in good nature, Mr. Barfoot," she replied, laughing. "But unfortunately you can't change the world."

"Not the world at large. But might I not change your views of it—in some respects?"

"Indeed I don't see how you could. I think I had rather have my own view than any you might wish to substitute for it."

In this humour she seemed more than ever a challenge to his manhood. She was armed at all points. She feared nothing that he might say. No flush of apprehension; no nervous tremor; no weak self-consciousness. Yet he saw her as a woman, and desirable.

"My views are not ignoble," he murmured.

"I hope not. But they are the views of a man."

"Man and woman ought to see life with much the same eyes."

"Ought they? Perhaps so. I am not sure. But they never will in our time."

"Individuals may. The man and woman who have thrown away prejudice and superstition. You and I, for instance."

"Oh, those words have such different meanings. In your judgment I should seem full of idle prejudice."

She liked this conversation; he read pleasure in her face, saw in her eyes a glint of merry defiance. And his pulses throbbed the quicker for it.

"You have a prejudice against *me*, for instance."

"Pray, did you go to the Savoy?" inquired Rhoda absently.

"I have no intention of talking about the Savoy, Miss Nunn. It is teacup time, but as yet we have the room to ourselves."

Rhoda went and rang the bell.

"The teacups shall come at once."

He laughed slightly, and looked at her from beneath drooping lids. Rhoda went on with talk of trifles, until the tea was brought and she had given a cup. Having

emptied it at two draughts, he resumed his former leaning position.

"Well, you were saying that you had a prejudice against me. Of course my cousin Mary is accountable for that. Mary has used me rather ill. Before ever you saw me, I represented to your mind something very disagreeable indeed. That was too bad of my cousin."

Rhoda, sipping her tea, had a cold, uninterested expression.

"I didn't know of this," he proceeded, "when we met that day in the gardens, and when I made you so angry."

"I wasn't disposed to jest about what had happened."

"But neither was I. You quite misunderstood me. Will you tell me how that unpleasantness came to an end?"

"Oh yes. I admitted that I had been ill-mannered and obstinate."

"How delightful! Obstinate? I have a great deal of that in my character. All the active part of my life was one long fit of obstinacy. As a lad I determined on a certain career, and I stuck to it in spite of conscious unfitness, in spite of a great deal of suffering, out of sheer obstinacy. I wonder whether Mary ever told you that."

"She mentioned something of the kind once."

"You could hardly believe it, I dare say? I am a far more reasonable being now. I have changed in so many respects that I hardly know my old self when I look back on it. Above all, in my thoughts about women. If I had married during my twenties I should have chosen, as the average man does, some simpleton —with unpleasant results. If I marry now, it will be a woman of character and brains. Marry in the legal

sense I never shall. My companion must be as independent of forms as I am myself."

Rhoda looked into her teacup for a second or two, then said with a smile,—

"You also are a reformer?"

"In that direction."

He had a difficulty in suppressing signs of nervousness. The bold declaration had come without forethought, and Rhoda's calm acceptance of it delighted him.

"Questions of marriage," she went on to say, "don't interest me much; but this particular reform doesn't seem very practical. It is trying to bring about an ideal state of things whilst we are yet struggling with elementary obstacles."

"I don't advocate this liberty for all mankind. Only for those who are worthy of it."

"And what"—she laughed a little—"are the sure signs of worthiness? I think it would be very needful to know them."

Everard kept a grave face.

"True. But a free union presupposes equality of position. No honest man would propose it, for instance, to a woman incapable of understanding all it involved, or incapable of resuming her separate life if that became desirable. I admit all the difficulties. One must consider those of feeling, as well as the material. If my wife should declare that she must be released, I might suffer grievously, but being a man of some intelligence, I should admit that the suffering couldn't be helped; the brutality of enforced marriage doesn't seem to me an alternative worth considering. It wouldn't seem so to any woman of the kind I mean."

Would she have the courage to urge one grave difficulty that he left aside? No. He fancied her about to

speak, but she ended by offering him another cup of tea.

"After all, that is *not* your ideal?" he said.

"I haven't to do with the subject at all," Rhoda answered, with perhaps a trace of impatience. "My work and thought are for the women who do not marry —the 'odd women' I call them. They alone interest me. One mustn't undertake too much."

"And you resolutely class yourself with them?"

"Of course I do."

"And therefore you have certain views of life which I should like to change. You are doing good work, but I had rather see any other woman in the world devote her life to it. I am selfish enough to wish——"

The door opened, and the servant announced,—

"Mr. and Mrs. Widdowson."

With perfect self-command Miss Nunn rose and stepped forward. Barfoot, rising more slowly, looked with curiosity at the husband of the pretty, black-browed woman whom he had already met. Widdowson surprised and amused him. How had this stiff, stern fellow with the grizzled beard won such a wife? Not that Mrs. Widdowson seemed a remarkable person, but certainly it was an ill-assorted union.

She came and shook hands. As he spoke a few natural words, Everard chanced to notice that the husband's eye was upon him, and with what a look! If ever a man declared in his countenance the worst species of jealous temper, Mr. Widdowson did so. His fixed smile became sardonic.

Presently Barfoot and he were introduced. They had nothing to say to each other, but Everard maintained a brief conversation just to observe the man. Turning at length, he began to talk with Mrs. Widdowson, and, because he was conscious of the jealous eye, assumed an

especial sprightliness, an air of familiar pleasantry, to which the lady responded, but with a nervous hesitation.

The arrival of these people was an intense annoyance to him. Another quarter of an hour and things would have come to an exciting pass between Rhoda and himself; he would have heard how she received a declaration of love. Rhoda's self-possession notwithstanding, he believed that he was not without power over her. She liked to talk with him, enjoyed the freedom he allowed himself in choice of subject. Perhaps no man before had ever shown an appreciation of her qualities as woman. But she would not yield, was in no real danger from his love-making. Nay, the danger was to his own peace. He felt that resistance would intensify the ardour of his wooing, and possibly end by making him a victim of genuine passion. Well, let her enjoy that triumph, if she were capable of winning it.

He had made up his mind to outstay the Widdowsons, who clearly would not make a long call. But the fates were against him. Another visitor arrived, a lady named Cosgrove, who settled herself as if for at least an hour. Worse than that, he heard her say to Rhoda,—

"Oh, then do come and dine with us. Do, I beg!"

"I will, with pleasure," was Miss Nunn's reply. "Can you wait and take me with you?"

Useless to stay longer. As soon as the Widdowsons had departed he went up to Rhoda and silently offered his hand. She scarcely looked at him, and did not in the least return his pressure.

Rhoda dined at Mrs. Cosgrove's, and was home again at eleven o'clock. When the house was locked up, and the servants had gone to bed, she sat in the library, turning over a book that she had brought from her friend's house. It was a volume of essays, one of which dealt

with the relations between the sexes in a very modern spirit, treating the subject as a perfectly open one, and arriving at unorthodox conclusions. Mrs. Cosgrove had spoken of this dissertation with lively interest. Rhoda perused it very carefully, pausing now and then to reflect.

In his reading of her mind, Barfoot came near the truth.

No man had ever made love to her; no man, to her knowledge, had ever been tempted to do so. In certain moods she derived satisfaction from this thought, using it to strengthen her life's purpose; having passed her thirtieth year, she might take it as a settled thing that she would never be sought in marriage, and so could shut the doors on every instinct tending to trouble her intellectual decisions. But these instincts sometimes refused to be thus treated. As Miss Barfoot told her, she was very young for her years, young in physique, young in emotion. As a girl she had dreamt passionately, and the fires of her nature, though hidden beneath aggregations of moral and mental attainment, were not yet smothered. An hour of lassitude filled her with despondency, none the less real because she was ashamed of it. If only she had once been loved, like other women—if she had listened to an offer of devotion, and rejected it—her heart would be more securely at peace. So she thought. Secretly she deemed it a hard thing never to have known that common triumph of her sex. And, moreover, it took away from the merit of her position as a leader and encourager of women living independently. There might be some who said, or thought, that she made a virtue of necessity.

Everard Barfoot's advances surprised her not a little. Judging him as a man wholly without principle, she supposed at first that this was merely his way with all women, and resented it as impertinence. But even then

she did not dislike the show of homage; what her mind regarded with disdain, her heart was all but willing to feed upon, after its long hunger. Barfoot interested her, and not the less because of his evil reputation. Here was one of the men for whom women—doubtless more than one—had sacrificed themselves; she could not but regard him with sexual curiosity. And her interest grew, her curiosity was more haunting, as their acquaintance became a sort of friendship; she found that her moral disapprobation wavered, or was altogether forgotten. Perhaps it was to compensate for this that she went the length of outraging Miss Barfoot's feelings on the death of Bella Royston.

Certainly she thought with much frequency of Barfoot, and looked forward to his coming. Never had she wished so much to see him again as after their encounter in Chelsea Gardens, and on that account she forced herself to hold aloof when he came. It was not love, nor the beginning of love; she judged it something less possible to avow. The man's presence affected her with a perturbation which she had no difficulty in concealing at the time, though afterwards it distressed and shamed her. She took refuge in the undeniable fact that the quality of his mind made an impression upon her, that his talk was sympathetic. Miss Barfoot submitted to this influence; she confessed that her cousin's talk had always had a charm for her.

Could it be that this man reciprocated, and more than reciprocated, her complex feeling? To-day only accident had prevented him from making an avowal of love—unless she strangely mistook him. All the evening she had dwelt on this thought; it grew more and more astonishing. Was he worse than she had imagined? Under cover of independent thought, of serious moral theories, did he conceal mere profligacy and heartless-

ness? It was an extraordinary thing to have to ask such questions in relation to herself. It made her feel as if she had to learn herself anew, to form a fresh conception of her personality. She the object of a man's passion!

And the thought was exultant. Even thus late, then, the satisfaction of vanity had been granted her—nay, not of vanity alone.

He must be sincere. What motive could he possibly have for playing a part? Might it not be true that he was a changed man in certain respects, and that a genuine emotion at length had control of him? If so, she had only to wait for his next speech with her in private; she could not misjudge a lover's pleading.

The interest would only be that of comedy. She did not love Everard Barfoot, and saw no likelihood of ever doing so; on the whole, a subject for thankfulness. Nor could he seriously anticipate an assent to his proposal for a free union; in declaring that legal marriage was out of the question for him, he had removed his love-making to the region of mere ideal sentiment. But, if he loved her, these theories would sooner or later be swept aside; he would plead with her to become his legal wife.

To that point she desired to bring him. Offer what he might, she would not accept it; but the secret chagrin that was upon her would be removed. Love would no longer be the privilege of other women. To reject a lover in so many respects desirable, whom so many women might envy her, would fortify her self-esteem, and enable her to go forward in the chosen path with firmer tread.

It was one o'clock; the fire had died out and she began to shiver with cold. But a trembling of joy at the same time went through her limbs; again she had the

sense of exultation, of triumph. She would not dismiss him peremptorily. He should prove the quality of his love, if love it were. Coming so late, the experience must yield her all it had to yield of delight and contentment.

CHAPTER XV.

THE JOYS OF HOME.

MONICA and her husband, on leaving the house in Queen's Road, walked slowly in the eastward direction. Though night had fallen, the air was not unpleasant; they had no object before them, and for five minutes they occupied themselves with their thoughts. Then Widdowson stopped.

"Shall we go home again?" he asked, just glancing at Monica, then letting his eyes stray vaguely in the gloom.

"I should like to see Milly, but I'm afraid I can hardly take you there to call with me."

"Why not?"

"It's a very poor little sitting-room, you know, and she might have some friend. Isn't there anywhere you could go, and meet me afterwards?"

Frowning, Widdowson looked at his watch.

"Nearly six o'clock. There isn't much time."

"Edmund, suppose you go home, and let me come back by myself? You wouldn't mind, for once? I should like so much to have a talk with Milly. If I got back about nine or half-past, I could have a little supper, and that's all I should want."

He answered abruptly,—

"Oh, but I can't have you going about alone at night."

"Why not?" answered Monica, with a just perceptible note of irritation. "Are you afraid I shall be robbed or murdered?"

"Nonsense. But you mustn't be alone."

"Didn't I always use to be alone?"

He made an angry gesture.

"I have begged you not to speak of that. Why do you say what you know is disagreeable to me? You used to do all sorts of things that you never ought to have been obliged to do, and it's very painful to remember it."

Monica, seeing that people were approaching, walked on, and neither spoke until they had nearly reached the end of the road.

"I think we had better go home," Widdowson at length remarked.

"If you wish it; but I really don't see why I shouldn't call on Milly, now that we are here."

"Why didn't you speak of it before we left home? You ought to be more methodical, Monica. Each morning I always plan how my day is to be spent, and it would be much better if you would do the same. Then you wouldn't be so restless and uncertain."

"If I go to Rutland Street," said Monica, without heeding this admonition, "couldn't you leave me there for an hour?"

"What in the world am I to do?"

"I should have thought you might walk about. It's a pity you don't know more people, Edmund. It would make things so much pleasanter for you."

In the end he consented to see her safely as far as Rutland Street, occupy himself for an hour, and come back for her. They went by cab, which was dismissed in Hampstead Road. Widdowson did not turn away until he had ocular proof of his wife's admittance to the

house where Miss Vesper lived, and even then he walked no farther than the neighbouring streets, returning about every ten minutes to watch the house from a short distance, as though he feared Monica might have some project of escape. His look was very bilious; trudging mechanically hither and thither where fewest people were to be met, he kept his eyes on the ground, and clumped to a dismal rhythm with the end of his walking-stick. In the three or four months since his marriage, he seemed to have grown older; he no longer held himself so upright.

At the very moment agreed upon he was waiting close by the house. Five minutes passed; twice he had looked at his watch, and he grew excessively impatient, stamping as if it were necessary to keep himself warm. Another five minutes, and he uttered a nervous ejaculation. He had all but made up his mind to go and knock at the door when Monica came forth.

"You haven't been waiting here long, I hope?" she said cheerfully.

"Ten minutes. But it doesn't matter."

"I'm very sorry. We were talking on——"

"Yes, but one must always be punctual. I wish I could impress that upon you. Life without punctuality is quite impossible."

"I'm very sorry, Edmund. I will be more careful. Please don't lecture me, dear. How shall we go home?"

"We had better take a cab to Victoria. No knowing how long we may have to wait for a train when we get there."

"Now don't be so grumpy. Where have you been all the time?"

"Oh, walking about. What else was I to do?"

On the drive they held no conversation. At Victoria they were delayed about half an hour before a train

started for Herne Hill; Monica sat in a waiting-room, and her husband trudged about the platform, still clumping rhythmically with his stick.

Their Sunday custom was to dine at one o'clock, and at six to have tea. Widdowson hated the slightest interference with domestic routine, and he had reluctantly indulged Monica's desire to go to Chelsea this afternoon. Hunger was now added to his causes of discontent.

"Let us have something to eat at once," he said on entering the house. "This disorder really won't do: we must manage better somehow."

Without replying, Monica rang the dining-room bell, and gave orders.

Little change had been made in the interior of the house since its master's marriage. The dressing-room adjoining the principal bed-chamber was adapted to Monica's use, and a few ornaments were added to the drawing-room. Unlike his deceased brother, Widdowson had the elements of artistic taste; in furnishing his abode he took counsel with approved decorators, and at moderate cost had made himself a home which presented no original features, but gave no offence to a cultivated eye. The first sight of the rooms pleased Monica greatly. She declared that all was perfect, nothing need be altered. In those days, if she had bidden him spend a hundred pounds on reconstruction, the lover would have obeyed, delighted to hear her express a wish.

Though competence had come to him only after a lifetime of narrow means, Widdowson felt no temptation to parsimony. Secure in his all-sufficing income, he grudged no expenditure that could bring himself or his wife satisfaction. On the wedding-tour in Cornwall, Devon, and Somerset—it lasted about seven weeks—Monica learnt, among other things less agreeable, that her husband was generous with money.

He was anxious she should dress well, though only, as Monica soon discovered, for his own gratification. Soon after they had settled down at home she equipped herself for the cold season, and Widdowson cared little about the price so long as the effect of her new costumes was pleasing to him.

"You are making a butterfly of me," said Monica merrily, when he expressed strong approval of a bright morning dress that had just come home.

"A beautiful woman," he replied, with the nervous gravity which still possessed him when complimenting her, or saying tender things, "a beautiful woman ought to be beautifully clad."

At the same time he endeavoured to impress her with the gravest sense of a married woman's obligations. His raptures, genuine enough, were sometimes interrupted in the oddest way if Monica chanced to utter a careless remark of which he could not strictly approve, and such interruptions frequently became the opportunity for a long and solemn review of the wifely status. Without much trouble he had brought her into a daily routine which satisfied him. During the whole of the morning she was to be absorbed in household cares. In the afternoon he would take her to walk or drive, and the evening he wished her to spend either in drawing-room or library, occupied with a book. Monica soon found that his idea of wedded happiness was that they should always be together. Most reluctantly he consented to her going any distance alone, for whatever purpose. Public entertainments he regarded with no great favour, but when he saw how Monica enjoyed herself at concert or theatre, he made no objection to indulging her at intervals of a fortnight or so; his own fondness for music made this compliance easier. He was jealous of her forming new acquaintances; indifferent to society himself, he thought

his wife should be satisfied with her present friends, and could not understand why she wished to see them so often.

The girl was docile, and for a time he imagined that there would never be conflict between his will and hers. Whilst enjoying their holiday they naturally went everywhere together, and were scarce an hour out of each other's presence, day or night. In quiet spots by the seashore, when they sat in solitude, Widdowson's tongue was loo ened, and he poured forth his philosophy of life with the happy assurance that Monica would listen passively. His devotion to her proved itself in a thousand ways; week after week he grew, if anything, more kind, more tender; yet in his view of their relations he was unconsciously the most complete despot, a monument of male autocracy. Never had it occurred to Widdowson that a wife remains an individual, with rights and obligations independent of her wifely condition. Everything he said presupposed his own supremacy; he took for granted that it was his to direct, hers to be guided. A display of energy, purpose, ambition, on Monica's part, which had no reference to domestic pursuits, would have gravely troubled him; at once he would have set himself to subdue, with all gentleness, impulses so inimical to his idea of the married state. It rejoiced him that she spoke with so little sympathy of the principles supported by Miss Barfoot and Miss Nunn; these persons seemed to him well-meaning, but grievously mistaken. Miss Nunn he judged "unwomanly," and hoped in secret that Monica would not long remain on terms of friendship with her. Of course his wife's former pursuits were an abomination to him; he could not bear to hear them referred to.

"Woman's sphere is the home, Monica. Unfortunately girls are often obliged to go out and earn their living,

but this is unnatural, a necessity which advanced civilization will altogether abolish. You shall read John Ruskin; every word he says about women is good and precious. If a woman can neither have a home of her own, nor find occupation in any one else's, she is deeply to be pitied; her life is bound to be unhappy. I sincerely believe that an educated woman had better become a domestic servant than try to imitate the life of a man."

Monica seemed to listen attentively, but before long she accustomed herself to wear this look whilst in truth she was thinking her own thoughts. And as often as not they were of a nature little suspected by her prosing companion.

He believed himself the happiest of men. He had taken a daring step, but fortune smiled upon him. Monica was all he had imagined in his love-fever; knowledge of her had as yet brought to light no single untruth, no trait of character that he could condemn. That she returned his love he would not and could not doubt. And something she said to him one day, early in their honeymoon, filled up the measure of his bliss.

"What a change you have made in my life, Edmund! How much I have to thank you for!"

That was what he had hoped to hear. He had thought it himself; had wondered whether Monica saw her position in this light. And when the words actually fell from her lips he glowed with joy. This, to his mind, was the perfect relation of wife to husband. She must look up to him as her benefactor, her providence. It would have pleased him still better if she had not possessed a penny of her own, but happily Monica seemed never to give a thought to the sum at her disposal.

Surely he was the easiest of men to live with. When he first became aware that Monica suffered an occasional

discontent, it caused him troublous surprise. As soon as he understood that she desired more freedom of movement, he became anxious, suspicious, irritable. Nothing like a quarrel had yet taken place between them, but Widdowson began to perceive that he must exert authority in a way he had imagined would never be necessary. All his fears, after all, were not groundless. Monica's undomestic life, and perhaps the association with those Chelsea people, had left results upon her mind. By way of mild discipline, he first of all suggested a closer attention to the affairs of the house. Would it not be well if she spent an hour a day in sewing or fancy work? Monica so far obeyed as to provide herself with some plain needlework, but Widdowson, watching with keen eye, soon remarked that her use of the needle was only a feint. He lay awake o' nights, pondering darkly.

On the present evening he was more decidedly out of temper than ever hitherto. He satisfied his hunger hurriedly and in silence. Then, observing that Monica ate only a few morsels, he took offence at this.

"I'm afraid you are not well, dear. You have had no appetite for several days."

"As much as usual, I think," she replied absently.

They went into the library, commonly their resort of an evening. Widdowson possessed several hundred volumes of English literature, most of them the works which are supposed to be indispensable to a well-informed man, though very few men even make a pretence of reading them. Self-educated, Widdowson deemed it his duty to make acquaintance with the great, the solid authors. Nor was his study of them affectation. For the poets he had little taste; the novelists he considered only profitable in intervals of graver reading; but history, political economy, even metaphysics, genuinely appealed to him. He had always two or three solid

books on hand, each with its marker; he studied them at stated hours, and always sitting at a table, a note-book open beside him. A little work once well-known, Todd's "Student's Manual," had formed his method and inspired him with zeal.

To-night, it being Sunday, he took down a volume of Barrow's Sermons. Though not strictly orthodox in religious faith, he conformed to the practices of the Church of England, and since his marriage had been more scrupulous on this point than before. He abhorred unorthodoxy in a woman, and would not on any account have suffered Monica to surmise that he had his doubts concerning any article of the Christian faith. Like most men of his kind, he viewed religion as a precious and powerful instrument for directing the female conscience. Frequently he read aloud to his wife, but this evening he showed no intention of doing so. Monica, however, sat unoccupied. After glancing at her once or twice, he said reprovingly,—

"Have you finished your Sunday book?"

"Not quite. But I don't care to read just now."

The silence that followed was broken by Monica herself.

"Have you accepted Mrs. Luke's invitation to dinner?" she asked.

"I have declined it," was the reply, carelessly given.

Monica bit her lip.

"But why?"

"Surely we needn't discuss that over again, Monica."

His eyes were still on the book, and he stirred impatiently.

"But," urged his wife, "do you mean to break with her altogether? If so, I think it's very unwise, Edmund. What an opinion you must have of me, if you think I can't see people's faults! I know it's very true, all you

say about her. But she wishes to be kind to us, I'm sure—and I like to see something of a life so different from our own."

Widdowson drummed on the floor with his foot. In a few moments, ignoring Monica's remarks, he stroked his beard, and asked, with a show of casual interest,—

"How was it you knew that Mr. Barfoot?"

"I had met him before—when I went there on the Saturday."

Widdowson's eyes fell; his brow was wrinkled.

"He's often there, then?"

"I don't know. Perhaps he is. He's Miss Barfoot's cousin, you know."

"You haven't seen him more than once before?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, it was only that he seemed to speak as if you were old acquaintances."

"That's his way, I suppose."

Monica had already learnt that the jealousy which Widdowson so often betrayed before their marriage still lurked in his mind. Perceiving why he put these questions, she could not look entirely unconcerned, and the sense of his eye being upon her caused her some annoyance.

"You talked to him, didn't you?" she said, changing her position in the deep chair.

"Oh, the kind of talk that is possible with a perfect stranger. I suppose he is in some profession?"

"I really don't know. Why, Edmund? Does he interest you?"

"Only that one likes to know something about the people that are introduced to one's wife," Widdowson answered rather acridly.

Their bedtime was half-past ten. Precisely at that moment Widdowson closed his book—glad to be re-

lieved from the pretence of reading—and walked over the lower part of the house to see that all was right. He had a passion for routine. Every night, before going upstairs, he did a number of little things in unvarying sequence—changed the calendar for next day, made perfect order on his writing-table, wound up his watch, and so on. That Monica could not direct her habits with like exactitude was frequently a distress to him; if she chanced to forget any most trivial detail of daily custom he looked very solemn, and begged her to be more vigilant.

Next morning after breakfast, as Monica stood by the dining-room window and looked rather cheerlessly at a leaden sky, her husband came towards her as if he had something to say. She turned, and saw that his face no longer wore the austere expression which had made her miserable last night, and even during the meal this morning.

"Are we friends?" he said, with the attempt at playfulness which always made him look particularly awkward.

"Of course we are," Monica answered, smiling, but not regarding him.

"Didn't he behave gruffly last night to his little girl?"

"Just a little."

"And what can the old bear do to show that he's sorry?"

"Never be gruff again."

"The old bear is sometimes an old goose as well, and torments himself in the silliest way. Tell him so, if ever he begins to behave badly. Isn't it account-book morning?"

"Yes. I'll come to you at eleven."

"And if we have a nice, quiet, comfortable week, I'll take you to the Crystal Palace concert next Saturday."

Monica nodded cheerfully, and went off to look after her housekeeping.

The week was in all respects what Widdowson desired. Not a soul came to the house; Monica went to see no one. Save on two days, it rained, sleeted, drizzled, fogged; on those two afternoons they had an hour's walk. Saturday brought no improvement of the atmosphere, but Widdowson was in his happiest mood; he cheerfully kept his promise about the concert. As they sat together at night, his contentment overflowed in tenderness like that of the first days of marriage.

"Now, why can't we always live like this? What have we to do with other people? Let us be everything to each other, and forget that any one else exists."

"I can't help thinking that's a mistake," Monica ventured to reply. "For one thing, if we saw more people, we should have so much more to talk about when we are alone."

"It's better to talk about ourselves. I shouldn't care if I never again saw any living creature but you. You see, the old bear loves his little girl better than she loves him."

Monica was silent.

"Isn't it true? You don't feel that my company would be enough for you?"

"Would it be right if I ceased to care for every one else? There are my sisters. I ought to have asked Virginia to come to-morrow; I'm sure she thinks I neglect her, and it must be dreadful living all alone like she does."

"Haven't they made up their mind yet about the school? I'm sure it's the right thing for them to do. If the venture were to fail, and they lost money, we would see that they never came to want."

"They're so timid about it. And it wouldn't be nice,

you know, to feel they were going to be dependent upon us for the rest of their lives. I had better go and see Virgie to-morrow morning, and bring her back for dinner."

"If you like," Widdowson assented slowly. "But why not send a message, and ask her to come here?"

"I had rather go. It makes a change for me."

This was a word Widdowson detested. Change, on Monica's lips, always seemed to mean a release from his society. But he swallowed his dissatisfaction, and finally consented to the arrangement.

Virginia came to dinner, and stayed until nightfall. Thanks to her sister's kindness, she was better clad than in former days, but her face signified no improvement of health. The enthusiasm with which Rhoda Nunn had inspired her appeared only in fitful affectations of interest when Monica pressed her concerning the projected undertaking down in Somerset. In general she had a dreamy, reticent look, and became uncomfortable when any one gazed at her inquiringly. Her talk was of the most insignificant things; this afternoon she spent nearly half an hour in describing a kitten which Mrs. Conisbee had given her; care of the little animal appeared to have absorbed her whole attention for many days past.

Another visitor to-day was Mr. Newdick, the City clerk who had been present at Monica's wedding. He and Mrs. Luke Widdowson were the sole friends of her husband that Monica had seen. Mr. Newdick enjoyed coming to Herne Hill. Always lugubrious to begin with, he gradually cheered up, and by the time for departure was loquacious. But he had the oddest ideas of talk suitable to a drawing-room. Had he been permitted, he would have held forth to Monica by the hour on the history of the business firm which he had served for a

quarter of a century. This subject alone could animate him. His anecdotes were as often as not quite unintelligible, save to people of City experience. For all that Monica did not dislike the man; he was a good, simple, unselfish fellow, and to her he behaved with exaggeration of respect.

A few days later Monica had a sudden fit of illness. Her marriage, and the long open-air holiday, had given her a much healthier appearance than when she was at the shop; but this present disorder resembled the attack she had suffered in Rutland Street. Widdowson hoped that it signified a condition for which he was anxiously waiting. That, however, did not seem to be the case. The medical man who was called in asked questions about the patient's mode of life. Did she take enough exercise? Had she wholesome variety of occupation? At these inquiries Widdowson inwardly raged. He was tormented with a suspicion that they resulted from something Monica had said to the doctor.

She kept her bed for three or four days, and on rising could only sit by the fireside, silent, melancholy. Widdowson indulged his hope, though Monica herself laughed it aside, and even showed annoyance if he returned to the subject. Her temper was strangely uncertain; some chance word in a conversation would irritate her beyond endurance, and after an outburst of petulant displeasure she became obstinately mute. At other times she behaved with such exquisite docility and sweetness that Widdowson was beside himself with rapture.

After a week of convalescence, she said one morning,—

"Couldn't we go away somewhere? I don't think I shall ever be quite well staying here."

"It's wretched weather," replied her husband.

"Oh, but there are places where it wouldn't be like this. You don't mind the expense, do you, Edmund?"

"Expense? Not I, indeed! But—were you thinking of abroad?"

She looked at him with eyes that had suddenly brightened.

"Oh! would it be possible? People do go out of England in the winter."

Widdowson plucked at his grizzled beard and fingered his watch-chain. It was a temptation. Why not take her away to some place where only foreigners and strangers would be about them? Yet the enterprise alarmed him.

"I have never been out of England," he said, with misgiving.

"All the more reason why we should go. I think Miss Barfoot could advise us about it. She has been abroad, I know, and she has so many friends."

"I don't see any need to consult Miss Barfoot," he replied stiffly. "I am not such a helpless man, Monica."

Yet a feeling of inability to grapple with such an undertaking as this grew on him the more he thought of it. Naturally, his mind busied itself with such vague knowledge as he had gathered of those places in the South of France, where rich English people go to escape their own climate: Nice, Cannes. He could not imagine himself setting forth to these regions. Doubtless it was possible to travel thither, and live there when one arrived, without a knowledge of French; but he pictured all sorts of humiliating situations resulting from his ignorance. Above everything he dreaded humiliation in Monica's sight; it would be intolerable to have her comparing him with men who spoke foreign languages, and were at home on the Continent.

Nevertheless, he wrote to his friend Newdick, and invited him to dine, solely for the purpose of talking over this question with him in private. After dinner

he broached the subject. To his surprise, Newdick had ideas concerning Nice and Cannes and such places. He had heard about them from the junior partner of his firm, a young gentleman who talked largely of his experiences abroad.

"An immoral lot there," he said, smiling and shaking his head. "Queer goings on."

"Oh, but that's among the foreigners, isn't it?"

Thereupon Mr. Newdick revealed his acquaintance with English literature.

"Did you ever read any of Ouida's novels?"

"No, I never did."

"I advise you to before you think of taking your wife over there. She writes a great deal about those parts. People get mixed up so, it seems. You couldn't live by yourself. You have to eat at public tables, and you'd have all sorts of people trying to make acquaintance with Mrs. Widdowson. They're a queer lot, I believe."

He abandoned the thought, at once and utterly. When Monica learnt this—he gave only vague and unsatisfactory reasons—she fell back into her despondent mood. For a whole day she scarcely uttered a word.

On the next day, in the dreary afternoon, they were surprised by a call from Mrs. Luke. The widow—less than ever a widow in externals—came in with a burst of exuberant spirits, and began to scold the moping couple like an affectionate parent.

"When are you silly young people coming to an end of your honeymoon? Do you sit here day after day and call each other pretty names? Really it's very charming in its way. I never knew such an obstinate case.—Monica, my black-eyed beauty, change your frock, and come with me to look up the Hodgson Bulls. They're quite too awful; I can't face them alone; but I'm bound to keep in with them. Be off, and let me pitch into

your young man for daring to refuse my dinner. Don't you know, sir, that my invitations are like those of Royalty—polite commands?"

Widdowson kept silence, waiting to see what his wife would do. He could not with decency object to her accompanying Mrs. Luke, yet hated the thought of such a step. A grim smile on his face, he sat stiffly, staring at the wall. To his inexpressible delight, Monica, after a short hesitation, excused herself; she was not well; she did not feel able——

"Oh!" laughed the visitor. "I see, I see! Do just as you like, of course. But if Edmund has any *nous*"—this phrase she had learnt from a young gentleman, late of Oxford, now of Tattersall's and elsewhere—"he won't let you sit here in the dumps. You *are* in the dumps, I can see."

The vivacious lady did not stay long. When she had rustled forth again to her carriage, Widdowson broke into a pæan of amorous gratitude. What could he do to show how he appreciated Monica's self-denial on his behalf? For a day or two he was absent rather mysteriously, and in the meantime made up his mind, after consultation with Newdick, to take his wife for a holiday in Guernsey.

Monica, when she heard of this project, was at first moderately grateful, but in a day or two showed by reviving strength and spirits that she looked forward eagerly to the departure. Her husband advertised for lodgings in St. Peter Port; he would not face the disagreeable chances of a hotel. In a fortnight's time all their preparations were made. During their absence, which might extend over a month, Virginia was to live at Herne Hill, in supervision of the two servants.

On the last Sunday Monica went to see her friends in Queen's Road. Widdowson was ashamed to offer an

objection; he much disliked her going there alone, but disliked almost equally the thought of accompanying her, for at Miss Barfoot's he could not pretend to sit, stand, or converse with ease.

It happened that Mrs. Cosgrove was again calling. On the first occasion of meeting with Monica this lady paid her no particular attention; to-day she addressed her in a friendly manner, and their conversation led to the discovery that both of them were about to spend the ensuing month in the same place. Mrs. Cosgrove hoped they might occasionally see each other.

Of this coincidence Monica thought better to say nothing on her return home. She could not be sure that her husband might not, at the last moment, decide to stay at Herne Hill rather than incur the risk of her meeting an acquaintance in Guernsey. On this point he could not be trusted to exercise common sense. For the first time Monica had a secret she desired to keep from him, and the necessity was one which could not but have an unfavourable effect on her manner of regarding Widdowson. They were to start on Monday evening. Through the day her mind was divided between joy in the thought of seeing a new part of the world and a sense of weary dislike for her home. She had not understood till now how terrible would be the prospect of living here for a long time with no companionship but her husband's. On the return that prospect would lie before her. But no; their way of life must somehow be modified; on that she was resolved.

CHAPTER XVI.

HEALTH FROM THE SEA.

FROM Herne Hill to St. Peter Port was a change which made of Monica a new creature. The weather could not have been more propitious; day after day of still air and magnificent sky, with temperature which made a brisk walk at any hour thoroughly enjoyable, yet allowed one to sit at ease in the midday sunshine. Their lodgings were in the best part of the town, high up, looking forth over blue sea to the cliffs of Sark. Widdowson congratulated himself on having taken this step; it was like a revival of his honeymoon; never since their settling down at home had Monica been so grateful, so affectionate. Why, his wife was what he had thought her from the first, perfect in every wifely attribute. How lovely she looked as she sat down to the breakfast-table, after breathing sea air at the open windows, in her charming dress, her black hair arranged in some new fashion just to please him! Or when she walked with him about the quays, obviously admired by men who passed them. Or when she seated herself in the open carriage for a drive which would warm her cheeks and make her lips redder and sweeter.

"Edmund," she said to him one evening, as they talked by the fireside, "don't you think you take life rather too gravely?"

He laughed.

"Gravely? Don't I seem to enjoy myself?"

"Oh yes; just now. But—still in a rather serious way. One would think you always had cares on your mind, and were struggling to get rid of them."

"I haven't a care in the world. I am the most blessed of mortals."

"So you ought to think yourself. But when we get back again, how will it be? You won't be angry with me? I really don't think I can live again as we were doing."

"Not live as——"

His brow darkened; he looked at her in astonishment.

"We ought to have more enjoyment," she pursued courageously. "Think of the numbers of people who live a dull, monotonous life just because they can't help it. How they would envy us, with so much money to spend, and free to do just what we like! Doesn't it seem a pity to sit there day after day alone——"

"Don't, my darling!" he implored. "Don't! That makes me think you don't really love me."

"Nonsense! I want you to see what I mean. I am not one of the silly people who care for nothing but amusement, but I do think we might enjoy our lives more when we are in London. We shan't live for ever, you know. Is it right to spend day after day sitting there in the house——"

"But come, come; we have our occupations. Surely it ought to be a pleasure to you to see that the house is kept in order. There are duties——"

"Yes, I know. But these duties I could perform in an hour or two."

"Not thoroughly."

"Quite thoroughly enough."

"In my opinion, Monica, a woman ought never to be so happy as when she is looking after her home."

It was the old pedantic tone. His figure, in sympathy with it, abandoned an easy attitude and became awkward. But Monica would not allow herself to be alarmed. During the past week she had conducted herself so as to smooth the way for this very discussion. Unsuspecting husband!

"I wish to do my duty," she said in a firm tone, "but I don't think it's right to make dull work for oneself, when one might be living. I don't think it *is* living to go on week after week like that. If we were poor, and I had a lot of children to look after as well as all the housework to do, I believe I shouldn't grumble—at least, I hope I shouldn't. I should know that I ought to do what there was no one else to do, and make the best of it. But——"

"Make the best of it!" he interrupted indignantly. "What an expression to use! It would not only be your duty, dear, but your privilege!"

"Wait a moment, Edmund. If you were a shopman earning fifteen shillings a week, and working from early morning to late at night, should you think it not only your duty but your privilege?"

He made a wrathful gesture.

"What comparison is there? I should be earning a hard livelihood by slaving for other people. But a married woman who works in her own home, for her husband and children——"

"Work is work, and when a woman is overburdened with it she must find it difficult not to weary of home and husband and children all together. But of course I don't mean to say that my work is too hard. All I mean is, that I don't see why any one should *make* work, and why life shouldn't be as full of enjoyment as possible."

"Monica, you have got these ideas from those people at Chelsea. That is exactly why I don't care for you to see much of them. I utterly disapprove of——"

"But you are mistaken. Miss Barfoot and Miss Nunn are all for work. They take life as seriously as you do."

"Work? What kind of work? They want to make women unwomanly, to make them unfit for the only duties women ought to perform. You know very well my opinions about that kind of thing."

He was trembling with the endeavour to control himself, to speak indulgently.

"I don't think, Edmund, there's much real difference between men and women. That is, there wouldn't be, if women had fair treatment."

"Not much difference? Oh, come; you are talking nonsense. There's as much difference between their minds as between their bodies. They are made for entirely different duties."

Monica sighed.

"Oh, that word Duty!"

Pained unutterably, Widdowson bent forward and took her hand. He spoke in a tone of the gravest but softest rebuke. She was giving entertainment to thoughts that would lead her who knew whither, that would undermine her happiness, would end by making both of them miserable. He besought her to put all such monstrous speculations out of her mind.

"Dear, good little wife! Do be guided by your husband. He is older than you, darling, and has seen so much more of the world."

"I haven't said anything very dreadful, dear. My thoughts don't come from other people; they rise naturally in my own head."

"Now, what do you really want? You say you can't live as we were doing. What change would you make?"

"I should like to make more friends, and to see them often. I want to hear people talk, and know what is going on round about me. And to read a different kind of books; books that would really amuse me, and give me something I could think about with pleasure. Life will be a burden to me before long if I don't have more freedom."

"Freedom?"

"Yes, I don't think there's any harm in saying that."

"Freedom?" He glared at her. "I shall begin to think that you wish you had never married me."

"I should only wish that if I were made to feel that you shut me up in a house and couldn't trust me to go where I chose. Suppose the thought took you that you would go and walk about the City some afternoon, and you wished to go alone, just to be more at ease, should I have a right to forbid you, or grumble at you? And yet you are very dissatisfied if I wish to go anywhere alone."

"But here's the old confusion. I am a man; you are a woman."

"I can't see that that makes any difference. A woman ought to go about just as freely as a man. I don't think it's just. When I have done my work at home I think I ought to be every bit as free as you are—every bit as free. And I'm very sure, Edmund, that love needs freedom if it is to remain love in truth."

He looked at her keenly.

"That's a dreadful thing for you to say. So, if I disapprove of your becoming the kind of woman that acknowledges no law, you will cease to love me?"

"What law do you mean?"

"Why, the natural law that points out a woman's place, and"—he added, with shaken voice—"commands her to follow her husband's guidance."

"Now you are angry. We mustn't talk about it any more just now."

She rose and poured out a glass of water. Her hand trembled as she drank. Widdowson fell into gloomy abstraction. Later, as they lay side by side, he wished to renew the theme, but Monica would not talk; she declared herself too sleepy, turned her back to him, and soon slept indeed.

That night the weather became stormy; a roaring wind swept the Channel, and when day broke nothing could be seen but cloud and rain. Widdowson, who had rested little, was in a heavy, taciturn mood; Monica, on the other hand, talked gaily, seeming not to observe her companion's irresponsiveness. She was glad of the wild sky; now they would see another aspect of island life—the fierce and perilous surges beating about these granite shores.

They had brought with them a few books, and Widdowson, after breakfast, sat down by the fire to read. Monica first of all wrote a letter to her sister; then, as it was still impossible to go out, she took up one of the volumes that lay on a side-table in their sitting-room, novels left by former lodgers. Her choice was something or other with yellow back. Widdowson, watching all her movements furtively, became aware of the pictured cover.

"I don't think you'll get much good out of that," he remarked, after one or two efforts to speak.

"No harm, at all events," she replied good-humouredly.

"I'm not so sure. Why should you waste your time? Take 'Guy Mannering,' if you want a novel."

"I'll see how I like this first."

He felt himself powerless, and suffered acutely from the thought that Monica was in rebellion against him. He could not understand what had brought about this

sudden change. Fear of losing his wife's love restrained him from practical despotism, yet he was very near to uttering a definite command.

In the afternoon it no longer rained, and the wind had less violence. They went out to look at the sea. Many people were gathered about the harbour, whence was a fine view of the great waves that broke into leaping foam and spray against the crags of Sark. As they stood thus occupied, Monica heard her name spoken in a friendly voice—that of Mrs. Cosgrove.

"I have been expecting to see you," said the lady. "We arrived three days ago."

Widdowson, starting with surprise, turned to examine the speaker. He saw a woman of something less than middle age, unfashionably attired, good-looking, with an air of high spirits; only when she offered her hand to him did he remember having met her at Miss Barfoot's. To be graceful in a high wind is difficult for any man; the ungainliness with which he returned Mrs. Cosgrove's greeting could not have been surpassed, and probably would have been much the same even had he not, of necessity, stood clutching at his felt hat.

The three talked for a few minutes. With Mrs. Cosgrove were two persons, a younger woman and a man of about thirty—the latter a comely and vivacious fellow, with rather long hair of the orange-tawny hue. These looked at Monica, but Mrs. Cosgrove made no introduction.

"Come and see me, will you?" she said, mentioning her address. "One can't get out much in the evenings; I shall be nearly always at home after dinner, and we have music—of a kind."

Monica boldly accepted the invitation, said she would be glad to come. Then Mrs. Cosgrove took leave of them, and walked landwards with her companions.

Widdowson stood gazing at the sea. There was no misreading his countenance. When Monica had remarked it, she pressed her lips together, and waited for what he would say or do. He said nothing, but presently turned his back upon the waves and began to walk on. Neither spoke until they were in the shelter of the streets; then Widdowson asked suddenly,—

"Who *is* that person?"

"I only know her name, and that she goes to Miss Barfoot's."

"It's a most extraordinary thing," he exclaimed in high irritation. "There's no getting out of the way of those people."

Monica also was angry; her cheeks, reddened by the wind, grew hotter.

"It's still more extraordinary that you should object so to them."

"Whether or no—I *do* object, and I had rather you didn't go to see that woman."

"You are unreasonable," Monica answered sharply. "Certainly I shall go and see her."

"I forbid you to do so! If you go, it will be in defiance of my wish."

"Then I am obliged to defy your wish. I shall certainly go."

His face was frightfully distorted. Had they been in a lonely spot, Monica would have felt afraid of him. She moved hurriedly away in the direction of their lodgings, and for a few paces he followed; then he checked himself, turned round about, took an opposite way.

With strides of rage he went along by the quay, past the hotels and the smaller houses that follow, on to St. Sampson. The wind, again preparing for a tempestuous night, beat and shook and at moments all but stopped him; he set his teeth like a madman, and raged on.

Past the granite quarries at Bordeaux Harbour, then towards the wild north extremity of the island, the sandy waste of L'Ancresse. When darkness began to fall, no human being was in his range of sight. He stood on one spot for nearly a quarter of an hour, watching, or appearing to watch, the black, low-flying scud.

Their time for dining was seven. Shortly before this Widdowson entered the house and went to the sitting-room; Monica was not there. He found her in the bed-chamber, before the looking-glass. At the sight of his reflected face she turned instantly.

"Monica!" He put his hands on her shoulders, whispering hoarsely, "Monica! don't you love me?"

She looked away, not replying.

"Monica!"

And of a sudden he fell on his knees before her, clasped her about the waist, burst into choking sobs.

"Have you no love for me? My darling! My dear, beautiful wife! Have you begun to hate me?"

Tears came to her eyes. She implored him to rise and command himself.

"I was so violent, so brutal with you. I spoke without thinking——"

"But *why* should you speak like that? Why are you so unreasonable? If you forbid me to do simple things, with not the least harm in them, you can't expect me to take it like a child. I shall resist; I can't help it."

He had risen and was crushing her in his arms, his hot breath on her neck, when he began to whisper,—

"I want to keep you all to myself. I don't like these people—they think so differently—they put such hateful ideas into your mind—they are not the right kind of friends for you——"

"You misunderstand them, and you don't in the least understand me. Oh, you hurt me, Edmund!"

He released her body, and took her head between his hands.

"I had rather you were dead than that you should cease to love me! You shall go to see her; I won't say a word against it. But, Monica, be faithful, be faithful to me!"

"Faithful to you?" she echoed in astonishment. "What *have* I said or done to put you in such a state? Because I wish to make a few friends as all women do——"

"It's because I have lived so much alone. I have never had more than one or two friends, and I am absurdly jealous when you want to get away from me and amuse yourself with strangers. I can't talk to such people. I am not suited for society. If I hadn't met you in that strange way, by miracle, I should never have been able to marry. If I allow you to have these friends——"

"I don't like to hear that word. Why should you say *allow?* Do you think of me as your servant, Edmund?"

"You know how I think of you. It is I who am your servant, your slave."

"Oh, I can't believe that!" She pressed her handkerchief to her cheeks, and laughed unnaturally. "Such words don't mean anything. It is you who forbid and allow and command, and——"

"I will never again use such words. Only convince me that you love me as much as ever."

"It is so miserable to begin quarrelling——"

"Never again! Say you love me! Put your arms round my neck—press closer to me——"

She kissed his cheek, but did not utter a word.

"You can't say that you love me?"

"I think I am always showing it. Do get ready for

dinner now; it's past seven. Oh, how foolish you have been!"

Of course their talk lasted half through the night. Monica held with remarkable firmness to the position she had taken; a much older woman might have envied her steadfast yet quite rational assertion of the right to live a life of her own apart from that imposed upon her by the duties of wedlock. A great deal of this spirit and the utterance it found was traceable to her association with the women whom Widdowson so deeply suspected; prior to her sojourn in Rutland Street she could not even have made clear to herself the demands which she now very clearly formulated. Believing that she had learnt nothing from them, and till of late instinctively opposing the doctrines held by Miss Barfoot and Rhoda Nunn, Monica in truth owed the sole bit of real education she had ever received to those few weeks of attendance in Great Portland Street. Circumstances were now proving how apt a pupil she had been, even against her will. Marriage, as is always the case with women capable of development, made for her a new heaven and a new earth; perhaps on no single subject did she now think as on the morning of her wedding-day.

"You must either trust me completely," she said, "or not at all. If you can't and won't trust me, how can I possibly love you?"

"Am I never to advise?" asked her husband, baffled, and even awed, by this extraordinary revelation of a woman he had supposed himself to know thoroughly.

"Oh, that's a very different thing from forbidding and commanding!" she laughed. "There was that novel this morning. Of course I know as well as you do that 'Guy Mannering' is better; but that doesn't say I am not to form my opinion of other books. You

mustn't be afraid to leave me the same freedom you have yourself."

The result of it all was that Widdowson felt his passionate love glow with new fire. For a moment he thought himself capable of accepting this change in their relations. The marvellous thought of equality between man and wife, that gospel which in far-off days will refashion the world, for an instant smote his imagination and exalted him above his native level.

Monica paid for the energy she had put forth by a day of suffering. Her head ached intolerably; she had feverish symptoms, and could hardly raise herself from the bed. It passed, and she was once more eager to go forth under the blue sky that followed the tempest.

"Will you go with me to Mrs. Cosgrove's this evening?" she asked of her husband.

He consented, and after dinner they sought the hotel where their acquaintance was staying. Widdowson was in extreme discomfort, partly due to the fact that he had no dress clothes to put on; for far from anticipating or desiring any such intercourse in Guernsey, he had never thought of packing an evening suit. Had he known Mrs. Cosgrove this uneasiness would have been spared him. That lady was in revolt against far graver institutions than the swallow-tail; she cared not a button in what garb her visitors came to her. On their arrival, they found, to Widdowson's horror, a room full of women. With the hostess was that younger lady they had seen on the quay, Mrs. Cosgrove's unmarried sister; Miss Knott's health had demanded this retreat from the London winter. The guests were four—a Mrs. Bevis and her three daughters—all invalidish persons, the mother somewhat lackadaisical, the girls with a look of unwilling spinsterhood.

Monica, noteworthy among the gathering for her

sweet, bright prettiness, and the finish of her dress, soon made herself at home; she chatted gaily with the girls —wondering indeed at her own air of maturity, which came to her for the first time. Mrs. Cosgrove, an easy woman of the world when circumstances required it, did her best to get something out of Widdowson, who presently thawed a little.

Then Miss Knott sat down to the piano, and played more than tolerably well; and the youngest Miss Bevis sang a song of Schubert, with passable voice but in very distressing German—the sole person distressed by it being the hostess.

Meanwhile Monica had been captured by Mrs. Bevis, who discoursed to her on a subject painfully familiar to all the old lady's friends.

"Do you know my son, Mrs. Widdowson? Oh, I thought you had perhaps met him. You will do so this evening, I hope. He is over here on a fortnight's holiday."

"Do you live in Guernsey?" Monica inquired.

"*I* practically live here, and one of my daughters is always with me. The other two live with their brother in a flat in Bayswater. Do you care for flats, Mrs. Widdowson?"

Monica could only say that she had no experience of that institution.

"I do think them such a boon," pursued Mrs. Bevis. "They are expensive, but the advantages and comforts are so many. My son wouldn't on any consideration give up his flat. As I was saying, he always has two of his sisters to keep house for him. He is quite a young man, not yet thirty, but—would you believe it?—we are all dependent upon him! My son has supported the *whole* of the family for the last six or seven years, and that by his own work. It sounds incredible, doesn't it?

But for him we should be quite unable to live. The dear girls have very delicate health; simply impossible for them to exert themselves in any way. My son has made extraordinary sacrifices on our account. His desire was to be a professional musician, and every one thinks he would have become eminent; myself, I am convinced of it—perhaps that is only natural. But when our circumstances began to grow very doubtful, and we really didn't know what was before us, my son consented to follow a business career—that of wine merchant, with which his father was connected. And he exerted himself so nobly, and gave proof of such ability, that very soon all our fears were at an end; and now, before he is thirty, his position is quite assured. We have no longer a care. I live here very economically—really sweet lodgings on the road to St. Martin's; I *do* hope you will come and see me. And the girls go backwards and forwards. You see we are *all* here at present. When my son returns to London he will take the eldest and the youngest with him. The middle girl, dear Grace—she is thought very clever in water-colours, and I am quite sure, if it were necessary, she could pursue the arts in a professional spirit."

Mr. Bevis entered the room, and Monica recognized the sprightly young man whom she had seen on the quay. The hostess presented him to her new friends, and he got into talk with Widdowson. Requested to make music for the company, he sang a gay little piece, which, to Monica at all events, seemed one of the most delightful things she had ever heard.

"His own composition," whispered Miss Grace Bevis, then sitting by Mrs. Widdowson.

That increased her delight. Foolish as Mrs. Bevis undoubtedly was, she perchance had not praised her son beyond his merits. He looked the best of good fellows;

so kind and merry and spirited; such a capable man, too. It struck Monica as a very hard fate that he should have this family on his hands. What they must cost him! Probably he could not think of marrying, just on their account.

Mr. Bevis came and took a place by her side.

"Thank you so very much," she said, "for that charming song. Is it published?"

"Oh dear, no!" He laughed and shook his thick hair about. "It's one of two or three that I somehow struck out when I was studying in Germany, ages ago. You play, I hope?"

Monica gave a sad negative.

"Oh, what does it matter? There are hosts of people who will always be overjoyed to play when you ask them. It would be a capital thing if only those children were allowed to learn an instrument who showed genuine talent for music."

"In that case," said Monica, "there certainly wouldn't be hosts of people ready to play for me."

"No." His merry laugh was repeated. "You mustn't mind when I contradict myself; it's one of my habits. Are you here for the whole winter?"

"Only a few weeks, unfortunately."

"And do you dread the voyage back?"

"To tell the truth, I do. I had a very unpleasant time coming."

"As for myself, how I ever undertake the thing I really don't know. One of these times I shall die; there's not a shadow of doubt of that. The girls always have to carry me ashore, one holding me by the hair and one by the boots. Happily, I am so emaciated that my weight doesn't distress them. I pick up flesh in a day or two, and then my health is stupendous—as at present. You see how marvellously *fit* I look."

"Yes, you look very well," replied Monica, glancing at the fair, comely face.

"It's deceptive. All our family have wretched constitutions. If I go to work regularly for a couple of months without a holiday, I sink into absolute decrepitude. An office-chair has been specially made for me, to hold me up at the desk.—I beg your pardon for this clowning, Mrs. Widdowson," he suddenly added in another voice. "The air puts me in such spirits. What air it is! Speaking quite seriously, my mother was saved by coming to live here. We believed her to be dying, and now I have hopes that she will live ever so many years longer."

He spoke of his mother with evident affection, glancing kindly towards her with his blue eyes.

Only once or twice had Monica ventured to exchange a glance with her husband. It satisfied her that he managed to converse; what his mood really was could not be determined until afterwards. When they were about to leave she saw him, to her surprise, speaking quite pleasantly with Mr. Bevis. A carriage was procured to convey them home, and as soon as they had started, Monica asked her husband, with a merry look, how he had enjoyed himself.

"There is not much harm in it," he replied dryly.

"Harm? How like you, Edmund, to put it that way! Now confess you will be glad to go again."

"I shall go if you wish."

"Unsatisfactory man! You can't bring yourself to admit that it was pleasant to be among new people. I believe, in your very heart, you think all enjoyment is wrong. The music was nice, wasn't it?"

"I didn't think much of the girl's singing, but that fellow Bevis wasn't bad."

Monica examined him as he spoke, and seemed to suppress a laugh.

"No, he wasn't at all bad. I saw you talking with Mrs. Bevis. Did she tell you anything about her wonderful son?"

"Nothing particular."

"Oh, then I must tell you the whole story."

And she did so, in a tone half of jest, half of serious approval.

"I don't see that he has done anything more than his duty," remarked Widdowson at the end. "But he isn't a bad fellow."

For private reasons, Monica contrasted this attitude towards Bevis with the disfavour her husband had shown to Mr. Barfoot, and was secretly much amused.

Two or three days after they went to spend the morning at Petit Bot Bay, and there encountered with Bevis and his three sisters. The result was an invitation to go back and have lunch at Mrs. Bevis's lodgings; they accepted it, and remained with their acquaintances till dusk. The young man's holiday was at an end; next morning he would face the voyage which he had depicted so grotesquely.

"And alone!" he lamented to Monica. "Only think of it. The girls are all rather below par just now; they had better stay here for the present."

"And in London you will be alone too?"

"Yes. It's very sad. I must bear up under it. The worst of it is, I am naturally subject to depression. In solitude I sink, sink. But the subject is too painful. Don't let us darken the last hours with such reflections."

Widdowson retained his indulgent opinion of the facetious young wine merchant. He even laughed now and then in recalling some phrase or other that Bevis had used to him.

Subsequently, Monica had several long conversations with the old lady. Impelled to gossipy frankness about all her affairs, Mrs. Bevis allowed it to be understood that the chief reason for two of the girls always being with their brother was the possibility thus afforded of their "meeting people"—that is to say, of their having a chance of marriage. Mrs. Cosgrove and one or two other ladies did them social service.

"They never *will* marry!" said Monica to her husband, rather thoughtfully than with commiseration.

"Why not? They are nice enough girls."

"Yes, but they have no money; and"—she smiled—"people see that they want to find husbands."

"I don't see that the first matters; and the second is only natural."

Monica attempted no rejoinder, but said presently,—

"Now they are just the kind of women who ought to find something to do."

"Something to do? Why, they attend to their mother and their brother. What could be more proper?"

"Very proper, perhaps. But they are miserable, and always will be."

"Then they have no *right* to be miserable. They are doing their duty, and that ought to keep them cheerful."

Monica could have said many things, but she overcame the desire, and laughed the subject aside.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TRIUMPH.

Not till mid-winter did Barfoot again see his friends the Micklethwaites. By invitation he went to South Tottenham on New Year's Eve, and dined with them at seven o'clock. He was the first guest that had entered the house since their marriage.

From the very doorstep Everard became conscious of a domestic atmosphere that told soothingly upon his nerves. The little servant who opened to him exhibited a gentle, noiseless demeanour which was no doubt the result of careful discipline. Micklethwaite himself, who at once came out into the passage, gave proof of a like influence; his hearty greeting was spoken in soft tones; a placid happiness beamed from his face. In the sitting-room (Micklethwaite's study, used for reception because the other had to serve as dining-room) tempered lamplight and the glow of a hospitable fire showed the hostess and her blind sister standing in expectation; to Everard's eyes both of them looked far better in health than a few months ago. Mrs. Micklethwaite was no longer so distressingly old; an expression that resembled girlish pleasure lit up her countenance as she stepped forward; nay, if he mistook not, there came a gentle warmth to her cheek, and the momentary downward glance was as graceful and modest as in a youthful bride. Never had

Barfoot approached a woman with more finished courtesy, the sincere expression of his feeling. The blind sister he regarded in like spirit; his voice touched its softest note as he held her hand for a moment and replied to her pleasant words.

No undue indication of poverty disturbed him. He saw that the house had been improved in many ways since Mrs. Micklethwaite had taken possession of it; pictures, ornaments, pieces of furniture were added, all in simple taste, but serving to heighten the effect of refined comfort. Where the average woman would have displayed pretentious emptiness, Mrs. Micklethwaite had made a home which in its way was beautiful. The dinner, which she herself had cooked, and which she assisted in serving, aimed at being no more than a simple, decorous meal, but the guest unfeignedly enjoyed it; even the vegetables and the bread seemed to him to have a daintier flavour than at many a rich table. He could not help noticing and admiring the skill with which Miss Wheatley ate without seeing what was before her; had he not known her misfortune, he would hardly have become aware of it by any peculiarity as she sat opposite to him.

The mathematician had learnt to sit upon a chair like ordinary mortals. For the first week or two it must have cost him severe restraint; now he betrayed no temptation to roll and jerk and twist himself. When the ladies retired, he reached from the sideboard a box which Barfoot viewed with uneasiness.

"Do you smoke here—in this room?"

"Oh, why not?"

Everard glanced at the pretty curtains before the windows.

"No, my boy, you do *not* smoke here. And, in fact, I like your claret; I won't spoil the flavour of it."

"As you please; but I think Fanny will be distressed."

"You shall say that I have abandoned the weed."

Emotions were at conflict in Micklethwaite's mind, but finally he beamed with gratitude.

"Barfoot"—he bent forward and touched his friend's arm—"there are angels walking the earth in this our day. Science hasn't abolished them, my dear fellow, and I don't think it ever will."

"It falls to the lot of but few men to encounter them, and of fewer still to entertain them permanently in a cottage at South Tottenham."

"You are right." Micklethwaite laughed in a new way, with scarcely any sound; a change Everard had already noticed. "These two sisters—but I had better not speak about them. In my old age I have become a worshipper, a mystic, a man of dream and vision."

"How about worship in a parochial sense?" inquired Barfoot, smiling. "Any difficulty on that point?"

"I conform, in moderation. Nothing would be asked of me. There is no fanaticism, no intolerance. It would be brutal if I declined to go to church on a Sunday morning. You see, my strictly scientific attitude helps in avoiding offence. Fanny can't understand it, but my lack of dogmatism vastly relieves her. I have been trying to explain to her that the scientific mind can have nothing to do with materialism. The new order of ideas is of course very difficult for her to grasp; but in time, in time."

"For Heaven's sake, don't attempt conversion!"

"On no account whatever. But I *should* like her to see what is meant by perception and conception, by the relativity of time and space—and a few simple things of that kind!"

Barfoot laughed heartily.

"By-the-bye," he said, shifting to safer ground, "my

brother Tom is in London, and in wretched health. *His* angel is from the wrong quarter, from the nethermost pit. I seriously believe that she has a plan for killing her husband. You remember my mentioning in a letter his horse-accident? He has never recovered from that, and as likely as not never will. His wife brought him away from Madeira just when he ought to have stopped there to get well. He settled himself at Torquay, whilst that woman ran about to pay visits. It was understood that she should go back to him at Torquay, but this she at length refused to do. The place was too dull; it didn't suit her extremely delicate health; she must live in London, her pure native air. If Tom had taken my advice, he would have let her live just where she pleased, thanking Heaven that she was at a distance from him. But the poor fellow can't be away from her. He has come up, and here I feel convinced he will die. It's a very monstrous thing, but uncommonly like women in general who have got a man into their power."

Micklethwaite shook his head.

"You are too hard upon them. You have been unlucky. You know my view of your duty."

"I begin to think that marriage isn't impossible for me," said Barfoot, with a grave smile.

"Ha! Capital!"

"But as likely as not it will be marriage without forms—simply a free union."

The mathematician was downcast.

"I'm sorry to hear that. It won't do. We must conform. Besides, in that case the person decidedly isn't suitable to you. You of all men must marry a lady."

"I should never think of any one that wasn't a lady."

"Is emancipation getting as far as that? Do ladies enter into that kind of union?"

"I don't know of any example. That's just why the idea tempts me."

Barfoot would go no further in explanation.

"How about your new algebra?"

"Alas! My dear boy, the temptation is so frightful—when I get back home. Remember that I have never known what it was to sit and talk through the evening with ordinary friends, let alone—— It's too much for me just yet. And, you know, I don't venture to work on Sundays. That will come; all in good time. I must grant myself half a year of luxury after such a life as mine has been."

"Of course you must. Let algebra wait."

"I think it over, of course, at odd moments. Church on Sunday morning is a good opportunity."

Barfoot could not stay to see the old year out, but good wishes were none the less heartily exchanged before he went. Micklethwaite walked with him to the railway station; at a few paces' distance from his house he stood and pointed back to it.

"That little place, Barfoot, is one of the sacred spots of the earth. Strange to think that the house has been waiting for me there through all the years of my hopelessness. I feel that a mysterious light ought to shine about it. It oughtn't to look just like common houses."

On his way home Everard thought over what he had seen and heard, smiling good-naturedly. Well, that was one ideal of marriage. Not *his* ideal; but very beautiful amid the vulgarities and vileness of ordinary experience. It was the old fashion in its purest presentment; the consecrated form of domestic happiness, removed beyond reach of satire, only to be touched, if touched at all, with the very gentlest irony.

A life by no means for him. If he tried it, even with a woman so perfect, he would perish of *ennui*. For him

marriage must not mean repose, inevitably tending to drowsiness, but the mutual incitement of vigorous minds. Passion—yes, there must be passion, at all events to begin with; passion not impossible of revival in days subsequent to its first indulgence. Beauty in the academic sense he no longer demanded; enough that the face spoke eloquently, that the limbs were vigorous. Let beauty perish if it cannot ally itself with mind; be a woman what else she may, let her have brains and the power of using them! In that demand the maturity of his manhood expressed itself. For casual amour the odalisque could still prevail with him; but for the life of wedlock, the durable companionship of man and woman, intellect was his first requirement.

A woman with man's capability of understanding and reasoning; free from superstition, religious or social; far above the ignoble weaknesses which men have been base enough to idealize in her sex. A woman who would scorn the vulgarism of jealousy, and yet know what it is to love. This was asking much of nature and civilization; did he grossly deceive himself in thinking he had found the paragon?

For thus far had he advanced in his thoughts of Rhoda Nunn. If the phrase had any meaning, he was in love with her; yet, strange complex of emotions, he was still only half serious in his desire to take her for a wife, wishing rather to amuse and flatter himself by merely inspiring her with passion. Therefore he refused to entertain a thought of formal marriage. To obtain her consent to marriage would mean nothing at all; it would afford him no satisfaction. But so to play upon her emotions that the proud, intellectual, earnest woman was willing to defy society for his sake—ah! that would be an end worth achieving.

Ever since the dialogue in which he frankly explained

his position, and all but declared love, he had not once seen Rhoda in private. She shunned him purposely beyond a doubt, and did not that denote a fear of him justified by her inclination? The postponement of what must necessarily come to pass between them began to try his patience, as assuredly it inflamed his ardour. If no other resource offered, he would be obliged to make his cousin an accomplice by requesting her beforehand to leave him alone with Rhoda some evening when he had called upon them.

But it was time that chance favoured him, and his interview with Miss Nunn came about in a way he could not have foreseen.

At the end of the first week of January he was invited to dine at Miss Barfoot's. The afternoon had been foggy, and when he set forth there seemed to be some likelihood of a plague of choking darkness such as would obstruct traffic. As usual, he went by train to Sloane Square, purposing (for it was dry under foot, and he could not disregard small economies) to walk the short distance from there to Queen's Road. On coming out from the station he found the fog so dense that it was doubtful whether he could reach his journey's end. Cabs were not to be had; he must either explore the gloom, with risk of getting nowhere at all, or give it up and take a train back. But he longed too ardently for the sight of Rhoda to abandon his evening without an effort. Having with difficulty made his way into King's Road, he found progress easier on account of the shop illuminations; the fog, however, was growing every moment more fearsome, and when he had to turn out of the highway his case appeared desperate. Literally he groped along, feeling the fronts of the houses. As under ordinary circumstances he would have had only just time enough to reach his cousin's punctually, he must

be very late: perhaps they would conclude that he had not ventured out on such a night, and were already dining without him. No matter; as well go one way as another now. After abandoning hope several times, and all but asphyxiated, he found by inquiry of a man with whom he collided that he was actually within a few doors of his destination. Another effort and he rang a joyous peal at the bell.

A mistake. It was the wrong house, and he had to go two doors farther on.

This time he procured admittance to the familiar little hall. The servant smiled at him, but said nothing. He was led to the drawing-room, and there found Rhoda Nunn alone. This fact did not so much surprise him as Rhoda's appearance. For the first time since he had known her, her dress was not uniform black; she wore a red silk blouse with a black skirt, and so admirable was the effect of this costume that he scarcely refrained from a delighted exclamation.

Some concern was visible in her face.

"I am sorry to say," were her first words, "that Miss Barfoot will not be here in time for dinner. She went to Faversham this morning, and ought to have been back about half-past seven. But a telegram came some time ago. A thick fog caused her to miss the train, and the next doesn't reach Victoria till ten minutes past ten."

It was now half-past eight; dinner had been appointed for the hour. Barfoot explained his lateness in arriving.

"Is it so bad as that? I didn't know."

The situation embarrassed both of them. Barfoot suspected a hope on Miss Nunn's part that he would relieve her of his company, but, even had there been no external hindrance, he could not have relinquished the happy occasion. To use frankness was best.

"Out of the question for me to leave the house," he said, meeting her eyes and smiling. "You won't be hard upon a starving man?'

At once Rhoda made a pretence of having felt no hesitation.

"Oh, of course we will dine immediately." She rang the bell. "Miss Barfoot took it for granted that I would represent her. Look, the fog is penetrating even to our fireside."

"Cheerful, very. What is Mary doing at Faversham?"

"Some one she has been corresponding with for some time begged her to go down and give an address to a number of ladies on—a certain subject."

"Ah! Mary is on the way to become a celebrity."

"Quite against her will, as you know."

They went to dinner, and Barfoot, thoroughly enjoying the abnormal state of things, continued to talk of his cousin.

"It seems to me that she can't logically refuse to put herself forward. Work of her kind can't be done in a corner. It isn't a case of 'Oh teach the orphan girl to sew.'"

"I have used the same argument to her," said Rhoda.

Her place at the head of the table had its full effect upon Everard's imagination. Why should he hold by a resolve of which he did not absolutely approve the motive? Why not ask her simply to be his wife, and so remove one element of difficulty from his pursuit? True, he was wretchedly poor. Marrying on such an income, he would at once find his freedom restricted in every direction. But then, more likely than not, Rhoda had determined against marriage, and of him, especially, never thought for a moment as a possible husband. Well, that was what he wanted to ascertain.

They conversed naturally enough till the meal was

over. Then their embarrassment revived, but this time it was Rhoda who took the initiative.

"Shall I leave you to your meditations?" she asked, moving a few inches from the table.

"I should much prefer your society, if you will grant it me for a little longer."

Without speaking, she rose and led the way to the drawing-room. There, sitting at a formal distance from each other, they talked—of the fog. Would Miss Barfoot be able to get back at all?

"*A propos*," said Everard, "did you ever read 'The City of Dreadful Night'?"

"Yes, I have read it."

"Without sympathy, of course?"

"Why 'of course'? Do I seem to you a shallow optimist?"

"No. A vigorous and rational optimist—such as I myself aim at being."

"Do you? But optimism of that kind must be proved by some effort on behalf of society."

"Precisely the effort I am making. If a man works at developing and fortifying the best things in his own character, he is surely doing society a service."

She smiled sceptically.

"Yes, no doubt. But how do you develop and fortify yourself?"

She was meeting him half-way, thought Everard. Foreseeing the inevitable, she wished to have it over and done with. Or else——

"I live very quietly," was his reply, "thinking of grave problems most of my time. You know I am a great deal alone."

"Naturally."

"No; anything but naturally."

Rhoda said nothing. He waited a moment, then

moved to a seat much nearer hers. Her face hardened, and he saw her fingers lock together.

"Where a man is in love, solitude seems to him the most unnatural of conditions."

"Please don't make me your confidante, Mr. Barfoot," Rhoda replied with well-assumed pleasantry. "I have no taste for that kind of thing."

"But I can't help doing so. It is you that I am in love with."

"I am very sorry to hear it. Happily, the sentiment will not long trouble you."

He read in her eyes and on her lips a profound agitation. She glanced about the room, and, before he could again speak, had risen to ring the bell.

"You always take coffee, I think?"

Without troubling to give any assent, he moved apart and turned over some books on the table. For full five minutes there was silence. The coffee was brought; he tasted it and put his cup down. Seeing that Rhoda had, as it were, entrenched herself behind the beverage, and would continue to sip at it as long as might be necessary, he went and stood in front of her.

"Miss Nunn, I am more serious than you will give me credit for being. The sentiment, as you call it, has troubled me for some time, and will last."

Her refuge failed her. The cup she was holding began to shake a little.

"Please let me put it aside for you."

Rhoda allowed him to do so, and then locked her fingers.

"I am so much in love with you that I can't keep away from this house more than a few days at a time. Of course you have known it; I haven't tried to disguise why I came here so often. It's so seldom that I see you alone; and now that fortune is kind to me I must

speak as best I can. I won't make myself ridiculous in your eyes—if I can help it. You despise the love-making of ballrooms and garden parties; so do I, most heartily. Let me speak like a man who has few illusions to overcome. I want you for the companion of my life; I don't see very well how I am to do without you. You know, I think, that I have only a moderate competence; it's enough to live upon without miseries, that's all one can say. Probably I shall never be richer, for I can't promise to exert myself to earn money; I wish to live for other things. You can picture the kind of life I want you to share. You know me well enough to understand that my wife—if we use the old word—would be as free to live in her own way as I to live in mine. All the same, it is love that I am asking for. Think how you may about man and woman, you know that there *is* such a thing as love between them, and that the love of a man and a woman who can think intelligently may be the best thing life has to offer them."

He could not see her eyes, but she was smiling in a forced way, with her lips close set.

"As you insisted on speaking," she said at length, "I had no choice but to listen. It is usual, I think—if one may trust the novels—for a woman to return thanks when an offer of this kind has been made to her. So—thank you very much, Mr. Barfoot."

Everard seized a little chair that was close by, planted it beside Rhoda's, there seated himself and took possession of one of her hands. It was done so rapidly and vehemently that Rhoda started back, her expression changing from sportive mockery to all but alarm.

"I will have no such thanks," he uttered in a low voice, much moved, a smile making him look strangely stern. "You shall understand what it means when a man says that he loves you. I have come to think

your face so beautiful that I am in torment with the desire to press my lips upon yours. Don't be afraid that I shall be brutal enough to do it without your consent; my respect for you is stronger even than my passion. When I first saw you, I thought you interesting because of your evident intelligence—nothing more; indeed you were not a woman to me. Now you are the one woman in the world; no other can draw my eyes from you. Touch me with your fingers and I shall tremble—that is what my love means."

She was colourless; her lips, just parted, quivered as the breath panted between them. She did not try to withdraw her hand.

"Can you love me in return?" Everard went on, his face still nearer. "Am I anything like this to *you?* Have the courage you boast of. Speak to me as one human being to another, plain, honest words."

"I don't love you in the least. And if I did I would never share your life."

The voice was very unlike her familiar tones. It seemed to hurt her to speak.

"The reason.—Because you have no faith in me?"

"I can't say whether I have or not. I know absolutely nothing of your life. But I have my work, and no one shall ever persuade me to abandon it."

"Your work? How do you understand it? What is its importance for you?"

"Oh, and you pretend to know me so well that you wish me to be your companion at every moment!"

She laughed mockingly, and tried to draw away her hand, for it was burnt by the heat of his. Barfoot held her firmly.

"What *is* your work? Copying with a type-machine, and teaching others to do the same—isn't that it?"

"The work by which I earn money, yes. But if it were no more than that——"

"Explain, then."

Passion was overmastering him as he watched the fine scorn in her eyes. He raised her hand to his lips.

"No!" Rhoda exclaimed with sudden wrath. "Your respect—oh, I appreciate your respect!"

She wrenched herself from his grasp, and went apart. Barfoot rose, gazing at her with admiration.

"It is better I should be at a distance from you," he said. "I want to know your mind, and not to be made insensate."

"Wouldn't it be better still if you left me?" Rhoda suggested, mistress of herself again.

"If you really wish it." He remembered the circumstances and spoke submissively. "Yet the fog gives me such a good excuse for begging your indulgence. The chances are I should only lose myself in an inferno."

"Doesn't it strike you that you take an advantage of me, as you did once before? I make no pretence of equalling you in muscular strength, yet you try to hold me by force."

He divined in her a pleasure akin to his own, the delight of conflict. Otherwise, she would never have spoken thus.

"Yes, it is true. Love revives the barbarian; it wouldn't mean much if it didn't. In this one respect I suppose no man, however civilized, would wish the woman he loves to be his equal. Marriage by capture can't quite be done away with. You say you have not the least love for me; if you had, should I like you to confess it instantly? A man must plead and woo; but there are different ways. I can't kneel before you and exclaim about my miserable unworthiness—for I am not unworthy of you. I shall never call you queen and

goddess—unless in delirium, and I think I should soon weary of the woman who put her head under my foot. Just because I am stronger than you, and have stronger passions, I take that advantage—try to overcome, as I may, the womanly resistance which is one of your charms."

"How useless, then, for us to talk. If you are determined to remind me again and again that your strength puts me at your mercy——"

"Oh, not that! I will come no nearer to you. Sit down, and tell me what I asked."

Rhoda hesitated, but at length took the chair by which she was standing.

"You are resolved never to marry?"

"I never shall," Rhoda replied firmly.

"But suppose marriage in no way interfered with your work?"

"It would interfere hopelessly with the best part of my life. I thought you understood this. What would become of the encouragement I am able to offer our girls?"

"Encouragement to refuse marriage?"

"To scorn the old idea that a woman's life is wasted if she does not marry. My work is to help those women who, by sheer necessity, must live alone—women whom vulgar opinion ridicules. How can I help them so effectually as by living among them, one of them, and showing that my life is anything but weariness and lamentation? I am fitted for this. It gives me a sense of power and usefulness which I enjoy. Your cousin is doing the same work admirably. If I deserted I should despise myself."

"Magnificent! If I could bear the thought of living without you, I should bid you persevere and be great."

"I need no such bidding to persevere."

"And for that very reason, because you are capable of such high things, I love you only the more."

There was triumph in her look, though she endeavoured to disguise it.

"Then, for your own peace," she said, "I must hope that you will avoid me. It is so easily done. We have nothing in common, Mr. Barfoot."

"I can't agree with that. For one thing, there are perhaps not half a dozen women living with whom I could talk as I have talked with you. It isn't likely that I shall ever meet one. Am I to make my bow, and abandon in resignation the one chance of perfecting my life?"

"You don't know me. We differ profoundly on a thousand essential points."

"You think so because you have a very wrong idea of me."

Rhoda glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"Mr. Barfoot," she said in a changed voice, "you will forgive me if I remind you that it is past ten o'clock."

He sighed and rose.

"The fog certainly cannot be so thick now. Shall I ask them to try and get you a cab?"

"I shall walk to the station."

"Only one more word." She assumed a quiet dignity which he could not disregard. "We have spoken in this way for the last time. You will not oblige me to take all sorts of trouble merely to avoid useless and painful conversations?"

"I love you, and I can't abandon hope."

"Then I *must* take that trouble." Her face darkened, and she stood in expectation of his departure.

"I mustn't offer to shake hands," said Everard, drawing a step nearer.

"I hope you can remember that I had no choice but to be your hostess."

The face and tone affected him with a brief shame. Bending his head, he approached her, and held her offered hand, without pressure, only for an instant.

Then he left the room.

There was a little improvement in the night; he could make his way along the pavement without actual groping, and no unpleasant adventure checked him before he reached the station. Rhoda's face and figure went before him. He was not downcast; for all that she had said, this woman, soon or late, would yield herself; he had a strange, unreasoning assurance of it. Perhaps the obstinacy of his temper supplied him with that confident expectation. He no longer cared on what terms he obtained her—legal marriage or free union—it was indifferent to him. But her life should be linked with his if fierce energy of will meant anything.

Miss Barfoot arrived at half-past eleven, after many delays on her journey. She was pierced with cold, choked with the poisonous air, and had derived very little satisfaction from her visit to Faversham.

"What happened?" was her first question, as Rhoda came out into the hall with sympathy and solicitude. "Did the fog keep our guest away?"

"No; he dined here."

"It was just as well. You haven't been lonely."

They spoke no more on the subject until Miss Barfoot recovered from her discomfort, and was enjoying a much needed supper.

"Did he offer to go away?"

"It was really impossible. It took him more than half an hour to get here from Sloane Square."

"Foolish fellow! Why didn't he take a train back at once?"

There was a peculiar brightness in Rhoda's countenance, and Miss Barfoot had observed it from the first.

"Did you quarrel much?"

"Not more than was to be expected."

"He didn't think of staying for my return?"

"He left about ten o'clock."

"Of course. Quite late enough, under the circumstances. It was very unfortunate, but I don't suppose Everard cared much. He would enjoy the opportunity of teasing you."

A glance told her that Everard was not alone in his enjoyment of the evening. Rhoda led the talk into other channels, but Miss Barfoot continued to reflect on what she had perceived.

A few evenings after, when Miss Barfoot had been sitting alone for an hour or two, Rhoda came to the library and took a place near her. The elder woman glanced up from her book, and saw that her friend had something special to say.

"What is it, dear?"

"I am going to tax your good-nature, to ask you about unpleasant things."

Miss Barfoot knew immediately what this meant. She professed readiness to answer, but had an uneasy look.

"Will you tell me in plain terms what it was that your cousin did when he disgraced himself?"

"Must you really know?"

"I wish to know."

There was a pause. Miss Barfoot kept her eyes on the page open before her.

"Then I shall take the liberty of an old friend, Rhoda. Why do you wish to know?"

"Mr. Barfoot," answered the other dryly, "has been good enough to say that he is in love with me."

Their eyes met.

"I suspected it. I felt sure it was coming. He asked you to marry him?"

"No, he didn't," replied Rhoda in purposely ambiguous phrase.

"You wouldn't allow him to?"

"At all events, it didn't come to that. I should be glad if you would let me know what I asked."

Miss Barfoot deliberated, but finally told the story of Amy Drake. Her hands supporting one knee, her head bent, Rhoda listened without comment, and, to judge from her features, without any emotion of any kind.

"That," said her friend at the close, "is the story as it was understood at the time—disgraceful to him in every particular. He knew what was said of him, and offered not a word of contradiction. But not very long ago he asked me one evening if you had been informed of this scandal. I told him that you knew he had done something which I thought very base. Everard was hurt, and thereupon he declared that neither I nor any other of his acquaintances knew the truth—that he had been maligned. He refused to say more, and what am I to believe?"

Rhoda was listening with livelier attention.

"He declared that he wasn't to blame?"

"I suppose he meant that. But it is difficult to see——"

"Of course the truth can never be known," said Rhoda, with sudden indifference. "And it doesn't matter. Thank you for satisfying my curiosity."

Miss Barfoot waited a moment, then laughed.

"Some day, Rhoda, you shall satisfy mine."

"Yes—if we live long enough."

What degree of blame might have attached to Barfoot, Rhoda did not care to ask herself; she thought no more of the story. Of course there must have been other

such incidents in his career; morally he was neither better nor worse than men in general. She viewed with contempt the women who furnished such opportunities; in her judgment of the male offenders she was more lenient, more philosophical, than formerly.

She had gained her wish, had enjoyed her triumph. A raising of the finger and Everard Barfoot would marry her. Assured of that, she felt a new contentment in life; at times when she was occupied with things as far as possible from this experience, a rush of joy would suddenly fill her heart, and make her cheek glow. She moved among people with a conscious dignity quite unlike that which had only satisfied her need of distinction. She spoke more softly, exercised more patience, smiled where she had been wont to scoff. Miss Nunn was altogether a more amiable person.

Yet, she convinced herself, essentially quite unchanged. She pursued the aim of her life with less bitterness, in a larger spirit, that was all. But pursued it, and without fear of being diverted from the generous path.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A REINFORCEMENT.

THROUGHOUT January, Barfoot was endeavouring to persuade his brother Tom to leave London, where the invalid's health perceptibly grew worse. Doctors were urgent to the same end, but ineffectually; for Mrs. Thomas, though she professed to be amazed at her husband's folly in remaining where he could not hope for recovery, herself refused to accompany him any whither. This pair had no children. The lady always spoke of herself as a sad sufferer from mysterious infirmities, and had, in fact, a tendency to hysteria, which confused itself inextricably with the results of evil nurture and the impulses of a disposition originally base; nevertheless she made a figure in a certain sphere of vulgar wealth, and even gave opportunity to scandalous tongues. Her husband, whatever his secret thought, would hear nothing against her; his temper, like Everard's, was marked with stubbornness, and after a good deal of wrangling he forbade his brother to address him again on the subject of their disagreement.

"Tom is dying," wrote Everard, early in February, to his cousin in Queen's Road. "Dr. Swain assures me that unless he be removed he cannot last more than a month or two. This morning I saw the woman"—it was thus he always referred to his sister-in-law—"and

talked to her in what was probably the plainest language she ever had the privilege of hearing. It was a tremendous scene, brought to a close only by her flinging herself on the sofa with shrieks which terrified the whole household. My idea is that we must carry the poor fellow away by force. His infatuation makes me rage and curse, but I am bent on trying to save his life. Will you come and give your help?"

A week later they succeeded in carrying the invalid back to Torquay. Mrs. Barfoot had abandoned him to his doctors, nurses, and angry relatives; she declared herself driven out of the house, and went to live at a fashionable hotel. Everard remained in Devon for more than a month, devoting himself with affection, which the trial of his temper seemed only to increase, to his brother's welfare. Thomas improved a little; once more there was hope. Then on a sudden frantic impulse, after writing fifty letters which elicited no reply, he travelled in pursuit of his wife; and three days after his arrival in London he was dead.

By a will, executed at Torquay, he bequeathed to Everard about a quarter of his wealth. All the rest went to Mrs. Barfoot, who had declared herself too ill to attend the funeral, but in a fortnight was sufficiently recovered to visit one of her friends in the country.

Everard could now count upon an income of not much less than fifteen hundred a year. That his brother's death would enrich him he had always foreseen, but no man could have exerted himself with more ardent energy to postpone that advantage. The widow charged him, wherever she happened to be, with deliberate fratricide; she vilified his reputation, by word of mouth or by letter, to all who knew him, and protested that his furious wrath at not having profited more largely by the will put her in fear of her life. This last re-

markable statement was made in a long and violent epistle to Miss Barfoot, which the recipient showed to her cousin on the first opportunity. Everard had called one Sunday morning—it was the end of March—to say good-bye on his departure for a few weeks' travel. Having read the letter, he laughed with a peculiar fierceness.

"This kind of thing," said Miss Barfoot, "may necessitate your prosecuting her. There is a limit, you know, even to a woman's licence."

"I am far more likely," he replied, "to purchase a very nice little cane, and give her an exemplary thrashing."

"Oh! oh!"

"Upon my word, I see no reason against it! That's how I should deal with a man who talked about me in this way, and none the less if he were a puny creature quite unable to protect himself. In that furious scene before we got Tom away I felt most terribly tempted to beat her. There's a great deal to be said for woman-beating. I am quite sure that many a labouring man who pommels his wife is doing exactly the right thing; no other measure would have the least result. You see what comes of impunity. If this woman saw the possibility that I should give her a public caning she would be far more careful how she behaved herself. Let us ask Miss Nunn's opinion."

Rhoda had that moment entered the room. She offered her hand frankly, and asked what the subject was.

"Glance over this letter," said Barfoot. "Oh, you have seen it. I propose to get a light, supple, dandyish cane, and to give Mrs. Thomas Barfoot half a dozen smart cuts across the back in her own drawing-room, some afternoon when people are present. What have you to say to it?"

He spoke with such show of angry seriousness that Rhoda paused before replying.

"I sympathized with you," she said at length, "but I don't think I would go to that extremity."

Everard repeated the argument he had used to his cousin.

"You are quite right," Rhoda assented. "I think many women deserve to be beaten, and ought to be beaten. But public opinion would be so much against you."

"What do I care? So is public opinion against *you*."

"Very well. Do as you like. Miss Barfoot and I will come to the police court and give strong evidence in your favour."

"Now there's a woman!" exclaimed Everard, not all in jest, for Rhoda's appearance had made his nerves thrill and his pulse beat. "Look at her, Mary. Do you wonder that I would walk the diameter of the globe to win her love?"

Rhoda flushed scarlet, and Miss Barfoot was much embarrassed. Neither could have anticipated such an utterance as this. "That's the simple truth," went on Everard recklessly, "and she knows it, and yet won't listen to me. Well, good-bye to you both! Now that I have so grossly misbehaved myself, she has a good excuse for refusing even to enter the room when I am here. But do speak a word for me whilst I am away, Mary."

He shook hands with them, scarcely looking at their faces, and abruptly departed.

The women stood for a few moments at a distance from each other. Then Miss Barfoot glanced at her friend and laughed.

"Really my poor cousin is not very discreet."

"Anything but," Rhoda answered, resting on the

back of a chair, her eyes cast down. "Do you think he will really cane his sister-in-law?"

"How can you ask such a question?"

"It would be amusing. I should think better of him for it."

"Well, make it a condition. We know the story of the lady and her glove. I can see you sympathize with her."

Rhoda laughed and went away, leaving Miss Barfoot with the impression that she had revealed a genuine impulse. It seemed not impossible that Rhoda might wish to say to her lover: "Face this monstrous scandal and I am yours."

A week passed and there arrived a letter, with a foreign stamp, addressed to Miss Nunn. Happening to receive it before Miss Barfoot had come down to breakfast, she put it away in a drawer till evening leisure, and made no mention of its arrival. Exhilaration appeared in her behaviour through the day. After dinner she disappeared, shutting herself up to read the letter.

"DEAR MISS NUNN,—I am sitting at a little marble table outside a café on the Cannebière. Does that name convey anything to you? The Cannibière is the principal street of Marseilles, a street of gorgeous cafés and restaurants, just now blazing with electric light. You, no doubt, are shivering by the fireside; here it is like an evening of summer. I have dined luxuriously, and I am taking my coffee whilst I write. At a table near to me sit two girls, engaged in the liveliest possible conversation, of which I catch a few words now and then, pretty French phrases that caress the ear. One of them is so strikingly beautiful that I cannot take my eyes from her when they have been tempted to that quarter. She speaks with indescribable grace and animation, has the sweetest eyes and lips——

"And all the time I am thinking of some one else. Ah, if *you* were here! How we would enjoy ourselves among these southern scenes! Alone, it is delightful; but with you for a companion, with you to talk about everything in your splendidly frank way! This French girl's talk is of course only silly chatter; it makes me long to hear a few words from your lips—strong, brave, intelligent.

"I dream of the ideal possibility. Suppose I were to look up and see you standing just in front of me, there on the pavement. You have come in a few hours straight from London. Your eyes glow with delight. To-morrow we shall travel on to Genoa, you and I, more than friends, and infinitely more than the common husband and wife! We have bidden the world go round for *our* amusement; henceforth it is our occupation to observe and discuss and make merry.

"Is it all in vain? Rhoda, if you never love me, my life will be poor to what it might have been; and you, you also, will lose something. In imagination I kiss your hands and your lips.

"EVERARD BARFOOT."

There was an address at the head of this letter, but certainly Barfoot expected no reply, and Rhoda had no thought of sending one. Every night, however, she unfolded the sheet of thin foreign paper, and read, more than once, what was written upon it. Read it with external calm, with a brow of meditation, and afterwards sat for some time in absent mood.

Would he write again? Her daily question was answered in rather more than a fortnight. This time the letter came from Italy; it was lying on the hall table when Rhoda returned from Great Portland Street, and Miss Barfoot was the first to read the address. They

exchanged no remark. On breaking the envelope—she did so at once—Rhoda found a little bunch of violets, crushed but fragrant.

"These in return for your Cheddar pinks," began the informal note accompanying the flowers. "I had them an hour ago from a very pretty girl in the streets of Parma. I didn't care to buy, and walked on, but the pretty girl ran by me, and with gentle force fixed the flowers in my button-hole, so that I had no choice but to stroke her velvety cheek and give her a lira. How hungry I am for a sight of your face! Think of me sometimes, dear friend."

She laughed, and laid the letter and its violets away with the other.

"I must depend on you, it seems, for news of Everard," said Miss Barfoot after dinner.

"I can only tell you," Rhoda answered lightly, "that he has travelled from the south of France to the north of Italy, with much observation of female countenances."

"He informs you of that?"

"Very naturally. It is his chief interest. One likes people to tell the truth."

* * * * *

Barfoot was away until the end of April, but after that note from Parma he did not write. One bright afternoon in May, a Saturday, he presented himself at his cousin's house, and found two or three callers in the drawing-room, ladies as usual; one of them was Miss Winifred Haven, another was Mrs. Widdowson. Mary received him without effusiveness, and after a few minutes' talk with her he took a place by Mrs. Widdowson, who, it struck him, looked by no means in such good spirits as during the early days of her marriage. As soon as she began to converse, his impression of a change in her was confirmed; the girlishness so pleasantly

noticeable when first he knew her had disappeared, and the gravity substituted for it was suggestive of disillusion, of trouble.

She asked him if he knew some people named Bevis, who occupied a flat just above his own.

"Bevis? I have seen the name on the index at the foot of the stairs; but I don't know them personally."

"That was how I came to know that *you* live there," said Monica. "My husband took me to call upon the Bevises, and there we saw your name. At least, we supposed it was you, and Miss Barfoot tells me we were right."

"Oh yes; I live there all alone, a gloomy bachelor. How delightful if you knocked at my door some day, when you and Mr. Widdowson are again calling on your friends."

Monica smiled, and her eyes wandered restlessly.

"You have been away—out of England?" she next said.

"Yes; in Italy."

"I envy you."

"You have never been there?"

"No—not yet."

He talked a little of the agreeables and disagreeables of life in that country. But Mrs. Widdowson had become irresponsive; he doubted at length whether she was listening to him, so, as Miss Haven stepped this way, he took an opportunity of a word aside with his cousin."

"Miss Nunn not at home?"

"No. Won't be till dinner-time."

"Quite well?"

"Never was better. Would you care to come back and dine with us at half-past seven?"

"Of course I should."

With this pleasant prospect he took his leave. The afternoon being sunny, instead of walking straight to the station, to return home, he went out on to the Embankment, and sauntered round by Chelsea Bridge Road. As he entered Sloane Square he saw Mrs. Widdowson, who was coming towards the railway; she walked rather wearily, with her eyes on the ground, and did not become aware of him until he addressed her.

"Are we travelling the same way?" he asked. "Westward?"

"Yes. I am going all the way round to Portland Road."

They entered the station, Barfoot chatting humorously. And, so intent was he on the expression of his companion's downcast face, that he allowed an acquaintance to pass close by him unobserved. It was Rhoda Nunn, returning sooner than Miss Barfoot had expected. She saw the pair, regarded them with a moment's keen attentiveness, and went on, out into the street.

In the first-class carriage which they entered there was no other passenger as far as Barfoot's station. He could not resist the temptation to use rather an intimate tone, though one that was quite conventional, in the hope that he might discover something of Mrs. Widdowson's mind. He began by asking whether she thought it a good Academy this year. She had not yet visited it, but hoped to do so on Monday. Did she herself do any kind of artistic work? Oh, nothing whatever; she was a very useless and idle person. He believed she had been a pupil of Miss Barfoot's at one time? Yes, for a very short time indeed, just before her marriage. Was she not an intimate friend of Miss Nunn? Hardly intimate. They knew each other a few years ago, but Miss Nunn did not care much about her now.

"Probably because I married," she added with a smile.

"Is Miss Nunn really such a determined enemy of marriage?"

"She thinks it pardonable in very weak people. In my case she was indulgent enough to come to the wedding."

This piece of news surprised Barfoot.

"She came to your wedding? And wore a wedding garment?"

"Oh yes. And looked very nice."

"Do describe it to me. Can you remember?"

Seeing that no woman ever forgot the details of another's dress, on however trivial an occasion, and at whatever distance of time, Monica was of course able to satisfy the inquirer. Her curiosity excited, she ventured in turn upon one or two insidious questions.

"You couldn't imagine Miss Nunn in such a costume?"

"I should very much like to have seen her."

"She has a very striking face—don't you think so?"

"Indeed I do. A wonderful face."

Their eyes met. Barfoot bent forward from his place opposite Monica.

"To me the most interesting of all faces," he said softly.

His companion blushed with surprise and pleasure.

"Does it seem strange to you, Mrs. Widdowson?"

"Oh—why? Not at all."

All at once she had brightened astonishingly. This subject was not pursued, but for the rest of the time they talked with a new appearance of mutual confidence and interest, Monica retaining her pretty, half-bashful smile. And when Barfoot alighted at Bayswater they shook hands with an especial friendliness, both seeming to suggest a wish that they might soon meet again.

They did so no later than the following Monday. Remembering what Mrs. Widdowson had said of her

intention to visit Burlington House, Barfoot went there in the afternoon. If he chanced to encounter the pretty little woman it would not be disagreeable. Perhaps her husband might be with her, and in that case he could judge of the terms on which they stood. A surly fellow, Widdowson; very likely to play the tyrant, he thought. If he were not mistaken, she had wearied of him and regretted her bondage—the old story. Thinking thus, and strolling through the rooms with casual glances at a picture, he discovered his acquaintance, catalogue in hand, alone for the present. Her pensive face again answered to his smile. They drew back from the pictures and sat down.

"I dined with our friends at Chelsea on Saturday evening," said Barfoot.

"On Saturday? You didn't tell me you were going back again."

"I wasn't thinking of it just at the time."

Monica hinted an amused surprise.

"You see," he went on, "I expected nothing, and happy for me that it was so. Miss Nunn was in her severest mood; I think she didn't smile once through the evening. I will confess to you that I wrote her a letter whilst I was abroad, and it offended her, I suppose."

"I don't think you can always judge of her thoughts by her face."

"Perhaps not. But I have studied her face so often and so closely. For all that, she is more a mystery to me than any woman I have ever known. That, of course, is partly the reason of her power over me. I feel that if ever—if ever she should disclose herself to me, it would be the strangest revelation. Every woman wears a mask, except to one man; but Rhoda's—Miss Nunn's—is, I fancy, a far completer disguise than I ever tried to pierce."

Monica had a sense of something perilous in this conversation. It arose from a secret trouble in her own heart, which she might, involuntarily, be led to betray. She had never talked thus confidentially with any man; not, in truth, with her husband. There was no fear whatever of her conceiving an undue interest in Barfoot; certain reasons assured her of that; but talk that was at all sentimental gravely threatened her peace—what little remained to her. It would have been better to discourage this man's confidences; yet they flattered her so pleasantly, and afforded such a fruitful subject for speculation, that she could not obey the prompting of prudence.

"Do you mean," she said, "that Miss Nunn seems to disguise her feelings?"

"It is supposed to be wrong—isn't it?—for a man to ask one woman her opinion of another."

"I can't be treacherous if I wished," Monica replied. "I don't feel that I understand her."

Barfoot wondered how much intelligence he might attribute to Mrs. Widdowson. Obviously her level was much below that of Rhoda. Yet she seemed to possess delicate sensibilities, and a refinement of thought not often met with in women of her position. Seriously desiring her aid, he looked at her with a grave smile, and asked,—

"Do you believe her capable of falling in love?"

Monica showed a painful confusion. She overcame it, however, and soon answered.

"She would perhaps try not—not to acknowledge it to herself."

"When, in fact, it had happened?"

"She thinks it so much nobler to disregard such feelings."

"I know. She is to be an inspiring example to the

women who cannot hope to marry." He laughed silently. "And I suppose it is quite possible that mere shame would withhold her from taking the opposite course."

"I think she is very strong. But——"

"But?"

He looked eagerly into her face.

"I can't tell. I don't really know her. A woman may be as much a mystery to another woman as she is to a man."

"On the whole, I am glad to hear you say that. I believe it. It is only the vulgar that hold a different opinion."

"Shall we look at the pictures, Mr. Barfoot?"

"Oh, I am so sorry. I have been wasting your time——"

Nervously disclaiming any such thought, Monica rose and drew near to the canvases. They walked on together for some ten minutes, until Barfoot, who had turned to look at a passing figure, said in his ordinary voice,—

"I think that is Mr. Widdowson on the other side of the room."

Monica looked quickly round, and saw her husband, as if occupied with the pictures, glancing in her direction.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CLANK OF THE CHAINS.

SINCE Saturday evening Monica and her husband had not been on speaking terms. A visit she paid to Mildred Vesper, after her call at Miss Barfoot's, prolonged itself so that she did not reach home until the dinner-hour was long past. On arriving, she was met with an outburst of tremendous wrath, to which she opposed a resolute and haughty silence; and since then the two had kept as much apart as possible.

Widdowson knew that Monica was going to the Academy. He allowed her to set forth alone, and even tried to persuade himself that he was indifferent as to the hour of her return; but she had not long been gone before he followed. Insufferable misery possessed him. His married life threatened to terminate in utter wreck, and he had the anguish of recognizing that to a great extent this catastrophe would be his own fault. Resolve as he might, he found it impossible to repress the impulses of jealousy which, as soon as peace had been declared between them, brought about a new misunderstanding. Terrible thoughts smouldered in his mind; he felt himself to be one of those men who are driven by passion into crime. Deliberately he had brooded over a tragic close to the wretchedness of his existence; he would kill himself, and Monica should perish with

him. But an hour of contentment sufficed to banish such visions as sheer frenzy. He saw once more how harmless, how natural, were Monica's demands, and how peacefully he might live with her but for the curse of suspicion from which he could not free himself. Any other man would deem her a model of wifely virtue. Her care of the house was all that reason could desire. In her behaviour he had never detected the slightest impropriety. He believed her chaste as any woman living. She asked only to be trusted, and that, in spite of all, was beyond his power.

In no woman on earth could he have put perfect confidence. He regarded them as born to perpetual pupilage. Not that their inclinations were necessarily wanton; they were simply incapable of attaining maturity, remained throughout their life imperfect beings, at the mercy of craft, ever liable to be misled by childish misconceptions. Of course he was right; he himself represented the guardian male, the wife-proprietor, who from the dawn of civilization has taken abundant care that woman shall not outgrow her nonage. The bitterness of his situation lay in the fact that he had wedded a woman who irresistibly proved to him her claims as a human being. Reason and tradition contended in him, to his ceaseless torment.

And again, he feared that Monica did not love him. Had she ever loved him? There was too much ground for suspecting that she had only yielded to the persistence of his entreaties, with just liking enough to permit a semblance of tenderness, and glad to exchange her prospect of distasteful work for a comfortable married life. Her liking he might have fostered; during those first happy weeks, assuredly he had done so, for no woman could be insensible to the passionate worship manifest in his every look, his every word. Later, he

took the wrong path, seeking to oppose her instincts, to reform her mind, eventually to become her lord and master. Could he not even now retrace his steps? Supposing her incapable of bowing before him, of kissing his feet, could he not be content to make of her a loyal friend, a delightful companion?

In that mood he hastened towards Burlington House. Seeking Monica through the galleries, he saw her at length—sitting side by side with that man Barfoot. They were in closest colloquy. Barfoot bent towards her as if speaking in an undertone, a smile on his face. Monica looked at once pleased and troubled.

The blood boiled in his veins. His first impulse was to walk straight up to Monica and bid her follow him. But the ecstasy of jealous suffering kept him an observer. He watched the pair until he was descried.

There was no help for it. Though his brain whirled, and his flesh was stabbed, he had no choice but to take the hand Barfoot offered him. Smile he could not, nor speak a word.

"So you have come after all?" Monica was saying to him.

He nodded. On her countenance there was obvious embarrassment, but this needed no explanation save the history of the last day or two. Looking into her eyes, he knew not whether consciousness of wrong might be read there. How to get at the secrets of this woman's heart?

Barfoot was talking, pointing at this picture and that, doing his best to smooth what he saw was an awkward situation. The gloomy husband, more like a tyrant than ever, muttered incoherent phrases. In a minute or two Everard freed himself and moved out of sight.

Monica turned from her husband and affected interest in the pictures. They reached the end of the room before Widdowson spoke.

"How long do you want to stay here?"

"I will go whenever you like," she answered, without looking at him.

"I have no wish to spoil your pleasure."

"Really, I have very little pleasure in anything. Did you come only to keep me in sight?"

"I think we will go home now, and you can come another day."

Monica assented by closing her catalogue and walking on.

Without a word, they made the journey back to Herne Hill. Widdowson shut himself in the library, and did not appear till dinner-time. The meal was a pretence for both of them, and as soon as they could rise from the table they again parted.

About ten o'clock Monica was joined by her husband in the drawing-room.

"I have almost made up my mind," he said, standing near her, "to take a serious step. As you have always spoken with pleasure of your old home, Clevedon, suppose we give up this house and go and live there?"

"It is for you to decide."

"I want to know whether you would have any objection."

"I shall do just as you wish."

"No, that isn't enough. The plan I have in mind is this. I should take a good large house—no doubt rents are low in the neighbourhood—and ask your sisters to come and live with us. I think it would be a good thing both for them and for you."

"You can't be sure that they would agree to it. You see that Virginia prefers her lodgings to living here."

Oddly enough, this was the case. On their return from Guernsey they had invited Virginia to make a permanent home with them, and she refused. Her

reasons Monica could not understand; those which she alleged—vague arguments as to its being better for a wife's relatives not to burden the husband—hardly seemed genuine. It was possible that Virginia had a distaste for Widdowson's society.

"I think they both would be glad to live at Clevedon," he urged, "judging from your sisters' talk. It's plain that they have quite given up the idea of the school, and Alice, you tell me, is getting dissatisfied with her work at Yatton. But I must know whether you will enter seriously into this scheme."

Monica kept silence.

"Please answer me."

"Why have you thought of it?"

"I don't think I need explain. We have had too many unpleasant conversations, and I wish to act for the best without saying things you would misunderstand."

"There is no fear of my misunderstanding. You have no confidence in me, and you want to get me away into a quiet country place where I shall be under your eyes every moment. It's much better to say that plainly."

"That means you would consider it going to prison."

"How could I help? What other motive have you?"

He was prompted to make brutal declaration of authority, and so cut the knot. Monica's unanswerable argument merely angered him. But he made an effort over himself.

"Don't you think it best that we should take some step before our happiness is irretrievably ruined?"

"I see no need for its ruin. As I have told you before, in talking like that you degrade yourself and insult me."

"I have my faults; I know them only too well. One of them is that I cannot bear you to make friends with people who are not of my kind. I shall never be able to endure that."

"Of course you are speaking of Mr. Barfoot."

"Yes," he avowed sullenly. "It was a very unfortunate thing that I happened to come up just as he was in your company."

"You are so very unreasonable," exclaimed Monica tartly. "What possible harm is there in Mr. Barfoot, when he meets me by chance in a public place, having a conversation with me? I wish I knew twenty such men. Such conversation gives me a new interest in life. I have every reason to think well of Mr. Barfoot."

Widdowson was in anguish.

"And I," he replied, in a voice shaken with angry feeling, "feel that I have every reason to dislike and suspect him. He is not an honest man; his face tells me that. I know his life wouldn't bear inspection. You can't possibly be as good a judge as I am in such a case. Contrast him with Bevis. Now, Bevis is a man one can trust; one talk with him produces a lasting favourable impression."

Monica, silent for a brief space, looked fixedly before her, her features all but expressionless.

"Yet even with Mr. Bevis," she said at length, "you don't make friends. That is the fault in you which causes all this trouble. You haven't a sociable spirit. Your dislike of Mr. Barfoot only means that you don't know him, and don't wish to. And you are completely wrong in your judgment of him. I have every reason for being sure that you are wrong."

"Of course you think so. In your ignorance of the world——"

"Which you think very proper in a woman," she interposed caustically.

"Yes, I do! That kind of knowledge is harmful to a woman."

"Then, please, how is she to judge her acquaintances?"

"A married woman must accept her husband's opinion, at all events about men." He plunged on into the ancient quagmire. "A man may know with impunity what is injurious if it enters a woman's mind."

"I don't believe that. I can't and won't believe it."

He made a gesture of despair.

"We differ hopelessly. It was all very well to discuss these things when you could do so in a friendly spirit. Now you say whatever you know will irritate me, and you say it on purpose to irritate me."

"No; indeed I do not. But you are quite right that I find it hard to be friendly with you. Most earnestly I wish to be your friend—your true and faithful friend. But you won't let me."

"Friend!" he cried scornfully. "The woman who has become my wife ought to be something more than a friend, I should think. You have lost all love for me—there's the misery."

Monica could not reply. That word "love" had grown a weariness to her upon his lips. She did not love him; could not pretend to love him. Every day the distance between them widened, and when he took her in his arms she had to struggle with a sense of shrinking, of disgust. Their union was unnatural; she felt herself constrained by a hateful force when he called upon her for the show of wifely tenderness. Yet how was she to utter this? The moment such a truth had passed her lips she must leave him. To declare that no trace of love remained in her heart, and still to live with him—that was impossible! The dark foresight of a necessity of parting from him corresponded in her to those lurid visions which at times shook Widdowson with a horrible temptation.

"You don't love me," he continued in harsh, choking

tones. "You wish to be my *friend*. That's how you try to compensate me for the loss of your love."

He laughed with bitterness.

"When you say that," Monica answered, "do you ever ask yourself whether you try to make me love you? Scenes like this are ruining my health. I have come to dread your talk. I have almost forgotten the sound of your voice when it isn't either angry or complaining."

Widdowson walked about the room, and a deep moan escaped him.

"That is why I have asked you to go away from here, Monica. We must have a new home if our life is to begin anew."

"I have no faith in mere change of place. You would be the same man. If you cannot command your senseless jealousy here, you never would anywhere else."

He made an effort to say something; seemed to abandon it; again tried, and spoke in a thick, unnatural voice.

"Can you honestly repeat to me what Barfoot was saying to-day, when you were on the seat together?"

Monica's eyes flashed.

"I could; every word. But I shall not try to do so."

"Not if I beseech you to, Monica? To put my mind at rest——"

"No. When I tell you that you might have heard every syllable, I have said all that I shall."

It mortified him profoundly that he should have been driven to make so humiliating a request. He threw himself into a chair and hid his face, sitting thus for a long time in the hope that Monica would be moved to compassion. But when she rose it was only to retire for the night. And with wretchedness in her heart, because she must needs go to the same chamber in

which her husband would sleep. She wished so to be alone. The poorest bed in a servant's garret would have been thrice welcome to her; liberty to lie awake, to think without a disturbing presence, to shed tears if need be—that seemed to her a precious boon. She thought with envy of the shop-girls in Walworth Road; wished herself back there. What unspeakable folly she had committed! And how true was everything she had heard from Rhoda Nunn on the subject of marriage! The next day Widdowson resorted to an expedient which he had once before tried in like circumstances. He wrote his wife a long letter, eight close pages, reviewing the cause of their troubles, confessing his own errors, insisting gently on those chargeable to her, and finally imploring her to co-operate with him in a sincere endeavour to restore their happiness. This he laid on the table after lunch, and then left Monica alone that she might read it. Knowing beforehand all that the letter contained, Monica glanced over it carelessly. An answer was expected, and she wrote one as briefly as possible.

"Your behaviour seems to me very weak, very unmanly. You make us both miserable, and quite without cause. I can only say as I have said before, that things will never be better until you come to think of me as your free companion, not as your bondwoman. If you can't do this, you will make me wish that I had never met you, and in the end I am sure it won't be possible for us to go on living together."

She left this note, in a blank envelope, on the hall table, and went out to walk for an hour.

It was the end of one more acute stage in their progressive discord. By keeping at home for a fortnight, Monica soothed her husband and obtained some repose for her own nerves. But she could no longer affect a

cordial reconciliation; caresses left her cold, and Widdowson saw that his company was never so agreeable to her as solitude. When they sat together, both were reading. Monica found more attraction in books as her life grew more unhappy. Though with reluctance Widdowson had consented to a subscription at Mudie's, and from the new catalogues she either chose for herself, necessarily at random, or by the advice of better-read people, such as she met at Mrs. Cosgrove's. What modern teaching was to be got from these volumes her mind readily absorbed. She sought for opinions and arguments which were congenial to her mood of discontent, all but of revolt.

Sometimes the perusal of a love-story embittered her lot to the last point of endurance. Before marriage, her love-ideal had been very vague, elusive; it found scarcely more than negative expression, as a shrinking from the vulgar or gross desires of her companions in the shop. Now that she had a clearer understanding of her own nature, the type of man correspondent to her natural sympathies also became clear. In every particular he was unlike her husband. She found a suggestion of him in books; and in actual life, already, perhaps something more than a suggestion. Widdowson's jealousy, in so far as it directed itself against her longing for freedom, was fully justified; this consciousness often made her sullen when she desired to express a nobler indignation; but his special prejudice led him altogether astray, and in free resistance on this point she found the relief which enabled her to bear a secret self-reproach. Her refusal to repeat the substance of Barfoot's conversation was, in some degree, prompted by a wish for the continuance of his groundless fears. By persevering in suspicion of Barfoot, he afforded her a firm foothold in their ever-renewed quarrels.

A husband's misdirected jealousy excites in the wife derision and a sense of superiority; more often than not, it fosters an unsuspected attachment, prompts to a perverse pleasure in misleading. Monica became aware of this; in her hours of misery she now and then gave a harsh laugh, the result of thoughts not seriously entertained, but tempting the fancy to recklessness. What, she asked herself again, would be the end of it all? Ten years hence, would she have subdued her soul to a life of weary insignificance, if not of dishonour? For it was dishonour to live with a man she could not love, whether her heart cherished another image or was merely vacant. A dishonour to which innumerable women submitted, a dishonour glorified by social precept, enforced under dread penalties.

But she was so young, and life abounds in unexpected changes.

CHAPTER XX.

THE FIRST LIE.

MRS. COSGROVE was a childless widow, with sufficient means and a very mixed multitude of acquaintances. In the general belief her marriage had been a happy one; when she spoke of her deceased husband it was with respect, and not seldom with affection. Yet her views on the matrimonial relation were known to be of singular audacity. She revealed them only to a small circle of intimates; most of the people who frequented her house had no startling theories to maintain, and regarded their hostess as a good-natured, rather eccentric woman, who loved society and understood how to amuse her guests.

Wealth and position were rarely represented in her drawing-room; nor, on the other hand, was Bohemianism. Mrs. Cosgrove belonged by birth and marriage to the staid middle class, and it seemed as if she made it her object to provide with social entertainment the kind of persons who, in an ordinary way, would enjoy very little of it. Lonely and impecunious girls or women were frequently about her; she tried to keep them in good spirits, tried to marry them if marriage seemed possible, and, it was whispered, used a good deal of her income for the practical benefit of those who needed assistance. A sprinkling of maidens who were neither

lonely nor impecunious served to attract young men, generally strugglers in some profession or other, on the lookout for a wife. Intercourse went on with a minimum of formalities. Chaperonage—save for that represented by the hostess herself—was as often as not dispensed with.

"We want to get rid of a lot of sham propriety"—so she urged to her closer friends. "Girls must learn to trust themselves, and look out for dangers. If a girl can only be kept straight by incessant watchfulness, why, let her go where she will, and learn by experience. In fact, I want to see experience substituted for precept."

Between this lady and Miss Barfoot there were considerable divergences of opinion, yet they agreed on a sufficient number of points to like each other very well. Occasionally one of Mrs. Cosgrove's *protégées* passed into Miss Barfoot's hands, abandoning the thought of matrimony for study in Great Portland Street. Rhoda Nunn, also, had a liking for Mrs. Cosgrove, though she made no secret of her opinion that Mrs. Cosgrove's influence was on the whole decidedly harmful.

"That house," she once said to Miss Barfoot, "is nothing more than a matrimonial agency."

"But so is every house where many people are entertained."

"Not in the same way. Mrs. Cosgrove was speaking to me of some girl who has just accepted an offer of marriage. 'I don't think they'll suit each other,' she said, 'but there's no harm in trying.'"

Miss Barfoot could not restrain a laugh.

"Who knows? Perhaps she is right in that view of things. After all, you know, it's only putting into plain words what everybody thinks on all but every such occasion."

"The first part of her remark—yes," said Rhoda

caustically. "But as for the 'no harm in trying,' well, let us ask the wife's opinion in a year's time."

* * * * *

Midway in the London season, on Sunday afternoon, about a score of visitors were assembled in Mrs. Cosgrove's drawing-rooms—there were two of them, with a landing between. As usual, some one sat at the piano, but a hum of talk went on as undercurrent to the music. Downstairs, in the library, half a dozen people found the quietness they preferred, and among these was Mrs. Widdowson. She had an album of portraits on her lap; whilst turning them over, she listened to a chat going on between the sprightly Mr. Bevis and a young married woman who laughed ceaselessly at his jokes. It was only a few minutes since she had come down from the drawing-room. Presently her eyes encountered a glance from Bevis, and at once he stepped over to a seat beside her.

"Your sisters are not here to-day?" she said.

"No. They have guests of their own. And when are you coming to see them again?"

"Before long, I hope."

Bevis looked away and seemed to reflect.

"Do come next Saturday—could you?"

"I had better not promise."

"Do try, and"—he lowered his voice—"come alone. Forgive me for saying that. The girls are rather afraid of Mr. Widdowson, that's the truth. They would so like a free gossip with you. Let me tell them to expect you about half-past three or four. They will rise up and call me blessed."

Laughing, Monica at length agreed to come if circumstances were favourable. Her talk with Bevis continued for a long time, until people had begun to leave. Some other acquaintance then claimed her, but she was now

dull and monosyllabic, as if conversation had exhausted her energies. At six o'clock she stole away unobserved, and went home.

Widdowson had resigned himself, in appearance at all events, to these absences. It was several weeks since he had accompanied his wife to call upon any one; a sluggishness was creeping over him, strengthening his disinclination for society. The futile endeavour to act with decision, to carry Monica away into Somerset, resulted, as futile efforts of that kind are wont to do, in increased feebleness of the will; he was less capable than ever of exerting the authority which he still believed himself to keep for the last resort. Occasionally some days went by without his leaving the house. Instead of the one daily newspaper he had been used to take he now received three; after breakfast he sometimes spent a couple of hours over the *Times*, and the evening papers often occupied him from dinner to bedtime. Monica noticed, with a painful conflict of emotions, that his hair had begun to lose its uniform colour, and to show streaks that matched with his grizzled beard. Was *she* responsible for this?

On the Saturday when she was to visit the Bevises she feared lest he should propose to go with her. She wished even to avoid the necessity of telling him where she was going. As she rose from luncheon Widdowson glanced at her.

"I've ordered the trap, Monica. Will you come for a drive?"

"I have promised to go into the town. I'm very sorry."

"It doesn't matter."

This was his latest mode of appealing to her—with an air of pained resignation.

"For a day or two I haven't felt at all well," he con-

tinued gloomily. "I thought a drive might do me good."

"Certainly. I hope it will. When would you like to have dinner?"

"I never care to alter the hours. Of course I shall be back at the usual time. Shall *you* be?"

"Oh yes—long before dinner."

So she got away without any explanation. At a quarter to four she reached the block of flats in which the Bevises (and Everard Barfoot) resided. With a fluttering of the heart, she went very quietly upstairs, as if anxious that her footsteps should not be heard; her knock at the door was timid.

Bevis in person opened to her.

"Delighted! I thought it *might* be——"

She entered, and walked into the first room, where she had been once before. But to her surprise it was vacant. She looked round and saw Bevis's countenance gleaming with satisfaction.

"My sisters will be here in a few minutes," he said. "A few minutes at most. Will you take this chair, Mrs. Widdowson? How delighted I am that you were able to come!"

So perfectly natural was his manner, that Monica, after the first moment of consternation, tried to forget that there was anything irregular in her presence here under these circumstances. As regards social propriety, a flat differs in many respects from a house. In an ordinary drawing-room, it could scarcely have mattered if Bevis entertained her for a short space until his sisters' arrival; but in this little set of rooms it was doubtfully permissible for her to sit *tête-à-tête* with a young man, under any excuse. And the fact of his opening the front door himself seemed to suggest that not even a servant was in the flat. A tremor grew upon her as

she talked, due in part to the consciousness that she was glad to be thus alone with Bevis.

"A place like this must seem to you to be very unhomelike," he was saying, as he lounged on a low chair not very far from her. "The girls didn't like it at all at first. I suppose it's a retrograde step in civilization. Servants are decidedly of that opinion; we have a great difficulty in getting them to stay here. The reason seems to me that they miss the congenial gossip of the area door. At this moment we are without a domestic. I found she compensated herself for disadvantages by stealing my tobacco and cigars. She went to work with such lack of discretion—abstracting half a pound of honeydew at a time—that I couldn't find any sympathy for her. Moreover, when charged with the delinquency, she became abusive, so very abusive that we were obliged to insist upon her immediate departure."

"Do you think she smoked?" asked Monica laughingly.

"We have debated that point with much interest. She was a person of advanced ideas, as you see; practically a communist. But I doubt whether honeydew had any charms for her personally. It seems more probable that some milkman, or baker's assistant, or even metropolitan policeman, benefited by her communism."

Indifferent to the progress of time, Bevis talked on with his usual jocoseness, now and then shaking his tawny hair in a fit of laughter the most contagious.

"But I have something to tell you," he said at length more seriously. "I am going to leave England. They want me to live at Bordeaux for a time, two or three years perhaps. It's a great bore, but I shall have to go. I am not my own master."

"Then your sisters will go to Guernsey?"

"Yes. I dare say I shall leave about the end of July."

He became silent, looking at Monica with humorous sadness.

"Do you think your sisters will soon be here, Mr. Bevis?" Monica asked, with a glance round the room.

"I think so. Do you know, I did a very silly thing. I wanted your visit (if you came) to be a surprise for them, and so—in fact, I said nothing about it. When I got here from business, a little before three, they were just going out. I asked them if they were sure they would be back in less than an hour. Oh, they were quite sure—not a doubt of it. I do hope they haven't altered their mind, and gone to call somewhere. But, Mrs. Widdowson, I am going to make you a cup of tea—with my own fair hands, as the novelists say."

Monica begged that he would not trouble. Under the circumstances she had better not stay. She would come again very soon.

"No, I can't, I can't let you go!" Bevis exclaimed, softening his gay tone as he stood before her. "How shall I entreat you? If you knew what an unforgettable delight it will be to me to make you a cup of tea! I shall think of it at Bordeaux every Saturday."

She had risen, but exhibited no immutable resolve.

"I really must go, Mr. Bevis——!"

"Don't drive me to despair. I am capable of turning my poor sisters out of house and home—flat and home, I mean—in anger at their delay. On their account, in pity for their youth, do stay, Mrs. Widdowson! Besides, I have a new song that I want you to hear—words and music my own. One little quarter of an hour! And I know the girls will be here directly."

His will, and her inclination, prevailed. Monica sat down again, and Bevis disappeared to make the tea. Water must have been already boiling, for in less than five minutes the young man returned with a tray, on

which all the necessaries were neatly arranged. With merry homage he waited upon his guest. Monica's cheeks were warm. After the vain attempt to release herself from what was now distinctly a compromising situation, she had sat down in an easier attitude than before, as though resolved to enjoy her liberty whilst she might. There was a suspicion in her mind that Bevis had arranged this interview; she doubted the truth of his explanation. And indeed she hoped that his sisters would not return until after her departure; it would be very embarrassing to meet them.

Whilst talking and listening, she silently defended herself against the charge of impropriety. What wrong was she committing? What matter that they were alone? Their talk was precisely what it might have been in other people's presence. And Bevis, such a frank, good-hearted fellow, could not by any possibility fail in respect to her. The objections were all cant, and cant of the worst kind. She would not be a slave of such ignoble prejudices.

"You haven't made Mr. Barfoot's acquaintance yet?" she asked.

"No, I haven't. There seems to have been no opportunity. Did you seriously wish me to know him?"

"Oh, I had no wish in the matter at all."

"You like Mr. Barfoot?"

"I think him very pleasant."

"How delightful to be praised by you, Mrs. Widdowson! Now if any one speaks to you about *me*, when I have left England, will you find some nice word? Don't think me foolish. I do so desire the good opinion of my friends. To know that you spoke of me as you did of Mr. Barfoot would give me a whole day of happiness."

"How enviable! To be so easily made happy."

"Now let me sing you this song of mine. It isn't very good; I haven't composed for years. But——"

He sat down and rattled over the keys. Monica was expecting a lively air and spirited words, as in the songs she had heard at Guernsey; but this composition told of sadness and longing and the burden of a lonely heart. She thought it very beautiful, very touching. Bevis looked round to see the effect it produced upon her, and she could not meet his eyes.

"Quite a new sort of thing for me, Mrs. Widdowson. Does it strike you as so very bad?"

"No—not at all."

"But you can't honestly praise it?" He sighed, in dejection. "I meant to give you a copy. I made this one specially for you, and—if you will forgive me—I have taken the liberty of dedicating it to you. Song-writers do that, you know. Of course it is altogether unworthy of your acceptance——"

"No—no—indeed I am very grateful to you, Mr. Bevis. Do give it to me—as you meant to."

"You will have it?" he cried delightedly. "Now for a triumphal march!"

Whilst he played, with look corresponding to the exultant strain, Monica rose from her chair. She stood with eyes downcast and lips pressed together. When the last chord had sounded,—

"Now I must say good-bye, Mr. Bevis. I am so sorry your sisters haven't come."

"So am I—and yet I am not. I have enjoyed the happiest half-hour of my life."

"Will you give me the piece of music?"

"Let me roll it up. There; it won't be very awkward to carry. But of course I shall see you again before the end of July? You will come some other afternoon?"

"If Miss Bevis will let me know when she is quite sure——"

"Yes, she shall. Do you know, I don't think I shall say a word about what has happened this afternoon. Will you allow me to keep silence about your call, Mrs. Widdowson? They would be so annoyed—and really it was a silly thing not to tell them——"

Monica gave no verbal reply. She looked towards the door. Bevis stepped forward, and held it open.

"Good-bye, then. You know what I told you about my tendency to low spirits. I'm going to have a terrible turn—down, down, down!"

She laughed, and offered her hand. He held it very lightly, looking at her with his blue eyes, which indeed expressed a profound melancholy.

"Thank you," he murmured. "Thank you for your great kindness."

And thereupon he opened the front door for her. Without another look Monica went quickly down the stairs; she appreciated his motive for not accompanying her to the exit.

* * * * *

Before entering the house she had managed to conceal the sheet of music which she was carrying. But, happily, Widdowson was still absent. Half an hour passed—half an hour of brooding and reverie—before she heard his footstep ascending the stairs. On the landing she met him with a pleasant smile.

"Have you enjoyed your drive?"

"Pretty well."

"And do you feel better?"

"Not much, dear. But it isn't worth talking about."

Later, he inquired where she had been.

"I had an appointment with Milly Vesper."

The first falsehood she had ever told him, and yet

uttered with such perfect assumption of sincerity as would have deceived the acutest observer. He nodded, discontented as usual, but entertaining no doubt.

And from that moment she hated him. If he had plied her with interrogations, if he had seemed to suspect anything, the burden of untruth would have been more endurable. His simple acceptance of her word was the sternest rebuke she could have received. She despised herself, and hated him for the degradation which resulted from his lordship over her.

CHAPTER XXI.

TOWARDS THE DECISIVE.

MARY BARFOOT had never suffered from lack of interest in life. Many a vivid moment dwelt in her memory; joys and sorrows, personal or of larger scope, affected her the more deeply because of that ruling intelligence which enabled her to transmute them into principles. No longer anticipating or desiring any great change in her own environment, in the modes and motives of her activity, she found it a sufficient happiness to watch, and when possible to direct, the tendency of younger lives. So kindly had nature tempered her disposition, that already she had been able to outlive those fervours of instinct which often make the middle life of an unwedded woman one long repining; but her womanly sympathies remained. And at present there was going forward under her own roof, within her daily observation, a comedy, a drama, which had power to excite all her disinterested emotions. It had been in progress for twelve months, and now, unless she was strangely mistaken, the *dénouement* drew very near.

For all her self-study, her unflinching recognition of physical and psychical facts which the average woman blinks over, Mary deceived herself as to the date of that final triumph which permitted her to observe Rhoda Nunn with perfect equanimity. Her outbreak of angry

feeling on the occasion of Bella Royston's death meant something more than she would acknowledge before the inquisition of her own mind. It was just then that she had become aware of Rhoda's changing attitude towards Everard Barfoot; trifles such as only a woman would detect had convinced her that Everard's interest in Rhoda was awakening a serious response; and this discovery, though it could not surprise her, caused an obscure pang which she attributed to impersonal regret, to mere natural misgiving. For some days she thought of Rhoda in an ironic, half-mocking spirit. Then came Bella's suicide, and the conversation in which Rhoda exhibited a seeming heartlessness, the result, undoubtedly, of grave emotional disturbance. To her own astonishment, Mary was overcome with an impulse of wrathful hostility, and spoke words which she regretted as soon as they had passed her lips.

Poor Bella had very little to do with this moment of discord between two women who sincerely liked and admired each other. She only offered the occasion for an outburst of secret feeling which probably could not have been avoided. Mary Barfoot had loved her cousin Everard; it began when he was one-and-twenty; she, so much older, had never allowed Everard or any one else to suspect her passion, which made her for two or three years more unhappy than she had ever been, or was ever to be when once her strong reason had prevailed. The scandal of Amy Drake, happening long after, revived her misery, which now took the form of truly feminine intolerance; she tried to believe that Everard was henceforth of less than no account to her, that she detested him for his vices. Amy Drake, however, she detested much more.

When her friendship with Rhoda Nunn had progressed to intimacy, she could not refrain from speaking of her

cousin Everard, absent at the ends of the earth, and perchance lost to her sight for ever. Her mention of him was severe, yet of a severity so obviously blended with other feeling, that Rhoda could not but surmise the truth. Sentimental confession never entered Miss Barfoot's mind; she had conquered her desires, and was by no means inclined to make herself ridiculous; Rhoda Nunn, of all women, seemed the least likely to make remarks, or put questions, such as would endanger a betrayal of the buried past. Yet, at a later time, when pressing the inquiry whether Rhoda had ever been in love, Mary did not scruple to suggest that her own knowledge in that direction was complete. She did it in lightness of heart, secure under the protection of her forty years. Rhoda, of course, understood her as referring to Everard.

So the quarrel was one of jealousy. But no sooner had it taken place than Mary Barfoot experienced a shame, a distress, which in truth signified the completion of self-conquest. She thought herself ashamed of being angry where anger was uncalled for; in reality, she chastised herself for the last revival of a conflict practically over and done with so many years ago. And on this very account, precisely because she was deceiving herself as to her state of mind, she prolonged the painful situation. She said to herself that Rhoda had behaved so wrongly that displeasure was justified, that to make up the quarrel at once would be unwise, for Miss Nunn needed a little discipline. This insistence upon the side issue helped her to disregard the main one, and when at length she offered Rhoda the kiss of reconcilement, that also signified something other than was professed. It meant a hope that Rhoda might know the happiness which to her friend had been denied.

Everard's announcement of his passion for Miss Nunn seemed to Mary a well-calculated piece of boldness. If he seriously sought Rhoda for his wife, this frank avowal of the desire before a third person might remove some of the peculiar difficulties of the case. Whether willing or not to be wooed, Rhoda, in mere consistency with her pronounced opinions, must needs maintain a scornful silence on the subject of Everard's love-making; by assailing this proud reserve, this dignity which perchance had begun to burden its supporter, Everard made possible, if not inevitable, a discussion of his suit between the two women. She who talks of her lover will be led to think of him.

Miss Barfoot knew not whether to hope for the marriage of this strange pair. She was distrustful of her cousin, found it hard to imagine him a loyal husband, and could not be sure whether Rhoda's qualities were such as would ultimately retain or repel him. She inclined to think his wooing a mere caprice. But Rhoda gave ear to him, of that there could be little doubt; and since his inheritance of ample means the affair began to have a new aspect. That Everard persevered, though the world of women was now open to him—for, on a moderate computation, any man with Barfoot's personal advantages, and armed with fifteen hundred a year, may choose among fifty possible maidens—seemed to argue that he was really in love. But what it would cost Rhoda to appear before her friends in the character of a bride! What a humbling of her glory!

Was she capable of the love which defies all humiliation? Or, loving ardently, would she renounce a desired happiness from dread of female smiles and whispers? Or would it be her sufficient satisfaction to reject a wealthy suitor, and thus pose more grandly than ever before the circle who saw in her an example of woman's

independence? Powerful was the incitement to curiosity in a situation which, however it ended, would afford such matter for emotional hypothesis.

They did not talk of Everard. Whether Rhoda replied to his letters from abroad Miss Barfoot had no means of ascertaining. But after his return he had a very cold reception—due, perhaps, to some audacity he had allowed himself in his correspondence. Rhoda again avoided meeting with him, and, as Miss Barfoot noticed, threw herself with increased energy into all her old pursuits.

"What about your holiday this year?" Mary asked one evening in June. "Shall you go first, or shall I?"

"Please make whatever arrangements you like."

Miss Barfoot had a reason for wishing to postpone her holiday until late in August. She said so, and proposed that Rhoda should take any three weeks she liked prior to that.

"Miss Vesper," she added, "can manage your room very well. We shall be much more at ease in that respect than last year."

"Yes. Miss Vesper is getting to be very useful and trustworthy."

Rhoda mused when she had made this remark.

"Do you know," she asked presently, "whether she sees much of Mrs. Widdowson?"

"I have no idea."

They decided that Rhoda should go away at the close of July. Where was her holiday to be spent? Miss Barfoot suggested the lake country.

"I was thinking of it myself," said Rhoda. "I should like to have some sea-bathing, though. A week by the shore, and then the rest of the time spent in vagabondage among the mountains, would suit me very well. Mrs. Cosgrove is at home in Cumberland; I must ask her advice."

This was done, and there resulted a scheme which seemed to excite Rhoda with joyous anticipation. On the coast of Cumberland, a few miles south of St. Bees, is a little place called Seascale, unknown to the ordinary tourist, but with a good hotel and a few scattered houses where lodgings can be obtained. Not far away rise the mountain barriers of lake-land, Wastdale clearly discernible. At Seascale, then, Rhoda would spend her first week, the quiet shore with its fine stretch of sand affording her just the retreat that she desired.

"There are one or two bathing-machines, Mrs. Cosgrove says, but I hope to avoid such abominations. How delicious it was in one's childhood, when one ran into the sea naked! I will enjoy that sensation once more, if I have to get up at three in the morning."

About this time Barfoot made one of his evening calls. He had no hope of seeing Rhoda, and was agreeably surprised by her presence in the drawing-room. Just as happened a year ago, the subject of Miss Nunn's holiday was brought into the conversation, Barfoot making a direct inquiry. With lively interest, Mary waited for the reply, and was careful not to smile when Rhoda made known her intentions.

"Have you planned a route after your stay at Seascale?" Barfoot asked.

"No. I shall do that when I am there."

Whether or not he intended a contrast to these homely projects, Barfoot presently began to talk of travel on a grander scale. When he next left England, he should go by the Orient Express right away to Constantinople. His cousin asked questions about the Orient Express, and he supplied her with details very exciting to the imagination of any one who longs to see the kingdoms of the earth—as undoubtedly Rhoda did. The very name, Orient Express, has a certain sublimity, such as

attaches, more or less, to all the familiar nomenclature of world-transits. He talked himself into fervour, and kept a watch on Rhoda's countenance. As also did Miss Barfoot. Rhoda tried to appear unaffected, but her coldness betrayed its insincerity.

The next day, when work at Great Portland Street was just finished, she fell into conversation with Mildred Vesper. Miss Barfoot had an engagement to dine out that evening, and Rhoda ended by inviting Milly to come home with her to Chelsea. To Milly this was a great honour; she hesitated because of her very plain dress, but easily allowed herself to be persuaded when she saw that Miss Nunn really desired her company.

Before dinner they had a walk in Battersea Park. Rhoda had never been so frank and friendly; she induced the quiet, unpretending girl to talk of her early days, her schools, her family. Remarkable was Milly's quiet contentedness; not long ago she had received an increase of payment from Miss Barfoot, and one would have judged that scarcely a wish now troubled her, unless it were that she might see her scattered brothers and sisters, all of whom, happily, were doing pretty well in the struggle for existence.

"You must feel rather lonely in your lodgings sometimes?" said Rhoda.

"Very rarely. In future I shall have music in the evening. Our best room has been let to a young man who has a violin, and he plays 'The Blue Bells of Scotland'—not badly."

Rhoda did not miss the humorous intention, veiled, as usual, under a manner of extreme sedateness.

"Does Mrs. Widdowson come to see you?"

"Not often. She came a few days ago."

"You go to her house sometimes?"

"I haven't been there for several months. At first

I used to go rather frequently, but—it's a long way."

To this subject Rhoda returned after dinner, when they were cosily settled in the drawing-room.

"Mrs. Widdowson comes here now and then, and we are always very glad to see her. But I can't help thinking she looks rather unhappy."

"I'm afraid she does," assented the other gravely.

"You and I were both at her wedding. It wasn't very cheerful, was it? I had a disagreeable sense of bad omens all the time. Do you think she is sorry?"

"I'm really afraid she is."

Rhoda observed the look that accompanied this admission.

"Foolish girl! Why couldn't she stay with us, and keep her liberty? She doesn't seem to have made any new friends. Has she spoken to you of any?"

"Only of people she has met here."

Rhoda yielded—or seemed to yield—to an impulse of frankness. Bending slightly forward, with an anxious expression, she said in confidential tones,—

"Can you help to put my mind at rest about Monica? You saw her a week ago. Did she say anything, or give any sign, that might make one really uneasy on her account?"

There was a struggle in Milly before she answered. Rhoda added,—

"Perhaps you had rather not——"

"Yes, I had rather tell you. She said a good many strange things, and I *have* been uneasy about her. I wished I could speak to some one——"

"How strange that I should feel urged to ask you about this," said Rhoda, her eyes, peculiarly bright and keen, fixed on the girl's face. "The poor thing is very miserable, I am sure. Her husband seems to leave her entirely to herself."

Milly looked surprised.

"Monica made quite the opposite complaint to me. She said that she was a prisoner."

"That's very odd. She certainly goes about a good deal, and alone."

"I didn't know that," said Milly. "She has very often talked to me about a woman's right to the same freedom as a man, and I always understood that Mr. Widdowson objected to her going anywhere without him, except just to call here, or at my lodgings."

"Do you think she has any acquaintance that he dislikes?"

The direct answer was delayed, but it came at length.

"There is some one. She hasn't told me who it is."

"In plain words, Mr. Widdowson thinks he has cause for jealousy?"

"Yes, I understood Monica to mean that."

Rhoda's face had grown very dark. She moved her hands nervously.

"But—you don't think she could deceive him?"

"Oh, I can't think that!" replied Miss Vesper, with much earnestness. "But what I couldn't help fearing, after I saw her last, was that she might almost be tempted to leave her husband. She spoke so much of freedom—and of a woman's right to release herself if she found her marriage was a mistake."

"I am so grateful to you for telling me all this. We must try to help her. Of course I will make no mention of you, Miss Vesper. Then you are really under the impression that there's some one she—prefers to her husband?"

"I can't help thinking there is," admitted the other very solemnly. "I was so sorry for her, and felt so powerless. She cried a little. All I could do was to

entreat her not to behave rashly. I thought her sister ought to know——"

"Oh, Miss Madden is useless. Monica cannot look to her for advice or support."

After this conversation Rhoda passed a very unquiet night, and gloom appeared in her countenance for the next few days.

She wished to have a private interview with Monica, but doubted whether it would in any degree serve her purpose—that of discovering whether certain suspicions she entertained had actual ground. Confidence between her and Mrs. Widdowson had never existed, and in the present state of things she could not hope to probe Monica's secret feelings. Whilst she still brooded over the difficulty there came a letter for her from Everard Barfoot. He wrote formally; it had occurred to him that he might be of some slight service, in view of her approaching holiday, if he looked through the guide-books, and jotted down the outline of such a walking-tour as she had in mind. This he had done, and the results were written out on an enclosed sheet of paper. Rhoda allowed a day to intervene, then sent a reply. She thanked Mr. Barfoot sincerely for the trouble he had so kindly taken. "I see you limit me to ten miles a day. In such scenery of course one doesn't hurry on, but I can't help informing you that twenty miles wouldn't alarm me. I think it very likely that I shall follow your itinerary, after my week of bathing and idling. I leave on Monday week."

Barfoot did not call again. Every evening she sat in expectation of his coming. Twice Miss Barfoot was away until a late hour, and on those occasions, after dinner, Rhoda sat in complete idleness, her face declaring the troubled nature of her thoughts. On the Sunday before her departure she took a sudden resolve and went to call upon Monica at Herne Hill.

Mrs. Widdowson, she learnt from the servant, had left home about an hour since.

"Is Mr. Widdowson at home?"

Yes, he was. And Rhoda waited for some time in the drawing-room until he made his appearance. Of late Widdowson had grown so careless in the matter of toilet, that an unexpected visit obliged him to hurry through a change of apparel before he could present himself. Looking upon him for the first time for several months, Rhoda saw that misery was undermining the man's health. Words could not have declared his trouble more plainly than the haggard features and stiff, depressed, self-conscious manner. He fixed his sunken eyes upon the visitor, and smiled, as was plain, only for civility's sake. Rhoda did her best to seem at ease; she explained (standing, for he forgot to ask her to be seated) that she was going away on the morrow, and had hoped to see Mrs. Widdowson, who, she was told, had not been very well of late.

"No, she is not in very good health," said Widdowson vaguely. "She has gone this afternoon to Mrs. Cosgrove's—I think you know her."

Less encouragement to remain could not have been offered, but Rhoda conceived a hope of hearing something significant if she persevered in conversation. The awkwardness of doing so was indifferent to her.

"Shall you be leaving town shortly, Mr. Widdowson?"

"We are not quite sure—— But pray sit down, Miss Nunn. You haven't seen my wife lately?"

He took a chair, and rested his hands upon his knees, gazing at the visitor's skirt.

"Mrs. Widdowson hasn't been to see us for more than a month—if I remember rightly."

His look expressed both surprise and doubt.

"A month? But I thought—I had an idea—that she went only a few days ago."

"In the day time?"

"To Great Portland Street, I mean—to hear a lecture, or something of that kind, by Miss Barfoot."

Rhoda kept silence for a moment. Then she replied hastily,—

"Oh yes—very likely—I wasn't there that afternoon."

"I see. That would explain——"

He seemed relieved, but only for the instant; then his eyes glanced hither and thither, with painful restlessness. Rhoda observed him closely. After fidgeting with his feet, he suddenly took a stiff position, and said in a louder voice,—

"We are going to leave London altogether. I have decided to take a house at my wife's native place, Clevedon. Her sisters will come and live with us."

"That is a recent decision, Mr. Widdowson?"

"I have thought about it for some time. London doesn't suit Monica's health; I'm sure it doesn't. She will be much better in the country."

"Yes, I think that very likely."

"As you say that you have noticed her changed looks, I shall lose no time in getting away." He made a great show of determined energy. "A few weeks—— We will go down to Clevedon at once and find a house. Yes, we will go to-morrow, or the day after. Miss Madden, also, is very far from well. I wish I hadn't delayed so long."

"You are doing very wisely, I think. I had meant to suggest something of this kind to Mrs. Widdowson. Perhaps, if I went at once to Mrs. Cosgrove's, I might be fortunate enough to find her still there?"

"You might. Did I understand you to say that you

go away to-morrow? For three weeks. Ah, then we may be getting ready to remove when you come back."

The change that had come over him was remarkable. He could not keep his seat, and began to pace the end of the room. Seeing no possibility of prolonging the talk for her own purposes, Rhoda accepted this dismissal, and with the briefest leave-taking went her way to Mrs. Cosgrove's.

She was deeply agitated. Monica had not attended that lecture of Miss Barfoot's, and so, it was evident, had purposely deceived her husband. To what end? Where were those hours spent? Mildred Vesper's report supplied grounds for sombre conjecture, and the incident at Sloane Square Station, the recollection of Monica and Barfoot absorbed in talk, seemed to have a possible significance which fired Rhoda with resentment.

Her arrival at Mrs. Cosgrove's was too late. Monica had been there, said the hostess, but had left nearly half an hour ago.

Rhoda's instant desire was to go on to Bayswater, and somehow keep watch near the flats where Barfoot lived. Monica might be there. Her coming forth from the building might be detected.

But the difficulty of the undertaking, and, still more, a dread of being seen hovering about that quarter, checked her purpose as soon as it was formed. She returned home, and for an hour or two kept in solitude.

"What has happened?" asked Miss Barfoot, when they at length met.

"Happened? Nothing that I know of."

"You look very strange."

"Your imagination. I have been packing; perhaps it's from stooping over the trunk."

This by no means satisfied Mary, who felt that things mysterious were going on about her. But she could only

wait, repeating to herself that the grand *dénouement* decidedly was not far off.

At nine o'clock sounded the visitor's bell. If, as she thought likely, the caller was Everard, Miss Barfoot decided that she would disregard everything but the dramatic pressure of the moment, and leave those two alone together for half an hour. Everard it was; he entered the drawing-room with an unusual air of gaiety.

"I have been in the country all day," were his first words; and he went on to talk of trivial things—the doings of a Cockney excursion party that had come under his notice.

In a few minutes Mary made an excuse for absenting herself. When she was gone, Rhoda looked steadily at Barfoot, and asked,—

"Have you really been out of town?"

"Why should you doubt it?"

"You left this morning, and have only just returned?"

"As I told you."

She averted her look. After examining her curiously, Everard came and stood before her.

"I want to ask your leave to meet you somewhere during these next three weeks. At any point on your route. We could have a day's ramble together, and then—say good-bye."

"The lake country is free to you, Mr. Barfoot."

"But I mustn't miss you. You will leave Seascale to-morrow week?"

"At present I think so. But I can't restrict myself by any agreement. Holiday must be a time of liberty."

They looked at each other—she with a carelessness which was all but defiance, he with a significant smile.

"To-morrow week, then, perhaps we may meet again."

Rhoda made no reply, beyond a movement of her eyebrows, as if to express indifference.

"I won't stay longer this evening. A pleasant journey to you!"

He shook hands, and left the room. In the hall Miss Barfoot came to meet him; they exchanged a few words, unimportant and without reference to what had passed between him and Rhoda. Nor did Rhoda speak of the matter when joined by her friend. She retired early, having settled all the arrangements for her departure by the ten o'clock express from Euston next morning.

Her luggage was to consist of one trunk and a wallet with a strap, which would serve the purposes of a man's knapsack. Save the indispensable umbrella, she carried no impeding trifles. A new costume, suitable for shore and mountain, was packed away in the trunk; Miss Barfoot had judged of its effect, and was of opinion that it became the wearer admirably.

But Rhoda, having adjusted everything that she was going to take with her, still had an occupation which kept her up for several hours. From a locked drawer she brought forth packets of letters, the storage of many years, and out of these selected carefully perhaps a tithe, which she bound together and deposited in a box; the remainder she burnt in the empty fireplace. Moreover, she collected from about the room a number of little objects, ornaments and things of use, which also found a place in the same big box. All her personal property which had any value for her, except books, was finally under lock and key, and in portable repositories. But still she kept moving, as if in search of trifles that might have escaped her notice; silently, in her soft slippers, she strayed hither and thither, till the short summer night had all but given place to dawn; and when at length weariness compelled her to go to bed, she was not able to sleep.

Nor did Mary Barfoot enjoy much sleep that night. She lay thinking, and forecasting strange possibilities.

On Monday evening, returned from Great Portland Street, the first thing she did was to visit Rhoda's chamber. The ashes of burnt paper had been cleared away, but a glance informed her of the needless and unprecedented care with which Miss Nunn had collected and packed most of the things that belonged to her. Again Mary had a troubled night.

CHAPTER XXII.

HONOUR IN DIFFICULTIES.

At Mrs. Cosgrove's, this Sunday afternoon, Monica had eyes and thoughts for one person only. Her coming at all was practically an appointment to meet Bevis, whom she had seen twice since her visit to the flat. A day or two after that occasion, she received a call from the Bevis girls, who told her of their brother's approaching departure for Bordeaux, and thereupon she invited the trio to dine with her. A fortnight subsequently to the dinner she had a chance encounter with Bevis in Oxford Street; constraint of business did not allow him to walk beside her for more than a minute or two, but they spoke of Mrs. Cosgrove's on the following Sunday, and there, accordingly, found each other.

Tremor of self-consciousness kept Monica in dread of being watched and suspected. Few people were present to-day, and after exchanging formal words with Bevis, she moved away to talk with the hostess. Not till half an hour had passed did she venture to obey the glances which her all but avowed lover cast towards her, and to take a seat where he could naturally engage her in conversation. He was so much at ease, so like what she had always known him, that Monica asked herself whether she had not mistaken the meaning of his homage. One moment she hoped it might be so; the next,

she longed for some sign of passionate devotion, and thought with anguish of the day, now so near, when he would be gone for ever. This, she ardently believed, was the man who should have been her husband. Him she could love with heart and soul, could make his will her absolute law, could live on his smiles, could devote herself to his interests. The independence she had been struggling to assert ever since her marriage meant only freedom to love. If she had understood herself as she now did, her life would never have been thus cast into bondage.

"The girls," Bevis was saying, "leave on Thursday. The rest of the week I shall be alone. On Monday the furniture will be stowed away at the Pantechnicon, and on Tuesday—off I go."

A casual listener could have supposed that the prospect pleased him. Monica, with a fixed smile, looked at the other groups conversing in the room; no one was paying any attention to her. In the same moment she heard a murmur from her companion's lips; he was speaking still, but in a voice only just audible.

"Come on Friday afternoon about four o'clock."

Her heart began to throb painfully, and she knew that a treacherous colour had risen to her cheeks.

"Do come—once more—for the last time. It shall be just as before—just as before. An hour's talk, and we will say good-bye to each other."

She was powerless to breathe a word. Bevis, noticing that Mrs. Cosgrove had thrown a look in their direction, suddenly laughed as if at some jest between them, and resumed his lively strain of talk. Monica also laughed. An interval of make-believe, and again the soft murmur fell upon her ear.

"I shall expect you. I know you won't refuse me this one last kindness. Some day," his voice was all but extinguished, "some day—who knows?"

Dreadful hope struck through her. A stranger's eyes turned their way, and again she laughed.

"On Friday, at four. I shall expect you."

She rose, looked for an instant about the room, then offered him her hand, uttering some commonplace word of leave-taking. Their eyes did not meet. She went up to Mrs. Cosgrove, and as soon as possible left the house.

Widdowson met her as she crossed the threshold of home. His face told her that something extraordinary had happened, and she trembled before him.

"Back already?" he exclaimed, with a grim smile. "Be quick, and take your things off, and come to the library."

If he had discovered anything (the lie, for instance, that she told him a month ago, or that more recent falsehood when she pretended, without serious reason, to have been at Miss Barfoot's lecture), he would not look and speak thus. Hurrying, panting, she made a change of dress, and obeyed his summons.

"Miss Nunn has been here," were his first words.

She turned pale as death. Of course he observed it; she was now prepared for anything.

"She wanted to see you because she is going away on Monday. What's the matter?"

"Nothing. You spoke so strangely——"

"Did I? And you *look* very strangely. I don't understand you. Miss Nunn says that everybody has noticed how ill you seem. It's time we did something. To-morrow morning we are going down into Somerset, to Clevedon, to find a house."

"I thought you had given up that idea."

"Whether I had or not doesn't matter."

In the determination to appear, and be, energetic, he spoke with a rough obstinacy, a doggedness that now and then became violence. "I am decided on it now.

There's a train to Bristol at ten-twenty. You will pack just a few things; we shan't be away for more than a day or two."

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday—— By Friday they might be back. Till now, in an anguish of uncertainty, Monica had made up her mind. She would keep the appointment on Friday, come of it what might. If she could not be back in time, she would write a letter.

"Why are you talking in this tone?" she said coldly.

"What tone? I am telling you what I have decided to do, that's all. I shall easily find a house down there, no doubt. Knowing the place, you will be able to suggest the likely localities."

She sat down, for strength was failing her.

"It's quite true," Widdowson went on, staring at her with inflamed eyes. "You are beginning to look like a ghost. Oh, we'll have an end of this!" He cackled in angry laughter. "Not a day's unnecessary delay! Write to both your sisters this evening and tell them. I wish them both to come and live with us."

"Very well."

"Now, won't you be glad? Won't it be better in every way?"

He came so near that she felt his feverish breath.

"I told you before," she answered, "to do just as you liked."

"And you won't talk about being kept a prisoner?"

Monica laughed.

"Oh no, I won't say anything at all."

She scarcely knew what words fell from her lips. Let him propose, let him do what he liked; to her it was indifferent. She saw something before her—something she durst not, even an hour ago, have steadily contemplated; it drew her with the force of fate.

"You know we couldn't go on living like this—don't you, Monica?"

"No, we couldn't."

"You see!" He almost shouted in triumph, misled by the smile on her face. "All that was needed was resolution on my part. I have been absurdly weak, and weakness in the husband means unhappiness in the wife. From to-day you look to me for guidance. I am no tyrant, but I shall rule you for your own good."

Still she smiled.

"So there's an end of our misery—isn't it, darling? What misery! Good God, how I have suffered! Haven't you known it?"

"I have known it too well."

"And now you will make up to me for it, Monica?"

Again prompted by the irresistible force, she answered mechanically,—

"I will do the best for both."

He threw himself on the ground beside her and clasped her in his arms.

"Now, that is my own dear wife once more! Your face has altogether changed. See how right it is that a husband should take the law into his own hands! Our second year of marriage shall be very different from the first. And yet we *were* happy, weren't we, my beautiful? It's only this cursed London that has come between us. At Clevedon we shall begin our life over again—like we did at Guernsey. All our trouble, I am convinced, has come of your ill-health. This air has never suited you; you have felt miserable, and couldn't be at peace in your home. Poor little girl! My poor darling!"

Through the evening he was in a state of transport, due partly to the belief that Monica really welcomed his decision, partly to the sense of having behaved at length

like a resolute man. His eyes were severely bloodshot, and before bedtime headache racked him intolerably.

Everything was carried out as he had planned it. They journeyed down into Somerset, put up at a Clevedon hotel, and began house-hunting. On Wednesday the suitable abode was discovered—a house of modest pretensions, but roomy and well situated. It could be made ready for occupation in a fortnight. Bent on continuing his exhibition of vigorous promptitude, Widdowson signed a lease that same evening.

"To-morrow we will go straight home and make our preparations for removal. When all is ready, you shall come down here and live at the hotel until the house is furnished. Go to your sister Virginia and simply bid her do as you wish. Imitate me!" He laughed fatuously. "Don't listen to any objection. When you have once got her away she will thank you."

By Thursday afternoon they were back at Herne Hill. Widdowson still kept up the show of extravagant spirits, but he was worn out. He spoke so hoarsely that one would have thought he had contracted a severe sore-throat; it resulted merely from nervous strain. After a pretence of dinner, he seated himself as if to read; glancing at him a few minutes later, Monica found that he was fast asleep.

She could not bear to gaze at him, yet her eyes turned thither again and again. His face was repulsive to her; the deep furrows, the red eyelids, the mottled skin moved her to loathing. And yet she pitied him. His frantic exultation was the cruelest irony. What would he do? What would become of him? She turned away, and presently left the room, for the sound of his uneasy breathing made her suffer too much.

When he woke up, he came in search of her, and laughed over his involuntary nap.

"Well, now, you will go and see your sister to-morrow morning."

"In the afternoon, I think."

"Why? Don't let us have any procrastination. The morning, the morning!"

"Please do let me have my way in such a trifle as that," Monica exclaimed nervously. "I have all sorts of things to see to here before I can go out."

He caressed her.

"You shan't say that I am unreasonable. In the afternoon, then. And don't listen to any objections."

"No, no."

* * * * *

It was Friday. All the morning Widdowson had business with house agents and furniture removers, for he would not let a day go by without some practical step towards release from the life he detested. Monica seemed to be equally active in her own department; she was turning out drawers and wardrobes, and making selection of things—on some principle understood by herself. A flush remained upon her cheeks, in marked contrast to the pallor which for a long time had given her an appearance of wasting away. That and her singularly bright eyes endowed her with beauty suggestive of what she might have gained in happy marriage.

They had luncheon at one o'clock, and at a quarter to two Monica started by train for Clapham Junction. It was her purpose to have a short conversation with Virginia, who knew of the trip to Clevedon, and to speak as though she were quite reconciled to the thought of removal; after that, she would pursue her journey so as to reach Bayswater by four o'clock. But Virginia was not at home. Mrs. Conisbee said she had gone out at eleven in the morning, and with the intention of

returning by teatime. After a brief hesitation Monica requested the landlady to deliver a message.

"Please ask her not to come to Herne Hill until she hears from me, as I am not likely to be at home for a day or two."

This left more time at her disposal than she knew how to employ. She returned to the railway station, and travelled on to Victoria; there, in the corner of a waiting-room, she sat, feverishly impatient, until her watch told her that she might take the next train westward.

A possible danger was before her—though perhaps she need not trouble herself with the thought of such dangers. What if Mr. Barfoot happened to encounter her as she ascended the stairs? But most likely he had no idea that her female friends, who dwelt on the floor above him, were gone away. Did it matter what he might think? In a day or two——

She came to the street, approached the block of flats, involuntarily casting anxious glances about her. And when she was within twenty yards of the door, it opened, and forth came Barfoot. Her first sensation was unreasoning terror; her next, thankfulness that she had not been a few minutes sooner, when the very meeting she had feared, within the building itself, would have come to pass. He walked this way; he saw her; and the pleasantest smile of recognition lit up his face.

"Mrs. Widdowson! Not a minute ago you were in my thoughts. I wished I could see you."

"I am going—to make a call in this neighbourhood——"

She could not command herself. The shock had left her trembling, and the necessity of feigning calmness was a new trial of her nerves. Barfoot, she felt certain, was reading her face like a printed page; he saw guilt there; his quickly-averted eyes, his peculiar smile, seemed to express the facile tolerance of a man of the world.

"Allow me to accompany you to the end of the street."

His words buzzed in her ears. She walked on without conscious effort, like an automaton obedient to a touch.

"You know that Miss Nunn has gone down into Cumberland?" Barfoot was saying, his look bent upon her.

"Yes. I know."

She tried to glance at him with a smile.

"To-morrow," he pursued, "I am going there myself."

"To Cumberland?"

"I shall see her, I hope. Perhaps she will only be angry with me."

"Perhaps. But perhaps not."

Her confusion would not be overcome. She felt a burning in her ears, on her neck. It was an agony of shame. The words she spoke sounded imbecile mutterings, which must confirm Barfoot in his worst opinion of her.

"If it is all in vain," he continued, "then I shall say good-bye, and there's an end."

"I hope not—I should think——"

Useless. She set her lips and became mute. If only he would leave her! And almost immediately he did so, with a few words of kind tone. She felt the pressure of his hand, and saw him walk rapidly away; doubtless he knew this was what she desired.

Until he had passed out of sight, Monica kept the same direction. Then she turned round and hurried back, fearful lest the detention might make her late, and Bevis might lose hope of her coming. There could be no one in the building now whom she need fear to meet. She opened the big entrance door and went up.

Bevis must have been waiting for the sound of her light footstep; his door flew open before she could knock. Without speaking, a silent laugh of joy upon his lips,

he drew back to make room for her entrance, and then pressed both her hands.

In the sitting-room were beginnings of disorder. Pictures had been taken down from the walls and light ornaments removed.

"I shan't sleep here after to-night," Bevis began, his agitation scarcely less obvious than Monica's. "To-morrow I shall be packing what is to go with me. How I hate it all!"

Monica dropped into a chair near the door.

"Oh, not there!" he exclaimed. "Here, where you sat before. We are going to have tea together again."

His utterances were forced, and the laugh that came between them betrayed the quivering of his nerves.

"Tell me what you have been doing. I have thought of you day and night."

He brought a chair close to her, and when he had seated himself he took one of her hands. Monica, scarcely repressing a sob, the result of reaction from her fears and miseries, drew the hand away. But again he took it.

"There's the glove on it," he said in a shaking voice. "What harm in my holding your glove? Don't think of it, and talk to me. I love music, but no music is like your voice."

"You go on Monday?"

It was her lips spoke the sentence, not she.

"No, on Tuesday—I think."

"My—Mr. Widdowson is going to take me away from London."

"Away?"

She told him the circumstances. Bevis kept his eyes upon her face, with a look of rapt adoration which turned at length to pain and woeful perplexity.

"You have been married a year," he murmured. "Oh,

if I had met you before that! What a cruel fate that we should know each other only when there was no hope!"

The man revealed himself in this dolorous sentimentality. His wonted blitheness and facetiousness, his healthy features, his supple, well-built frame, suggested that when love awoke within him he would express it with virile force. But he trembled and blushed like a young girl, and his accents fell at last into a melodious whining.

He raised the gloved fingers to his lips. Monica bent her face away, deadly pale, with closed eyes.

"Are we to part to-day, and never again see each other?" he went on. "Say that you love me! Only say that you love me!"

"You despise me for coming to you like this."

"Despise you?"

In a sudden rapture he folded his arms about her.

"Say that you love me!"

He kissed away the last syllable of her whispered reply.

"Monica!—what is there before us? How can I leave you?"

Yielding herself for the moment in a faintness that threatened to subdue her, she was yet able, when his caresses grew wild with passion, to put back his arms and move suddenly away. He sprang up, and they stood speechless. Again he drew near.

"Take me away with you!" Monica then cried, clasping her hands together. "I can't live with *him*. Let me go with you to France."

Bevis's blue eyes widened with consternation.

"Dare you—dare you do that?" he stammered.

"Dare I? What courage is needed? How *dare* I remain with a man I hate?"

"You must leave him. Of course you must leave him."

"Oh, before another day has passed!" sobbed Monica.

"It is wrong even to go back to-day. I love you, and in that there is nothing to be ashamed of; but what bitter shame to be living with *him*, practising hypocrisy. He makes me hate myself as much as I hate *him*."

"Has he behaved brutally to you, dearest?"

"I have nothing to accuse him of, except that he persuaded me to marry him—made me think that I could love him when I didn't know what love meant. And now he wishes to get me away from all the people I know, because he is jealous of every one. And how can I blame him? Hasn't he cause for jealousy? I am deceiving him—I have deceived him for a long time, pretending to be a faithful wife when I have often wished that he might die and release me. It is I who am to blame. I ought to have left him. Every woman who thinks of her husband as I do ought to go away from him. It is base and wicked to stay there—pretending—deceiving——"

Bevis came towards her and took her in his arms.

"You love me?" she panted under his hot kisses. "You will take me away with you?"

"Yes, you shall come. We mustn't travel together, but you shall come—when I am settled there——"

"Why can't I go with you?"

"My own darling, think what it would mean if our secret were discovered——"

"Discovered? But how can we think of that? How can I go back there, with your kisses on my lips? Oh, I must live somewhere in secret until you go, and then—I have put aside the few things that I want to take. I could never have continued to live with him even if you hadn't said you love me. I was obliged to pretend that I agreed to everything, but I will beg and starve rather than bear that misery any longer. Don't you love me enough to face whatever may happen?"

"I love you with all my soul, Monica! Sit down again, dearest; let us talk about it, and see what we can do."

He half led, half carried, her to a couch, and there, holding her embraced, gave way to such amorous frenzy that again Monica broke from him.

"If you love me," she said in tones of bitter distress, "you will respect me as much as before I came to you. Help me—I am suffering so dreadfully. Say at once that I shall go away with you, even if we travel as strangers. If you are afraid of it becoming known I will do everything to prevent it. I will go back and live there until Tuesday, and come away only at the last hour, so that no one will ever suspect where—— I don't care how humbly I live when we are abroad. I can have lodgings somewhere in the same town, or near, and you will come——"

His hair disordered, his eyes wild, quivering throughout with excitement, he stood as if pondering possibilities.

"Shall I be a burden to you?" she asked in a faint voice. "Is the expense more than you——"

"No, no, no! How can you think of such a thing? But it would be so much better if you could wait here until I—— Oh, what a wretched thing to have to seem so cowardly to you! But the difficulties are so great, darling. I shall be a perfect stranger in Bordeaux. I don't even speak the language at all well. When I reach there I shall be met at the station by one of our people, and—just think, how could we manage? You know, if it were discovered that I had run away with you, it would damage my position terribly. I can't say what might happen. My darling, we shall have to be very careful. In a few weeks it might all be managed very easily. I would write to you to some address, and as soon as ever I had made arrangements——"

Monica broke down. The unmanliness of his tone was so dreadful a disillusion. She had expected something so entirely different—swift, virile passion, eagerness even to anticipate her desire of flight, a strength, a courage to which she could abandon herself, body and soul. She broke down utterly, and wept with her hands upon her face.

Bevis, in sympathetic distraction, threw himself on his knees before her, clutching at her waist.

"Don't, don't!" he wailed. "I can't bear that! I will do as you wish, Monica. Tell me some place where I can write to you. Don't cry, darling—don't——"

She went to the couch again, and rested her face against the back, sobbing. For a time they exchanged mere incoherences. Then passion seized upon both, and they clung together, mute, motionless.

"To-morrow I shall leave him," whispered Monica, when at length their eyes met. "He will be away in the morning, and I can take what I need. Tell me where I shall go to, dear—to wait until you are ready. No one will ever suspect that we have gone together. He knows I am miserable with him; he will believe that I have found some way of supporting myself in London. Where shall I live till Tuesday?"

Bevis scarcely listened to her words. The temptation of the natural man, basely selfish, was strengthening its hold upon him.

"Do you love me? Do you really love me?" he replied to her, with thick, agitated utterance.

"Why should you ask that? How can you doubt it?"

"If you really love me——"

His face and tones frightened her.

"Don't make me doubt *your* love! If I have not perfect trust in you what will become of me?"

Yet once more she drew resolutely away from him. He pursued, and held her arms with violence.

"Oh, I am mistaken in you!" Monica cried in fear and bitterness. "You don't know what love means, as *I* feel it. You won't speak, you won't think, of our future life together——"

"I have promised——"

"Leave loose of me! It's because I have come here. You think me a worthless woman, without sense of honour, with no self-respect——"

He protested vehemently. The anguished look in her eyes had its effect upon his senses; by degrees it subjugated him, and made him ashamed of his ignoble impulse.

"Shall I find a lodging for you till Tuesday?" he asked, after moving away and returning.

"Will you?"

"You are sure you can leave home to-morrow—without being suspected?"

"Yes, I am sure I can. He is going to the City in the morning. Appoint some place where I can meet you. I will come in a cab, and then you can take me on to the——"

"But you are forgetting the risks. If you take a cab from Herne Hill, with your luggage, he will be able to find out the driver afterwards, and learn where you went."

"Then I will drive only as far as the station, and come to Victoria, and you shall meet me there."

The necessity of these paltry arrangements filled her soul with shame. On the details of her escape she had hardly reflected. All such considerations were, she deemed, naturally the care of her lover, who would act with promptitude, and so as to spare her a moment's perplexity. She had imagined everything in readiness within a few hours; on *her* no responsibility save that

of breaking the hated bond. Inevitably she returned to the wretched thought that Bevis regarded her as a burden. Yes, he had already his mother and his sisters to support; she ought to have remembered that.

"What time would it be?" he was asking.

Unable to reply, she pursued her reflections. She had money, but how to obtain possession of it? Afterwards, when her flight was accomplished, secrecy, it appeared, would be no less needful than now. That necessity had never occurred to her; declaration of the love that had freed her seemed inevitable—nay, desirable. Her self-respect demanded it; only thus could she justify herself before his sisters and other people who knew her. *They*, perhaps, would not see it in the light of justification, but that mattered little; her own conscience would approve what she had done. But to steal away, and live henceforth in hiding, like a woman dishonoured even in her own eyes—from that she shrank with repugnance. Rather than that, would it not be preferable to break with her husband, and openly live apart from him, alone?

"Be honest with me," she suddenly exclaimed. "Had you rather I didn't come?"

"No, no! I can't live without you——"

"But, if that is true, why haven't you the courage to let every one know it? In your heart you must think that we are acting wrongly."

"I don't! I believe, as you do, that love is the only true marriage. Very well!" He made a desperate gesture. "Let us defy all consequences. For your sake——"

His exaggerated vehemence could not deceive Monica.

"What is it," she asked, "that you most fear?"

He began to babble protestations, but she would not listen to them.

"Tell me—I have every right to ask—what you most fear?"

"I fear nothing if *you* are with me. Let my relatives say and think what they like. I have made great sacrifices for them; to give up *you* would be too much."

Yet his distress was evident. It strained the corners of his mouth, wrinkled his forehead.

"The disgrace would be more than you could bear. You would never see your mother and your sisters again."

"If they are so prejudiced, so unreasonable, I can't help it. They must——"

He was interrupted by a loud rat-tat at the outer door. Blanched herself, Monica saw that her lover's face turned to ghastly pallor.

"Who can that be?" he whispered hoarsely. "I expect no one."

"Need you answer?"

"Can it be——? Have you been followed? Does any one suspect——?"

They stared at each other, still half-paralysed, and stood waiting thus until the knock was repeated impatiently.

"I daren't open," Bevis whispered, coming close to her, as if on the impulse of seeking protection—for to offer it was assuredly not in his mind. "It might be——"

"No! That's impossible."

"I daren't go to the door. The risk is too frightful. He will go away, whoever it is, if no one answers."

Both were shaking in the second stage of terror. Bevis put his arm about Monica, and felt her heart give great throbs against his own. Their passion for the moment was effectually quenched.

"Listen! That's the clink of the letter-box. A card or something has been put in. Then it's all right. I'll wait a moment."

He stepped to the door of the room, opened it without sound, and at once heard footsteps descending the stairs. In the look which he cast back at her, a grin rather than a smile, Monica saw something that gave her a pang of shame on his behalf. On going to the letter-box he found a card, with a few words scribbled upon it.

"Only one of our partners!" he exclaimed gleefully. "Wants to see me to-night. Of course he took it for granted I was out."

Monica was looking at her watch. Past five o'clock.

"I think I must go," she said timidly.

"But what are our arrangements? Do you still intend——"

"Intend? Isn't it for you to decide?"

There was a coldness in the words of both, partly the result of the great shock they had undergone, in part due to their impatience with each other.

"Darling—do what I proposed at first. Stay for a few days, until I am settled at Bordeaux."

"Stay with my—my husband?"

She used the word purposely, significantly, to see how it would affect him. The bitterness of her growing disillusion allowed her to think and speak as if no ardent feeling were concerned.

"For both our sakes, dearest, dearest love! A few days longer, until I have written to you, and told you exactly what to do. The journey won't be very difficult for you; and think how much better, dear Monica, if we can escape discovery, and live for each other without any shame or fear to disturb us. You will be my own dear true wife. I will love and guard you as long as I live."

He embraced her with placid tenderness, laying his cheek against hers, kissing her hands.

"We must see each other again," he continued. "Come on Sunday, will you? And in the meantime find out some place where I could address letters to you. You can always find a stationer's shop where they will receive letters. Be guided by me, dear little girl. Only a week or two—to save the happiness of our whole lives."

Monica listened, but with half-attention, her look fixed on the floor. Encouraged by her silence, the lover went on in a strain of heightening enthusiasm, depicting the raptures of their retirement from the world in some suburb of Bordeaux. How this retreat was to escape the notice of his business companions, through whom the scandal might get wind, he did not suggest. The truth was, Bevis found himself in an extremely awkward position, with issues he had not contemplated, and all he cared for was to avert the immediate peril of public discovery. The easy-going, kindly fellow had never considered all the responsibility involved in making mild love—timorously selfish from the first—to a married woman who took his advances with desperate seriousness. He had not in him the stuff of vigorous rascality, still less the only other quality which can support a man in such a situation as this—heroism of moral revolt. So he cut a very poor figure, and was dolefully aware of it. He talked, talked; trying to disguise his feebleness in tinsel phrases; and Monica still kept her eyes cast down.

When another half-hour had passed, she sighed deeply and rose from her seat. She would write to him, she said, and let him know where a reply would reach her. No, she must not come here again; all he had to tell her could be communicated by letter. The subdued tone, the simple sadness of her words, distressed Bevis, and yet he secretly congratulated himself. He had done nothing for which this woman could justly reproach

him; marvellous—so he considered—had been his self-restraint; absolutely, he had behaved "like a gentleman." To be sure, he was miserably in love, and, if circumstances by any means allowed of it, would send for Monica to join him in France. Should the thing prove impossible, he had nothing whatever on his conscience.

He held out his arms to her. Monica shook her head and looked away.

"Say once more that you love me, darling," he pleaded. "I shall not rest for an hour until I am able to write and say, 'Come to me!'"

She permitted him to hold her once more in his soft embrace.

"Kiss me, Monica!"

"She put her lips to his cheek, and withdrew them, still shunning his look.

"Oh, not that kind of kiss. Like you kissed me before."

"I can't," she replied, with choking voice, the tears again starting forth.

"But what have I done that you should love me less, dearest?"

He kissed the falling drops, murmuring assurances, encouragements.

"You shan't leave me until I have heard you say that your love is unchanged. Whisper it to me, sweetest!"

"When we meet again—not now."

"You frighten me. Monica, we are not saying good-bye for ever?"

"If you send for me I will come."

"You promise faithfully? You *will* come?"

"If you send for me I will come."

That was her last word. He opened the door for her, and listened as she departed.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN AMBUSH.

HITHERTO, Widdowson had entertained no grave mistrust of his wife. The principles she had avowed, directly traceable as it seemed to her friendship with the militant women in Chelsea, he disliked and feared; but her conduct he fully believed to be above reproach. His jealousy of Barfoot did not glance at Monica's attitude towards the man; merely at the man himself, whom he credited with native scoundreldom. Barfoot represented to his mind a type of licentious bachelor; why, he could not have made perfectly clear to his own understanding. Possibly the ease of Everard's bearing, the something aristocratic in his countenance and his speech, the polish of his manner, especially in formal converse with women, from the first grave offence to Widdowson's essentially middle-class sensibilities. If Monica were in danger at all, it was, he felt convinced, from that quarter. The subject of his wife's intimate dialogue with Barfoot at the Academy still remained a mystery to him. He put faith in her rebellious declaration that every word might have been safely repeated in his hearing, but, be the matter what it might, the manner of Barfoot's talk meant evil. Of that conviction he could not get rid.

He had read somewhere that a persistently jealous

husband may not improbably end by irritating an innocent wife into affording real ground for jealousy. A man with small knowledge of the world is much impressed by dicta such as these; they get into the crannies of his mind, and thence direct the course of his thinking. Widdowson, before his marriage, had never suspected the difficulty of understanding a woman; had he spoken his serious belief on that subject, it would have been found to represent the most primitive male conception of the feminine being. Women were very like children; it was rather a task to amuse them and to keep them out of mischief. Therefore the blessedness of household toil, in especial the blessedness of child-bearing and all that followed. Intimacy with Monica had greatly affected his views, yet chiefly by disturbing them; no firmer ground offered itself to his treading when he perforce admitted that his former standpoint was every day assailed by some incontestable piece of evidence. Women had individual characters; that discovery, though not a very profound one, impressed him with the force of something arrived at by independent observation. Monica often puzzled him gravely; he could not find the key to her satisfactions and discontents. To regard her simply as a human being was beyond the reach of his intelligence. He cast the blame of his difficulties upon sex, and paid more attention to the hints on such topics afforded him by his reading. He would endeavour to keep his jealousy out of sight, lest the mysterious tendency of the female nature might prompt Monica to deliberate wrongdoing.

To-day for the first time there flashed across him the thought that already he might have been deceived. It originated in a peculiarity of Monica's behaviour at luncheon. She ate scarcely anything; she seemed hurried, frequently glancing at the clock; and she lost herself in reverie. Discovering that his eye was upon her, she betrayed uneasiness, and began to talk without considering what she meant to say. All this might mean nothing more than her barely-concealed regret at being obliged

to leave London; but Widdowson remarked it with a vivacity of feeling perhaps due to the excitement in which he had lived for the past week. Perhaps the activity, the resolution to which he had urged himself, caused a sharpening of his perceptions. And the very thought, never out of his mind, that only a few days had to elapse before he carried off his wife from the scene of peril, tended to make him more vividly conscious of that peril. Certain it was that a moment's clairvoyance assailed his peace, and left behind it all manner of ugly conjectures. Women—so said the books—are adepts at dissimulation. Was it conceivable that Monica had taken advantage of the liberty he had of late allowed her? If a woman could not endure a direct, searching gaze, must it not imply some enormous wickedness?—seeing that nature has armed them for this very trial.

In her setting forth for the railway station hurry was again evident, and disinclination to exchange parting words. Why should she be so eager to go and see Virginia? If the eagerness were simple and honest, would she not have accepted his suggestion and have gone in the morning?

For five minutes after her departure he stood in the hall, staring before him. A new jealousy, a horrible constriction of the heart, had begun to torture him. He went and walked about in the library, but could not dispel his suffering. Vain to keep repeating that Monica was incapable of baseness. Of that he was persuaded, but none the less a hideous image returned upon his mental vision—a horror—a pollution of thought.

One thing he could do to restore his sanity. He would walk over to Lavender Hill, and accompany his wife on her return home. Indeed, the mere difficulty of getting through the afternoon advised this project. He could not employ himself, and knew that his imagination, once inflamed, would leave him not a moment's rest. Yes, he would walk to Lavender Hill, and ramble about that region until Monica had had reasonable time for talk with her sister.

About three o'clock there fell a heavy shower of rain. Strangely against his habits, Widdowson turned into a quiet public-house, and sat for a quarter of an hour at the bar, drinking a glass of whisky. During the past week he had taken considerably more wine than usual at meals; he seemed to need the support. Whilst sipping at his glass of spirits, he oddly enough fell into talk with the barmaid, a young woman of some charms, and what appeared to be unaffected modesty. Not for twenty years had Widdowson conversed with a member of this sisterhood. Their dialogue was made up of the most trifling of trivialities—weather, a railway accident, the desirability of holidays at this season. And when at length he rose and put an end to the chat it was with appreciable reluctance.

"A good, nice sort of girl," he went away saying to himself. "Pity she should be serving at a bar—hearing doubtful talk, and seeing very often vile sights. A nice, soft-spoken little girl."

And he mused upon her remembered face with a complacency which soothed his feelings.

Of a sudden he was checked by the conversion of his sentiment into thought. Would he not have been a much happier man if he had married a girl distinctly his inferior in mind and station? Provided she were sweet, lovable, docile—such a wife would have spared him all the misery he had known with Monica. From the first he had understood that Monica was no representative shop-girl, and on that very account he had striven so eagerly to win her. But it was a mistake. He had loved her, still loved her, with all the emotion of which he was capable. How many hours' genuine happiness of soul had that love afforded him? The minutest fraction of the twelve months for which she had been his wife. And of suffering, often amounting to frantic misery, he could count many weeks. Could such a marriage as this be judged a marriage at all, in any true sense of the word?

"Let me ask myself a question. If Monica were

absolutely free to choose between continuing to live with me and resuming her perfect liberty, can I persuade myself that she would remain my wife? She would not. Not for a day; not for an hour. Of that I am morally convinced. And I acknowledge the grounds of her dissatisfaction. We are unsuited to each other. We do not understand each other. Our marriage is physical and nothing more. My love—what is my love? I do not love her mind, her intellectual part. If I did, this frightful jealousy from which I suffer would be impossible. My ideal of the wife perfectly suited to me is far liker that girl at the public-house bar than Monica. Monica's independence of thought is a perpetual irritation to me. I don't know what her thoughts really are, what her intellectual life signifies. And yet I hold her to me with the sternest grasp. If she endeavoured to release herself I should feel capable of killing her. Is not this a strange, a brutal thing?"

Widdowson had never before reached this height of speculation. In the moment, by the very fact, of admitting that Monica and he ought not to be living together, he became more worthy of his wife's companionship than ever hitherto.

Well, he would exercise greater forbearance. He would endeavour to win her respect by respecting the freedom she claimed. His recent suspicions of her were monstrous. If she knew them, how her soul would revolt from him! What if she took an interest in other men, perchance more her equals than he? Why, had he not just been thinking of another woman, reflecting that she, or one like her, would have made him a more suitable wife than Monica? Yet this could not reasonably be called unfaithfulness.

They were bound together for life, and their wisdom lay in mutual toleration, the constant endeavour to understand each other aright—not in fierce restraint of each other's mental liberty. How many marriages were anything more than mutual forbearance? Perhaps there ought not to be such a thing as enforced

permanence of marriage. This was daring speculation; he could not have endured to hear it from Monica's lips. But—perhaps, some day, marriage would be dissoluble at the will of either party to it. Perhaps the man who sought to hold a woman when she no longer loved him would be regarded with contempt and condemnation.

What a simple thing marriage had always seemed to him, and how far from simple he had found it! Why, it led him to musings which overset the order of the world, and flung all ideas of religion and morality into wildest confusion. It would not do to think like this. He was a man wedded to a woman very difficult to manage—there was the practical upshot of the matter. His duty was to manage her. He was responsible for her right conduct. With intentions perfectly harmless, she might run into unknown jeopardy—above all, just at this time when she was taking reluctant leave of her friends. The danger justified him in exceptional vigilance.

So, from his excursion into the realms of reason did he return to the safe sphere of the commonplace. And now he might venture to press on towards Mrs. Conisbee's house, for it was half-past four, and already Monica must have been talking with her sister for a couple of hours.

His knock at the door was answered by the landlady herself. She told of Mrs. Widdowson's arrival and departure. Ah, then Monica had no doubt gone straight home again. But, as Miss Madden had returned, he would speak with her.

"The poor lady isn't very well, sir," said Mrs. Conisbee, fingering the hem of her apron.

"Not very well? But couldn't I see her for a moment?"

Virginia answered this question by appearing on the staircase.

"Some one for me, Mrs. Conisbee?" she called from above. "Oh, is it *you*, Edmund? So very glad! I'm sure Mrs. Conisbee will have the kindness to let you

come into her sitting-room. What a pity I was away when Monica called! I've had—business to see to in town; and I've walked and walked, until I'm really—hardly able——"

She sank upon a chair in the room, and looked fixedly at the visitor with a broad, benevolent smile, her head moving up and down. Widdowson was for a moment in perplexity. If the evidence of his eyes could be trusted, Miss Madden's indisposition pointed to a cause so strange that it seemed incredible. He turned to look for Mrs. Conisbee, but the landlady had hurriedly withdrawn, closing the door behind her.

"It is so foolish of me, Edmund," Virginia rambled on, addressing him with a familiarity she had never yet used. "When I am away from home I forget all about my meals—really forget—and then all at once I find that I am quite exhausted—quite exhausted—as you see. And the worst of it is I have altogether lost my appetite by the time I get back. I couldn't eat a mouthful of food—not a mouthful—I assure you I couldn't. And it does so distress good Mrs. Conisbee. She is exceedingly kind to me—exceedingly careful about my health. Oh, and in Battersea Park Road I saw such a shocking sight; a great cart ran over a poor little dog, and it was killed on the spot. It unnerved me dreadfully. I do think, Edmund, those drivers ought to be more careful. I was saying to Mrs. Conisbee only the other day—and that reminds me, I do so want to know all about your visit to Clevedon. Dear, dear Clevedon! And have you really taken a house there, Edmund? Oh, if we could all end our days at Clevedon! You know that our dear father and mother are buried in the old churchyard. You remember Tennyson's lines about the old church at Clevedon? Oh, and what did Monica decide about—about—really, what *was* I going to ask? It is so foolish of me to forget that dinner-time has come and gone. I get so exhausted, and even my memory fails me."

He could doubt no longer. This poor woman had

yielded to one of the temptations that beset a life of idleness and solitude. His pity was mingled with disgust.

"I only wished to tell you," he said gravely, "that we have taken a house at Clevedon——"

"You really *have!*" She clasped her hands together. "Whereabouts?"

"Near Dial Hill."

Virginia began a rhapsody which her brother-in-law had no inclination to hear. He rose abruptly.

"Perhaps you had better come and see us to-morrow."

"But Monica left a message that she wouldn't be at home for the next few days, and that I wasn't to come till I heard from her."

"Not at home——? I think there's a mistake."

"Oh, impossible! We'll ask Mrs. Conisbee."

She went to the door and called. From the landlady Widdowson learnt exactly what Monica had said. He reflected for a moment.

"She shall write to you then. Don't come just yet. I mustn't stay any longer now."

And with a mere pretence of shaking hands he abruptly left the house.

Suspicions thickened about him. He would have thought it utterly impossible for Miss Madden to disgrace herself in this vulgar way, and the appalling discovery affected his view of Monica. They were sisters; they had characteristics in common, family traits, weaknesses. If the elder woman could fall into this degradation, might there not be possibilities in Monica's character such as he had refused to contemplate? Was there not terrible reason for mistrusting her? What did she mean by her message to Virginia?

Black and haggard, he went home as fast as a hansom could take him. It was half-past five when he reached the house. His wife was not here, and had not been here.

At this moment Monica was starting by train from

Bayswater, after her parting with Bevis. Arrived at Victoria, she crossed to the main station, and went to the ladies' waiting-room for the purpose of bathing her face. She had red, swollen eyes, and her hair was in slight disorder. This done, she inquired as to the next train for Herne Hill. One had just gone; another would leave in about a quarter of an hour.

A dreadful indecision was harassing her. Ought she, did she dare, to return home at all? Even if her strength sufficed for simulating a natural manner, could she consent to play so base a part?

There was but one possible alternative. She might go to Virginia's lodgings, and there remain, writing to her husband that she had left him. The true cause need not be confessed. She would merely declare that life with him had become intolerable to her, that she demanded a release. Their approaching removal to Clevedon offered the occasion. She would say that her endurance failed before that prospect of solitude, and that, feeling as she did, it was dishonourable to make longer pretence of doing her duty as a wife. Then, if Bevis wrote to her in such a way as to revive her love, if he seriously told her to come to him, all difficulties could be solved by her disappearance.

Was such revival of disheartened love a likely or a possible thing? At this moment she felt that to flee in secret, and live with Bevis as he proposed, would be no less dishonour than abiding with the man who had a legal claim upon her companionship. Her lover, as she had thought of him for the past two or three months, was only a figment of her imagination; Bevis had proved himself a complete stranger to her mind; she must reshape her knowledge of him. His face was all that she could still dwell upon with the old desire; nay, even that had suffered a change.

Insensibly the minutes went by. Whilst she sat in the waiting-room her train started; and when she had become aware of that, her irresolution grew more tormenting.

Suddenly there came upon her a feeling of illness, of nausea. Perspiration broke out on her forehead; her eyes dazzled; she had to let her head fall back. It passed, but in a minute or two the fit again seized her, and with a moan she lost consciousness.

Two or three women who were in the room rendered assistance. The remarks they exchanged, though expressing uncertainty and discreetly ambiguous, would have been significant to Monica. On her recovery, which took place in a few moments, she at once started up, and with hurried thanks to those about her, listening to nothing that was said and answering no inquiry, went out on to the platform. There was just time to catch the train now departing for Herne Hill.

She explained her fainting fit by the hours of agitation through which she had passed. There was no room for surprise. She had suffered indescribably, and still suffered. Her wish was to get back into the quietness of home, to rest and to lose herself in sleep.

* * * * * *

On entering, she saw nothing of her husband. His hat hung on the hall-tree, and he was perhaps sitting in the library; the more genial temper would account for his not coming forth at once to meet her, as had been his custom when she returned from an absence alone.

She changed her dress, and disguised as far as was possible the traces of suffering on her features. Weakness and tremor urged her to lie down, but she could not venture to do this until she had spoken to her husband. Supporting herself by the banisters, she slowly descended, and opened the library door. Widdowson was reading a newspaper. He did not look round, but said carelessly,—

"So you are back?"

"Yes. I hope you didn't expect me sooner."

"Oh, it's all right." He threw a rapid glance at her over his shoulder. "Had a long talk with Virginia, I suppose?"

"Yes. I couldn't get away before."

Widdowson seemed to be much interested in some paragraph. He put his face closer to the paper, and was silent for two or three seconds. Then he again looked round, this time observing his wife steadily, but with a face that gave no intimation of unusual thoughts.

"Does she consent to go?"

Monica replied that it was still uncertain; she thought, however, that Virginia's objections would be overcome.

"You look very tired," remarked the other.

"I am, very."

And thereupon she withdrew, unable to command her countenance, scarce able to remain standing for another moment.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TRACKED.

When Widdowson went up to the bedroom that night, Monica was already asleep. He discovered this on turning up the gas. The light fell upon her face, and he was drawn to the bedside to look at her. The features signified nothing but repose; her lips were just apart, her eyelids lay softly with their black fringe of exquisite pencilling, and her hair was arranged as she always prepared it for the pillow. He watched her for full five minutes, and detected not the slightest movement, so profound was her sleep. Then he turned away, muttering savagely under his breath, "Hypocrite! Liar!"

But for a purpose in his thoughts he would not have lain down beside her. On getting into bed he kept as far away as possible, and all through the wakeful night his limbs shrank from the touch of hers.

He rose an hour earlier than usual. Monica had long been awake, but she moved so seldom that he could not be sure of this; her face was turned from him. When he came back to the room after his bath, Monica propped herself on her elbow and asked why he was moving so early.

"I want to be in the City at nine," he replied, with a show of cheerfulness. "There's a money affair I must see after."

"Something that's going wrong?"

"I'm afraid so. I must lose no time in looking to it. What plans have you for to-day?"

"None whatever."

"It's Saturday, you know. I promised to see Newdick this afternoon. Perhaps I may bring him to dinner."

About twelve o'clock he returned from his business. At two he went away again, saying that he should not be back before seven, it might be a little later. In Monica these movements excited no special remark; they were merely a continuance of his restlessness. But no sooner had he departed, after luncheon, than she went to her dressing-room, and began to make slow, uncertain preparations for leaving home herself.

This morning she had tried to write a letter for Bevis, but vainly. She knew not what to say to him, uncertain of her own desires and of what lay before her. Yet, if she were to communicate with him henceforth at all, it was necessary, this very afternoon, to find an address where letters could be received for her, and to let him know of it. To-morrow, Sunday, was useless for the purpose, and on Monday it might be impossible for her to go out alone. Besides that, she could not be sure of the safety of a letter delivered at the flat on Monday night or Tuesday morning.

She dressed at length and went out. Her wisest course, probably, was to seek for some obliging shopkeeper near Lavender Hill. Then she could call on Virginia, transact the business she had pretended to discharge yesterday, and there pen a note to Bevis.

Her moods alternated with distracting rapidity. A hundred times she had resolved that Bevis could be nothing more to her, and again had thought of him with impulses of yearning, trying to persuade herself that he had acted well and wisely. A hundred times she determined to carry out her idea of yesterday—to quit her husband and resist all his efforts to recall her—and again had all but resigned herself to live with him, accepting degradation as so many wives perforce did. Her mind was in confusion, and physically she felt far from well. A heaviness weighed upon her limbs, making it hardship to walk however short a distance.

Arrived at Clapham Junction, she began to search wearily, indifferently, for the kind of shop that might answer her purpose. The receiving of letters which, for one reason or another, must be dispatched to a secret address, is a very ordinary complaisance on the part of small London stationers; hundreds of such letters are sent and called for every week within the metropolitan postal area. It did not take Monica long to find an obliging shopkeeper; the first to whom she applied—a decent woman behind a counter which displayed newspapers, tobacco, and fancy articles—willingly accepted the commission.

She came out of the shop with flushed cheeks. Another step in shameful descent—yet it had the result of strengthening once more her emotions favourable to Bevis. On his account she had braved this ignominy, and it drew her towards him, instead of producing the effect which would have seemed more natural. Perhaps the reason was that she felt herself more hopelessly an outcast from the world of honourable women, and therefore longed in her desolation for the support of a man's love. Did he not love her? It was *her* fault if she expected him to act with a boldness that did not lie in his nature. Perhaps his discretion, which she had so bitterly condemned as weakness, meant a wise regard for her interests as well as his own. The public scandal of divorce was a hideous thing. If it damaged his prospects and sundered him from his relatives, how could she hope that his love of her, the cause of it all, would long endure?

The need of love overcame her. She would submit to any conditions rather than lose this lover whose kisses were upon her lips, and whose arms had held her so passionately. She was too young to accept a life of resignation, too ardent. Why had she left him in despondency, in doubt whether he would ever again see her?

* * * * * *

She turned back on her way to Virginia's lodgings, re-entered the station, and journeyed townwards. It

was an odd incident, by Monica unperceived, that when she was taking her ticket there stood close by her a man, seemingly a mechanic, who had also stood within hearing when she booked at Herne Hill. This same man, though he had not travelled in the compartment with her, followed her when she changed trains at Victoria, and yet again followed her when she alighted at Bayswater. She did not once observe him.

Instead of writing, she had resolved to see Bevis again —if it were possible. Perhaps he would not be at the flat; yet his wish might suggest the bare hope of her coming to-day. The risk of meeting Barfoot probably need not be considered, for he had told her that he was travelling to-day into Cumberland, and for so long a journey he would be sure to set forth in the morning. At worst she would suffer a disappointment. Indulgence of her fervid feelings had made her as eager to see Bevis as she was yesterday. Words of tenderness rushed to her lips for utterance. When she reached the building all but delirium possessed her.

She had hurried up to the first landing, when a footstep behind drew her attention. It was a man in mechanic's dress, coming up with head bent, doubtless for some task or other in one of the flats. Perhaps he was going to Bevis's. She went forward more slowly, and on the next landing allowed the man to pass her. Yes, more likely than not he was engaged in packing her lover's furniture. She stood still. At that moment a door closed above, and another step, lighter and quicker, that of a woman, came downstairs. As far as her ear could judge, this person might have left Bevis's flat. A conflict of emotions excited her to panic. She was afraid either to advance or to retreat, and in equal dread of standing without purpose. She stepped up to the nearest door, and gave a summons with the knocker.

This door was Barfoot's. She knew that; in the first instant of fear occasioned by the workman's approach, she had glanced at the door and reminded herself that here Mr. Barfoot dwelt, immediately beneath Bevis.

But for the wild alarm due to her conscience-stricken state she could not have risked the possibility of the tenant being still at home; and yet it seemed to her that she was doing the only thing possible under the circumstances. For this woman whom she heard just above might perchance be one of Bevis's sisters, returned to London for some purpose or other, and in that case she preferred being seen at Barfoot's door to detection as she made for her lover's.

Uncertainty on this point lasted but a few seconds. Dreading to look at the woman, Monica yet did so, just as she passed, and beheld the face of a perfect stranger. A young and good-looking face, however. Her mind, sufficiently tumultuous, received a new impulse of disturbance. Had this woman come forth from Bevis's flat or from the one opposite ?—for on each floor there were two dwellings.

In the meantime no one answered her knock. Mr. Barfoot had gone; she breathed thankfully. Now she might venture to ascend to the next floor. But then sounded a knock from above. That, she felt convinced, was at Bevis's door, and if so her conjecture about the workman was correct. She stood waiting for certainty, as if still expecting a reply to her own signal at Mr. Barfoot's door. The mechanic looked down at her over the banisters, but of this she was unaware.

The knock above was repeated. Yes, this time there could be no mistake; it was on this side of the landing —that is to say, at her lover's door. But the door did not open; thus, without going up herself, she received assurance that Bevis was not at home. He might come later. She still had an hour or two to spare. So, as if disappointed in a call at Mr. Barfoot's, she descended the stairs and issued into the street.

Agitation had exhausted her, and a dazzling of her eyes threatened a recurrence of yesterday's faintness. She found a shop where refreshments were sold, and sat for half an hour over a cup of tea, trying to amuse herself with illustrated papers. The mechanic who had

knocked at Bevis's door passed once or twice along the pavement, and, as long as she remained here, kept the shop within sight.

At length she asked for writing materials, and penned a few lines. If on her second attempt she failed to see Bevis, she would drop this note into his letter-box. It acquainted him with the address to which he might direct letters, assured him passionately of her love, and implored him to be true to her, to send for her as soon as circumstances made it possible.

Self-torment of every kind was natural to her position. Though the relief of escaping from several distinct dangers had put her mind comparatively at ease for a short time, she had now begun to suffer a fresh uneasiness with reference to the young and handsome woman who came downstairs. The fact that no one answered the workman's knock had seemed to her a sufficient proof that Bevis was not at home, and that the stranger must have come forth from the flat opposite his. But she recollected the incident which had so alarmingly disturbed her and her lover yesterday. Bevis did not then go to the door, and suppose—oh, it was folly! But suppose that woman had been with him; suppose he did not care to open to a visitor whose signal sounded only a minute or two after that person's departure?

Had she not anguish enough to endure without the addition of frantic jealousy? She would not give another thought to such absurd suggestions. The woman had of course come from the dwelling opposite. Yet why might she not have been in Bevis's flat when he himself was absent? Suppose her an intimate to whom he had entrusted a latch-key. If any such connection existed, might it not help to explain Bevis's half-heartedness?

To think thus was courting madness. Unable to sit still any longer, Monica left the shop, and strayed for some ten minutes about the neighbouring streets, drawing nearer and nearer to her goal. Finally she entered the building and went upstairs. On this occasion no

one met her, and no one entered in her rear. She knocked at her lover's door, and stood longing, praying, that it might open. But it did not. Tears started to her eyes; she uttered a moan of bitterest disappointment, and slipped the envelope she was carrying into the letter-box.

The mechanic had seen her go in, and he waited outside, a few yards away. Either she would soon reappear, or her not doing so would show that she had obtained admittance somewhere. In the latter case, this workman of much curiosity and leisure had only to lurk about the staircase until she came forth again. But this trial of patience was spared him. He found that he had simply to follow the lady back to Herne Hill. Acting on very suggestive instructions, it never occurred to the worthy man that the lady's second visit was not to the same flat as in the former instance.

Monica was home again long before dinner-time. When that hour arrived her husband had not yet come; the delay, no doubt, was somehow connected with his visit to Mr. Newdick. But time went on. At nine o'clock Monica still sat alone, hungry, yet scarce conscious of hunger owing to her miseries. Widdowson had never behaved thus. Another quarter of an hour and she heard the front door open.

He came to the drawing-room, where she sat waiting.

"How late you are! Are you alone?"

"Yes, alone."

"You haven't had dinner?"

"No."

He seemed to be in rather a gloomy mood, but Monica noticed nothing that alarmed her. He was drawing nearer, his eyes on the ground.

"Have you had bad news—in the City?"

"Yes, I have."

Still he came nearer, and at length, when a yard or two away, raised his look to her face.

"Have you been out this afternoon?"

She was prompted to a falsehood, but durst not utter it, so keenly was he regarding her.

"Yes. I went to see Miss Barfoot."

"Liar!"

As the word burst from his lips, he sprang at her, clutched her dress at the throat, and flung her violently upon her knees. A short cry of terror escaped her; then she was stricken dumb, with eyes starting and mouth open. It was well that he held her by the garment and not by the neck, for his hand closed with murderous convulsion, and the desire of crushing out her life was for an instant all his consciousness.

"Liar!" again burst from him. "Day after day you have lied to me. Liar! Adulteress!"

"I am not! I am not that!"

She clung upon his arms and strove to raise herself. The bloodless lips, the choked voice, meant dread of him, but the distortion of her features was hatred and the will to resist.

"Not that? What is your word worth? The prostitute in the street is sooner to be believed. She has the honesty to say what she is, but you—— Where were you yesterday when you were *not* at your sister's? Where were you this afternoon?"

She had nearly struggled to her feet; he thrust her down again, crushed her backwards until her head all but touched the floor.

"Where were you? Tell the truth, or you shall never speak again!"

"Oh—help! help! He will kill me!"

Her cry rang through the room.

"Call them up—let them come and look at you and hear what you are. Soon enough every one will know. Where were you this afternoon? You were watched every step of the way from here to that place where you have made yourself a base, vile, unclean creature——"

"I am not that! Your spies have misled you."

"Misled? Didn't you go to that man Barfoot's door and knock there? And because you were disap-

pointed, didn't you wait about, and go there a second time?"

"What if I did? It doesn't mean what you think."

"What? You go time after time to the private chambers of an unmarried man—a man such as that—and it means no harm?"

"I have never been there before."

"You expect me to believe you?" Widdowson cried with savage contumely. He had just loosed his hold of her, and she was upright again before him, her eyes flashing defiance, though every muscle in her frame quivered. "When did your lies begin? Was it when you told me you had been to hear Miss Barfoot's lecture, and never went there at all?"

He aimed the charge at a venture, and her face told him that his suspicion had been grounded.

"For how many weeks, for how many months, have you been dishonouring me and yourself?"

"I am not guilty of what you believe, but I shan't try to defend myself. Thank Heaven, this is the end of everything between us! Charge me with what you like. I am going away from you, and I hope we may never meet again."

"Yes, you are going—no doubt of that. But not before you have answered my questions. Whether with lies or not doesn't matter much. You shall give your own account of what you have been doing."

Both panting as if after some supreme effort of their physical force, they stood and looked at each other. Each to the other's eyes was incredibly transformed. Monica could not have imagined such brutal ferocity in her husband's face, and she herself had a wild recklessness in her eyes, a scorn and abhorrence in all the lines of her countenance, which made Widdowson feel as if a stranger were before him.

"I shall answer no question whatever," Monica replied. "All I want is to leave your house, and never see you again."

He regretted what he had done. The result of the

first day's espionage being a piece of evidence so incomplete, he had hoped to command himself until more solid proof of his wife's guilt were forthcoming. But jealousy was too strong for such prudence, and the sight of Monica as she uttered her falsehood made a mere madman of him. Predisposed to believe a story of this kind, he could not reason as he might have done if fear of Barfoot had never entered his thoughts. The whole course of dishonour seemed so clear; he traced it from Monica's earliest meetings with Barfoot at Chelsea. Wavering between the impulse to cast off his wife with every circumstance of public shame, and the piteous desire to arrest her on her path of destruction, he rushed into a middle course, compatible with neither of these intentions. If at this stage he chose to tell Monica what had come to his knowledge, it should have been done with the sternest calm, with dignity capable of shaming her guilt. As it was, he had spoilt his chances in every direction. Perhaps Monica understood this; he had begun to esteem her a mistress in craft and intrigue.

"You say you were never at that man's rooms before to-day?" he asked in a lower voice.

"What I have said you must take the trouble to recollect. I shall answer no question."

Again the impulse assailed him to wring confession from her by terror. He took a step forward, the demon in his face. Monica in that moment leapt past him, and reached the door of the room before he could stop her.

"Stay where you are!" she cried. "If your hands touch me again I shall call for help until some one comes up. I won't endure your touch!"

"Do you pretend you are innocent of any crime against me?"

"I am not what you called me. Explain everything as you like. I will explain nothing. I want only to be free from you."

She opened the door, rapidly crossed the landing, and

went upstairs. Feeling it was useless to follow, Widdowson allowed the door to remain wide, and waited. Five minutes passed and Monica came down again, dressed for leaving the house.

"Where are you going?" he asked, stepping out of the room to intercept her.

"It is nothing to you. I am going away."

They subdued their voices, which might else have been audible to the servants below.

"No, that you shall not!"

He stepped forward to block the head of the stairs, but again Monica was too quick for him. She fled down, and across the hall, and to the house-door. Only there, as she was arrested by the difficulty of drawing back the two latches, did Widdowson overtake her.

"Make what scandal you like, you don't leave this house."

His tones were violent rather than resolute. What could he do? If Monica persisted, what means had he of confining her to the house—short of carrying her by main force to an upper room and there locking her in? He knew that his courage would not sustain him through such a task as this.

"For scandal I care nothing," was her reply. "One way or another I will leave the house."

"Where are you going?"

"To my sister's."

His hand on the door, Widdowson stood as if determined in opposition. But her will was stronger than his. Only by homicide can a man maintain his dignity in a situation of this kind; Widdowson could not kill his wife, and every moment that he stood there made him more ridiculous, more contemptible.

He turned back into the hall and reached his hat. Whilst he was doing so Monica opened the door. Heavy rain was falling, but she paid no heed to it. In a moment Widdowson hastened after her, careless, he too, of the descending floods. Her way was towards the railway station, but the driver of a cab chancing to

attract her notice, she accepted the man's offer, and bade him drive to Lavender Hill.

On the first opportunity Widdowson took like refuge from the rain, and was driven in the same direction. He alighted not far from Mrs. Conisbee's house. That Monica had come hither he felt no doubt, but he would presently make sure of it. As it still rained he sought shelter in a public-house, where he quenched a painful thirst, and then satisfied his hunger with such primitive foods as a licensed victualler is disposed to vend. It was nearing eleven o'clock, and he had neither eaten nor drunk since luncheon.

After that he walked to Mrs. Conisbee's, and knocked at the door. The landlady came.

"Will you please to tell me," he asked, "whether Mrs. Widdowson is here?"

The sly curiosity of the woman's face informed him at once that she saw something unusual in these circumstances.

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Widdowson is with her sister."

"Thank you."

Without another word he departed. But went only a short distance, and until midnight kept Mrs. Conisbee's door in view. The rain fell, the air was raw; shelterless, and often shivering with fever, Widdowson walked the pavement with a constable's regularity. He could not but remember the many nights when he thus kept watch in Walworth Road and in Rutland Street, with jealousy, then too, burning in his heart, but also with amorous ardours, never again to be revived. A little more than twelve months ago! And he had waited, longed for marriage through half a lifetime.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE FATE OF THE IDEAL.

RHODA'S week at the seashore was spoilt by uncertain weather. Only two days of abiding sunshine; for the rest, mere fitful gleams across a sky heaped with storm-clouds. Over Wastdale hung a black canopy; from Scawfell came mutterings of thunder; and on the last night of the week—when Monica fled from her home in pelting rain—tempest broke upon the mountains and the sea. Wakeful until early morning, and at times watching the sky from her inland-looking window, Rhoda saw the rocky heights that frown upon Wastwater illumined by lightning-flare of such intensity and duration that miles of distance were annihilated, and it seemed but a step to those stern crags and precipices.

Sunday began with rain, but also with promise of better things; far over the sea was a broad expanse of blue, and before long the foam of the fallen tide glistened in strong, hopeful rays. Rhoda wandered about the shore towards St. Bees Head. A broad stream flowing into the sea stopped her progress before she had gone very far; the only way of crossing it was to go up on to the line of railway, which here runs along the edge of the sands. But she had little inclination to walk farther. No house, no person within sight, she sat down to gaze at the gulls fishing by the little river-mouth, their screams the only sound that blended with that of the subdued breakers.

On the horizon lay a long, low shape that might have

been mistaken for cloud, though it resembled land. It was the Isle of Man. In an hour or two the outline had grown much clearer; the heights and hollows were no longer doubtful. In the north became visible another remote and hilly tract; it was the coast of Scotland beyond Solway Firth.

These distant objects acted as incentives to Rhoda's imagination. She heard Everard Barfoot's voice as he talked of travel—of the Orient Express. That joy of freedom he had offered her. Perhaps he was now very near her, anxious to repeat his offer. If he carried out the project suggested at their last interview, she would see him to-day or to-morrow morning—then she must make her choice. To have a day's walk with him among the mountains would be practically deciding. But for what? If she rejected his proposal of a free union, was he prepared to marry her in legal form? Yes; she had enough power over him for that. But how would it affect his thought of her? Constraining him to legal marriage, would she not lower herself in his estimation, and make the endurance of his love less probable? Barfoot was not a man to accept with genuine satisfaction even the appearance of bondage, and more likely than not his love of her depended upon the belief that in her he had found a woman capable of regarding life from his own point of view—a woman who, when she once loved, would be scornful of the formalities clung to by feeble minds. He would yield to her if she demanded forms, but afterwards—when passion had subsided——

A week had been none too long to ponder these considerations by themselves; but they were complicated with doubts of a more disturbing nature. Her mind could not free itself from the thought of Monica. That Mrs. Widdowson was not always truthful with her husband she had absolute proof; whether that supported her fear of an intimacy between Monica and Everard she was unable to determine. The grounds of suspicion seemed to her very grave; so grave, that during her

first day or two in Cumberland she had all but renounced the hopes long secretly fostered. She knew herself well enough to understand how jealousy might wreck her life—even if it were only retrospective. If she married Barfoot (forms or none—that question in no way touched this other), she would demand of him a flawless faith. Her pride revolted against the thought of possessing only a share in his devotion; the moment that any faithlessness came to her knowledge she would leave him, perforce, inevitably—and what miseries were then before her!

Was flawless faith possible to Everard Barfoot? His cousin would ridicule the hope of any such thing—or so Rhoda believed. A conventional woman would of course see the completest evidence of his untrustworthiness in his dislike of legal marriage; but Rhoda knew the idleness of this argument. If love did not hold him, assuredly the forms of marriage could be no restraint upon Everard; married ten times over, he would still deem himself absolutely free from any obligation save that of love. Yet how did he think of that obligation? He might hold it perfectly compatible with the indulgence of casual impulse. And this (which she suspected to be the view of every man) Rhoda had no power of tolerating. It must be all or nothing, whole faith or none whatever.

* * * * *

In the afternoon she suffered from impatient expectancy. If Barfoot came to-day—she imagined him somewhere in the neighbourhood, approaching Seascale as the time of his appointment drew near—would he call at her lodgings? The address she had not given him, but doubtless he had obtained it from his cousin. Perhaps he would prefer to meet her unexpectedly—not a difficult thing in this little place, with its handful of residents and visitors. Certain it was she desired his arrival. Her heart leapt with joy in the thought that this very evening might bring him. She wished to study him under new conditions, and—possibly—to talk with

him even more frankly than ever yet, for there would be opportunity enough.

About six o'clock a train coming from the south stopped at the station, which was visible from Rhoda's sitting-room window. She had been waiting for this moment. She could not go to the station, and did not venture even to wait anywhere in sight of the exit. Whether any passenger had alighted must remain uncertain. If Everard had arrived by this train, doubtless he would go to the hotel, which stood only a few yards from the line. He would take a meal and presently come forth.

Having allowed half an hour to elapse, she dressed and walked shoreward. Seascale has no street, no shops; only two or three short rows of houses irregularly placed on the rising ground above the beach. To cross the intervening railway, Rhoda could either pass through the little station, in which case she would also pass the hotel and be observable from its chief windows, or descend by a longer road which led under a bridge, and in this way avoid the hotel altogether. She took the former route. On the sands were a few scattered people, and some children subdued to Sunday decorum. The tide was rising. She went down to the nearest tract of hard sand, and stood there for a long time, a soft western breeze playing upon her face.

If Barfoot were here he would now be coming out to look for her. From a distance he might not recognize her figure, clad as she was in a costume such as he had never seen her wearing. She might venture now to walk up towards the dry, white sandheaps, where the little convolvulus grew in abundance, and other flowers of which she neither knew nor cared to learn the names. Scarcely had she turned when she saw Everard approaching, still far off, but unmistakable. He signalled by taking off his hat, and quickly was beside her.

"Did you know me before I happened to look round?" she asked laughingly.

"Of course I did. Up there by the station I caught

sight of you. Who else bears herself as you do—with splendid disdain of common mortals?"

"Please don't make me think that my movements are ridiculous."

"They are superb. The sea has already touched your cheeks. But I am afraid you have had abominable weather."

"Yes, rather bad; but there's hope to-day. Where do you come from?"

"By train, only from Carnforth. I left London yesterday morning, and stopped at Morecambe—some people I know are there. As trains were awkward to-day, I drove from Morecambe to Carnforth. Did you expect me?"

"I thought you might come, as you spoke of it."

"How I have got through the week I couldn't tell you. I should have been here days ago, but I was afraid. Let us go nearer to the sea. I was afraid of making you angry."

"It's better to keep one's word."

"Of course it is. And I am all the more delighted to be with you for the miserable week of waiting. Have you bathed?"

"Once or twice."

"I had a swim this morning before breakfast, in pouring rain. Now *you* can't swim."

"No, I can't. But why were you sure about it?"

"Only because it's so rare for any girl to learn swimming. A man who can't swim is only half the man he might be, and to a woman I should think it must be of even more benefit. As in everything else, women are trammelled by their clothes; to be able to get rid of them, and to move about with free and brave exertion of all the body, must tend to every kind of health, physical, mental, and moral."

"Yes, I quite believe that," said Rhoda, gazing at the sea.

"I spoke rather exultantly, didn't I? I like to feel myself superior to you in some things. You have so

often pointed out to me what a paltry, ineffectual creature I am."

"I don't remember ever using those words, or implying them."

"How does the day stand with you?" asked Everard in the tone of perfect comradeship. "Have you still to dine?"

"My dining is a very simple matter; it happens at one o'clock. About nine I shall have supper."

"Let us walk a little then. And may I smoke?"

"Why not?"

Everard lit a cigar, and, as the tide drove them back, they moved eventually to the higher ground, whence there was a fine view of the mountains, rich in evening colours.

"To-morrow you leave here?"

"Yes," Rhoda answered. "I shall go by railway to Coniston, and walk from there towards Helvellyn, as you suggested."

"I have something else to propose. A man I talked to in the train told me of a fine walk in this neighbourhood. From Ravenglass, just below here, there's a little line runs up Eskdale to a terminus at the foot of Scawfell, a place called Boot. From Boot one can walk either over the top of Scawfell or by a lower track to Wastdale Head. It's very grand, wild country, especially the last part, the going down to Wastwater, and not many miles in all. Suppose we have that walk to-morrow? From Wastdale we could drive back to Seascale in the evening, and then the next day—just as you like."

"Are you quite sure about the distances?"

"Quite. I have the Ordnance map in my pocket. Let me show you."

He spread the map on the top of a wall, and they stood side by side inspecting it.

"We must take something to eat; I'll provide for that. And at the Wastdale Head hotel we can have dinner—about three or four, probably. It would be enjoyable, wouldn't it?"

"If it doesn't rain."

"We'll hope it won't. As we go back we can look out the trains at the station. No doubt there's one soon after breakfast."

Their rambling, with talk in a strain of easy friendliness, brought them back to Seascale half an hour after sunset, which was of a kind that seemed to promise well for the morrow.

"Won't you come out again after supper?" Barfoot asked.

"Not again to-night."

"For a quarter of an hour," he urged. "Just down to the sea and back."

"I have been walking all day. I shall be glad to rest and read."

"Very well. To-morrow morning."

Having discovered the train which would take them to Ravenglass, and connect with one on the Eskdale line, they agreed to meet at the station. Barfoot was to bring with him such refreshment as would be necessary.

Their hopes for the weather had complete fulfilment. The only fear was lest the sun's heat might be oppressive, but this anxiety could be cheerfully borne. Slung over his shoulders Barfoot had a small forage-bag, which gave him matter for talk on the railway journey; it had been his companion in many parts of the world, and had held strange kinds of food.

The journey up Eskdale, from Ravenglass to Boot, is by a miniature railway, with the oddest little engine and a carriage or two of primitive simplicity. At each station on the upward winding track—stations represented only by a wooden shed like a tool-house—the guard jumps down and acts as booking-clerk, if passengers there be desirous of booking. In a few miles the scenery changes from beauty to grandeur, and at the terminus no further steaming would be possible, for the great flank of Scawfell bars the way.

Everard and his companion began their climb through

the pretty straggling village of Boot. A mountain torrent roared by the wayside, and the course they had marked upon the map showed that they must follow this stream for some miles up to the tarn where it originated. Houses, human beings, and even trodden paths they soon left behind, coming out on to a vast moorland, with hill summits near and far. Scawfell they could not hope to ascend; with the walk that lay before them it was enough to make a way over one of his huge shoulders.

"If your strength fails," said Everard merrily, when for an hour they had been plodding through grey solitudes, "there is no human help. I should have to choose between carrying you back to Boot or on to Wastdale."

"My strength is not likely to fail sooner than yours," was the laughing reply.

"I have chicken sandwiches, and wine that maketh glad the heart of man. Tell me when hunger overcomes you. I should think we had better make our halt at Burmoor Tarn."

That, indeed, proved to be the convenient resting-place. A wild spot, a hollow amid the rolling expanse of moorland, its little lake of black water glistening under the midday sun. And here stood a shepherd's cottage, the only habitation they had seen since leaving Boot. Somewhat uncertain about the course to be henceforth followed, they made inquiry at this cottage, and a woman who appeared to be quite alone gave them the needful direction. Thus at ease in mind they crossed the bridge at the foot of the tarn, and just beyond it found a spot suitable for repose. Everard brought forth his sandwiches and his flask of wine, moreover a wine-glass, which was for Rhoda's use. They ate and drank festively.

"Now this is just what I have enjoyed in imagination for a year or more," said Barfoot, when the luncheon was over, and he lay propped upon his elbow, gazing at Rhoda's fine eyes and her sun-warmed cheeks. "An ideal realized, for once in one's life. A perfect moment."

"Don't you like the scent of burning peat from that cottage?"

"Yes. I like everything about us, in heaven and earth, and most of all I like your companionship, Rhoda."

She could not resent this first use of her Christian name; it was so natural, so inevitable; yet she moved her head as if with a slight annoyance.

"Is mine as agreeable to you?" he added, stroking the back of her hand with a spray of heather. "Or do you just tolerate me out of good-nature?"

"I have liked your companionship all the way from Seascale. Don't disturb my enjoyment of it for the rest of the way."

"That would be a misfortune indeed. The whole day shall be perfect. Not a note of discord. But I must have liberty to say what comes into my mind, and when you don't choose to answer I shall respect your silence."

"Wouldn't you like to smoke a cigar before we start again?"

"Yes. But I like still better not to. The scent of peat is pleasanter to you than that of tobacco."

"Oblige me by lighting the cigar."

"If you command——" He did her bidding. "The whole day shall be perfect. A delightful dinner at the inn, a drive to Seascale, an hour or two of rest, and then one more quiet talk by the sea at nightfall."

"All but the last. I shall be too tired."

"No. I must have that hour of talk by the sea. You are free to answer me or not, but your presence you must grant me. We are in an ideal world remember. We care nothing for all the sons and daughters of men. You and I will spend this one day together between cloudless heaven and silent earth—a memory for life-time. At nightfall you will come out again, and meet me down by the sea, where you stood when I first saw you yesterday."

Rhoda made no reply. She looked away from him at the black, deep water.

"What an opportunity," he went on, raising his hand to point at the cottage, "for saying the silliest of conceivable things!"

"What *might* that be, I wonder?"

"Why, that to dwell there together for the rest of our lives would be supreme felicity. You know the kind of man that would say that."

"Not personally, thank goodness!"

"A week—a month, even—with weather such as this. Nay, with a storm for variety; clouds from the top of Scawfell falling thick about us; a fierce wind shrieking across the tarn; sheets and torrents and floods of rain beating upon our roof; and you and I by the peat-fire. With a good supply of books, old and new, I can picture it for three months, for half a year!"

"Be on your guard. Remember 'that kind of man.'"

"I am in no danger. There is a vast difference between six months and all one's life. When the half-year was over we would leave England."

"By the Orient Express?"

They laughed together, Rhoda colouring, for the words that had escaped her meant too much for mere jest.

"By the Orient Express. We would have a house by the Bosphorus for the next half-year, and contrast our emotions with those we had known by Burmoor Tarn. Think what a rich year of life that would make! How much we should have learnt from nature and from each other!"

"And how dreadfully tired of each other we should be!"

Barfoot looked keenly at her. He could not with certainty read her countenance.

"You mean that?" he asked.

"You know it is true."

"Hush! The day is to be perfect. I won't admit that we could ever tire of each other with reasonable variety of circumstance. You to me are infinitely interesting, and I believe that I might become so to you."

He did not allow himself to vary from this tone of fanciful speculation, suited to the idle hour. Rhoda said very little; her remarks were generally a purposed interruption of Everard's theme. When the cigar was smoked out they rose and set forward again. This latter half of their walk proved the most interesting, for they were expectant of the view down upon Wastdale. A bold summit came in sight, dark, desolate, which they judged to be Great Gabel; and when they had pressed on eagerly for another mile, the valley opened beneath them with such striking suddenness that they stopped on the instant and glanced at each other in silence. From a noble height they looked down upon Wastwater, sternest and blackest of the lakes, on the fields and copses of the valley head with its winding stream, and the rugged gorges which lie beyond in mountain shadow.

The descent was by a path which in winter becomes the bed of a torrent, steep and stony, zigzagging through a thick wood. Here, and when they had reached the level road leading into the village, their talk was in the same natural, light-hearted strain as before they rested. So at the inn where they dined, and during their drive homewards—by the dark lake with its woods and precipices, out into the country of green hills, and thence through Gosforth on the long road descending seaward. Since their early departure scarcely a cloud had passed over the sun—a perfect day.

They alighted before reaching Seascale. Barfoot discharged his debt to the driver—who went on to bait at the hotel—and walked with Rhoda for the last quarter of a mile. This was his own idea; Rhoda made no remark, but approved his discretion.

"It is six o'clock," said Everard, after a short silence. "You remember our arrangement. At eight, down on the shore."

"I should be much more comfortable in the armchair with a book."

"Oh, you have had enough of books. It's time to live."

"It's time to rest."

"Are you so very tired? Poor girl! The day has been rather too much for you."

Rhoda laughed.

"I could walk back again to Wastwater if it were necessary."

"Of course; I knew that. You are magnificent. At eight o'clock then——"

Nothing more was said on the subject. When in sight of Rhoda's lodgings they parted without hand-shaking.

Before eight Everard was straying about the beach, watching the sun go down in splendour. He smiled to himself frequently. The hour had come for his last trial of Rhoda, and he felt some confidence as to the result. If her mettle endured his test, if she declared herself willing not only to abandon her avowed ideal of life, but to defy the world's opinion by becoming his wife without forms of mutual bondage—she was the woman he had imagined, and by her side he would go cheerfully on his way as a married man. Legally married; the proposal of free union was to be a test only. Loving her as he had never thought to love, there still remained with him so much of the temper in which he first wooed her that he could be satisfied with nothing short of unconditional surrender. Delighting in her independence of mind, he still desired to see her in complete subjugation to him, to inspire her with unreflecting passion. Tame consent to matrimony was an everyday experience. Agnes Brissenden, he felt sure, would marry him whenever he chose to ask her—and would make one of the best wives conceivable. But of Rhoda Nunn he expected and demanded more than this. She must rise far above the level of ordinary intelligent women. She must manifest an absolute confidence in him—that was the true significance of his present motives. The censures and suspicions which she had not scrupled to confess in plain words must linger in no corner of her mind.

His heart throbbed with impatience for her coming. Come she would; it was not in Rhoda's nature to play tricks; if she had not meant to meet him she would have said so resolutely, as last night.

At a few minutes past the hour he looked landward, and saw her figure against the golden sky. She came down from the sandbank very slowly, with careless, loitering steps. He moved but a little way to meet her, and then stood still. He had done his part; it was now hers to forego female privileges, to obey the constraint of love. The western afterglow touched her features, heightening the beauty Everard had learnt to see in them. Still she loitered, stooping to pick up a piece of seaweed; but still he kept his place, motionless, and she came nearer.

"Did you see the light of sunset on the mountains?"

"Yes," he replied.

"There has been no such evening since I came."

"And you wanted to sit at home with a book. That was no close for a perfect day."

"I found a letter from your cousin. She was with her friends the Goodalls yesterday."

"The Goodalls—I used to know them."

"Yes."

The word was uttered with significance. Everard understood the allusion, but did not care to show that he did.

"How does Mary get on without you?"

"There's no difficulty."

"Has she any one capable of taking your place?"

"Yes. Miss Vesper can do all that's necessary."

"Even to inspiring the girls with zeal for an independent life?"

"Perhaps even that."

They went along by the waves, in the warm-coloured twilight, until the houses of Seascale were hidden. Then Everard stopped.

"To-morrow we go to Coniston?" he said, smiling as he stood before her.

"You are going?"

"Do you think I can leave you?"

Rhoda's eyes fell. She held the long strip of seaweed with both hands and tightened it.

"Do you *wish* me to leave you?" he added.

"You mean that we are to go through the lakes together—as we have been to-day?"

"No. I don't mean that."

Rhoda took a few steps onward, so that he remained standing behind. Another moment and his arms had folded about her, his lips were on hers. She did not resist. His embrace grew stronger, and he pressed kiss after kiss upon her mouth. With exquisite delight he saw the deep crimson flush that transfigured her countenance; saw her look for one instant into his eyes, and was conscious of the triumphant gleam she met there.

"Do you remember my saying in the letter how I hungered to taste your lips? I don't know how I have refrained so long——"

"What is your love worth?" asked Rhoda, speaking with a great effort. She had dropped the seaweed, and one of her hands rested upon his shoulder, with a slight repelling pressure.

"Worth your whole life!" he answered, with a low, glad laugh.

"That is what I doubt. Convince me of that."

"Convince you? With more kisses? But what is *your* love worth?"

"Perhaps more than you yet understand. Perhaps more than you *can* understand."

"I will believe that, Rhoda. I know, at all events, that it is something of inestimable price. The knowledge has grown in me for a year and more."

"Let me stand away from you again. There is something more to be said before—— No, let me be quite apart from you."

He released her after one more kiss.

"Will you answer me a question with perfect truthfulness?"

Her voice was not quite steady, but she succeeded in looking at him with unflinching eyes.

"Yes, I will answer you *any* question."

"That is spoken like a man. Tell me then—is there at this moment any woman living who has a claim upon you—a moral claim?"

"No such woman exists."

"But—do we speak the same language?"

"Surely," he answered with great earnestness. "There is no woman to whom I am bound by any kind of obligation."

A long wave rolled up, broke, and retreated, whilst Rhoda stood in silent uncertainty.

"I must put the question in another way. During the past month—the past three months—have you made profession of love—have you even pretended love—to any woman?"

"To no woman whatever," he answered firmly.

"That satisfies me."

"If I knew what is in your mind!" exclaimed Everard, laughing. "What sort of life have you imagined for me? Is this the result of Mary's talk?"

"Not immediately."

"Still, she planted the suspicion. Believe me, you have been altogether mistaken. I never was the kind of man Mary thought me. Some day you shall understand more about it—in the meantime my word must be enough. I have no thought of love for any woman but you. Did I frighten you with those joking confessions in my letters? I wrote them purposely—as you must have seen. The mean, paltry jealousies of women such as one meets every day are so hateful to me. They argue such a lack of brains. If I were so unfortunate as to love a woman who looked sour when I praised a beautiful face, I would snap the bond between us like a bit of thread. But you are not one of those poor creatures."

He looked at her with some gravity.

"Should you think me a poor creature if I resented

any kind of unfaithfulness?—whether love, in any noble sense, had part in it or not?"

"No. That is the reasonable understanding between man and wife. If I exact fidelity from you, and certainly I should, I must consider myself under the same obligation."

"You say 'man and wife.' Do you say it with the ordinary meaning?"

"Not as it applies to us. You know what I mean when I ask you to be my wife. If we cannot trust each other without legal bonds, any union between us would be unjustified."

Suppressing the agitation which he felt, he awaited her answer. They could still read each other's faces perfectly in a pale yellow light from across the sea. Rhoda's manifested an intense conflict.

"After all, you doubt of your love for me?" said Barfoot quietly.

That was not her doubt. She loved with passion, allowing herself to indulge the luxurious emotion as never yet. She longed once more to feel his arms about her. But even thus she could consider the vast issues of the step to which she was urged. The temptation to yield was very strong, for it seemed to her an easier and a nobler thing to proclaim her emancipation from social statutes than to announce before her friends the simple news that she was about to marry. That announcement would excite something more than surprise. Mary Barfoot could not but smile with gentle irony; other women would laugh among themselves; the girls would feel a shock, as at the fall of one who had made heroic pretences. A sure way of averting this ridicule was by furnishing occasion for much graver astonishment. If it became known that she had taken a step such as few women would have dared to take—deliberately setting an example of new liberty—her position in the eyes of all who knew her remained one of proud independence. Rhoda's character was specially exposed to the temptation of such a motive. For months this argument had

been in her mind, again and again she decided that the sensational step was preferable to a commonplace renunciation of all she had so vehemently preached. And now that the moment of actual choice had come she felt able to dare everything—as far as the danger concerned herself; but she perceived more strongly than hitherto that not only her own future was involved. How would such practical heresy affect Everard's position?

She uttered this thought.

"Are you willing, for the sake of this idea, to abandon all society but that of the very few people who would approve or tolerate what you have done?"

"I look upon the thing in this way. We are not called upon to declare our principles wherever we go. If we regard each other as married, why, we *are* married. I am no Quixote, hoping to convert the world. It is between you and me—our own sense of what is reasonable and dignified."

"But you would not make it a mere deception?"

"Mary would of course be told, and any one else you like."

She believed him entirely serious. Another woman might have suspected that he was merely trying her courage, either to assure himself of her love or to gratify his vanity. But Rhoda's idealism enabled her to take him literally. She herself had for years maintained an exaggerated standard of duty and merit; desirous of seeing Everard in a nobler light than hitherto, she endeavoured to regard his scruple against formal wedlock as worthy of all respect.

"I can't answer you at once," she said, half turning away.

"You must. Here and at once."

The one word of assent would have satisfied him. This he obstinately required. He believed that it would confirm his love beyond any other satisfaction she could render him. He must be able to regard her as magnanimous, a woman who had proved herself worth living or

dying for. And he must have the joy of subduing her to his will.

"No," said Rhoda firmly. "I can't answer you to-night. I can't decide so suddenly."

This was disingenuous, and she felt humiliated by her subterfuge. Anything but a sudden decision was asked of her. Before leaving Chelsea she had foreseen this moment, and had made preparations for the possibility of never returning to Miss Barfoot's house—knowing the nature of the proposal that would be offered to her. But the practical resolve needed a greater effort than she had imagined. Above all, she feared an ignominious failure of purpose after her word was given; *that* would belittle her in Everard's eyes, and so shame her in her own that all hope of happiness in marriage must be at an end.

"You are still doubtful of me, Rhoda."

He took her hand, and again drew her close. But she refused her lips.

"Or are you doubtful of your own love?"

"No. If I understand what love means, I love you."

"Then give me the kiss I am waiting for. You have not kissed me yet."

"I can't—until I am sure of myself—of my readiness——"

Her broken words betrayed the passion with which she was struggling. Everard felt her tremble against his side.

"Give me your hand," he whispered. "The left hand."

Before she could guess his purpose he had slipped a ring upon her finger, a marriage ring. Rhoda started away from him, and at once drew off the perilous symbol.

"No—that proves to me I can't! What should we gain? You see, you dare not be quite consistent. It's only deceiving the people who don't know us."

"But I have explained to you. The consistency is in ourselves, our own minds——"

"Take it back. Custom is too strong for us. We

should only play at defying it. Take this back—or I shall drop it on the sand."

Profoundly mortified, Everard restored the gold circlet to its hiding-place and stood gazing at the dim horizon. Some moments passed, then he heard his name murmured. He did not look round.

"Everard, dearest——"

Was that Rhoda's voice, so low, tender, caressing? It thrilled him, and with a silent laugh of scorn at his own folly, he turned to her, every thought burnt up in passion.

"Will you kiss me?"

For answer she laid her hands on his shoulders and gazed at him. Barfoot understood. He smiled constrainedly, and said in a low voice,—

"You wish for that old, idle form—— ?"

"Not the religious form, which has no meaning for either of us. But——"

"You have been living here seven or eight days. Stay till the fifteenth, then we can get a licence from the registrar of the district. Does that please you?"

Her eyes made reply.

"Do you love me any the less, Everard?"

"Kiss me."

She did, and consciousness was lost for them as their mouths clung together and their hearts throbbed like one.

"Isn't it better?" Rhoda asked, as they walked back in the darkness. "Won't it make our life so much simpler and happier?"

"Perhaps."

"You know it will." She laughed joyously, trying to meet his look.

"Perhaps you are right."

"I shall let no one hear of it until—— Then let us go abroad."

"You dare not face Mary?"

"I dare, if you wish it. Of course she will laugh at me. They will all laugh at me."

"Why, you may laugh as well."

"But you have spoilt my life, you know. Such a grand life it might have been. Why did you come and interfere with me? And you have been so terribly obstinate."

"Of course; that's my nature. But after all I have been weak."

"Yielding in one point that didn't matter to you at all? It was the only way of making me sure that you loved me."

Barfoot laughed slightingly.

"And what if I needed the other proof that you loved *me?*"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE UNIDEAL TESTED.

AND neither was content.

Barfoot, over his cigar and glass of whisky at the hotel, fell into a mood of chagrin. The woman he loved would be his, and there was matter enough for ardent imagination in the indulgence of that thought; but his temper disturbed him. After all, he had not triumphed. As usual the woman had her way. She played upon his senses, and made him her obedient slave. To prolong the conflict would have availed nothing; Rhoda, doubtless, was in part actuated by the desire to conquer, and she knew her power over him. So it was a mere repetition of the old story—a marriage like any other. And how would it result?

She had great qualities; but was there not much in her that he must subdue, reform, if they were really to spend their lives together? Her energy of domination perhaps excelled his. Such a woman might be unable to concede him the liberty in marriage which theoretically she granted to be just. Perhaps she would torment him with restless jealousies, suspecting on every trivial occasion an infringement of her right. From that point of view it would have been far wiser to persist in rejecting legal marriage, that her dependence upon him might be more complete. Later, if all went well, the concession could have been made—if, for instance, she became a mother. But then returned the exasperating

thought that Rhoda had overcome his will. Was not that a beginning of evil augury?

To be sure, after marriage their relations would be different. He would not then be at the mercy of his senses. But how miserable to anticipate a long, perhaps bitter, struggle for predominance. After all, that could hardly come about. The commencement of any such discord would be the signal for separation. His wealth assured his freedom. He was not like the poor devils who must perforce live with an intolerable woman because they cannot support themselves and their families in different places. Need he entertain that worst of fears—the dread that his independence might fail him, subdued by his wife's will?

Free as he boasted himself from lover's silliness, he had magnified Rhoda's image. She was not the glorious rebel he had pictured. Like any other woman, she mistrusted her love without the sanction of society. Well, that was something relinquished, lost. Marriage would after all be a compromise. He had not found his ideal—though in these days it assuredly existed.

* * * * *

And Rhoda, sitting late in the little lodging-house parlour, visited her soul with questionings no less troublesome. Everard was not satisfied with her. He had yielded, perhaps more than half contemptuously, to what he thought a feminine weakness. In going with her to the registrar's office he would feel himself to be acting an ignoble part. Was it not a bad beginning to rule him against his conscience?

She had triumphed splendidly. In the world's eye this marriage of hers was far better than any she could reasonably have hoped, and her heart approved it with rapture. At a stage in life when she had sternly reconciled herself never to know a man's love, this love had sought her with passionate persistency of which even a beautiful young girl might feel proud. She had no beauty; she was loved for her mind, her very self. But must not Everard's conception of her have suffered?

In winning her had he obtained the woman of his desire?

Why was she not more politic? Would it not have been possible to gratify him, and yet to gain his consent to legal marriage? By first of all complying she would have seemed to confirm all he believed of her; and then, his ardour at height, how simple to point out to him—without entreaty, without show of much concern—that by neglecting formalities they gained absolutely nothing. Artifice of that kind was perhaps demanded by the mere circumstances. Possibly he himself would have welcomed it—after the grateful sense of inspiring such complete devotion. It is the woman's part to exercise tact; she had proved herself lamentably deficient in that quality.

To-morrow she must study his manner. If she discerned any serious change, any grave indication of disappointment——

What was her life to be? At first they would travel together; but before long it might be necessary to have a settled home, and what then would be her social position, her duties and pleasures? Housekeeping, mere domesticities, could never occupy her for more than the smallest possible part of each day. Having lost one purpose in life, dignified, absorbing, likely to extend its sphere as time went on, what other could she hope to substitute for it?

Love of husband—perhaps of child. There must be more than that. Rhoda did not deceive herself as to the requirements of her nature. Practical activity in some intellectual undertaking; a share—nay, leadership—in some "movement;" contact with the revolutionary life of her time—the impulses of her heart once satisfied, these things would again claim her. But how if Everard resisted such tendencies? Was he in truth capable of respecting her individuality? Or would his strong instinct of lordship urge him to direct his wife as a dependent, to impose upon her his own view of things? She doubted whether he had much genuine sympathy