She and I - Volume 1

by John Conroy Hutcheson

CHAPTER ONE.

AT FIRST SIGHT.

"I muse, as in a trance, when e'er The languors of thy love-deep eyes Float on me. I would I were So tranced, so wrapt in ecstasies, To stand apart, and to adore, Gazing on thee for evermore!"

I saw her first in church.

Do you happen to know a quaint, dreamy old region in the west of London, which bricks and mortar have not, as yet, overtaken, nor newfangled villas vulgarised?

A region of innumerable market gardens that are principally laid out in long, narrow beds, lost into nothingness as they dwindle down in the dim vista of perspective, and which are planted with curly endive, piquante- looking lettuces, and early cabbages; squat rows of gooseberry bushes and currant trees, with a rose set here and there in between; and sweet- smelling, besides, of hidden violets and honeysuckles, and the pink and white hawthorn of the hedges in May:--

A region of country lanes, ever winding and seemingly never ending, leading down to and past and from the whilom silent, whilom bustling river, that never heeds their tortuous intricacies, but hurries by on its way through the busy city towards the sea below; lanes wherein are to be occasionally met with curious old stone houses, of almost historical antecedents and dreamy as the region in which they lie, scattered about in the queerest situations without plan or precedent, on which the casual pedestrian comes when he least expects:--

Do you know this quaint old region, this fleeting oasis in the Sahara of the building-mad suburban metropolis? I do, well; its market gardens, its circumambient lanes, its old, antiquarian stone houses, and all!

Many a time have I wandered through them; many a time watched the heavy waggons as they went creaking on their way to town and the great emporium at Covent Garden, groaning beneath the wealth and weight of the vegetable produce they carried, and laden so high with cunningly- arranged nests of baskets on baskets, that one believed each moment that they would topple over, and held the breath for fear of hastening their fall; many a time sought to trace each curving lane to its probable goal, or tried to hunt out the hidden histories which lay concealed within the crumbling walls of the old dwellings on which I might happen to light in my walks.

But my favourite ramble, eclipsing all others now in pleasant recollections of by-gone days, was through the Prebend's Walk, bordered with its noble grove of stately lime trees and oaks and elms on either hand; and passing by open fields, that are, in spring, rich with yellow buttercups and star-spangled daisies, and, in summer, ripe with the aromatic odours of new-mown hay.

The Prebend's Walk, beyond where the lime-grove ends, whence the prebend's residence can be faintly distinguished through the clustering masses of tree-foliage, merges into the open, commanding the river in front; but it is still marked out by a stray elm or horse-chestnut, placed at scanty intervals, to keep up the idea of the ancient avenue beyond.

Here, turning to the right and crossing a piece of unkempt land, half copse, half meadow, the scene again changed.

You came to a stile. That surmounted and left behind, a narrow by-path led you through its twisting turns until you reached a tiny, rustic stone bridge--such a tiny, little bridge! This was over the sluice and aqueduct from the adjacent river, which supplied the fosse that in olden times surrounded the prebend's residence, when there were such things as sieges and besiegements in this fair land of ours.

The prebend's residence was then a castle, protected, probably, by battlements and mantlets and turreted walls, and with its keep and its drawbridge, its postern and its fosse--simple works of defence that were armed for retaliation, with catapult and mangonel, the canon raye of the period, besides arquebuse and other hand weapons wielded, no doubt, by mighty men at arms, mail-clad and helmeted, who knew how to give and take with the best of them; now, it was but a peaceful priest's dwelling, inhabited by as true a clergyman and gentleman as ever lived, although it was still a fine old house.

As for the fosse, it sank long ages ago to the level and capacity of a common ditch, and was almost hidden from view by the overhanging boughs and branches of the park trees on the opposite side, and the half- decayed trunks of former monarchs of the forest that filled its bed--a ditch covered with a superstratum of slimy, green water, lank weeds, and rank vegetation; and wherein, at flood time, urchin anglers could fish for eels and sticklebats, and, at ebb, the village ducks disport themselves and mudlarks play.

Along this fosse, the path continued. Further on, it widened into a broader way, which led you direct to the churchyard of Saint Canon's. So studded is it with weatherworn tombstones, inclining at all angles like so many miniature leaning towers of Pisa, ivy-wreathed obelisks and quaintly-fashioned, railed-in monuments, that you can scarcely make out the lower buttresses of the ancient church that stands up from amongst their midst.

With its whitish-grey walls, time-stained and rain-eaten, its severe-looking, square Norman tower, and its generally-formal style of architecture, that edifice does not present a very imposing appearance from without; but, within, the case is different.

Lofty, pointed, stained-glass windows light it. The chancel bears the stamp of the Restoration. Oaken beams; carved galleries, curiously contrived to fit into every available space; high, upright box pews--of the sort instituted, in the reign of Anne, by the renowned Bishop Burnett to restrain the roving eyes of the congregation and make gallants better attend to their devotions; all these, in addition to the

memorial slabs and tablets, and weeping angels over cinereal urns, tend to give the church that air of ugliness and comfort which the modern churchman detests.

Dear old church!

I love its old walls, its old chancel, its old pews, its form of worship, and all; for it was there that I first saw her,--my own, my darling!

O, Min, Min! can I ever forget that time?

Can I!

One Sunday--it is not so long ago that my hair is grey, nor so recently as to prevent my having a story to tell--I was in Saint Canon's church, sitting in one of its old, square box pews, where one was, as it were, shut up in a small, private house, away from all connection with the outer world; for you could not see anything when the door was closed, with the exception of the roof overhead, and, mayhap, the walls around. I was listening to the varied fugue introitus that the organist was playing from the gallery beyond the pulpit,--playing with the full wind power of the venerable reed instrument he skilfully manipulated, having all the stops out,--diapasons, trumpet, vox humana, and the rest. The music was from Handel, a composer of whom the maestro was especially fond; so fond, indeed, that any of the congregation who might have the like musical proclivities need seldom fear disappointment. They could reckon upon hearing the Hallelujah Chorus at least once a fortnight, and the lesser morceaux of *Israel in Egypt* at intervals in between.

Presently, just before the vicar and curate made their customary processional entry, ere the service began, two ladies were ushered into the large pew which I occupied alone in solitary state. There was room enough, in all conscience. It could have accommodated a round dozen, and that without any squeezing.

Both the ladies were dressed in half-mourning, which attracted my attention and made me observe them more closely than I might

otherwise have done. My mind was soon engaged wondering, as one is apt to do-- when in church, more particularly--who and what they were. One, I saw, was middle-aged: the other had not, probably, as yet reached her eighteenth year; and what a charming face she had,--what an expression!

I could not take my eyes off her.

How shall I describe her? I had ample opportunity of taking a study, as she faced me on the opposite side of the pew, seated beside the other and elder lady, who, I could see at a glance, was her mother, from the striking likeness between them--although, there was a wonderful difference the while.

Have you never observed the slight, yet unmistakable traits of family resemblance, and the various points in which they are displayed? They may sometimes be only traceable in a single feature, a smile, a look, or in some peculiar mannerism of speech, or action, or even thought; but there they are; and, however indistinct they may be, however faint on casual inspection, a practised eye can seldom fail to perceive them and distinguish the relationship betwixt father and son, or mother and daughter:--the kinship of brothers and sisters is not so evident to strangers. In the present case no one could doubt: the younger lady must certainly be the daughter of the other.

But, what was she like, you ask?

Well, she was not beautiful. She was not even what empty-headed people, unaware of the real signification of the term, call "pretty." She was interesting--will that word suit?

No. The description would not give you the least idea of what her face really was like--much less of her expression, in which consisted its great charm.

Shall I endeavour to picture her to you as I saw her for that first time in church, before Love's busy fingers had woven a halo of romance around her, only allowing me to behold her through a sort of fairy

glamour; and making me forget everything concerning her, save that she was "Min," and that I loved her, and that she was the darling of my heart?

I will.

Her figure seemed to me then a trifle below the middle height, but so well-proportioned that one could not easily tell, unless standing beside her, whether she was actually short or tall. Her features were Grecian in outline, as regarded the upper portion of her face, and irregular below; with such a delightful little dimple in her curving chin, and full, pouting lips. Her eyes, calm, steady, quiet, loving, grey eyes,-- eyes symbolical of faith and constancy, and unswerving fidelity of purpose: eyes that looked like tranquil depths through which you could see the soul-light reflected from below; and which only wanted the stirring power of some great motive or passion to illumine them with a myriad irradiating gems.

But,--pshaw! How can I describe her? It is sacrilege thus to weigh and consider the points and merits of one we love. Besides, even the most perfect and faultlessly-beautiful face in the world would be unable to stand the test of minute examination in detail. As Thomson sings, to put his poetry into prose, how can you "from the diamond single out each ray, when all, though trembling with ten thousand hues, effuse one dazzling undivided light?"

It is impossible. No words of mine could put before you what her face really was like, as it appeared to me then and afterwards when I had learnt to watch and decipher every versatile look and expression it wore. Sometimes, when in repose, it reminded me of one of Raphael's angels. At other times, when moved by mirth and with arch glances dancing in the deep, grey eyes,--and they could make merry when they willed,--it was a witching, teasing, provoking little face. Or, again, if changed by grief,--under which aspect, thank God! I seldom saw it,-- a noble, resolute face, bearing that indescribable look of calm, set, high resolve, which the face of the heart-broken daughter of Lear, or the deep-suffering mother of the Gracchi might have borne. You may say, perhaps, that this is rhapsody; but what is love without rhapsody?--

what, a love story?

I determined at first, before I had studied it more attentively, that her face lacked expression; but I made a grievous error. I quickly altered my opinion on seeing it in profile and upturned; for I marked the embodiment of devotion it betrayed during the service, when her voice was raised in the praise of her Maker. She looked now exactly like the picture of Saint Cecilia; and her appearance recalled to my mind what one of the American essayists, I forget who it is, observes quaintly somewhere, that it is no wonder that Catholics pay their vows to the queen of heaven, for "the unpoetical side of Protestantism is, that it has no woman to be worshipped."

Of course I had fallen in love with her,--love at first sight; and, although you may not credit the assertion, allow me to put you right upon the point and inform you that such a thing is not only possible, but much more probable, and of more frequent occurrence than a good many people imagine or believe. Love is sometimes the growth of degrees: it may also bound into existence in a moment; for there is a certain sympathetic attraction between some persons, as there is between others an antipathetical, repulsive force. Understand, passion is not here alluded to. That is, of the senses. What I mean is, the essence or spirit of love, as pure as that which may subsist amongst the angels above.

I felt such love growing within me, as I looked at her, with her downcast eyes bent over her Bible, or as she sat, with head upraised and attentive ear, drinking in the words of spiritual wisdom addressed us by our good old pastor, of which at the time *I* took but little heed. She did not seem at all conscious that she was being observed; although she doubtless knew that I was looking at her, in that instinctive way common to her sex, in which they manage to take cognisance of everything going on around them, without so much as raising an eyelid. Indeed, she told me afterwards that she had been well aware of my watch, and added that she thought me "very rude, too;" but, just now, she took no notice of my looks and longings, as far as I could see.

It was not until the close of the service, and when she and her mother

were leaving the pew, that I obtained a glance, a look, which dwelt in my memory for days and days. She had brought with her into church a tiny spray of mignonette, and this she left behind her on the seat close to where she had been sitting. I perceived it, and taking it up, made as if to restore it to its lawful owner.

A half smile faintly played across her slightly parted lips, as she looked at me for an instant, an amused sparkle in her clear, grey eyes, and then turned away with a polite inclination and shake of her little head, in refusal of the mignonette, which I have kept ever since. But that smile!

Her whole face lit up, gaining just the colour and expression which it appeared to lack. My fate was sealed; and, as the organ pealed forth the grand prayer from *Mose in Egitto* for the exodus of the congregation, and I slowly paced down the aisle after my enchantress, my soul expanded into a very heaven of adoration and love!

CHAPTER TWO.

EXPECTATION.

"With what a leaden and retarding weight, Does expectation load the wing of time!"

When, after a few minutes, I got outside the church, she had disappeared, although I had endeavoured to follow as close as I could on her footsteps, without, of course, appearing to be intrusively watching her.

I had managed too cleverly. She was gone. I had been so long, to my great vexation, painfully pacing after the slowly-moving, out-shuffling mass of ex-worshippers--dexterously essaying the while to avoid treading on the trailing trains of the ladies, or incurring the anathemas, "not loud, but deep," of gouty old gentlemen with tender feet, which they *would* put in one's way--that, on my succeeding at length in arriving at the outer porch, and being enabled to don my hat once more, there was not a single trace of either her mother or herself to be seen anywhere in sight.

Here was a disappointment! While getting-out, I had made up my mind to track them home, and find out where they lived; and now, they might be beyond my ken for ever.

I had noted them both so keenly, as to their appearance and the manner in which each was dressed, for, in spite of mother and daughter being alike "in mourning," there were still distinctive features in their toilets, that I could not have failed to distinguish them from the rest of the congregation.

But now, my plans were entirely overthrown. What should I do in the emergency? Stop, there was Horner; I would ask him if he had seen them. There, dressed a merveille and with his inseparable eye-glass stuck askew in the corner of his left eye, he stood listlessly criticising the people as they came forth from prayer, in his usual impertinently-inoffensive way. He was just as likely as not to have seen them, and could naturally give me the information I sought about the direction in which they had gone.

"Jack Horner," as he was familiarly styled by those having the honour of his acquaintance, was a clerk in Downing Street languishing on a hundred-and-fifty pounds per annum, which paltry income he received from an ungrateful country in consideration of his valuable services on behalf of the state. How he contrived merely to dress himself and follow the ever-changing fashions on that sum, paid quarterly though it was, appeared a puzzle to many; but he did, and well, too. It was currently believed, besides, by his congeners, that he never got into debt, happy fellow that he was! notwithstanding that, in addition to his hopes of promotion at "the office," he had considerable "expectations" from a bachelor uncle, reported to be enormously wealthy and with no near kindred to leave his money to save our friend Horner, who cultivated him accordingly.

No, Horner never got into debt. He was said to be in the habit of promptly discharging all his tailor's claims punctually every year, as the gay and festive season of Christmas--and bills!--came round.

Truth to say, however, there need not have been any great astonishment

concerning Horner in this respect. The surprise would have been that he had *not* discharged his just obligations to his tailor and others; for his habits were regular, and he was guiltless of the faintest soupcon of extravagance. He never played billiards, did not smoke, did not care about "little dinners" at Richmond or elsewhere, never betted, never went to the Derby, seldom, if ever, patronised the theatre, unless admitted through the medium of orders; consequently, he had no expenditure, with the exception of that required for his toilet, as he eschewed all those many and various ways mentioned for running through money, which more excitable but less conscientious mortals than himself find thrown in their way.

His neatly-clad form and constant eye-glass were in great request at all tea-parties and carpet dances that took place in the social circle to which he belonged; but, beyond such slight beguilements of "life's dull weary round," his existence was uneventful. His character altogether might be said to have been a negative one, as the only speciality for which he was particularly distinguished was for the variety of intonation and meaning which he could give to his two favourite exclamations, "Yaas," and "Bai-ey Je-ove!"--thus economising his conversational powers to a considerable extent, which was a great advantage for him--and others, too, as he might, you know, have had little more to say.

Horner's principal amusement when at home on a Sunday, was to go to church; that is, if he had not to go to town, which was sometimes the case even on the great day of rest, through his diplomatic skill being required in Downing Street. This was what he said, pleading his having to adjust some nice and knotty point of difference between the valiant King of Congo and the neighbouring and pugnacious Ja Ja, or else to remonstrate, in firm and equable language, as Officialdom knows so well how to do, against the repeated unjustifiable homicides of the despot of Dahomey, in sacrifice to his gods, beneath the sheltering shade of the tum-tum tree.

Well, what of that--you may pertinently remark--a most praiseworthy proceeding, surely, on his part to go to church whenever he possibly

could? Granted; but then, Horner was prone to indulge in another practice which might not be held quite so praiseworthy in some people's view.

Quite contrary to his abnormal mode of progression, he would hasten out of the sacred edifice immediately after the doxology; and, planting himself easily and gracefully in a studied attitude some short distance from the doors, would from that commanding position proceed to stare at and minutely observe the congregation, collectively and severally, as they came tripping forth from the porch after him. This was, really, very indefensible; and yet, I do not think that Horner meant to commit any deliberate wrong in so doing.

Be the motive what it may, such was his general habit.

He would always courteously acknowledge the passing salutations of men- folk with an almost imperceptible nod, so as not to disarrange the careful adjustment of his eye-glass, or disturb the poise of his beaver: to ladies, on the contrary, he was all "effusion," as the French say, dashing off his hat as if he metaphorically flung it at their feet for a gage d'amour, not of battle--just like an Ethiopian minstrel striking the gay tambourine on his knee in a sudden flight of enthusiasm. All in all, Horner was essentially a ladies' man, his points lying in that way; and, although what is popularly known as "harmless," he was not by any means a bad sort of fellow on the whole, when judged by the more exacting masculine standard, being very good-natured and obliging, like most of us, when you did not put him out of his way or expect too much from him.

To me at this crisis of my fate, he appeared for the nonce an angel in human form. He would be just the person who could tell me in what direction my unknown enchantress went. I would ask him.

Fiat.

"Hullo, Horner!" I said, tapping him at once on the shoulder, and arresting him from the abstracted contemplation of two stylish girls in pink, who were just turning the corner of the churchyard out of sight.

"Yaas, 'do?" he replied, moving his head round slowly, as if it worked on a pivot which, wanted greasing, so as to confront me. He was as mild and imperturbable as usual. An earthquake, I believe, would not have quickened his movements.

"How d'ye do?" responded I to his mono-syllabical greeting. "I say, old fellow," I continued, "did you chance to see which way two ladies went who came out a minute or so before myself? One was middle-aged, or thereabouts; the other young; both were dressed in half-mourning. They looked strangers to the parish, I think: you must have seen them, I'm sure, eh?"

"Bai-ey Je-ove! Two middle-aged ladies; one dwessed in hawf-mawning?--"

"Nonsense, Horner!" said I, interrupting him; "what a mess you are making of it! I said *one* lady was middle-aged; and *both* dressed in half-mourning."

"Weally, now? No, Lorton, 'pon honah; didn't see 'em, I asshaw you. Was it Baby Blake and her moth-ah, now, ah?" and he smiled complacently, as if he had given me a fund of information.

"Baby Blake!" I ejaculated in disgust--"why, Horner, you're quite absurd. Do you take me for a fool? I think I ought to know Baby Blake as well as yourself by this time, my Solon!"

"Yaas; but, my deah fellah, I don't know who you know, you know. Bai-ey Je-ove! there's *Lizzie* Dangler. Who's that man she's got in tow, ah?"

"Hang Lizzie Dangler!" I exclaimed, impatiently. "Can't you answer a question for once in your life--did you see them, or not?"

"Weally, Lorton," said he, in quite an imploring way, "you needn't get angwy with a fellah, because he can't tell you what you want to know, you know! It's weally too hot for that sawt of thing. I didn't see them, I tell you. I can't say mo-ah than that, can I? You mustn't expect a fellah

to see evwybody. Why, it's seem-plee impawsible!"

His languid drawl exasperated me.

"Oh, bother!" I muttered, sotto voce, but loud enough for him to hear; and turned away from him angrily, leaving him still standing in his pet attitude, taking mental stock of all the fast-looking fair ones who might come under his notice. "Oh, bother?" I am not prepared to assert positively that I did not use a much stronger expletive. He *ought* to have seen them! What the deuce was the use of his sticking star-gazing there, unless to observe people, I should like to know?

Just fancy, too, his comparing my last madonna, the image and eidolon of whose witching face filled my heart, to that odious little flirt, Baby Blake, a young damsel that hawked her tender affections about at the beck and call of every male biped who might for the moment be enthralled by her charms! It was like his cool impudence. And then, again, his asking me his stupid, inane questions, as if I cared what man, and how many. Lizzie Dangler or any other girl might have "in tow," as he called it. Idiot! I declare to you I positively hated Horner at that moment, inoffensive and harmless as he was.

I left the precincts of the church; and, walking along the path by the fosse, directed my steps towards the Prebend's Walk, hoping to light upon the object of my quest.

The air was filled with the fragrance of wild flowers and the smell of the new-mown hay from the adjacent meadows. One heard the buzzing sound of busy insect life around, and the love-calls of song-birds from the hedge-rows; while the grateful shade of the lime-grove seemed to invite repose and suggest peaceful meditation: but I heeded none of these things. I felt, like the singer of "The Banks and Braes of Bonny Doon," out of harmony with nature and all its surroundings. My thoughts were jostling one another in a wild dance through my breast. Where on earth could they have disappeared so very suddenly! It was quite inexplicable. I must find them. Himmel! I must see *her* again. I felt in a perfect state of frenzy. So excited was I, that, although it was a broiling hot day in July, I walked along as if I were walking for a wager.

I do not think, by the way, that a very learned and distinguished philosopher was so very much out in his reckoning after all, when he laid down the general dogma, that all men are more or less mad. I know, at all events, that I felt mad enough at this moment, as I was careering along the Prebend's Walk. I was almost nerved up to desperation.

I was an only child; and my parents being both elderly people, rarely mixing in society, I could not make use of home influence, as I might have done if I had had any kind sister to assist me in the way that kind sisters sometimes can assist their brothers when they fall victims to the tender passion. Whom should I ask to help me in my strait? I could not go round everywhere, asking everybody after two ladies dressed in half-mourning, could I? Not exactly. People might take me for a maniac at large; and, even should I be one, still, I would naturally wish to keep my mental derangement to myself. What could I do?

While I was thus perplexing myself with vain imaginings, the recollection of the Dashers occurred to my mind. How was it that I had not thought of them before, when they were the very people for my purpose? Why, not a soul could come into Saint Canon's parish without their knowledge, and a fresh face in church would set them at once on the qui vive. The Dashers, of course, must have seen my unknown ladies, and would be able to give me more information concerning them than I could expect from any one else. I had often heard three to one betted, with no "takers," that they would tell you everything about any particular person, his, or her, antecedents, prospects, and position, who had but remained for ten consecutive minutes within a radius of one mile of their house. To the Dashers I would consequently go, by all means--thank Providence for the suggestion, and their existence!

Lady Dasher, the head of this all-wise circle, was the youngest daughter of a deceased Irish peer, whom she was continually bringing on the carpet, and causing--unhappy ghost that he was--to retrace his weary way from wherever the spirits of defunct Hibernian nobles most do congregate.

She did not do this through family pride, or with any boastful intention, but simply from sheer morbidity. She was always scoring down

grievances in the present by looking back on the past. With her, it was all repining and retrospect. When her poor father, the earl, was alive, she was never slighted in this way. Had her dear papa but now existed, Mistress So-and-So would have returned her call, and not insulted her by her palpable neglect. It was very Christian-like and charitable to say otherwise; but *she* knew better: it was on account of her being poor, and living in a small house. Oh, yes! she was very well aware of *that*; yet, although she could not keep up a grand establishment and was poor, she was proud, and would never forget that she was an earl's daughter. She would not be ground down with impunity! Even the worm will turn: and so on. You can understand her character almost without another word of description.

In spite of being a kindly-hearted soul at bottom, she was really, I believe, the most morbid and melancholic person that ever breathed,--at least, in my experience. Should you, unfortunately, be forced to remain for any length of time in her presence, she had a most singularly depressing influence on your spirits. Wet blanket? Bless your heart! that would be no name for her. She was a patent shower-bath, coming down on all your cherished sentiments, hopes, and schemes, with a "whish" of heavy extinguishment. The cheeriest, sprightliest mortal in the world could not have continued gay in her society. Mark Tapley would have met his match in her, I'm certain.

Next to the demise of her lamented parent--which was indeed an after consideration--Lady Dasher's marriage was the source and well-spring of all her woes. She had espoused, as soon as she had a will of her own, a handsome young gin distiller, who "ran" a large manufactory in Essex. People said it was entirely a love match; but, whether that was the case or no, all *I* know is, that on changing the honoured name of Planetree--the first Earl had been boot-black to the conquering Cromwell in Ireland--for the base-born patronymic Dasher, all her troubles began. Her noble relatives cut her dead in the first instance, as Dasher, aspiring though he was, aspired a trifle too high. The connection was never acknowledged; and his papa-in-law, utterly ignoring his entity, never gave him the honour of an invitation to Ballybrogue Castle, the ancestral seat of the Planetrees in Tipperary.

This was not the worst of it, either. Dasher, forgetting that simplicity of his forefathers which had promoted his fortunes, learnt on his marriage to launch out into unheard-of extravagances, spending his hardly-gained substance in riotous living. He kept open house in town and country, getting laughed at, en parenthese, by the toadies who spunged upon him; failed; got into "the Gazette;" and?--died of a broken heart. Poor Dasher!

On the death of her other half--it is problematical which half he was, whether better or worse--Lady Dasher found herself left with a couple of daughters and a few thousands, which her husband had taken care to settle on her so as to be beyond the reach of his creditors. The provision was ample to have enabled her to live in comfort, if she had practised the slightest economy; but, never having learnt that species of common sense, called "savoir faire," which is useful in every-day life, Lady Dasher soon outran the constable. She then had to appeal to her father, Earl Planetree, who, now that poor Dasher disgraced the family escutcheon no longer by living, acknowledged her once more, relieving her necessities; and when he, too, died, he bequeathed her a fair income, on which, by dint of hard struggling, she contrived to support existence and repine at her bitter lot.

She was in the habit of telling people--who, between ourselves, were hopelessly ignorant that such a person as the late earl had ever breathed, and cared less, probably, about the fact--that had her poor papa been yet alive, things would have been "very different with her;" an assertion of questionable accuracy.

There are some persons in this world who can never by any possibility take a rose-coloured view of life. No matter what vivid touches the great painter puts in on the canvas of their every-day being, they always remain mentally colour-blind, and perceive but one monotonous neutral tint--as they will continue to do until the end, when, perchance, their proper sight may be restored.

Lady Dasher was one of these. She persisted in taking a despondent view of everything around her--her past, her future, her position, her prospects; nay, even the circumstances and surroundings of her friends

and few intimates came to be regarded in the same unsatisfactory light. She was unacquainted with the healthy tone of wisdom contained in the old quatrain,--

"That man, I trow, is doubly blest, Who of the worst can make the best; And he, I'm sure, is doubly curst, Who of the best doth make the worst!"

Morbid and melancholic had been her disposition at the commencement of the chapter:--morbid and melancholic she would naturally remain to its close.

With all her morbidity, however, she took a wonderful, albeit lachrymose, interest in the temporal matters of the parish; and was acquainted with most of the contemporary facts and incidents with which her neighbours were mixed up, being mostly indebted for her information, as she seldom went out herself, to her daughters Bessie and Seraphine-- the latter commonly known amongst audacious young men as "the Seraph," on account of her petite figure, her blue eyes, and her musical voice, the latter having just a suspicion of Irish brogue and blarney about it.

They were nice lively girls and much liked, as they were quite a contrast to their mother. Indeed, it was surprising, considering her disposition and their bringing up, that they were what they were. Had it not been for them, Lady Dasher's existence would have been considerably more monotonous and dreary than it was; but, thanks to their assistance, she was kept thoroughly "posted up" in all the social life going on in her midst, in which, through her own lache, she was unable to take part.

Bessie and Seraphine did not attend parties, although sprightly, taking girls like themselves would have been welcomed in almost any circle. The fact was, people would have been glad enough to invite them, had their mother not been jealous of any attention paid to her daughters that was not extended to herself; and, hospitable as their friends might be, it was but reasonable that a monument of grief and picture of woe unutterable should not be earnestly sought after for the centre-piece of a

social gathering. It was owing to the same reason, also, that neither of the girls had yet got married; for Lady Dasher would certainly have expected any matrimonial proposal to have been made to herself in the first instance, when, after declining the honour, she could have passed the handkerchief to her daughters. Besides, the mere dread of having the infliction of such a mother-in-law would have sufficed to frighten off the most ardent wooer or rabid aspirant for connubial felicity.

Notwithstanding this, the girls went about to some extent in their own ways; and, on their return home, naturally gossiped with their mother over all they had seen and heard abroad. Thus it was that Lady Dasher was so well-informed in all local matters, and why I thought of appealing to her aid. But I should have to manage cautiously. She would think nothing--she was such a simple-minded body--of detailing all your inquiries to the very subject of them, in a fit of unguarded confidence. Cross-examining her was a most diplomatic proceeding. If you went the right way about it, you could get anything out of her without committing yourself in the slightest way; whereas, if you set to work wrongly, you might not only be foundered by a provoking reticence, which she could assume at times, but might, also, some day hear that your secret intentions and machiavellian conduct were the common talk of the parish.

Lady Dasher, although of a strictly pious turn of mind, did not object to Sunday callers. Good. I would go there that very afternoon after lunch, and see how the land lay.

I kept my resolve, and went.

Ushered into the well-known little drawing-room of the corner house of The Terrace, whose windows had a commanding view of the main thoroughfare of our suburb, I had ample leisure, before the ladies appeared, of observing the arrangement of certain fuchsias in a monster flower-stand that took up half the room, on the growth and excellence of which Lady Dasher prided herself greatly. Praise her fuchsias, and you were the most excellent of men; pass them by unnoticed, and you might be capable of committing the worst sin in the decalogue.

Is it not curious, how particular scents of flowers and their appearance will call up old scenes and circumstances to your memory? To this day, the mere sight of a fuchsia will bring back to my mind Lady Dasher's little drawing-room; and I can fancy myself sitting in the old easy-chair by the window, and listening to that morbid lady's chit-chat.

Presently my lady came in, pale and melancholy, as usual, and with her normal expression of acutest woe.

"Dear me, Mr Lorton! how very ill you are looking, to be sure. Is there not consumption in your family?"

"Not that I'm aware of, Lady Dasher, thank you," I replied; "but how well *you* are looking, if one may judge by appearances."

"Ah!" she sighed with deep sadness, "appearances, my young friend, are very deceptive. I am *not* well--far from it, in fact. I believe, Mr Lorton, that I am fast hastening to that bourne from whence no traveller ever returns. I would not be at all surprised to wake up some morning and find that I was dead!"

"Indeed!" I said, for the fact she hinted at would have been somewhat astonishing to a weak-minded person. I then tried to change the conversation from this sombre subject to one I had more at heart; but it was very hard to lead her on the track I wished. "We had a good congregation to-day, Lady Dasher, I think," said I; "the church seemed to be quite crammed."

"Really, now; do you think so? *I* did not consider it at all a large gathering. When poor dear papa was alive, I've seen twice the number there, I am certain. *You* may say that the falling off is due to the hot weather and people going out of town, but *I* think it is owing to the spread of unbelief. We are living in terrible times, Mr Lorton. It seems to me that every one is becoming more atheistic and wicked every day. I don't know what we shall come to, unless we have another deluge, or something of that sort, to recall us to our senses!"

Fortunately at this juncture, before Lady Dasher, could get into full

swing on her favourite theological hobby-horse--the degeneracy of the present age--Bessie and Seraphine entered the room. The conversation then became a trifle livelier, and we discussed the weather, the fashions, and various items of clerical gossip.

I discreetly asked if they had seen any new faces in church. But no; neither of them had, it was evident, seen my ladies in half-mourning, about whom I was diffident of inquiring directly.

Were any fresh people coming to reside in the neighbourhood that they had heard of?

"No," said Lady Dasher, with a melancholy shake of her head. "No; how should they? It is not very likely that any new residents would come *here*! The place may suit poor people like *me*, but would not take the fancy of persons having plenty of money to spend, who can select a house where they like. Ah! the miseries of poverty, Mr Lorton, and to be poor but proud! I hope *you* will never have my bitter experience, I'm sure!"--with another sad shake of her head, and an expression on her face that she was pretty certain that I *would* one day arrive at the same hollow estimate of life as herself. "No," she continued, "no new people are at all likely to come here. I saw Mr Shuffler yesterday, and asked if that house which he has to let in The Terrace were yet taken, but he said, `not that he knew of;' he had `heard of nobody coming'--had I? I assure you he was quite impertinent about it. He would not have spoken to me so uncivilly had poor dear papa been alive, I know! But it is always the way with that class of people:--they only look upon you in the light of how much you are worth!"

"Oh, ma!" said Bessie Dasher, "I think Mr Shuffler very civil and polite. He always makes me quite a low bow whenever he sees me."

"Ah! my dear," said her mother, "that's because you are young and pretty, as I was once. He never bows to me as he used to do when your grandpapa lived."

After a little more harping on the same string, the conversation drooped; and, as none of them could give me any further information towards

assisting my quest, I took my leave of Lady Dasher and her daughters, in a much less buoyant frame of mind than when I had first thought of my visit an hour or so previously.

I had made certain that they would know something of the mysterious ladies in half-mourning; consequently, I was all the more disappointed. However, they had given me one hint; I would ask Shuffler himself, on the morrow, whether any new residents were expected in the suburb.

Shuffler was a house-agent who had to do with all the letting and taking, overhauling and repairing, of most of the habitations in our neighbourhood. He was a portly, oily personage; one who clipped his English royally, and walked, through the effects of bunions, I believe--although some mistook it for gout, and gave him the credit of being afflicted with that painful but aristocratic malady--as if he were continuously on pattens, or wore those clumsy wooden sabots which the Normandy peasantry use. He was also one-eyed, like Cyclops, the place of the missing organ being temporarily filled with a round glass orb, whose nature could be detected at a glance; this seemed to stare at you with a dull, searching look and take mental and disparaging stock of your person, while the sound eye was winking and blinking at you as jovially as you please.

Shuffler was affable enough to me, as usual, in despite of Lady Dasher having such a bad opinion of his manners; but, he could give me no information such as I wanted to hear. Everybody, really, appeared to be as cautious as "Non mi recordo" was on Queen Caroline's trial. Nobody had heard of anybody coming to our neighbourhood. Nobody had seen any strange faces about. Nobody knew anything!

It was quite vexatious.

I haunted the Prebend's Walk. I went to church three times every Sunday, but did not meet her. The only thing I had to assure me that it was not all a dream, and that I had really seen her, was the little spray of mignonette, which I carried next my heart.

It was now July.

Sultry August came and passed; dull September followed suit; dreary October ensued, in the natural cycle of the seasons; foggy, suicidal November came; and yet, *she* came not!

I felt almost weary of waiting and looking out and longing, notwithstanding the inward assurance I had, and the fact of my whole nature being imbued with the belief that we should meet again. We *must* meet. I knew *that*, I felt firmly convinced of it.

Thus the year wore on. Weeks and months elapsed since our meeting in church, which I should never, never forget.

Dreary, dreary expectation! I lost interest regarding things in which I had formerly been interested. The society of people which I had previously coveted became distasteful to me.

Lady Dasher, you may be sure, I never went nigh; *she* would have altogether overwhelmed me.

As for that insufferable ass, Horner, he was always asking me whenever we met, which was much oftener than I cared about, with a provoking simper and his unmeaning, eye-glass stare and drawling voice--coupled with a tone of would-be-facetious irony--"Bai-ey Je-ove! I say, old fellah, seen those ladies in hawf-mawning yet, ah?"

Brute! I could have kicked him; and I wonder now that I didn't!

CHAPTER THREE.

M'APPARI.

"She's coming, my own, my sweet! Had she never so airy a tread, My heart would hear her, and beat, Were it earth in an earthy bed!"

It was now November, as I have already said; and a very dull, dismal, desolate November it was--more so, even, than usual. Fogs were frequent, rain regular, and the sun singular in his appearance. It was enough to make one feel miserable, without the haunting thoughts that

affected me; so, before the weather became too much for me and turned me insane, I determined to go abroad for a short time to try what change of air and scene could do towards relaxing my mind, although nothing could banish the remembrance of *her* from my heart.

When I came back to England, it was close on Christmas, and Christmas, you must know, was always a busy and stirring time with us in our suburb, especially so, too, for its younger and prettier parishioners.

Then the church had to be decorated--a matter not to be trifled with. Commencing about a week or ten days before the festival, these young ladies would gather themselves together in the old school-room, which was a detached building, situated a short distance from Saint Canon's.

Here, the scholars being dismissed for their long holidays, they would change the look of the academic apartment into that of a miniature Covent Garden market or greengrocer's shop, filling it up with heaps of evergreens--holly and ivy and yew, ad libitum, to be transformed by the aid of their nimble fingers into all sorts of floral decorations. Garlands were woven, elaborate illuminated texts and scrolls painted, and wondrous crosses of commingled laurel leaves and holly berries contrived; all of which went so far to change the aspect of the old church, that those well acquainted with it could not help wondering within themselves, if, indeed, it was really so *very* old and ancient after all as learned archaeologists said; while new comers, who only saw it in its festal trim, had serious doubts as to whether they were not in a ritualistic edifice--the vicar allowing the girls to have their own way and import as much natural ornament as they pleased. The flowers and shrubs were God's handiwork, he said, so why should they not be used in God's service, to do honour to "the Giver of the feast?"

This year was no exception to the general practice. On my going down to the school-room on the first day that the work of "the decorations" began, which was the very morning after my return from the continent, I found things just as they had been in previous years, save that some half-a-dozen panes of glass had been smashed in the oriel window at the eastern end of the room, through the incautious manipulation of a

bunch of holly by some "green" hand.

There were the usual number of young ladies, all of whose faces I knew so well, engaged in the pious work; with Horner, Mr Mawley the curate, and one or *two* other attendant male aides, to minister to their needs--such as stripping off leaves for wreath making--and help them to flirt the dull hours away. Dear little Miss Pimpernell, our vicar's maiden sister and good right hand, presided, also, to preserve order and set an example for industrious souls to follow, just as she had been in the habit of presiding as far back as I could recollect.

She was not there merely as a chaperon. Oh no! If Lady Dasher, sitting on an upturned form in a corner, like a very melancholy statue of Patience, was not sufficient to prevent the prudent proprieties from being outraged, there was, also, the "model of all the virtues" present--Miss Spight--a lady of a certain age, who, believing, as the kindly beings of her order do, that there was too large a flow of the milk of human kindness current in the world, deemed it her mission to temper this dispensation by the admixture of as much vitriol and vinegar as in her lay: she succeeded pretty well, too, for that matter, in her practice and belief.

Little Miss Pimpernell was quite a different sort of body altogether to Miss Spight. Every one who knew her, or ever saw her kindly face, loved her and venerated her.

She was the very impersonification of good-nature, good-will, and good action. Did any misfortune chance to befall some one with whom she was acquainted, or any casual stranger with whom she might be brought in contact, there was none of that "I told you so" spirit of philosophy about *her*.

No; she tried to do her best for the sufferer as well as she was able; and would not be contented until she was absolutely satisfied that matters had somewhat mended.

Young and old, rich and poor, alike considered her as one of their best friends--as indeed she was--a good Samaritan to whom they might

always confide their griefs and ailments, their sufferings and privations, with the assurance that they would certainly meet with a kindly sympathy and a word of comfort, in addition to as much practical assistance in their adversity and physical consolation in their need as "little" Miss Pimpernell--that was the fond title she was always known by--could compass or give.

The worst of it was, that she was in such general request, that we had to make up our minds to lose her sometimes.

Of course it was a selfish consideration, but we missed her and grumbled at her visits and absences sadly; for, when she was away, everything appeared to go wrong in the parish. Still none, knowing the gratification that her ministrations gave her, would have grudged her their indulgence.

She was never so happy as when she was helping somebody; and, of course, people took advantage of her weakness, and were merciless in their calls upon her time.

Whenever the most distant cousin or stray relative happened to be ill--or about to move into a new house, or be married, or increase the population in defiance of Malthus, or depart from the pomps and vanities of this wicked world--as sure as possible would Miss Pimpernell be sent for post haste. She had, as a matter of course, to nurse the patient, assist the flitting, accelerate the wedding, welcome the little stranger, or console the mourners as the case might be.

We, the inhabitants of the suburb which she blessed with her presence, thought all this a gross infringement of our rights in her possession, although we welcomed the dear old lady all the more gladly when we got her back again amongst us once more.

As for confidences, I believe she had the skeleton secret of every soul in the place confided to her sacred keeping at some one time or other; and love stories! why, she must have been cram full of them--from the heart-breaking affair of poor little Polly Skittles, the laundress' pretty daughter, up to Baby Blake's last flirtation.

What her brother would have done without her, it would be impossible to tell. She had quite as much to do with the parish as he; and, I'm sure, if little Miss Pimpernell had not kept house for him and minded all his temporal affairs, he would never have known what to eat or drink, or what to put on.

The vicar had lost his wife soon after his marriage, when he was quite a young man; but, instead of being bowed down by his affliction, as might have been the case with a good many ardent natures like his, he earnestly fought against it, buckling to his work, all the more vigorously perhaps, as one of Christ's ministers.

Everybody thenceforth was wife and child, brother and sister to him: humanity in general took the place of all family ties.

He was the purest Christian character I have ever come across, lovable, intelligent, winning and merry, too, at times, in spite of his grief--would that all ministers were like him to uphold the old love and honour of our national Church!

No orator or skilled preacher in the pulpit, he simply led you captive by his earnestness and evident thorough belief in all that he uttered; so that "those who came to scoff, remained to pray." No hard, metallic repetition by rote was his; but the plain, unvarnished story of the gospel which he felt and of whose truth he was assured, animated by a broad spirit of Protestantism that led him to extend a raising hand to every erring brother, and see religion in other creeds besides his own.

"In his duty prompt at every call, He watch'd and wept, he pray'd and felt for all; And, as a bird each fond endearment tries, To tempt its new-fledged offspring to the skies, He tried each art, reproved each dull delay, Allured to brighter worlds, and *led the way*!"

He and his good sister were, in fact, a pair of heart-oddities, whom to know was to admire with reverential affection. They could not have had an enemy or slanderer in the world. Even Miss Spight had never a word to say against either; that alone spoke volumes for them.

"Oh, Frank," exclaimed little Miss Pimpernell as I entered the school-room--she always called me by my Christian name, or styled me her "boy," having known me from childhood--"Oh, Frank! Here you are at last! I am so glad to see you back again, my boy: you have just come in time to help us. I was really afraid those nasty Frenchmen had eaten you up, you have been such a long time away!"

"I dare say there's enough left of him," sneered Mr Mawley the curate. *He* was the direct opposite of the vicar; and a man whom I cordially detested, the feeling, I believe, being mutual. He was consequential, dogmatic, and with all the self-asserting priggishness of young Oxford fresh upon him. I confess I was pretty much inclined the same way myself; so, it was but natural that we should disagree: two suns, you know, cannot shine in the same hemisphere.

Before I could answer him, Miss Pimpernell hastily interposed. She hated to hear us arguing and bickering as was generally our way when we met. "Please bring the measuring tape, Frank," she said, "you will find it on that bench in the corner; and come and see how long my wreath is. It should be just nineteen feet, but I'm afraid I am a yard short."

By the time I had done as my old friend requested, the conversation which I had interrupted by my advent resumed its course. They were talking about the future world, and ventilating sundry curious thoughts on the subject.

"And what do *you* think heaven will be like?" asked Seraphine Dasher, appealing to me. "Everybody's opinion has been given but yours and Miss Pimpernell's, and Mr Mawley's; and I'm coming to them presently."

"I'm sure I can't say," I answered, "perhaps a combination of choral music, running water, I mean the sound of brooks gliding and fountains splashing, with almond toffee at discretion: that's my idea of earthly felicity at least."

"Oh, fie!" said my interlocutor; while I could hear Miss Spight murmur

"What deplorable levity," as she glowered at me severely and looked sympathisingly at Mr Mawley.

"Well," said I, "I was only joking then; for, really, I've never seriously thought about the matter. As far as I can believe, however, I do not imagine heaven is going to be a place where we'll be singing hymns all day. I think we shall be happy there, each in our several ways, as we are on earth, and be in the company of those we love: heaven would be miserable without that, I think."

"And what do you say, Miss Pimpernell?" next asked Seraphine.

"I do not say anything at all, my dear: the subject is beyond me. I leave it to One who is wiser than us all to tell me in his own good time."

"And you, Mr Mawley?" continued our fair questioner.

"We should not seek to understand the mysteries of the oracles of God," said the curate pompously.

"My dear, I can tell you," said the vicar, who had slipped in quietly, unknown to us all, "`Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him!'"

"I wonder, sir," said I, "whether that text, `In My Father's house are many mansions,' means that there are different degrees of happiness in the future world?"

"That passage," said the vicar, "is one whose interpretation has been more disputed than any I know. Some say it has the meaning which you attach to it; while others, with whom I am more inclined to agree, think that it conveys only the promise and assurance that in heaven there will be found room for us all. You must remember that we in the present day have the Bible through the medium of translation; and all translations are liable to error. Why, if you read the Book of Job, for instance, in the original Hebrew, without the arbitrary division into verses which the translators of the authorised version inserted, you

would find it a perfect poem!"

"For my part," said Mr Mawley, "I do not think we ought to speak about religious matters in this sort of way, and make them subjects for general conversation."

"I don't agree with you, Mawley," said the vicar, "the truth is not so brittle that we should be afraid of handling it; if religion were more openly discussed and brought into our daily life, I believe we should be all the better for it."

"Ah, you are Broad Church!" said the curate.

"Very well, be it so," said the vicar good-humouredly; "I'm not ashamed of it, so long as you allow that I'm at least a Christian."

"What *is* Broad Church, Mr Mawley?" asked Bessie Dasher, who was suspected of having tender feelings towards the curate, for she generally deferred to his views and opinions.

"Broad Church," said Mr Mawley, "holds that every man is at liberty to judge for himself; and that any Sectarian or Unitarian, or heathen, has as much chance of heaven as you or I."

"Positively shocking!" said Miss Spight, in virtuous indignation at any nonconformist being esteemed as worthy of future salvation as herself.

"Oliver Wendell Holmes," I said, "gives a truer exposition. He says that `the narrow church may be seen in the ship's boats of humanity, in the long boat, in the jolly boat, in the captain's gig, lying off the poor old vessel, thanking God that *they* are safe, and reckoning how soon the hulk containing the mass of their fellow-creatures will go down. The Broad Church is on board, working hard at the pumps, and very slow to believe that the ship will be swallowed up with so many poor people in it, fastened down under the hatches ever since it floated!'"

"Ah, that is better," said the vicar. "It is there put very aptly. If we could only be less bigoted, and assimilate our various sects together,

what a happy church would ours be! We all have the same sure fundamental ground of belief, and only differ in details."

"But, my dear sir," said the curate, in pious horror, "that is rank latitudinarianism!"

"Latitudinarianism or not, Mawley," said the vicar, "it is the Christianity and doctrine that earnest thinkers like Kingsley and Maurice preach and practise. If we could only all act up to it--all act up to it!"

"Then, I suppose," said Mr Mawley, "that you agree with the writers of *Essays and Reviews*?"

"Suppose nothing, my dear Mawley," said the vicar, kindly but seriously, "except what you have facts to vouch for. I do not say I agree with them or not."

"And do you think the hare chewed the cud, as Colenso says?" asked Baby Blake, with such a serious face that we could not help laughing at her.

"Proximus ille deo est qui scit ratione tacere!" said the vicar, putting on his hat and moving towards the door.

"And what does that mean, brother?" asked Miss Pimpernell.

"My dear, it is only Dionysius Cato's original Latin for our old English proverb, `A silent tongue shows a wise head!'" said the vicar; and he then went out to attend to his parish duties, promising to look in upon us again, and see how we were getting on before we separated for the day.

On his departure, our conversation veered round to local chit-chat.

"Have you heard the news about The Terrace yet, Frank?" asked Miss Pimpernell.

"No," I said. "What is it?"

"Number sixty-five is let at last!"

"Indeed," said I; "how pleased old Shuffler must be, for the house has hung a long time on his hands. Who are the people that have taken it?"

"A widow lady and her daughter. Their name is Clyde, and they have a good deal of money, I believe," said Bessie Dasher.

"Bai-ey Je-ove!" exclaimed Horner. "I say, old fellah, p'waps they ah those ladies in hawf-mawning, ah?"

"Dear me! this is quite interesting," said Miss Spight. "Do let me know what the joke is about ladies in half-mourning, Mr Lorton--something romantic, I've no doubt." She was always keen to scent out what might be disagreeable to other people, was Miss Spight!

"Oh, it's only Horner's nonsense!" said I. "But what are these Clydes like?"

"Very nice, indeed!" said Miss Pimpernell. "The mother is extremely well-bred and ladylike, and the daughter Minnie--such a pretty name, Frank--is quite a little darling. I'm positively in love with her, and I'm sure you will like her. They are very nice people indeed, my boy, and thorough acquisitions to our little society."

"I only hope so, Miss Pimpernell," sighed Lady Dasher; "but appearances, you know, are *so* deceitful sometimes."

"Ah!" ejaculated Miss Spight, "handsome is as handsome does! We'll see them by and by in their true colours; new brooms, Lady Dasher, sweep clean. Ah!"

There was a world in that "ah!"

"Well," said little Miss Pimpernell, in her staunch good-nature, "I think it is best to be charitable and take people as we find them. I have seen a good deal of the Clydes during the month they have been here and like them very much. But you will have an opportunity of judging for

yourself, Frank, as Minnie Clyde promised me to come down to-day and help us with the decorations."

"She's a very nice-looking girl," said the curate.

"Do you really think her pretty?" asked Bessie Dasher. One could detect a slight tone of dissatisfaction in her voice, and she spoke with a decided pout.

"Well, perhaps she's not exactly pretty," said Mr Mawley, diplomatically; "but nice-looking, at all events--that was the word I used, Miss Bessie."

"But she dresses so plainly!" said Lizzie Dangler.

"I call her quite a dowdthy!" lisped Baby Blake.

"And I say she's very nice!" said Seraphine Dasher, who had none of the petty dislike of her sex to praise another girl that might turn out to be a possible rival.

"That's right, my dear," said Miss Pimpernell; "I'm glad, Seraphine, to hear you take the part of the absent; Miss Clyde ought to be here now--she promised me to come soon after luncheon."

Even as the good old soul spoke, I heard the outer door of the school-room open, and a light footstep along the passage. "There she is now, I do believe!" whispered Miss Pimpernell to me.

I could scarcely breathe. I felt that I had at last arrived at the crisis of my life. It must be *her*, I thought, for my heart palpitated with wild pulsations.

And, as the thought thrilled through me, my lost madonna entered the room.

I was not one whit surprised. I had been certain that I should see her again!

CHAPTER FOUR.

"HOPE."

"The wit, the vivid energy of sense, The truth of nature, which, with Attic point, And kind, well-temper'd satire, smoothly keen, Steals through the soul, and without pain corrects."

Yes, she it was of whom I had thought and dreamt, and built airy castles on imaginative foundations--chateaux en Espagne--that had almost crumbled into vacancy during those long and weary weeks, and monotonous months, of waiting, and watching, and longing!

She entered; and the dull, disordered school-room, with its leaf-strewn floor all covered with broken branches and naked boughs of chopped-up evergreens, its mass of piled forms, its lumbering desks and hassocks, its broken windows, its down-hanging maps of colossal continents, seemed changed all at once, in a moment, as if by the touch of some magic wand, into an enchanted palace.

The fairy princess had at last appeared, the sleeping beauty been awakened; and all was altered.

The semi-transparent sprig of mistletoe, which Seraphine Dasher had mischievously suspended over the doorway, looked like a chaplet of pearls; the pointed stems of yew became frosted in silver; the variegated holly was transformed into branches of malachite, ornamented with a network of gold, its bright red berries glowing with a ruddy reflection as of interspersed rubies; while, above all, the glorious sunshine, streaming in through the shattered panes of the oriel at the eastern end, cast floods of quickening, mellow light, to the remotest corners of the room, making the floating atoms of dust turn to waves of powdery amber, and enriching every object it touched with its luminous rays. Even the very representations of Europe, Asia, and Africa, on the walls, lost their typographical characteristics, and shone out to me in the guise of tapestried chronicles, ancient as those of Bayeux, describing deeds of gallant chivalry--so my fancy pictured--and love, and knight-errantry, painted over with oriental

arabesques in crimson gilding, the cunning handiwork of the potent sun-god. Her coming in effected all this to my mind.

What a darling she looked, sitting there, with a pretty little scarlet and white sontag, of soft wool knitting, crossed over her bosom and clasped round her dainty, dainty waist; her busy fingers industriously weaving broad ivy garlands for the church columns, and her sweet, calm face bent earnestly over her task--the surrounding foliage, scattered here, there, and everywhere, bringing out her well-formed figure in relief, just like a picture in some rustic portrait frame! Micat inter omnes, as Virgil sang of "the young Marcellus," his hero: she "glistened out before them all."

Of course she was introduced to me.

"Mr Lorton--Miss Minnie Clyde." Now, at last, I had met her and knew her name! What a pretty name she had, too, as little Miss Pimpernell had said! Just in keeping with its owner.

As my name was pronounced, she raised her beautiful grey eyes from the garland in her lap; and I could perceive, from a sudden gleam of intelligence which shot through them for an instant, that I was at once recognised:--from my face, I'm sure, she must have noticed that *she* had not been forgotten.

I was in heaven; I would not have relinquished my position, kneeling at her feet and stripping off ivy leaves for her use, no, not for a dukedom!

Our conversation became again imperceptibly of a higher tone. Hers was light, sparkling, brilliant; and one could see that she possessed a fund of native drollery within herself, despite her demure looks and downcast eyes. She had a sweet, low voice, "that most excellent thing in woman;" while her light, silvery laughter rippled forth ever and anon, like a chime of well-tuned bells, enchaining me as would chords of Offenbach's champagne music.

In comparison with her, Lizzie Dangler's prosy platitudes, which some deemed wit--Horner, par exemple--sank into nothingness, and Baby

Blake, one of the "gushing" order of girlhood, appeared as a stick, or, rather, a too pliant sapling--her inane "yes's" and lisping "no's" having an opportunity of being "weighed in the balance," and consequently, in my opinion, "found wanting." All were mediocre beside her. Perhaps I was prejudiced; but, now, the remarks of the other girls seemed to me singularly silly.

From light badinage, we got talking of literature. Some one, Mr Mawley the curate, I think, drew a parallel between Douglas Jerrold and Thackeray, describing both, in his blunt, dogmatic way, as cynics.

To this I immediately demurred. In the first place, because Mawley was so antipathetical to me, that I dearly loved to combat his assertions; and, secondly, on account of his disparaging my beau ideal of all that is grand and good in a writer and in man.

"You make a great mistake," I said, "for Thackeray is a satirist pur et simple. Jerrold was a cynic, if you please, although he had a wonderful amount of kindly feeling even in his bitterest moods--indeed I would rather prefer calling him a one-sided advocate of the poor against the rich, than apply to him your opprobrious term."

"Well, cynic or satirist, I should like to know what great difference lies between the two?" the curate retorted, glad of an argument, and wishing, as usual, to display his critical acumen by demolishing me.

"I will tell you with pleasure," said I, not a bit "put out," according to his evident wish and expectation, "and I will use the plainest language in my exposition, so that you may be able to understand me! A cynic, I take it, is one who talks or writes bitterly, in the gratification of a malicious temperament, merely for the sake of inflicting pain on the object of his attack, just as a bad-dispositioned boy will stick pins in a donkey, or persecute a frog, for the sheer sake of seeing it wince: a satirist, on the contrary, is a philosopher who ridicules traits of character, customs and mannerisms, with the intention of remedying existing evils, abolishing abuses, and reforming society--in the same way as a surgeon performs an operation to remove an injured limb, inflicting temporary pain on his patient, with the prospect of ultimate

good resulting from it. I have never seen this definition given anywhere; consequently, as it is but my own private opinion, you need only take it for what it is worth."

"Thank you, Mr Lorton," said *somebody*, giving me a gratefully intelligent look from a pair of deep, thinking grey eyes.

"Oh, indeed! so that's your opinion, Lorton?" put in Mr Mawley, as antagonistic as ever. "So that's your opinion, is it? I *will* do as you say, and take it for what it is worth--that is, keep my own still! You may be very sharp and clever, and all that sort of thing, my dear fellow; but I don't see the difference between the two that you have so lucidly pointed out. Satire and cynicism are co-equal terms to my mind: your argument won't persuade me, Lorton, although I must say that you are absolutely brilliant to-day. You should really start a school of Modern Literature, my dear fellow, and set up as a professor of the same!"

"Please get my scissors, Frank," said Miss Pimpernell, trying to stop our wordy warfare. I got them; but I had my return blow at the curate all the same.

"I suppose you'd be one of my first pupils, Mr Mawley," I said. "I think I could coach you up a little!"

He was going to crush me with some of his sledge-hammer declamation, being thoroughly roused, when Bessie Dasher averted the storm, by entering the arena and changing the conversation to a broader footing.

"How I dote on Thackeray!" she exclaimed with all her natural impulsiveness. "What a dear, delicious creature Becky Sharp is; and that funny old baronet, Sir Pitt something or other, too! When I first took up *Vanity Fair* I could not let it out of my hands until I finished it."

"That's more than I can say," said the curate. "I don't like Thackeray. He cuts up every one and everything. Is not that a cynic for you?"

"Not everybody," said Min--I cannot call her anything else now--coming to my assistance, "not everybody, Mr Mawley. I think Thackeray, with all his satire and kindly laughter in his sleeve at persons that ought to be laughed down, has yet given us some of the most pathetic touches of human nature existing in English literature. There's the old colonel in *The Newcomes*, for instance. That little bit about his teaching his tiny grandson to say his prayers, before he put him into bed in his poor chamber in the Charter House, to which he was reduced, would make any one cry. And Henry Esmond, and Warrington, and Laura--where would you find more nobly-drawn characters than those?" and she stopped, out of breath with her defence of one of the greatest writers we have ever had, indignant, with such a pretty indignation, at his merits being questioned for a moment.

"Of course I must bow to your decision, Miss Clyde," said the curate, with one of those stock ceremonial bows that stood him in such good stead amongst the female community of the parish. He was a cunning fellow, Mawley. Knew which way his interest lay; and never went against the ladies if he could help it. "But," he continued, "if we talk of pathos, there's `the great master of fiction,' Dickens; who can come up to him?"

"Ah, yes! Mr Mawley,"--chorused the majority of the girls--"we quite agree with you: there's nobody like Dickens!"

It is a strange thing how perverse the divine sex is, in preferring confectionery to solid food; and superficial writers, to those who dive beneath the surface of society and expose its rottenness--like as they esteem Tupper's weak-minded version of Solomon's Proverbs beyond the best poetry that ever was written!

I wasn't going to be beaten by the curate, however, prattled he never so wisely with the cunning of the serpent-charmer. "I grant you," said I, "that Dickens appeals oftener to our susceptible sympathies; but he is *unreal* in comparison with Thackeray. The one was a far more correct student of human nature than the other. Dickens selected exceptionalities and invested them with attributes which we never see possessed by their prototypes whom we may meet in the world. He

gives us either caricature, or pictures of men and women seen through a rose- coloured medium: Thackeray, on the other hand, shows you life *as it is*. He takes you behind the scenes and lets you perceive for yourself how the `dummies' and machinery are managed, how rough the distemper painting, all beauty from the front of `the house,' looks on nearer inspection, how the `lifts' work, and the `flats' are pushed on; besides disclosing all the secrets connected with masks and `properties.' He is not content in merely allowing you to witness the piece from before the curtain, in the full glory of that distance from the place of action which lends enchantment to the view, and with all the deceptive concomitants of music and limelights and Bengal fire! To adopt another illustration, I should say that Dickens was the John Leech of fictional literature, Thackeray its Hogarth. Even Jerrold, I think, in his most bitter, cynical moods, was truer to life and nature than Dickens. Did you ever read the former's *Story of a Feather*, by the way?"

"No," answered Mawley, testily, "I can't say I ever did; and I don't think it likely I ever will."

"Well, I dare say you are quite right, Frank," said the kindly voice of my usual ally little Miss Pimpernell, interposing just at the right time--as she always did, indeed--to throw oil on the troubled waters. "But, still, I like Dickens the best. Do you know, children," she went on, looking round, as we all sat watching her dear old wrinkled face beaming cheerily on us through her spectacles, "do you know, children, I've no doubt you'll laugh at me for telling you, but, when I first read `David Copperfield'--and I was an old woman then--I cried my eyes out over the account of the death of poor Dora's little dog Gyp. Dear little fellow! Don't you recollect how he crawled out of his tiny Chinese pagoda house, and licked his master's hand and died? I think it's the most affecting thing in fiction I ever read in my life."

"And I, too, dear Miss Pimpernell," said Min, in her soft, low voice, which had a slight tremor as she spoke, and there was a misty look in her clear grey eyes--silent witnesses of the emotion that stirred her heart. "I shed more tears over poor Gyp than I can bear to think of now--except when I cried over little Tiny Tim, in the `Christmas Carol,'

where, you remember, the spirit told Uncle Scrooge that the cripple boy would die. That affected me equally, I believe; and I could not read it dry-eyed now."

"Nor I," lisped Baby Blake, following suit, in order to keep up her reputation for sentimentality; "I would thob my eyth out!"

"See," quoted the curate, grandiloquently, "how `one touch of nature makes the whole world kin!'"

"For my part," exclaimed Miss Spight, who had taken no share in our conversation since we had dropped personalities, "I don't see the use of people crying over the fabulous woes of a lot of fictitious persons that never existed, when there is such an amount of real grief and misery going on in the world."

"That is not brought home to us," said Min, courageously; "but the troubles and trials of the people in fiction are; and I believe that every kind thought which a writer makes throb through our hearts, better enables us to pity the sorrows of actual persons."

"Bai-ey Je-ove!" exclaimed Horner, twisting his eye-glass round and making an observation for the first time--the discussion before had been apparently beyond his depth,--"Bai-ey Je-ove! Ju-ust what I was gaw-ing to say! Bai-ey Je-ove, yaas! But Miss Spight is much above human emawtion, you know, and all that sawt of thing, you know-ah!"

"Besides," continued Min, not taking any notice of our friend's original remark I was glad to see, "one does not always cry over novels. I'm sure I've laughed more than I've wept over Dickens, and other authors."

"Ah!" said Lady Dasher, with a melancholy shake of her head, "life is too serious for merry-making! It is better to mourn than to rejoice, as I've often heard my poor dear papa say when he was alive."

"Nonsense, ma!" pertly said her daughter Seraphine; "you can't believe that. I'm sure I'd rather laugh than cry, any day. And so would you, too, ma, in spite of your seriousness!"

"Your mamma is quite right in some respects, my dear," said little Miss Pimpernell. "We should not be always thinking of nothing but merry-making. Don't you recollect those lines of my favourite Herrick?--

"`Time flies away fast! The while we never remember, How soon our life here Grows old with the year, That dies in December.'"

"Yes, I do, you cross old thing!" said the seraph, shaking her golden locks and laughing saucily; "and I remember also that your `favourite Herrick' says something else about one's `gathering rose-buds whilst one may.'"

"You naughty girl!" said Miss Pimpernell, trying to look angry and frown at her; but the attempt was such a palpable pretence that we all laughed at her as much as the delinquent.

"And what is your favourite style of poetry, Miss Clyde?" asked the curate, taking advantage of the introduction of Herrick to change the subject.

And then there followed a chorus of discussion: Miss Spight declared she adored Wordsworth: Mr Mawley tried to show off his superiority, and I attempted to put him down; I believe I was jealous lest Min should agree with him.

"Now, Frank," exclaimed Miss Pimpernell, "I will not have any more sparring between you and Mr Mawley, for I'm sure you've argued enough. It is `the merry Christmas-time,' you know; and we ought all to be at peace, and gay and happy, too! What do you say, girls?"

"But what shall we do to be merry?" asked Bessie Dasher.

"Ah! my dear," groaned her mother; "it is not right to be foolishly `merry,' as you call it. This season of the year is a very sad one, and we ought to be thinking, as my poor dear papa used to say, of what our Saviour did for us and the other world! We have now arrived at the end of another year, and it is very sad, very sad!"

"What!" exclaimed Min, "wrong to be merry at Christmas? The vicar said in his sermon last Sunday, that our hearts ought to expand with joy at this time; and that we should try, not only to be glad and happy in ourselves, but also to make others glad and happy, too. It appears to me," and her face flushed with excitement as she spoke, "a very erroneous idea of religion that would only associate it with gloom and sadness. The same Creator endowed us with the faculty to laugh as well as cry; and we must take poor comfort in him if we cannot be glad in his company, to which the Christmas season always brings us nearer and into more intimate connection, as it were."

"Bravo, my little champion!" said the vicar, who had again stolen in unperceived by us all. "That is the spirit of true Christianity. You have preached a more practical sermon than I, my dear." Then, seeing her confusion at being thus singled out and her embarrassment at having, as she thought, been too forward in speaking out impulsively on the spur of the moment, the vicar created a diversion. "And now, young ladies," he said, "as we are going to be merry, what shall we play at?"

"Oh, puss in the corner!" cried Seraphine Dasher. "That will be delightful!"

"With all my heart; puss in the corner be it," said the vicar, who could be a boy again on fitting occasions, and play with the best of us. "Come, Mawley," he added, "come and exert yourself; and help to pull these forms out of the way," setting to work vigorously at the same time, himself.

In another minute or two we were in the middle of a wild romp, wherein little Miss Pimpernell and the vicar were the most active participants-- they showing themselves to be quite as active as the younger hands; while Miss Spight and Lady Dasher were the only idle spectators. Min at first did not join in, as she was not accustomed to the ways of us old habitues, but she presently participated, being soon as gay and noisy as any. What fun we had in blindfolding Horner, and manoeuvring so that he should rush into the arms of Miss Spight! What a shout of laughter there was when he exclaimed, clasping her the while, "Bai-ey Je-ove! Yaas, I've cawght you at lawst!"

The look of pious horror which settled on the face of the elderly maiden was a study.

Thus our working day ended; and it became time to separate and go home. I had the further happiness of seeing Min to her door, both of us living in the same direction.

It was the same on the morrow, and on the morrow after that, for a whole week.

Of course, we did not talk "Shakspeare and the musical glasses" always. Our discourse was generally composed of much lighter elements, especially when Mr Mawley and I did not come in contact--argument being then, naturally, as a dead letter. Our conversation during these peaceful interregnums mainly consisted in friendly banter, parish news, and gossip. Scandal Miss Pimpernell never permitted; indeed, no one would have had the heart to say an ill-natured thing of anybody else in her presence.

Day after day Min and I were closely associated together, learning to know more of one another than we might have acquired in years of ordinary society intercourse; day after day, I would watch her dainty figure, and study her beautiful face, and gaze into the fathomless depths of her honest grey eyes, my love towards her increasing by such rapid strides, that, at length, I almost worshipped the very ground on which she trod.

And so the week wore by, until Christmas Eve arrived. Then our task was finished, and we decorated Saint Canon's old church with all the wreaths and garlands, the crosses and illuminations, on which we had been so busy in the school-room; making it look quite modern in its festal preparation for the ensuing day, when the result of our handiwork would be displayed to the admiration, we hoped, of the congregation at large.

On parting with Min late in the evening at her door--for our work at the church had occupied us longer than usual--I thought it the happiest Christmas Eve I had ever passed; and, as I went to bed that night, I

wondered, dreamily, if the morning's sun would rise for another as happy a day, while I prayed to God that He would shape my life in accordance with the fervent desire of my heart.

CHAPTER FIVE.

"JOY."

"Love took up the glass of Time, and turn'd it in his glowing hands; Every moment, lightly shaken, ran itself in golden sands. Love took up the harp of life, and smote on all the chords with might; Smote the chord of self that, trembling, pass'd in music out of sight!"

It was a regular joyous, jolly, old-fashioned Christmas morning: bright, sparkling, exhilarating.

Just sufficient snow had fallen during the night to give that semblance of winter to the house-tops and hedge-rows, with a faint white powdering of the roadway and pavement, which adds so much to the quondam season of family gatherings, merrymakings, and plum-pudding; and this, King Frost had hardened by his patent adamantine process, so that it might not cause any inconvenience to foot passengers or lose its virgin freshness; while, at the same time, he decked and bedizened each separate twig and branch of the poor, leafless, skeleton trees with rare festal jewels and ear-drops of glittering icicles; besides weaving fantastic devices of goblin castles and airy, feathery foliage on the window panes, fairy armies in martial array and delicate gnome-tracery--transforming their appearance from that of ordinary glass into brilliantly-embroidered flakes of transparent, lucent crystal. Ah me! Jack Frost is a cunning enchanter: his will is all-powerful, his taste wondrous.

The clanging church bells were merrily ringing in "the day of glad tidings," as our good vicar styled it, when I jumped out of bed and looked out to see what the weather was like. It was exactly as I could have wished--if I had had any choice in the matter--Christmas all over!

A little robin acquaintance, who never omitted his daily call at my

window-ledge for his matutinal crumbs, was stretching his tiny crimson throat to its fullest extent, with quivering heart-notes of choral song, from a solitary poplar-tree in the adjacent garden on which my room out- looked, making the still air re-echo with his melody; my old retriever, Catch, a good dog and true, was pawing and scratching at the door to be admitted, in his customary way, and sniffing a cordial welcome, as he wondered and grumbled, in the most intelligible doggy language, at my being so late in taking him out for his preprandial walk--when it was such a fine morning, too! I heard the maid wishing me a cheery "Merry Christmas, sir!" as she left my hot water; so, it is not to be wondered that, after I had had the moral courage to plunge into my cold tub, dressing afterwards in a subsequent glow, I became infected with the buoyant spirit of all these social surroundings; and felt as light- hearted and "seasonable" as Santa Claus and his wintry comrades, the church bells, little robin redbreast, dog Catch, and Bridget the maid, could either inspire or expect.

Dog Catch and I sallied forth for our walk--I, cheerful, and drinking in healthy draughts of the fresh, frosty aether; he with great red tongue lolling out, as he trotted along in front of me, coming back every second step and looking up into my face with a broad grin on his jaws and a roguish glance in his brown eyes--I suppose at some funny canine joke or other, which he could not permit me to share--or else, darting backwards and forwards, gleefully barking and making sundry feints and dashes at me; or, prancing up in his elephantine bounds, with felonious intentions regarding my walking stick, which he considered he had a much better right to carry than myself.

We had lots of meetings and greetings when strolling along.

First, there was the gardener's dog at the corner, an old chum of Catch's, who passed the time of day to us with a cheerful bow-wow; although I was surprised to see that he had not "a posy tied to his tail," according to the orthodox adage of typical smartness. Then there was the milkman's dog, a gaunt retriever like mine, but of a very bad disposition, and a surly brute withal. He and Catch were deadly foes, as is frequently the case with dogs of the same breed; so, of course, they

could never meet without quarrelling: on this occasion they exchanged ferocious challenges, and parted with signs and symptoms of unmitigated contempt on both sides, expressed by growls and barks, tail risings, and mane upliftings.

Further on, we encountered Mrs O'Flannagan, an Irish lady, who kept the fruit stall at the corner by the cross roads. She was dressed, as neatly as a new pin, in an "illigant" Connemara cloak, which seemed to be donned for the first time, besides a bran new bonnet; and, thanks to "elbow grease," her peachy, soap-scrubbed cheeks shone again. She was returning from early chapel, whither she had gone to mass and confession; and where I trust she had received absolution for her little peccadilloes. I've no doubt she *did* get absolution, for she told me that Father Macmanus was "a raal gintleman."

Then Catch chased a roving cat until it got within the neighbouring shelter of its domiciliary railings, whence it me-ai-ouwed to him, through all the vowels of pussy's vocabulary, a Christmas compliment--with, probably, a curse tacked on to the tail of it, or that "phoo! phoo! phiz!" meant nothing. But the feline expletives were all thrown away; for Catch was only "full of fun and with nobody to play with him," like Peter Mooney's goose, and had only chased pussy in the natural exuberance of his spirits, having no "hard feelings" towards her, or any desire, I know, to injure her soft tabby fur.

We next came across old Shuffler, the house-agent, waddling along, with his sound eye rolling buoyantly on its axis, while the artificial orb glared steadily forward in a fixed, glassy stare.

"Bootiful weether!" said he, cordially, to me, touching his hat--"bootiful weether, sir!"

"It *is* a fine day," I responded. "A merry Christmas to you, Mr Shuffler."

"Same to you, sir, and many on 'em," he replied, courteously.

"Thank you, Shuffler," I said, satisfied with the colloquy, "but I must

now say good day!"

"Good day, and a 'appy noo year to you," answered he, passing on his way. Really, everybody appeared to be very civil and good natured to-day; and everything joyous and rose-coloured! Was it owing to the bright morning, or to the fact of its being Christmas, or to the sweet feelings I had lying hidden in my heart anent my darling?

I cannot tell: can you?

After a time Catch and I reached the river. It was not now rolling by, a muddy, silent, whilom sluggish, whilom busy stream. It was quite transformed in its appearance and resembled more some frozen arctic stream than the old Thames which I knew so well. Far as the eye could reach, it was covered with sheets of broken ice, again congealed together and piled up with snow--so many little bergs, that had been born at Great Marlow and Hampton, and other spots above the locks; gradually increasing in size and bulk as they span round and swept by on the current, until they should reach the bridges below. Then, they would, perhaps, be formed into one great icefield, stretching from bank to bank, whereon a grand bullock-roasting festival might be held, or a fancy fair instituted, as happened in the reign of James, the king, "of ever pious memory:" that is, if my chronology be right and my memory not at fault, as may very possibly be the case.

Doggy did not mind the ice a bit, however. He plunged in, time after time, to fetch out my in-thrown stick, with a frisky bound; emerging after the performance with ice-pendants to his glossy, silken ears and coat smartly curled, as if he had just paid a visit to Truefitt's, and been manipulated by the dexterous hands of one of the assistants at that celebrated establishment, armed with the crinal tongs and anybody's best macassar.

By-and-by we returned; and whom should I then meet on my way home but, positively, my eye-glass acquaintance of Downing Street. Fancy his being out before nine o'clock in the morning! It was an unparalleled occurrence.

"Hullo, Horner!" I sang out, "'morning, old fellow. Compliments of the season!"

"Bai-ey Je-ove! Lorton, how you stawtled me--'do!"

"You don't mean to say," I asked, on getting closer to him, "that you've actually taken to early rising?"

"No, 'pon honah, I asshaw you, my deah fellah, no!" he replied, quite excitedly. "No, I asshaw you, no," he repeated.

"Well, then, what on earth makes you come out at this early unearthly hour?" I said.

"Oh--ah! you see--ah, my deah fellah," he answered, "it was all those confawnded little bahds and the bells kicking up such a raow; that, 'pon honah, I couldn't sleep and so I came out. I asshaw you it was all those bweastwy little bahds and the bells!"

"At all events, I must congratulate you on your reformation," I said.

"Yaas? But it was all those bweastwy little bahds and the bells, you know; and it's only once a ye-ah you know, Lorton," he added.

"So you will never do so again till next time--is that what you mean, Horner?" I asked.

"Yaas! But, bai-ey Je-ove, I say, Lorton, my deah fellah, were the Clydes those ladies in hawf-mawning, eh?" said he, smiling feebly in his usual suave manner. He thought he had got hold of a grand joke at my expense.

However, I was not in the least angry with him. I felt too happy to have lost my temper with any one, especially Horner, whom I generally regarded as a poor creature to be tolerated rather than blamed.

"Did you ever hear, Horner," said I, "how Peabody made his first fortune?"

"No, 'pon honah, I asshaw you, no."

"Well, then, I'll tell you, Horner," said I. "It was by minding his own business, my dear fellow."

"Bai-ey Je-ove!" he ejaculated, adding, after a pause, "Weally, Lorton, you dawn't mean it?"

"I suppose," I continued, "that you are also just as ignorant again how Mr Peabody made his second and greater fortune, eh?"

"Yaas," he drawled out.

"Ah," said I, "he got *that* by letting other people's business alone!"

"Bai-ey Je-ove!" said Horner, quite staggered at this second blow. "Vewy amusing anecdote, indeed! Thank you, Lorton. Much obwiged, and all that sawt of thing, for the in-fawmation. Yaas, bai-ey Je-ove! And so I'll say good day. Good day, Lorton; good day to you!" and he started off, with a quick step, in the very opposite direction to that which he had been previously going. I went on homeward, with Catch following obediently at my heels.

Which way did we go?

Can you not guess, or must I have to tell you?

How very obtuse some persons are!

Why, by The Terrace, of course. Was it not there that Min lived; and might I not chance to get a glance from her love-speaking, soft grey eyes? Only one glance--and I would be amply repaid!

I passed by her house. Yes, there she was at the window, attending to her flowers and carefully shielding a much-prized little maidenhair fern with a bell glass from the rays of the sun, which beamed as though Phoebus had mistaken the season and thought it a summer day.

She saw me as I sauntered by, recognising me with a little nod and

smile and a sudden heightening of colour; and came to the door. Of course I went up the steps and spoke to her. *You* would have proceeded on your way with a passing bow? Oh, yes!

"Good morning, Mr Lorton," she said. "How very early you are out to be sure! I thought gentlemen were always lazy, but you're an exception to the rule, it seems;" and her soft grey eyes sparkled.

"Well, I don't know that, Miss Clyde," I said. "I suppose I'm just as lazy as the rest. I only came out to give my old doggy a walk and a dip, as I generally do every morning before breakfast. If it were not for him, I do not believe I would get up sooner than anybody else; but he's such a pertinacious fellow that he won't be denied his walk, always rousing me up at eight o'clock `sharp.' Would you believe it, he brings my boots up to my door, and it is a trick he taught himself!"

"Dear old doggy," she said, stooping down and patting his head. "What a nice sagacious fellow you are! Come here, sir, and give me your paw! Now, shake hands. Doggy, do you like me?" Catch could tell a friend at once; so looking up, he licked her hand, expressing, as intelligently as possible, that he was pleased to make her acquaintance. "How I love dogs!" she ejaculated, rising up again.

"Do you!" said I. "Ah, Miss Clyde! `Love me, love my dog.'"

"What nonsense, Mr Lorton!" she said, with a warm blush tinting her cheek. "But, I declare you haven't wished me the compliments of the season yet. How very ungallant you are! I will set you an example--a merry Christmas, Mr Lorton!"

"A thousand to you, Miss Clyde; and each happier than the last!" I said.

"Oh dear, dear!" she exclaimed in mimic dismay; "I am sure I would not care about having so many as that! Fancy a thousand Christmases--why, what an old, old woman I should be then!"

"And a very nice old woman, too," said I.

"Merci pour le compliment, Monsieur," she replied, making me an elaborate curtsey and laughing merrily. "And what have you got there?" she asked, pointing to a little bunch of violets that I was extracting from my overcoat pocket, and which I had procured for her when Catch met his friend the gardener's dog.

"I got them for you, Miss Clyde," said I, somewhat bashfully; "and--and--"

"Oh, *thank* you, Mr Lorton," she said, quite pleased. "I love violets more than any other flower. You could not have given me a nicer present. I was only wishing for some just now. But, I hear mamma coming down stairs; so, as I've not made the tea yet, I must go in--good-bye!"

"Good-bye," I echoed, clasping her tiny hand in mine. "Good-bye, and many good wishes for the day, *my darling*!" I courageously added the last two words, lowering my voice over them, as she gently closed the door.

She was not offended, if she *had* heard the term of endearment I used, for she gave me another nice little bow and smile from the window. Still I think she *did* hear me. I fancied I saw a conscious look in the dancing grey eyes, a blush yet lingering on her damask cheek.

I went home with joy in my heart--joy which fed upon itself and increased each moment. Don't you remember what Herder says? Let but the heart once awake, and wave follows wave of newborn feelings--

"So bald sich das Herz ergiesst, Stromt Welle auf Welle!"

I only know that I was as happy as possible, and astonished everybody by the breakfast I ate.

You fancy, perhaps, that I wasn't really in love, or I wouldn't probably have been hungry? Nonsense! Let me tell you that happy lovers are always hungry, and have great appetites. It is only your poor, miserable, disappointed suitors, who are in a state of suspense, that go about with

a hang-dog look and cannot eat. I firmly believe that Shakespeare intended to convey the idea that Valentine was mad, or he would never have put into his mouth such ridiculous words as those, that he could "break his fast, dine, sup, and sleep, upon the very naked name of love!" If that gentleman of Verona had been sane knowing how his passion was reciprocated and that his lady loved him in return, he would have had just as good an appetite as I had that morning; when, joyous as a bird, I was as hungry as a hunter.

As for dog Catch, you should have seen how he galloped into his oatmeal porridge after his walk--how the oatmeal porridge galloped into him would, however, be a more correct form of expression. You should have only seen him, that's all!

Next came church; and, of all occasions when church-going strikes even an uninterested spectator, generally lacking in religious zeal, with feelings of unwonted emotion, commend me to Christmas day. Then, to paraphrase the well-known lines of the poet, those in the habit of being regularly present at worship "went the more;" while those go now "who never went before." People make a practice of visiting church on that day who seldom, if ever, attend a religious service at any other time, taking the year all through. It is like the wedding feast to which the lame, the halt, and the blind were invited. Every one goes then; every class and clan is represented.

Saint Canon's was a sight. Its garland-twined oaken columns, its wreath-hung galleries, its scroll-work in the chancel--where "Unto us a son is born," and the message of glad tidings, which the shepherds of Bethlehem first heard when they "watched their flocks by night," and saw the star in the east, two thousand years ago, shone forth in blazonments of red and purple and gold--all reminded the congregation of the festival they had assembled to commemorate; the day of peace and good- will to all, that had dawned for them once more, as I trust it will dawn again and again for us yet on many more future anniversaries. The place, too, was crammed, contrary to Lady Dasher's fears concerning the spread of unbelief and the degeneracy of the present age. Everybody was there that could go at all, for it was a year in which we

had to be specially mindful of mercies vouchsafed to us. Even old Shuffler, who had not been seen inside a place of public worship before within the memory of man, was not an absentee.

I was not thinking of him, however, nor of the display which the decorations made, nor of the congregation--indeed, I hardly attended to the service. All my thoughts were centred on Min.

A madonna-like face, a pair of honest, steadfast, speaking, grey eyes were ever before me; although I could not actually see her, except when we stood up during the service, according to the ordinances of the rubric, as she sat a long way off. Notwithstanding my usual attachment towards them, I felt inclined to quarrel with the high pews that hid her from my sight; and, I'm afraid, despised Bishop Burnet for his innovation. The vicar, they told me afterwards, preached a simple, beautiful sermon, that struck home to the hearts of every one present; but I heard none of it. My sermon was in my heart, and bore for its text one little word of four letters. O Min, Min! you had a good deal to answer for.

"Long was the good man's sermon, Yet it seemed not so to me; For he spoke of Ruth the beautiful, And still I thought of thee.

"Long was the prayer he uttered, Yet it seemed not so to me; For in my heart I prayed with him, And still I thought of thee!"

After service, of course everybody met everybody else, each of their own respective little world, at the church door, exchanging those good wishes and seasonable greetings proper to the day.

There was a grand throng without the porch. Horner was there. It would have been nothing at all without him and his eye-glass. He did not appear to bear me any hard feelings, I was glad to see, for my unkindness of the morning. He nodded affably, and said "'do!" to me, in his usual way, as if he had not met me before.

Min and her mother did not linger as did the other parishioners; so, I had only an opportunity of a passing bow, without that other tender

little hand-clasp which I had hoped for. But she looked at me, and that was something.

Lady Dasher, however, stopped for a minute or two; so did her daughters.

"Beautiful weather for Christmas, Lady Dasher," hazarded I. She evidently did not agree with me, for she looked about her mournfully, with a down-drawn visage, just as if we were all attending a funeral, of which she was the chief mourner.

"Really, Mr Lorton, do you think so?" came her answer at length. "Don't you find it very cold?"

"Dear me, ma! why you said last Christmas that it was too warm!" said her daughter Bessie.

"Ah! Mr Lorton," continued her mother, not noticing her remark, "we never have those good, old-fashioned Christmases that we had when my poor dear papa was alive!"

"No, I suppose not," I answered; "people say that it is because of the vast American forests being gradually cut down, admitting freer currents of air all over the world; while others put the change down to the influence of the Gulf Stream. Still, I dare say, it will all come right again at some time or other."

"Ah, Mr Lorton," said Lady Dasher, "I'm afraid it will *never* come right again. You are too sanguine, like all young people."

"Oh, `never' is a long day," I said; "we should all be hopeful and merry, I think, at least on this one day in the year."

"I could never be merry again, Mr Lorton," she said, with a prodigious sigh, which seemed to come from the depths of her heart, "since poor dear papa died;" and she then passed on mournfully homewards, with Bessie and Seraphine in her wake. Their cheerful faces, as they nodded back and smiled at Horner and myself, contrasted strongly with their

mother's lugubrious visage. I wonder if anybody ever saw her laugh? I've got my doubts about it.

Then came out Miss Pimpernell, her kind old face beaming with smiles as she bowed here and there, and gave a cordial greeting to us young fellows, who still stood around the church porch. She did not forget me, you may be certain. "God bless you, Frank, my boy!" she said, in her affectionate, purring way; dismissing me home with a light heart to eat the traditionary roast turkey and plum-pudding, at peace with all mankind, and in love with all womankind for her sake.

What a happy, happy day it had been!

That night I passed and repassed Min's house a dozen times at least, only that I might see her shadow on the blinds, weaving luxurious castles in Spain the while. I would be a great general, a distinguished orator, a famous statesman, a celebrated author! I would do some grand, heroic action. I desired to be "somebody," something, only great and glorious! And yet, as One above is my judge, I had not one selfish craving, not a single purely-personal thought in connection with these mad wishes. It was but for *her* sake that I longed for honour and fame and advancement. Only for her, only for her!

CHAPTER SIX.

"ECSTASY!"

"...From thy rose-red lips my name Floweth; and then, as in a swoon, With dinning sound my ears are rife, My tremulous tongue faltereth, I lose my colour, I lose my breath, I drink the cup of a costly death, Brimm'd with delirious draughts of warmest life!"

Some few days after Christmas, little Miss Pimpernell gave a small evening party for the especial delectation of those who had so meritoriously assisted in the decoration of the church.

Of course, it was not at all like the "barty" the celebrated Hans Breitman "giv'd" to his friends for the imbibition of "lager beer" ad

libitum; but still, one may feel inclined to exclaim, in the exquisite broken words of that worthy, "Where am dat barty now?" For, time has worked its usual changes; and all of us have long since been divided, separated, scattered, and dispersed to the four winds of heaven, so to speak, to the severance of old ties, and all kindred associations.

I had not had the slightest inkling that the "little affair" was about to "come off" beforehand. I had met Miss Pimpernell out the very morning of the day on which it took place; yet--sly old lady that she was--she hardly gave me a hint of her social intent.

She certainly said that she had a little surprise in store for me; but when I pressed her to learn what that "something" was, she preserved a provoking reticence, declining to enlighten me any further. "No, Frank," she said in her cheery way, "it is of no use your trying to coax me with your `dear Miss Pimpernell,' or think to flatter me into divulging my news by false compliments paid to my shabby old bonnet! No, you shall hear it all in good time, so don't be impatient. I won't tell you another word now, my boy, there!" she added finally, trotting off on her parochial rounds and leaving me in suspense until the evening, to exercise my imagination regarding her contemplated "surprise."

Then, however, I was let into the secret; and the party was all the more pleasurable from coming quite unexpectedly. I always like doing things on the spur of the moment, without premeditation. If you look out for anything long beforehand, it is apt to pall on the palate when it arrives within your reach. "Unlooked-for blessings" are generally twice as grateful as those which you are led to expect--so, at least, I have found them.

On my return home from a walk in the evening, I found a little note of invitation awaiting me, in which Miss Pimpernell requested me to come round to the vicarage precisely at eight, "dressed all in my best," like the impassioned lover of "Sally in our Alley," as she "expected a few friends." She added in a postscript, underlined with one of her characteristic dashes, that *Miss Clyde* would be there, if that would be any further inducement for me.

Oh Miss Pimpernell, you machiavellian old lady! I would not have thought you could have practised such great dissimulation. Would Min's presence be any further inducement to me! Wouldn't it? Oh, dear no, certainly not!

In ten minutes' time I was dressed en regle and at the vicarage.

It was quite a nice little party. Not one too many, and not a single discordant element. Old ladies and gentlemen seemed to have been rigidly tabooed, with the exception, naturally, of our host and hostess, the vicar and his sister; for Lady Dasher, owing to some fortunate conjuncture of circumstances, was unable to come: Miss Spight was busy at home, entertaining an elderly relative who had suddenly thrown herself on her hospitality; while Mr Mawley was at Oxford enjoying the season with sundry dogmatic Fellows of his own calibre. Minus these charmers, our gathering was pretty much what it had been down in the old school-room at the decorations. There were the Dasher girls, two young collegians from Cambridge--ex-pupils of the vicar--to entertain Bessie and Seraphine, Lizzie Dangler, Horner with his inseparable eye-glass and faultless toilet, Baby Blake for *his* entertainment--Miss Pimpernell was a wise caterer--Min, and myself.

Our hostess had so planned that we should all pair off, each lady having her cavalier, as she said, in the good old-fashioned way. She planned very ably, as we had one of the pleasantest evenings imaginable, without any stiffness or formality or being forced to make a toil of enjoyment, in the customary manner of most fashionable reunions: we were not "fashionable," thank goodness. But we had "a good time" of it, as young America says, all the same.

What did we do?

Well, then, there were none of those abominable "round games," which, unless they descend to vulgar romping, are the dreariest attempts at conviviality possible to conceive; none of those dreadful and much-to-be-avoided exactions and remissions of "forfeits," that plunge everybody into embarrassing situations, and destroy, instead of creating, sociability; none of those stock--so-called--"drawing-room

entertainments;" in fact, which always result in hopeless boredom. But, we had a little music and part-singing: a little lively, general chit- chat, in which all could join and each take a share: a few anecdotes well told--a complete success, to be brief, in making us all feel perfectly natural and at ease, for we were allowed to do and say exactly what we pleased in moderation.

Each of us was made to feel that his or her absence would have detracted from the happiness of the rest; and *that* is the true art of treating one's guests--an art which both the vicar and Miss Pimpernell had apparently studied to perfection, although it really proceeded from their natural good-heartedness.

But, amongst our company I had almost forgotten to enumerate the name of Monsieur Parole d'Honneur, one of the nicest of French emigres and a dear friend of the vicar's; one known to most of us, also, for many years.

Perhaps you may chance to remember the noise that the great Barnard extradition case made in the newspapers--and, indeed, all over England too, for that matter--in the year 1859?

You don't? Why, it nearly led to a war between France and Britain! Did you never hear how the fiercely-moustachioed Gallic colonels swaggered about the Boulogne cafes, loud in their denunciations of perfidious Albion, while smoking their endless cigarettes and sipping their poisonous absinthe; and how, but for the staunch fidelity of the ill-fated Emperor Napoleon--since deserted by his quondam ally--and the jaunty pluck of our then gallant premier, brave "old Pam"--whose loss we have had ample reason, oftentimes of late, to deplore--there might have been a sudden rupture of that "entente cordiale" between the two nations, which was cemented in the Crimea, and expired but a couple of years ago under the besieged walls of Paris?

Ah! that was a time when the whilom "Cupid's" boast, "Civis Anglicanus sum," was not an empty claim, as it is in these days of poverty-stricken "retrenchments," and senile forfeitures of all that made England great and grand through five hundred years of history!

But the Barnard case--you must have heard of that, surely? It was just about the period when the wonderful volunteer fever commenced to rage with such intense earnestness over here; and when our "valuable auxiliary forces"--as amateur military critics in the House are so fond of repeating--were first instituted, in the fear of a second invasion of this sacred realm of liberty. We did not then place much reliance on the "streak of silver sea," when in the direct face of danger, as a great "statesman" would have us do now that it no longer confronts us! Ha, at last you recollect, eh? I need not prompt your memory any further.

Bien. It was at this period that Monsieur Parole d'Honneur was advised in high official circles that it would be for the benefit of his health if he quitted French soil for awhile. He had been known to have once been intimately associated with Mazzini, and that gentleman was supposed to be implicated in the Orsini affair--when an attempt was made against Napoleon's life in the Place d'Opera; so, as Parole d'Honneur had likewise been heard to speak rather unguardedly at a political club of patriots to which he belonged, the prefectorial mind "putting that and that together," very reasonably presumed that our friend must have some connection with the bomb conspirators. The consequences were, that Parole d'Honneur was told to quit Paris instantly, and leave France itself within four-and-twenty hours,--although he was innocent of the slightest knowledge concerning the plot.

However, there was no help for it. Prefects are not in the habit of discussing their suspicions with suspected persons; and thus he had to bid adieu to his country in a hurry. He thereupon shook off its dust from his papier-mache-soled boots, coming to England, in the manner of his compatriots, to earn his livelihood as a teacher of languages.

Having the highest recommendations, he easily obtained as much employment as he wanted, and devoted himself to giving conversational lectures to a circle of collegiate establishments lying in different parts of London, which he visited bi-weekly, or so, in turn. Amongst these was one in our suburb; hence, first an acquaintance and then a lasting friendship sprung up between him and the vicar, both taking to each other immensely through their large-hearted philosophy;

thus, too, I also got acquainted with one of the brightest, cheeriest, kindest Gauls of many that I have had the happiness of knowing.

At the time of which I write, Parole d'Honneur was a very happy emigre, despite his enforced exile in the land of fogs. Indeed, he was an exile no longer in the strict sense of the word, as he had received permission to go back to France whenever he pleased; a permission of which he had already availed himself, having paid a visit, in company with me, to Paris, the previous month, at the time when I had been so miserable and despondent about not meeting Min again. However, he had become so fond of England and things English, from his long enforced residence here, that he avowed his determination of living and dying amongst us--that is, unless his country and "the cause" should have need of his services.

On the evening of Miss Pimpernell's little party, this patriotic gentleman, in the presence of ladies, whom he reverenced with a knight- errant's devotion and homage, was the life of our circle. He carried an aroma of fun and light-heartedness about him that was simply contagious. He sang Beranger's ditties with a verve and elan that brought back bonny Paris and student days to those of us who were acquainted with them. One moment he played exquisite bits from Mozart on his violin, to the accompaniment of the vicar's violoncello, that were most entrancing; the next, scraped away at some provoking tarantella that almost set the whole of us dancing, in defiance of the proprieties generally observed at the vicarage.

We were asking each other riddles and conundrums. Monsieur Parole suddenly bethought him of one. "Ah, ha!" he said, "I heard one good reedel ze ozer day. A leetle mees at one of my academies told it me. Young ladies, why is ze old gentlemans, le diable, zat is--"

"O-oh! Monsieur Parole!" ejaculated Miss Pimpernell.

"Your pardon, Mees Peemple," said Monsieur Parole--he never could give her the additional syllable to her name--"Your pardon, Mees Peemple; but we wiz call hims somesing else. Why is--ah, ha! I have got hims. Why is Lucifers like, when riding sur un souris, on a mouse,

like the very same tings? You gives him up? Ah, ha! I t'ought you would never guess him!" he continued, on our professing our ignorance of the solution. "Because he is synonime!--vat you calls sin-on-a-mouse! Ha, ha, ha!" and he burst into a chuckle of his merry laughter.

This reminded Horner of one. "Bai-ey Je-ove!" he said, after a long pause. "I--ah, came akwass a vewy good one the othah day--ah. A blind beggah had a bwoth-ah, and the bwoth-ah died; now, what welation was-- ah, the blind beggah to the--ah, dead beggah?"

"His sister, of course," said Bessie Dasher, promptly.

"Weally," said Horner, who usually put on most of his *w* and *r* ish airs when in the presence of ladies in evening costume: in the day he sometimes spoke more plainly. "Weally, how clevah you ah! I asshaw you, I didn't gwess it for neawy a week--ah!"

"I can quite believe *that*!" said Seraphine, wickedly.

"Did you ever hear any of Praed's charades?" I asked Min.

"No," she said. "Do you recollect some?"

"Ah," put in the vicar, "Praed was a clever fellow; and a true poet, too."

"Indeed?" said Min. "I have heard his name, but I've never seen anything that he wrote. Do you recollect any of his charades, Mr Lorton?" she asked again, turning to me.

"I think I remember one," I said, repeating those three spirited verses which are well-known, beginning "Come from my First, ay, come!"

"How beautiful the lines are!" said Min; "but it seems a pity that they should be thrown away on a mere charade."

"That was exactly Praed's way," said the vicar. "I remember well, when I was a young man at college, what a stir his name made, and what great things were predicted of him, that he never lived to realise."

"He died young, did he not?" asked Min.

"Yes," said the vicar, "in his thirty-second year. If he had lived, he would probably have been one of the foremost men in England to-day."

"`Whom the gods love, die young,'" quoted I grandiloquently, like Mawley.

"True," said the vicar. "There is more philosophy in that, than in most of those old Pagan beliefs: there is a glimmering of Christianity about the saying."

"I wonder," said Miss Pimpernell, "whether there is any connection between it and the text, `Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth'?"

"I can't say, my dear," said the vicar, "if you are right in this instance; but there is often a great similarity between different parts of the Bible and the utterances of profane writers."

"Have you ever noticed, sir," said Min, "how David says in the Psalms that `all the foundations of the world are out of course;' while Shakespeare makes Hamlet observe that `the world is out of joint'?"

"Yes," said the vicar, "and there are many other parallels that could be drawn from Shakespeare. He was frequently indebted to the inspired volume for his reflections; whether wittingly or unknowingly, I cannot say."

"I think," said I, "that Douglas Jerrold's celebrated bon mot about Australia must be put down to the same source. He said, if you remember, speaking of the prolific nature of the soil of the new continent, `Tickle her with a hoe, and she will laugh with a harvest;' and in the Psalms we have the verse, `The valleys also shall stand so thick with corn, that they shall laugh and sing.'"

"It is debatable," said the vicar, "whether we should ascribe these striking resemblances to unconscious plagiarism or to similarity of thought."

"We will have to agree with Solomon," said I, "that there is nothing new under the sun!"

"True enough, Frank," said the vicar. "From the explorations at Nineveh and at Pompeii, we have already learnt that the ancients well knew of what we in our pride long ascribed to modern inquiry and research."

Miss Pimpernell here calling upon her brother and Monsieur Parole for some more of their concerted music, they sat down to a sonata of Beethoven. The remainder of us broke up into little coteries; Min and I having a long quiet talk, under cover of the deep tones of the vicar's violoncello, in a corner by the piano, where we entrenched ourselves for some time undisturbed.

What did we say?

I'm sure I can't tell you. Probably we talked about the weather and the crops; the prospects of the coming season; the expected new tenor at the opera, who was said to rival Orpheus and put Mario into the shade; or, peradventure, we discussed political economy, grumbling over the high price of meat and the general expenses of housekeeping! But, please put yourself in our place, and you will be able, I have no doubt, to imagine all we could possibly have found to chat about, much better, probably, than I can describe it. I will merely say for your guidance, without entering into details, that it was happiness, rapture to me, to be only beside her--will that enlighten you at all?

Later on, came supper.

After that we had some part-singing of good old glees, like "The Chough and Crow," "Here in cool Grot," and the ever-beautiful "Dawn of Day." We then separated, after the pleasantest of evenings, when it was close on midnight:--Miss Pimpernell's party had been emphatically a social success.

Of course I walked home with Min. I had been so much with her of late, that I somehow or other began to look upon her as my own property;

and was jealous of the interference of anyone else. You should have seen how I glared at Horner when he suggested, good-naturedly enough, that Min should go round, by the way that the Dasher girls and the others went, under his escort! How overjoyed I was when she politely declined the offer, saying that, as her mamma was sitting up for her, she must hurry home by the shortest way!

She looked like a little fairy, tripping along beside me through the fresh-looking frozen snow, her dark dress and scarlet petticoat showing out in strong relief against the glittering white of the roadway. The moon was shining brightly, so that it was as light as day; and I could see her face distinctly as she looked up into mine every now and then to answer some remark. Her honest, lustrous, grey eyes sparkled with fun, while a little ripple of silvery laughter came occasionally from the rosebud-parted coral lips! We chatted merrily, exchanging notes touching the enjoyments of the evening.

We gradually approached her door. I was telling her that, instead of mere days, I seemed to have known her for years and could not affect to treat her as a stranger.

She said that she looked upon me almost as an old friend already.

I asked her if she would let me abandon the formal appellation of "Miss Clyde," and call her "Min?"

She said, "Yes."

I asked her then, ere the door opened, on wishing her "good-bye," with a lingering hand-clasp, whether she would not call me by my Christian name, too?

She gently whispered, "Frank"--so softly, so faintly, that the night-wind, sighing by, could not catch the accents and bear the sound to alien ears; but *I* heard it, and my heart throbbed in a delirious tempest of happiness; I lost my senses almost: my head swam in a whirlwind of tumultuous joy: I was intoxicated with ecstasy!

"Good-night, Frank!" I heard her dear, sweet voice whispering, like strains of music in my heart, as I went homewards. I seemed to feel her warm violet breath still on my cheek. I could fancy I yet gazed into the star-depths of her soul-speaking, deep, grey eyes.

"Good-night, Frank!" The words sang in my ears all night, and I slept in fairyland.

CHAPTER SEVEN.

DOUBT.

"Thro' light and shadow thou dost range, Sudden glances sweet and strange, Delicious spites and darling angers, And airy forms of flitting change."

I had not yet had an opportunity of being introduced to Min's mother.

'Pon my word, you exclaim, this looks very serious!

I beg to differ from you. We had been brought together legitimately enough, down at the church-decoration-gathering in the school-room: we had been regularly introduced by no less a clerical authority than little Miss Pimpernell, the vicar's sister: we had then and there associated under the safest chaperonage--good heavens! would not Miss Spight's jealous green eyes, that were certain to pick out the tiniest blot in her fellow man or woman, and Lady Dasher's stately, albeit melancholy presence, satisfy you? Thus, the "convenances," that horrid Anglo-French pseudonym, of the still more horrible bugbear "society," had no cause to consider themselves neglected and find an excuse for taking umbrage. From this point, our acquaintanceship naturally and gradually ripened. We got intimate: it was our fate, I suppose--what more or less would you have expected?

Besides, although, mind you, I do not consider myself in any way bound to allay your curiosity and satisfy your compunctious scruples, you should remember that all of us young parishioners of Saint Canon's-- Horner, Baby Blake, Lizzie Dangler and the rest--had known

each other almost from the distant days of childhood; and, consequently, were in the habit of *tutoyer*-ing one another, using our respective "given" names in familiar conversation. The habit may be a bad one, it is true, but you cannot prevent it sometimes. There is no practice so capable of imitation as that of calling one another by the Christian name. It is just like that of the monkeys all cleaning their teeth along the banks of the Amazon with pieces of stick, because they saw Professor Agassiz setting them an example one fine morning, when engaged on his toilet in company with a tooth-brush. You can't help yourself: you must bow to the custom and follow suit.

In this instance, there was Miss Pimpernell, always addressing *her* as "Min," and *me* as "Frank." The Dasher girls and others soon learnt to do the same. What more likely than that we ourselves should fall into a similar friendly system? It was only reasonable; and a result which even a less alert person than yourself would have looked for. At all events, neither of us meant any harm by it; and I am willing to "take my affidavit" to that effect any day you please to name, in any Court of Justice you may appoint.

Notwithstanding the intimate footing that now existed between Min and myself, the fact of my non-acquaintance with her mother, annoyed me extremely. You need not flatter yourself, however. It was not in the least on account of any conscientious qualms, like yours.

I wished to know her personally from a totally different motive; and yet, in spite of all attempts and stratagems on my part, I never could get a chance of meeting her when I was in the company of some kind friend to act as go-between and soothe the exigencies of introduction; although, when alone I would encounter her frequently. This was very vexing--especially so after a while; and I'll tell you how it was.

As the days flew by, and the new year, born in a moment, grew with giant strides in that hasty growth common to all new years--they have a habit of shooting ahead the first few months of their existence, as if they desired to "force the pace," and make all the "running" they can--my facilities for intercourse with Min became "small by degrees and beautifully less." There you have the cause of my annoyance at

once.

I could see her at the window, certainly. I also frequently passed her mother and herself in the street, or on The Terrace, or along the Prebend's Walk, when I was taking an airing abroad with dog Catch at my heels; yet, I don't know how it was, but I invariably chanced to be on the opposite side of the street, or road, or terrace, whenever I thus passed them. I never failed to receive the timid little bow and smile from Min, with a rosy heightening of her complexion the while--to which I had now got so accustomed that, should I have been debarred from their receipt, I would have considered myself very hardly used and felt a morbid inclination to go mad and drown myself. But, Min's bow was hardly sufficient to introduce me to her mother, even if people could be introduced from opposite sides of roads. Thus it was that I remained a stranger to Mrs Clyde, and did not have a chance of meeting her daughter and talking to her, as I might have done if I could but have visited her at home.

I never was able to have a word with her now, never could hear her darling voice repeat my name in those soft accents I loved so well. It was very hard--very hard, indeed! You see, I had ample reasons, beyond the requirements of mere social etiquette, for wishing to know Mrs Clyde.

Our suburb, you must know, was an extremely quiet place--"remote, unfriended, solitary, slow."

Although everybody knew everybody, who happened to be anybody at all, there was not much of current sociability and party giving. We were not sociable. On the contrary, we were a very humdrum lot; rising early and going to town to our business and daily toil--such of us as had any sort of business to attend to--and coming back at a fixed regular hour. We were in the habit of having our respective dinners and teas, and, mayhap, suppers, at certain appointed times and seasons--also duly regulated--and subsequently going to bed, to recruit for the same routine on the morrow, without any excitements, or renovation and destruction of tissue worth speaking of.

A "tea-party" was quite a sensation in the parish of Saint Canon's--equivalent to one of the queen's garden fetes. Beyond school treats and working parties, to which latter only the clergy and Lady Dorcases were admitted, and the anniversary of Christmas, when we sometimes *did* indulge a little in wholesome but subdued gaiety, we went on from year's beginning to year's end without balls, or dinners, or dances, or any of those resources which fashionable people have for killing time and keeping up acquaintanceship.

We were not "high-toned" people; quite the reverse, in fact, as, I believe, I have previously described. We only "dropped in" of an evening to see friends, and spend a quiet hour or two over bezique and music. On these occasions, a carpet cotillon or quadrille has been sometimes indulged in; but it was the exception and not the rule. We were generally satisfied with much milder pastime; our visits rarely exceeding the interval between tea and "supper" time, when we partook of a friendly, though seedy, abernethy and glass of wine or beer; and then went home virtuously to bed.

Our society being thus constituted, it became a matter almost of impossibility to meet any one particular person frequently, excepting out in the street, unless you had the entree of their house. Hence, I never could chat with Min, as I had done at the decorations; and, naturally, I felt very much aggrieved thereanent.

What made it additionally provoking to me was, that Horner had contrived to get introduced to Mrs Clyde almost as soon as she had settled in the place, before I had returned from Paris; and there was Mr Mawley the curate, too, exercising the privilege of his cloth by continually frequenting her house. He drove me to desperation by going in and out, apparently just as the fancy suited him, as if he were a tame cat about the place.

His conduct was perfectly odious--that is, to any right-thinking person.

Curates and cousins are, I consider, two of the greatest obstacles to an innocent layman's intimacy with the diviner portion of creation; and, in these days of reform and disestablishment, of hereditary and other

conservative grievances, something ought to be done to abolish the persons in question, or at least handicap them so that other deserving young men might have a fair chance in the race for beauty's smile and Hymen's chain. They have an enormous advantage, at present, over outside men-folk. Girls like to have a sort of good-natured lap-dog about them, to play with occasionally and run their errands, "do this" and "that" for the asking--like Cornelius the centurion's obedient servant--and make himself generally useful, without looking for any ulterior reward on account of services rendered. You see, cousins and curates are regarded as "harmless"--"detrimentals with the chill off," so to speak. His scrap of relationship throws a glimmer of possession around the one, endowing with inherent right every act of his ministry; while his "cloth" invests the other with a halo of sanctity and Platonic freedom that disarms gossip of the usual clothes-peg whereon it hangs its scandal. "Cousin Tom"--by-the-way, did you ever read Mackworth Praed's lines on the same theme?--is allowed opportunities for, and latitude in, flirtation, which poor Corydon, not a cousin never so remote, may sigh in vain for; and, who would be so despicable as to impute secular motives to the Reverend Hobplush's tender ministrations towards those sweet young "sisters," who dote on his sucking sermons and work him carpet slippers and text-markers without limit? Certainly, not I.

I do not mean to say, however, that curates and cousins have it all their own way always. There's a sweet little cupid who "sits up aloft," like Jack's guardian angel, to watch o'er the loves of poor laymen. Still, it is very galling, to one of an ardent temperament especially, to mark the anxious solicitude with which "Cousin Tom" may hang over the divine creature--whom you can only look upon from afar as some distant star--without attracting any observations anent his "attentions." The confounded airs of possession he gives himself, while you are languishing "out in the cold," in the expressive vernacular, are frightful to contemplate. As for curate Hobplush, he may drop in whenever he pleases, being treated like one of the family circle; while you, miserable creature, can only call at stated intervals, always dreading the horrid possibility of out-staying your welcome, and receiving the metaphorical "cold shoulder"--though love may prompt you to the

sacrifice.

Such was my position now.

There was Mr Mawley visiting at Mrs Clyde's house some half-a-dozen times a week, for all I knew to the contrary--and of course I imagined the worst--and having endless chances and opportunities of conversing with my darling, in the morning, at noontide, and at night; while poor, wretched *I* had to content myself with a passing bow and smile when we chanced to meet abroad, or I should happen to see her dainty figure at the window as I promenaded past her house.

You say I ought to have considered myself lucky to get even that slight modicum of notice?

But I did *not* so consider myself. I was not by any means contented. Where did you ever find a lover worth his salt who was?

To tell the truth, I was horribly jealous of Mawley. He was not at all a bad-looking fellow; and, with all his dogmatic tone and love of argument, had a wonderfully taking way with ladies. Besides, his connection with the Church gave him a considerable pull over me--girls are so impressionable, as a rule, with regard to nice young curates, that they generally have the pick of the parish! Really, all things considered, I'm very much afraid that I had not that kind Christian feeling and charity in my heart towards Mawley that the vicar had enjoined in his Christmas sermon. I did not regard the curate even with that reverence which his Oxford waistcoat should have inspired. I believe that at that particular time I looked upon him with somewhat of the same feeling with which the homicidal Cain regarded his brother Abel about the sacrificing business.

Then, there was Horner, too, who was generally looked upon as an "eligible" person, having a respectable position of his own in addition to considerable expectations from his rich uncle, as I told you before. I could see that Mrs Clyde encouraged him. He was always going there, and frequently walking out with them also. I saw him, and it made my heart bitter. One evening, I met him in full costume, with an opera-

glass slung round his shoulders, just before he reached their door. He told me that Mrs Clyde had asked him to accompany her daughter and herself to Covent Garden and share their box. They would have waited a considerable time, I thought, before they would have been invited to share *his*! I watched them drive off, and I went home mad. It was getting too grievous for mortal to bear.

The house felt suffocating to me that evening. I could not stop in. I determined to go and call on my old friend Miss Pimpernell, and see what she could do to cheer me up.

"My dear boy," she said, as I entered the parlour, where she sat darning the vicar's socks by the light of a moderator lamp, which stood on a little table close beside her. "My dear boy, what is the matter with you? You look quite haggard, and like a wild man from the woods! Have you had your tea yet? I can ring for some in a moment."

"No, pray don't, thank you," I answered. "Miss Pimpernell," I continued, in a determined voice, "I have had tea enough to-night to last me for a twelvemonth! I can't bear this any longer. You must introduce me to Mrs Clyde. I have never been able as yet to make her acquaintance, and I want to go to her house as Horner does, and that fellow Mawley."

"Hush, my dear boy!" she said, in her soothing way, as if she were stroking me down the back like she stroked her tabby Tom--one of the mousiest and most petted of cats. "You should not speak so of a clergyman, my dear Frank. Think what the vicar would say if he heard you!"

"Oh, never mind Mr Mawley," I said, somewhat petulantly; "I want to know Mrs Clyde."

"Ah! that's what's the matter, is it, Frank? Then why did you not come to old Sally before?"

"Well, Miss Pimpernell," I replied, "I never thought of you until to-night."

"Never thought of me! You *are* ungallant, Master Frank! But think of me next time, my dear boy, whenever you find yourself in a difficulty; and if Sally Pimpernell can help you out of it, she will, you may depend!"

"Oh, thank you, dear Miss Pimpernell! And when will you introduce me to Mrs Clyde?" I asked, thinking it best to "strike the iron" whilst it was "hot."

"Come round to-morrow afternoon, Frank," she replied. "She is going to be here by appointment, to see me about some charity in which she is interested; and I'll try and manage it for you then."

"I'll be here, Miss Pimpernell, without fail," I said. "I can never be sufficiently obliged to you, if you do it."

"All right, my boy," she said. "I'm sure I shall be very glad to help you in such a trifling matter. But I do not want any of your soft speeches, Frank! Keep them for somebody else who will appreciate them better;" and she laughed her cheery, merry laugh, wishing me good-night and sending me home much easier in my mind and happier than I had been for many days past.

On the following afternoon I was introduced, as my old friend had promised; and you may be certain that I tried to make myself as agreeable as I could be to Min's mother. I think I succeeded, too; for, when I took my leave early, in order to allow Miss Pimpernell and her visitor an opportunity of discussing the best way of relieving the parish poor, Mrs Clyde gave me an invitation.

"Mr Lorton," said she, "I should be glad if you would come round and see us on Wednesday evening--I think you know our address? My daughter is going to have a few friends in for a little music; and we shall both be happy if you will join us. Miss Pimpernell tells me you are very musical."

"With great pleasure," I answered, in society's stock phraseology. With the "greatest" pleasure, I might have said, as I could almost have

jumped for joy. Just fancy! all that I had longed for was accorded in a moment. My good fairy must undoubtedly have been hovering about the vicarage premises that day; and I strongly suspect my good fairy in this instance, as was the case also in many other circumstances of my life, being none other than my very unfairylike old friend, little Miss Pimpernell, the vicar's kind-hearted sister.

Did I not look forward to Wednesday evening? Did I not, when the time for me to dress at last came round after an excruciatingly long interval, bestow the most elaborate and unheard-of pains on my toilet, almost rivalling Horner's generally unimpeachable "get up"? Did I not proceed in the utmost joy and gladness towards the habitation of my darling?

I should rather think I did!

And yet, when I crossed the threshold of Miss Clyde's house, I was seized with a sudden vague impression of uneasiness. I felt a, to me, singular sensation of nervousness, shyness, "mauvais honte"--just as if a cold key had been put down my back--for which I was at a loss to account. Those who know me say that bashfulness is one of the least of my virtues; and, I do not think that I am constitutionally timid--so why this feeling? Was it not a foreboding of evil? I believe it was, for everything went wrong with me that night, instead of my having a surfeit of pleasure, as I had sanguinely expected.

"Hope told a flattering tale." My good fairy deceived me. My unpropitious star was again in the ascendant.

In fact, my bad genius reigned supreme, in spite of such counteracting influences as my being at last admitted to Min's home and permitted to watch her gliding movements about the room, hear her liquid voice, catch the bright looks from her glancing grey eyes, speak to her, smile with her, adore her.

Yes, in spite of all this, my bad influence reigned supreme; and, I'm afraid, something wrong must have been done at my baptism to disgust my better genii.

In the first place, I arrived too soon, which was a calamity in itself. There is always pardon for one who goes late to an evening party--nay, it often enhances his reputation. Absolution may even be extended to the calculating individual who ravenously times his arrival by the supper hour; but, for a simple-minded person, unaccustomed to the usages of polite society, to believe in the invariability of fixed appointments and, taking an invitation au pied de la lettre, make his appearance a full hour before any other guest would dare to "turn up," from the fear of being thought unfashionable, is simply monstrous! His behaviour is perfectly inexcusable; and, as a punishment, he should in future be compelled for a certain time to dine at our Saxon forefathers' early hour, and go to bed at the sound of the curfew bell instituted by their Norman conquerors--that is how I would teach him manners!

I committed this grievous fault on the present occasion. I had been so anxious to get there in good time and not miss a minute of Min's charming company, that, like our friend Paddy who ate his breakfast over night in order to save time in the morning, I overdid it, arriving there too early. I saw this at once from Mrs Clyde's face when I was announced, the unhappy premier of all the coming guests.

Perhaps it was only my fancy, as I'm extremely sensitive on such points, for she received me courteously enough, pressing the welcoming cup of coffee and hospitable muffin in an adjoining ante-room on my notice; but, I thought I could perceive, below the veneer of social civility, a sort of "how-tiresome-of-you-to-come-before-anybody-else" look in her eyes, which made me extremely small in my own estimation.

It was a horrible interval waiting for the other guests to come and support me. I made a vow there and then that I would never again present myself wherever I might be invited out until a full hour beyond the specified time--and I've generally kept it, too!

Min did not treat me cavalierly, however, notwithstanding that I had arrived in advance of expectation. *She* was all kindness and grace, endeavouring to make the "mauvais quart d'heure" of my solitary guesthood pass away as little uncomfortably to me as possible.

She asked me to come and see her flowers in the bay window of the drawing-room, which she had fitted up as a tiny conservatory; while her mother sat down to the piano and played dreamy music in a desultory fashion. I like dreamy music, although it always makes me melancholy-- indeed, all music affects me the same way, in spite of my not being by any means what you would call a sad person. On the contrary, I am supposed to be one of the most light-hearted fellows imaginable, and, certainly, laugh more than I ever cry. However, mirth and sadness are closer allies than people generally suspect. All emotion proceeds, more or less, from hysteria.

While Mrs Clyde was playing, Min and I got talking. She thanked me for coming early; and upbraided the absent guests for thinking it fashionable to come later than bidden.

We discussed the rival merits of a scarlet japonica and a double fuchsia, giving the palm of merit to the former, though the latter had some wondrous lobes; and I was also asked my opinion whether her favourite maidenhair fern would survive a sudden and unaccountable blight which had fallen upon it a few days before.

She then showed me the identical violets I had given her that Christmas morning, now so long passed by: she had tipped the stalks with sealing wax and preserved them in cotton wool, so that they looked as fresh as when first gathered.

"There!" she said, with an air of triumph. "There, Mr Lorton! I have kept them ever since."

"Mr Lorton!" I repeated, "who is he? I don't know him."

"Well, `Frank,' then--will that please you better, you tiresome thing?"

"You know you promised," I said, apologetically.

"Did I?" she asked, with charming naivete.

"Why, have you forgotten that night already?" I said, in a melancholy

tone.

"Don't be so lugubrious," she said. "You have to amuse me. You mustn't remember all my promises."

"Are they so unsubstantial?" I asked.

"No, they're not, sir!" she said, stamping her foot in affected anger. "But what do you say to my keeping your violets so long, Frank?"

"What do I say?" I repeated after her, looking my delight into her eyes; when, a frantic chord, struck deep down in the bass by Mrs Clyde, marking the finish of some piece of Wagner's, recalled us both to every- day life.

As nobody else had yet arrived, Min challenged me to a game of chess.

I allowed her to win the first game easily.

She pouted, saying that she supposed I thought it below my dignity to put forth my best energies in playing against a lady!

Thereupon, I *did* exert myself; but, she was just as provokingly dissatisfied.

I took her queen. She protested it was unfair.

I offered to restore it to her; she would not have it at any price;--she wished me to play the game, she said, just as if I were playing with a man.

I checkmated her. She got up in a pet, saying that chess was a nasty, stupid, tiresome thing, and that she would not play it any longer.

O, the contrariness of feminine nature!

Other people now began to drop in; and it was *my* turn to get put out.

I heard it was Min's birthday, which I had not known before. I saw that

they remembered it; while, I, had not brought her even a paltry flower!

Everybody was wishing her "many happy returns of the day." I had not done so; neither had I any opportunity of atoning for my neglect, as she was too busy receiving the new comers; but, indeed, I would have been too proud to excuse myself after witnessing Mr Mawley's "effusion."

He seemed to me to be guilty of unpardonable effrontery in holding Min's hand such an unconscionably long time in his, when presenting a miserable shop-bouquet; and, as for the lackadaisical airs of that insufferable donkey, Horner--I can find no words adequate wherewith to express what I thought; he was positively sickening!

I did not have another chance of speaking to Min either; that is, unless I chose to bawl what I had to say across a crowded room; and, I need hardly say, I did not exactly care about that!

She appeared to me to be very inconsistent, too.

She seemed really much more interested in Mawley's conversation than *I* thought any reasonable person could be; while *he* was grinning and carrying on at a rate, which, if I had been Mrs Clyde, I would not have allowed for a moment.

O, the equilibriant temperament of the "superior" sex!

Min teased me yet further.

She sang every song that Mawley and Horner asked her for, playing the accompaniments for the latter when he favoured the company with his idea of ballad vocalisation.

Horner thought he possessed a fine tenor voice: I didn't think so, especially on this evening!

But, no matter what these two asked her to do, she did. If *I*, however, requested any particular song, she said she did not believe she could manage it; her voice could not compass it; she had lent it out; or, she

hadn't got it!

Was it not enough to provoke one? Wouldn't you have been affected by it?

In addition to Horner and Mawley, there was also an odious cousin of hers, called "Jack," or "Tom," or "Ned," or some other abominably familiar abbreviation, who hung over the piano stool, and said "Min, do this," and "Min, do that," in a way that drove me to frenzy.

I hate cousins! I don't see the necessity for them. I'm sure people can get along very well without their existence. I would do away with them to-morrow by act of Parliament, if I only had the power.

When everybody else who had a voice at all had exercised their vocal powers, Mrs Clyde at last asked me to sing.

Instead of declining, as I would have done at any other time, on account of her slight, I bowed my acquiescence and went to the piano.

To tell you the truth, I was glad of the opportunity afforded me for carrying out a petty piece of revenge against Min, of which I had suddenly bethought me.

I had composed a little song, you must know, that I believed highly applicable to her at the moment, although when I had written it she was no more in my mind than Adam or Eve, or both!

I sang it, looking into her face the while, as she stood by the instrument; and these were the words. I gave them expression enough, you may be sure.

"My lady's eyes are soft and blue, deep-changing as the iris hue; *But, eyes deceive Hearts `worn on sleeve,' And make us oft their power rue*!

"Her little mouth--a `sunny south'--wafts perfumed kisses to the wind; *But, winds blow cold, And kiss of old, A trait'rous symbol was, I find*!

"For pearly teeth and rosebud lips, whose honied wealth the zephyr sips,

But bait the lair Where fickle fair, Like Scylla, wreck men's stately ships--

"And witching eyes and plaintive sighs, and looks of love and tender words-- Love's tricking arts - *Are poison'd darts, More awesome far than pendant swords*!"

"Thank you," said Mrs Clyde; "it is very pretty. Your own, I suppose?"

"Yes," I said. I did not feel disposed to be more communicative.

"What do you call it?" asked Min, carelessly.

"`Per Contra,'" I answered. "Don't you think it a suitable title?"

"Yes, *I understand*" she said. "Thank you, *Mr Lorton*!"

She spoke, with marked emphasis.

A little time afterwards, when I was sitting moodily in a corner, with a book before me which I was supposed to be looking at, but whose bare title escapes my recollection, Min came to my side; and, she began overhauling some volumes of music that were piled up in a heap on the floor.

"Mr Lorton," she said, hesitatingly.

That "Mr Lorton" set my teeth on edge.

I made no reply.

"Frank!"

"Yes," I said, testily.

I felt very angry with her for her attentions to Horner and Mawley, and, as I thought, neglect of me; so, I wished to let her know it.

"Frank," she repeated, "didn't you mean that song at me?"

"Yes, I did," I replied, very grumpily.

"Foolish fellow!" she said; "what a very bad opinion you must have of me, although I did not know my eyes were blue before! You said the other night they were grey," and she smiled bewitchingly. But, I wouldn't be coaxed into good humour.

"Ce m'est egal," I answered coldly, "whatever they are."

"You are very cross!" she said pettishly; "I will go and talk to Mr Mawley, until you get into a better mood, sir, and are more amiable."

"I'm sure," said I, loftily, "that I would not be the means of depriving you of his valuable and entertaining society."

Min laughed provokingly. "At all events," she said, "he is not cross with me about nothing; and *some* people might learn better manners from him, Mr Lorton!"

"Pray do not let me detain you from such a charming companion, Miss Clyde," I said, with distant politeness.

"Even poor Mr Horner can be agreeable and amusing, and *you* won't even try to be. I will go to him," she continued, still striving to get me to be more sociable; but I was obstinate and ill-tempered.

An angel would not have pacified me. How could I have been so rude to her?

I was a brute.

"Ah," I exclaimed, "*his* conversation is truly intellectual!"

She was quite vexed now.

"You are very unkind," she said. "You speak ill-naturedly of everybody, and are cross with me on my birthday! I won't speak to you, Frank, again this evening; there, see if I do!" and she turned away from me with a tremble in her voice, and an indignant look in the, now, flashing,

grey eyes.

She kept her promise.

Much as I tried, when my ill-temper had subsided, to get speech with her, I was not allowed a word. Even when leaving the house, I only received a bow. She would not shake hands, to show that I was forgiven.

I had stopped to the very last in order to sit out Horner. *He* would not budge first, and *I* would not budge first; so now we started off together, our homeward routes being identical.

You may imagine that I felt very amicably disposed towards him. I was ripe for a quarrel, or at least a separation; and Horner soon gave me an opening.

He began to praise Min's looks and voice, and the manner in which she had sung the songs *he* had asked her for, including the one *he* had given her that evening.

Really, the cool impudence of Horner was something astounding! What right had he to criticise her? He spoke just as if she belonged to him, I assure you!

This was too much, after what I had already gone through.

"Which way are you going?" I asked him suddenly.

"Gaw-ing?" he said, in a surprised tone. "Why, stwaight on, of cawse--stwaight on!"

"Then, I'm going round *here*!" I said, wheeling off abruptly at a right angle from the road we had been pursuing, and going out of my way in order to get rid of him.

Flesh and blood could no longer stand his unmeaning, yet gibing platitudes.

"Bai-ey Je-ove!" he exclaimed. "But, stawp, my deah fellah. Lorton, I asshaw you I only meant to say--ah--that Miss Clyde sang my songs most divinely--ah--and that she's--ah--a vewy nice gahl--ah!"

Confound him!

What business had he to say or think anything of the sort?

I could faintly hear his voice exclaim "Bai-ey Je-ove!" in the distance, after some seconds' interval, during which we had become widely separated.

I was as thoroughly out of temper as I could possibly be.

I was angry with everybody in the world, Min not excepted, and with the world itself; but, at myself, more than all.

CHAPTER EIGHT.

ONLY ABOUT A LITTLE BIRD.

Oh! let them ne'er, with artificial note, To please a tyrant, strain their little bill; But sing what heaven inspires, and wander where they will!

I was ten times angrier with myself when I got home.

What a fool I had been--what an idiot--to have thrown away my chances as I had done! I had wished for "the roc's egg" to complete my happiness; and I had obtained it with a vengeance.

My roc's egg had been the "open sesame" to Mrs Clyde's castle. I had sighed for it, striven for it, gained it at last; and, a fine mess I had made of it, all things considered!

What must she think me?

An ill-bred, untutored, unlicked cub, most probably!

I did not let myself off easily, I promise you. My conscience gave it to

me well, and I could find no satisfactory terms in which I could express my opinion of my own surly behaviour.

I think if some people only knew the bitter pangs that social culprits afterwards experience within themselves for their slips and slidings by the way, they would be less harsh in their judgments and unsparing in their condemnation than they usually are. Sending him to Coventry is a poor punishment in comparison with the offender's own remorse. He finds the "labor et opus redintegrare gradum" hard enough, without that Rhadamanthus, "society," making the ascent slippery for him!

As I recalled the incidents of the evening, I could not help allowing to my conscience that Mr Mawley the curate, whom I disliked, had shown himself a gentleman, where I had only acted like a snob; while Horner, a man whom I, in my conceit, had looked down upon and affected to despise as an empty-headed fop and nonentity, was a prince beside me!

They had but played their respective social parts, and accepted the gifts that the gods provided; while I--dunder-headed dolt that I was-- had conducted myself worse than a budding school-boy who had but just donned swallow-tails, and made his first entry into society!

Jealousy had been the cause of it all, of course; but, although I have always held, and will continue to believe, that the presence of that "green-eyed monster," as the passion is euphuistically termed, is inseparable from all cases of real, thorough, heart-felt, engrossing love--still, jealousy is no excuse for ill-manners. "Noblesse oblige" always. There is no half-way medium; no middle course to take.

Then, fancy my being such a brute as to quarrel with Min, merely because she could not avoid being courteous to her guests! The fact of their being personally obnoxious to me, did not affect the scale one way or the other; she could not help *that*. I doubt whether she even knew it.

I was unable to forgive myself, and wondered if she would excuse my conduct, and speak to me again; although, I really deserved social extinction.

But, I surely could not belie her angel nature, I thought? When she came to know all I had suffered that evening, and the miserable self-upbraidings I had since endured, she would pity me, and forgive me, forgetting all that had occurred "as a dream when one awaketh?" I was sure she would; and I gained renewed courage from the impression.

I now bethought me how I should next present myself before her. In accordance with the usages of conventionality, it would be right for me to make an early call at Mrs Clyde's, in recognition of her late assembly; and, unless I should chance to meet Min out alone, I would have no chance of making my apology before then, while, even on that occasion, the presence of her mother might prevent my speaking to her as openly as I wished. What should I do?

I determined, under the circumstances, and from the fact of our being such old friends--she had said so herself, had she not?--that I would make her a little peace-offering, in the shape of a present of some sort or other.

This did not occur to me with the idea of propitiating her as an offended goddess, sacrifices being out of date in the existing era--except those to Moloch! No, such a thought never occurred to me for a moment.

Min was not the class of girl whose pardon or good-will could be purchased, as is frequently the case, perhaps, with others of her sex!

What suggested the scheme to me was, my not having made her any birthday gift, as her other friends, without exception, had done. It is "never too late to mend;" so, why should I not take her a little present now, to show her that she lived in my heart and had not been intentionally forgotten? If she accepted my offering, good. I should then be certain that she extenuated my gaucherie at her party, whether I got speech with her or no. Yes, that would be the proper course for me to pursue. Would you not have thought so in a like contingency?

The present being decided on, what should I get for her? Flowers, photographs, books, music, and all those delicate nothings, which

people generally tender as souvenirs for other people's acceptance, she had in abundance.

None of these would do at all. I wanted her to have some special, out-of-the-way something from me, which would always call the giver before her mind whenever she saw it. You may think my wish a selfish one, perhaps, but we generally like to be remembered by those we love. I think so, at least; and, I do not believe I am a very exceptional individual.

What should my gift be? It would not be proper for me to offer, nor was it likely that her mother would allow her to accept, anything very valuable, or of intrinsic worth: such as a watch, which I first thought of. Besides, she had a watch already--one that kept time, unlike most ladies' "time-keepers"--and a particularly pretty one it was, too; so, that was out of the question at once. Jewellery would be just as inadmissible. What on earth should my present consist of?

Why, a bird, of course! How stupid I was growing, to be sure! I really had become quite dull. A bird would be the very thing of all others to suit her, so I need not worry my brains any longer. She had plenty of flowers in her bay window conservatory, besides a tiny crystal fountain, that leaped and sparkled to the astounding altitude of some eighteen inches, and which, on festive occasions, ran Florida-water or Eau-de-Cologne. In addition to these, she required, to my mind, a bird to complete the effect of the whole. A bird she, accordingly, should have.

I had often heard her say that she loved birds dearly. Not wild songsters, however, who sing best in their native freedom of the skies, like the spotted-breasted, circle-carolling lark, the thicket-haunting blackbird, and the sweet-throated thrush.--It would have afforded her no pleasure to prison up one of these in a cage. But, a little fledgling that had never known what it was to roam at its own sweet will, and who, when offered the liberty of the air, would hardly care to "take advantage of the situation;" *that* would be the bird which she would like to have, I was certain.

I knew just such an one. I had him, in fact. He was "Dicky Chips:"-- the

funniest, quaintest, most intelligent, and most amusing little bullfinch you ever clapped eyes on.

I resolved that Dicky Chips should be Min's property from henceforth.

Whenever she watched him going through his varied pantomimic role, and heard his well-turned, whistling notes--he had a rare ear for music--she would think of *him* who gave him to her, although he might then be far away. I decided the point at once before going to bed. Dicky Chips should, like Caliban, have a new master, or rather mistress; and be a new man, or rather bird, to adopt Mr Toots' peculiar ellipto-synthetical style of speaking. Where do you think I got hold of him? Do you know a travelling naturalist who goes about London during the summer months--and all over the country, too, for that matter, as I've met him north of Tweed, and down also at the Land's End, in Cornwall?

He has birds for sale, and he sells them only at that period.

Where he hides himself when winter, dark and drear, approaches, I'm sure I cannot tell; but I've never seen him *then* perambulating the streets. He may possibly, at that season, join company with Jamrack--that curiosity of the animal world; or, he may hibernate in the Seven Dials, as most feather-fanciers do; or, he may retire to his private mansion in Belgrave Square; or, again, he may, peradventure, go abroad "to increase his store," in the fashion of Norval's father, the "frugal swain" who fattened his flocks on the Grampian Hills--though, I prefer South Down mutton, myself!

The bird-seller may do either and all of these things in the winter months; but, I only know his summer habitude:--then he is always to be observed going about the streets with birds for sale.

Do I mean the gentleman who wheels about a costermonger's table-cart, whereon he makes a number of unfortunate canaries pull about tiny carriages, with yokes, shaped like those of the Roman chariots, and fire cannons, and appear as if they liked it; while a decrepit white mouse runs up a cane flag-staff, supporting himself finally, and very

uncomfortably, on the top?

No; I do not mean anything of the sort. The person I refer to is quite a different character.

He is generally to be seen driving in a large, full-bodied gipsy waggon, or covered-in break, with open sides and a tarpaulin roof, in which he has, carefully stowed away, tiers upon tiers of cages, that contain almost every description of English and foreign birds; not excluding, also, sundry small pet animals--monkeys, squirrels, and toy dogs, to wit.

He invariably accommodates two horribly-ugly, black-faced pugs, underneath the driving seat of his vehicle; and you may generally hear his approach, when distant more than a mile, through the chirping, and squeaking, and squalling, of his motley cargo.

Canaries are there by the hundred, packed up separately in those square little wooden boxes, each fitted with a small, red, goblet-shaped pitcher and seed-rack, in which they are imported from Germany; parrots, macaws, cockatoos, and lories; larks, thrushes, blackbirds; starlings, magpies, and such like--down to the common hedge-sparrow and poor little Jenny wren.

There, now! I have pointed out the distinguishing characteristics of the itinerant bird-fancier; and, should you never have seen him before, you will be able at once to recognise him in case of your possibly encountering him in the future.

Well, one day, meeting this gentleman "drumming around" our suburb, I had the curiosity to stop and inspect his live freight. In doing so I lighted upon Dicky Chips, as I subsequently christened him: a sturdy little bullfinch, who looked somewhat out of place, and lonesome, amongst his screaming companions from foreign lands. I purchased him for a trifle, and have never since regretted the bargain, for, he was a dear, bright little fellow; so tractable, too, and intelligent, that I was able to educate him to a pitch of excellence, which, I believe, no bullfinch in England ever reached, before or since.

When invited properly, he would dance a hornpipe, whistling his own music in sharp staccato notes, as from a piccolo. He could likewise "present arms" with a little straw musket which I had provided for him; besides feigning to be dead, and allowing you to take him up by the legs, his head hanging down, apparently lifeless, the while, without stirring--although he would sometimes, if you kept him too long in this position, open one of his beady black eyes, and seem to give you a sly wink, as if to say, "A joke is a joke, certainly; but you may, perhaps, carry it too far!" I could not enumerate half his accomplishments in this line; and, as for whistling operatic tunes--the most difficult ones, with unlimited roulades, were his especial choice--"Bai-ey Je- ove!" as Horner would say, you should only have heard him.

As I allowed him to go in and out of his cage at pleasure, he roamed the garden according to his own sweet will, whenever and wherever he pleased, without reservation; and he, I may add, seldom abused the privilege. Some time after I had given him to Min, he actually found his way back one morning to our house again. I shall never forget the circumstance: you should have witnessed his delight at seeing the old place and his old friends again! He flirted, he danced, he rolled in paroxysms of joy on the little table by the window, whereon he had been accustomed to go through his performances:--he chirped, he whistled; in fact, he behaved just like a mad bird.

But he did not desert his mistress, mind you. I think he even got fonder of her than he had even been of me. Still, often after discovering that he could thus vary the monotony of his existence by paying a visit to his old domicile--which only lay a short distance from his new quarters--he would come round; and, after spending an hour or two with me, when he would conscientiously insist on going through the entire round of his accomplishments without any invitation on my part, as if to show that he yet retained his early instructions well in mind, he would return to Min's house, and the no less warm affection that awaited him there.

This was the little present that I intended for a birthday gift to my darling: one that I valued beyond gold. The very next afternoon I carried him round to her in my coat-pocket--he having a tiny cage that

just fitted into it comfortably "to a *t*."

Fortunately, I found Min alone in the drawing-room, when I was ushered in. She was sitting on the sofa reading, and, although she rose up on my entrance, she only bowed, looking distant, and somewhat embarrassed.

This did not look well for my chances of forgiveness, and for getting her to accept Dicky Chips, did it?

I went up to her impulsively.

"Min!" I exclaimed, "can you, will you, excuse and forgive me for acting so rudely last night? I cannot forgive myself; and I shall be miserable till you pardon me!"

She looked down gravely a minute.

"What made you so naughty, sir?" she asked at length, looking up again with a dancing light in the clear grey eyes, and a smile on her pretty little mouth.

"I thought that you did not want me, Min; and I wished myself away, when I saw you speaking to every one else that came, as if you did not care to speak to me. I was very unhappy, and--"

"Oh, Frank!" she said; "unhappy!"

"Yes," I said, "I was never more so in my life. I believed you preferred speaking to Mr Mawley and Horner, to talking to me, and I thought it very unkind of you."

"Well, do not think so again, sir," she said, with such a pretty affectation of sternness, and laughing one of her light, silvery laughs.

"And you did not wish me away?" I asked, anxiously.

"Of course not," she answered. "Why should I have done so? You would not have been invited, sir, if your noble presence had not been

wished for, Master Frank."

"And you didn't care so much for Mawley after all?" I continued, rendered bolder by her changed manner.

"You must not ask too many questions, sir!" she said. "This just shows how very unreasonable you were! How could I have neglected everybody else to speak to you, only, all the evening; what would they have thought, sir? what would mamma have said? Besides, you were not very entertaining, Master Frank; you were very cross, sir; you know you were!"

"But you forgive me now, Min, don't you?" I implored.

"Yes," she said, "if you promise never to be cross with me again."

"What, cross with *you*?" I exclaimed.

"You were, though, last night," she said, with a little toss of her well-shaped head.

I thought the time had now arrived for making my little peace-offering; and yet, I felt as shy and nervous about it as did poor "Young John," the gaoler's son of the Marshalsea, when he went to call on Little Dorrit's father in the grand Bond Street hotel, and drew his humble present of a bundle of cigars from his coat-pocket.

"Min," I said, "you have heard me speak of a clever little bird I had--Dicky Chips?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "You mean the nice little fellow you taught to do so many funny things? Nothing has happened to him, I hope, Frank? I should be so very sorry," she added, sympathisingly, "for I know you are very fond of him."

"No," said I hesitatingly; "nothing has happened to him, exactly; that is, Min, I have brought him over for you; and, unless you accept him, I shall think you are still angry with me, and have not forgiven me."

I thereupon pulled the little chap, cage and all, out of my pocket, and presented him to her.

"Oh, Frank!" she exclaimed, in her sweet, earnest accents, with a ring of emotion in them. "He's such a little pet of yours; and you have had him so long! I would not take him from you for the world!"

"Then," said I, just as earnestly, "you have not forgiven me. Oh, Min! when you promised to do so!" And I took up my hat as if to go away.

We argued the point; but, the end of the matter was, that Dicky Chips was made over to his new mistress, with all his goods, chattels, and appurtenances. A happy bird he might consider himself henceforth, I knew. He would be idolised--a very nice situation, indeed, for a bullfinch!

By-and-by I got closer to Min, as we were standing up, talking together and making Dicky go through a few of his tricks on the drawing-room table.

"Min," said I, softly, bending over her and looking down into her honest, truth-telling grey eyes--"my darling!"

But, at that precise moment, the door opened; and, in walked Mrs Clyde.

CHAPTER NINE.

BREAKERS AHEAD!

Oh, I see thee, old and formal, fitted to thy petty part, With a little hoard of maxims preaching down a daughter's heart. "They were dangerous guides the feelings--she herself was not exempt-- Truly she herself had suffer'd"--perish in thy self-contempt!

Mrs Clyde's appearance coming so suddenly upon the scene, acted as an application of the cold douche to all the loving ardour with which I was addressing Min. It completely spoiled the tableau; checking my

eager impetuosity in a moment, and causing me to remain, tongue-tied, in a state of almost hopeless embarrassment.

Picture the unexpected presentment of the statue of "The Commander" before Don Giovanni, and his horror at hearing words proceed from marble lips! You will, then, be able to form some faint idea of my feelings, when my pleasant position was thus interrupted by Min's mother. I was altogether "nonplussed," to use a vulgar but expressive word.

Had she not come in so opportunely--or inopportunely, as *you* may think--I don't know what I might not have said.

You see, I was close to my darling, bending down over her and looking into her beautiful face. I was fathoming the depths of her soul- lighted, lustrous grey eyes; and, contiguity is sometimes apt in such circumstances, I am told, to hurry one into the rashness of desperation, bringing matters to a crisis. However, Mrs Clyde's entrance stopped all this. I was brought up all at once, "with a round turn," like a horse in full gallop pulled back on his haunches; or, "all standing," as a boat with her head to the wind--whichever simile you may best prefer.

A shower-bath is a very excellent thing in its way, when taken at the proper time and under certain conditions; but those two requirements must be carefully considered beforehand, for the human frame is a fabric of very delicate organisation. Any violent change, or hasty interference with the regular and legitimate working of its functions, may throw the whole machine out of gear, just as the sudden quickening of an engine's motions will, probably, cause it to break down or turn it off the line; while, on the other hand, a wholesome tonic, or fillip, judiciously administered when occasion seems to demand it, like our shower-bath, may often better enable it to discharge its duties and go all the more smoothly and easily--as a tiny touch of the oil-can will affect the movements of man's mammoth mechanical contrivances, that are so typical of himself.

There are some people, I am aware, who object to the institution in toto, arguing that it hurts the system with its unexpected shock, doing more

harm than good. There are others who believe in nothing but shocks, and similar methods of treatment out of the common run; and these "go in" for shower-baths, "a discretion"--though, without discretion, would, perhaps, be a truer description. You may not be informed, also, that the "institution" is frequently used in lunatic asylums and penal establishments as an instrument of torture and correction, being known to operate most efficaciously on obstreperous and hardened criminals, when all other means of coercion have failed.

As it is with the shower-bath physically considered, so it is in regard to the moral douche, to bring my apparent digression to a pointed application. Properly taken, it nerves up the cerebral tissues; experienced unawares, at right angles to previous paths of thought and preparation, it reduces the patient to a temporary state of mental coma and bewilderment--as exemplified in my case on the present unhappy occasion.

I never felt so completely "flabbergasted," as sailors say, in my life, as when Min's mother came into the room that afternoon, just at the moment when I was meditating a master-stroke against the fortress of my darling's heart.

I trembled in my boots.

I wished the earth to open and swallow me up!

Mrs Clyde was a thorough woman of the world. Judging her out of her own circle of limited diameter, you would imagine her to be cool, unimpassioned, cold-blooded, narrow-minded; but, she could be, at the same time, bigoted enough in regard to all that concerned herself, her social surroundings and her belongings--an advocate, as warm as Demosthenes, as logical as Cicero:--a partisan amongst partisans. Warm and impulsive, where fervour and a display of seemingly-generous enthusiasm would effect the object she had in view, that of compassing her ends, she could also be as frigid as an icicle, when it likewise so suited her purpose. "Respectability" and "position" were her gods:--the "world"--*her* world!--her microcosm.

Where persons and things agreed with these, being sympathetic to their rules and regulations, they naturally belonged to "the house beautiful" of her creed, for they *must* be good:--where they ran counter to such standards of merit, which were upheld by laws as unvarying and unchangeable as those of the Medes and Persians, and administered by a judge as stern as Draco--they were, they *must* be evil; and were, therefore, cast out into the outer darkness that existed beyond her sacred Lares and Penates.

Good Heavens! how can pigmy people, atoms in the vast eternity of time, thus narrow the great universe in which they are permitted to exist; dwarfing it down, to the limit of their jaundiced vision, by the application of their miserable measuring tape of "fashionable" feet and "class" inches! How can they abase grand humanity to the level of their social organon, affecting to control it with their arbitrary absolutisms, their mammon deification, their mimic infallibility! What creeping, crawling, wretched insects we all are, taken collectively; and, of all of us, the blindest, the most insignificant, and most grub- like, are, so-called men and women "of the world!"

Cold, heartless, in a general sense, and worldly as Mrs Clyde was, I could easily have excused it in her and tried to like her, for, was she not the mother of my darling, whom with all her faults she loved very dearly--her affection being judiciously tempered by those considerations paramount in the clique to which she belonged? But, Mrs Clyde did not like *me*. She spurned every effort I essayed to make her my friend.

I saw this the first evening I passed in her house; and the impression I then received never wore off.

Just as you can tell at sight whether certain persons attract or repel you, through some unknown, nameless influence that you are unable to fathom; so, in like degree, can you decide--that is, if you possess a naturally sensitive mind--whether they are drawn towards yourself or remain antipathetical. I know that *I* can tell without asking them, if people whom I see for the first time are likely to fancy me or not; and, at all events, I had some inward monition which warned me that Mrs

Clyde, contrary to my earnest wish that she should regard me in a friendly light, was not one of those amiable beings who would "cotton to me," as the inhabitants of New England express the sentiment in their pointed vernacular.

Perhaps you think me a very egotistical person, thus to dwell upon my own ideas and feelings?

You must recollect, however, that I'm telling you this story myself, a story in which I am both actively and intimately interested; and how, unless I speak of my own self, are you going to learn anything about me? I have nobody to describe me, so I *must* be what you call "egotistical."

Yes, Mrs Clyde did not like me.

I do not mean to say, remember, that she was impolite, or grim, or wanting in courtesy.

The reverse was the case, as she was one of the smoothest, suavest persons you ever met.

But, there is an exquisitely refined way in which a woman of the world can make you understand that your presence is "de trop" and your society distasteful, without saying a single word that might be construed into an offence against good breeding.

Mrs Clyde was a thorough mistress of this art.

Her searching eye could appraise at a glance a man's mental calibre or a lady's toilette. It seemed to pierce you through and through, exploring your inmost thoughts, and enlightening her as to what her course of procedure should be in regard to you, before she had spoken a word, or you either.

So *I* believed at any rate; for, to tell the honest truth, I was horribly afraid of Min's mother. I always felt on tenter hooks in her presence, from the very first date of our acquaintanceship.

On coming into the room where Min and I were regarding Dicky Chip's performances with loving eyes, and I completely "translated" by various combinating influences, Mrs Clyde appeared to take in the situation in an instant--"an eyewink," as a minute portion of time is happily rendered in the Teutonic tongue. Certainly, she grasped everything at a glance--even the contingency that might have possibly occurred, for, my embarrassment was not lost upon her. I saw an anxious expression hover across her face for a second, to be quickly replaced by her ordinary society look of calm, studied suavity.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, in well-feigned astonishment at my presence--"Mr Lorton, how d'ye do!"

"How do you do, Mrs Clyde?" said I, straightening myself up, and then bending in feeble attempt at a bow.

She said nothing further for the moment, thinking it best to leave the burden of the conversation on me, so as to better promote my ease of manner and general welfare, in a "company" light. She was dexterous in fence, was Mrs Clyde.

"Ah!" said I at length after an uncomfortable pause, "that was a delightful evening we had last night!" It was a polite falsehood; but then, one must say something when in "society" be it never so senseless and silly!

"I am glad you enjoyed yourself," she answered, although she knew well enough that I had done no such thing.

"Oh, mamma!" said Min, coming to the rescue, "see what a dear little bird Mr Lorton has brought me! It is really so clever that it can almost do anything. Dicky, dicky, cheep!" she chirped to my young representative, who sat in the centre of the table, perched on a photographic album and with his head cocked on one side. He was staring very inquisitively at Mrs Clyde. He evidently regarded her as an enemy; for, the feathers on his crest got ruffled.

"Indeed!" said her mother, in freezing accents--down to the temperature

of the best Wenham Lake ice!--"I'm sure Mr Lorton is very good! Still, you know, Minnie," she continued, "that I do not like you receiving presents in this way."

"But it is only a little bird, Mrs Clyde!" I said, at last nerved up to the speaking-point. I thought she would have told me then and there to take it back; and I awaited, in fear and trembling, what she would say next.

"And he's such a little darling, mamma!" interposed Min impulsively.

Mrs Clyde could not help smiling.

"That may be quite true, my dear," she said; "but, as you know, and as Mr Lorton is probably also aware--although he is very young to have as yet mixed much in the world"--*cut number two*!--"it is not quite correct for young ladies to receive presents, however trifling, from gentlemen who are, comparatively, strangers to them, and to whom they have been but barely introduced!"--*cut three*!

"Oh, mamma!" said Min, in an agony of maidenly shame. She coloured up to the eyes--at the dread of having done something she ought not to have done.

Her exclamation armed me to the teeth. I would have stood up in defence of my darling against a hundred mammas, all cased in society's best satire-proof steel. I determined to "carry the war into Egypt," and opened fire accordingly.

"Pardon me, Mrs Clyde," said I, quite as frigidly as herself--"but the fault, if error there be on either side, lies on my shoulders. I am sure I meant no harm. I only brought the little bird as a remembrance of your daughter's birthday, having forgotten to present it yesterday, when her other friends made *their* offerings."

My speech, however, produced no impression; she quickly parried my weak thrust, returning me tierce en carte.

"But they were all *old* friends, Mr Lorton:--*that* made it quite a

different thing," she said, very coldly, although with the sweetest expression. I daresay Jael smiled very pleasantly when she drove that nail into Sisera's temple!

I thought I perceived a slight loophole for attack. "I believe," said I, "that both Mr Horner and Mr Mawley were only introduced to Miss Clyde a short time previously to myself."

Bless you, I was a child in her practised hands! Fancy my making such a blunder as to show her where the shoe pinched me!

"I think, Mr Lorton," she replied, "that *I* am the best judge as to whom I consider my daughter's friends. Mr Mawley is a clergyman of the parish, and Mr Horner the nephew of a gentleman whom I have known for years!"--Ah! she *did* know about Horner's expectations, then; I thought she did!--"But," she continued, in a slightly less frigid tone, probably on account of seeing Min's agitation, and from the belief that she had put me down sufficiently--"But, Mr Lorton, I do not wish to appear unkind; and, as you never thought of all this, most likely, my daughter may keep the bird you kindly brought her, if she likes."

"Oh, thank you, mamma," said Min, caressing Dicky Chips, who thereupon burst into a paean of melody, in which the opening bars of the "Silver Trumpets" march and "Green grow the Rushes, O" were mixed up harmoniously, in splendid confusion. Knowing little bullfinch that he was! He succeeded, as peradventure he intended, in at once turning the conversation into a fresh channel, where Min's constraint and my embarrassment were soon dispelled.

Mrs Clyde had not been a bit put out during the entire interview.

She was now, as she had been all along, as cool and collected, as suave and serene, as possible. In this respect she somewhat resembled Horner, her promising young friend--nothing could put her out--although *her* mental equilibrium resulted from habit and training; while Horner's, in my opinion, was entirely owing to his natural apathy and inherent dulness of disposition.

Shortly after hostilities had terminated between us, and a truce declared, Mrs Clyde said that she hoped that I would kindly excuse herself and Min, as they had to prepare to go out to make several calls.

Thus politely dismissed, I accordingly took my leave. But, not before the astute lady of the world had contrived to impress me with the consideration that Mrs Clyde moved in a very different circle to that of Mr Lorton; and, that, if I had the assurance and audacity to aspire to the hand of "her daughter," I need not nurse the sweet belief that *she* would lend a favourable ear to my suit. I must, in that case, be prepared to wage a war a outrance, in which there would be no quarter allowed, on *one* side at least.

You must not think that I make these remarks with any bitter feelings now in my heart towards Min's mother. I only desire to tell my story truthfully; and, I may say at once that she failed in our after struggle together. I really believe that she meant honestly to do the best she could for her daughter, as "the best" was held by the articles of her social creed; and that she manoeuvred so that her "lines" should "fall in pleasant places." Yet, those good thoughts, and best wishes, and wise plans of worldly people, effect incalculable mischief and misery and unhappiness in life.

Many a sorely-tried heart has been broken by their influence--many a man and woman ruined for life and for eternity, through their means! And, although I mean no harm towards Mrs Clyde now, as I have already stated, however much I may have been opposed to her once--for the battle has been fought lang syne, and the game played out to its end--still, I can never forget that she *was* my enemy!

CHAPTER TEN.

"A FOOL'S PARADISE."

Gather ye rose-buds while ye may, Old Time is still a-flying; And the same flower that blooms to-day, To-morrow may be dying!

Rost nubila Phoebus; "after clouds, comes sunshine."

I did not allow the coldness of Min's mother to dwell long in my mind.

What, if Mrs Clyde did not appear to like me? Could I alter the obliquity of her mental vision by brooding over it, and worrying myself into a fit of misanthropy? Would it not be better for me to allow matters to run their appointed course, in accordance with the inexorable law of events, and not to anticipate those evils with which the future might be pregnant? The followers of Mahomet are wise men in their generation. They take everything that happens to them with the philosophy of their faith. Kismet! It is their fate, may Allah be praised! they say.

I was perfectly satisfied to accommodate myself to circumstances; and gathered flowers, according to wise old Herrick's advice, to my heart's content. I did not seek to inquire about the future:--why should I?

Time flew by on golden pinions, and I was as happy as the day was long. Winter made way for spring, spring gave place to summer. The halcyon hours sped brighter and brighter for me, from the time of violets--when nature's sweetest nurslings modestly blossomed beneath the hedge-rows.

Then came "the month of roses," as the Persians appropriately style that duodecimal portion of the year. It was a happier time still; for, I loved Min, and I thought that Min loved me.

The very seasons seemed to draw me nearer to her.

In the spring the violets' scented breath recalled her whenever I inhaled their fragrance; while, the nightingale's amorous trills--we had nightingales to visit us in our suburb, closely situated as it was to London--appeared to me to embody the impassioned words that Tennyson puts in the mouth of his love-wooing sea maiden--

"We will kiss sweet kisses, and speak sweet words; O listen, listen, your eyes shall glisten, With pleasure and love and jubilee!"

And, in the early summer, when smiling June came in with her flowery train, making a garden of the whole earth, the twining roses, of crimson

and white and red, were all emblematic of my darling. They were love-gages of her own sweet self; for, was she not my rose, my violet, that budded and blossomed in purple and pink alone for me--the idol of my heart, my fancy's queen?

With all these fond imaginings, however, I did not see much of her.

I had very few opportunities for unfettered intercourse. I believe I could number on the fingers of one hand all the special little tete-a- tete conversations that Min and I ever had together. This was not owing to any fault of mine, you may be sure; but was, entirely, the result of "circumstances," over which neither of us had "any control."

"Society" was the cause of it all. Had her mother been never so willing, and the fates never so kindly lent their most propitious aid to my suit, it is quite probable that we might not have had the chance of associating much more together than we did; nor would our interviews have happened oftener, I think.

You see people of the upper and middle-classes have far less facility afforded them, than is common in lower social grades, for intimate acquaintance; and really know very little, in the long run, of those of whom they may become enamoured and subsequently marry, prior to the tying of the nuptial noose.

Laura and Augustus, may, it is true, meet each other out frequently, in the houses of their mutual friends at parties, and at various gatherings of one sort and another; but what means have they of learning anything trustworthy respecting the inner self of their respective enchanter or enchantress?

Do you think they can manage thus to summarise their several points and merits, during the pauses of the Trois Temps, or while nailing "a rover" at croquet, or, mayhap, when promenading at the Botanical?

I doubt it much.

Professor Owen, it is said, will, if you submit to his notice a couple of

inches of the bone of any bird, beast, fish, or reptile, at once describe to you the characteristics of the animal to which it belonged; its habits, and everything connected with it; besides telling you when and where it lived and died, and whether it existed at the pre-Adamite period or not--and that, too, without your giving him the least previous information touching the osseous substance about which you asked his opinion.

But, granting that the most gigantic theory might be built up on some slighter practical evidence, I would defy anyone--even that philosophising German who evolved a camel from the depths of his inner moral consciousness--to determine the capabilities of any young lady for the future onerous duties of wife and mother, and mistress of a household, merely from hearing her say what coloured ice she would have after the heated dance; or, from her statements that the evening was "flat" or "nice," the season "dull" or "busy," and the heroine of the last new novel "delightful," while the villain was correspondingly "odious."

He couldn't do it.

The commonplace conversation of every-day society is no criterion for character.

With Jemima, the maid-of-all-work, and Bob, the baker's assistant, her "young man," it is quite a different thing. They have no trammels placed in the way of their free association; and, I would venture to assert, know more of one another in one month of company-keeping than Augustus and Laura will achieve in the course of any number of seasons of fashionable intercourse. A "Sunday out" beats a croquet party hollow, in its opportunities for intimacy--as may readily be believed.

It is, really, curious this ignorance common in middle-class husbands and wives, sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, respecting their several attributes and characteristics before they became connected by marriage, and time makes them better acquainted--very curious, indeed!

An American essayist, writing on this point, says--"When your mother came and told her mother that she was *engaged,* and your grandmother told your grandfather, how much did they know of the intimate nature of the young gentleman to whom she had pledged her existence? I will not be so hard as to ask how much your respected mamma knew at that time of the intimate nature of your respected papa, though, if we should compare a young girl's *man-as-she-thinks-him* with a forty-summered matron's *man-as-she-finds-him,* I have my doubts as to whether the second would be a fac-simile of the first." And yet, young men and women of respectable standing "over the way," are allowed far greater latitude for intercommunication than our own; so much so, that I must say, I would not like our budding misses to go the lengths of the American girl, who receives her own company when she pleases, without any previous permission, and can go abroad to places of public amusement, or, indeed, anywhere she likes, without a chaperon.

Still, there is a medium in all things; and, without verging to the extreme of our Transatlantic cousins, our conventionalities might be so tempered by the introduction of a little genuine human nature, as to admit of a trifling freer intercourse between our youth and young maidenhood of the upper classes.

Goethe, you may remember, makes Werther, whose "sorrows" fascinated a generation in the days of our great grandmothers, fall in love with Charlotte, entirely through seeing her cutting bread and butter--nothing more or less!

A very unromantic situation for fostering the growth of the tender passion, you say?

Ah! but the literary lion of Weimar meant a good deal more in his description than lies on the outer surface. He wished to teach a frivolous school that true affection will ripen better under the genial influences of domestic duties and home surroundings, than the masked world believes.

A girl's chances of marriage, the usual end and aim of feminine existence, are not increased in a direct ratio with the number of her ball

dresses!

Let your eligible suitors but see those young ladies who may wish to change their maiden state of single blessedness, *at home,* where they are engaged living their simple lives out in the ordinary avocations of the family circle; and not only abroad, in the whirligig of society, where they have no opportunities for displaying their *real* natures.

Enterprising mammas might then find that their daughters would get more readily "off their hands," at a less expense than they now incur by pursuing Coelebs through all the turnings and windings of Vanity Fair.

Besides, they would have the additional assurance, that they would be better mated to those who prefer studying them under the domestic regime, than if they were hawked about to parties and concerts without end, to be angled for by the butterflies of fashion, who can only exist in the atmosphere of a ballroom and would die of nil admirari-ism if out of sight of Coote's baton!

Your man really worth marrying, in the true sense of the word and not speaking of the value of his rent-roll, likes to know something more of his future wife-that-is-to-be, beyond what he is able to pick up from meeting her in society. Think, how many of her most engaging charms he must remain ignorant of; and then, what on earth can he know of her disposition?

The most hot-tempered young lady in the world will manage to control her anger, and tutor herself to smile sweetly, when her awkward, albeit rich, partner tears off her train during his elephantine gambols in the gallop. She may even say, with the most unaffected affectation of perfect candour that "really it doesn't matter at all," laughing at the mishap; but I should just like you to hear what she exclaims when her obnoxious little brother, Master Tommy, playfully dabbles his raspberry- jam'd fingers over her violet silk dress, or converts her new Dolly Varden hat into a temporary entomological museum!

Observation in the family would enable Coelebs to mark these little episodes more closely, judging for himself the temper and tact of the

idol of his fancy; while, at the same time, he might discover many admirable little traits of kindness and charity and grace, which can only be seen to advantage when displayed naturally in the home circle.

The moral is obvious.

Depend upon it, if there were a little more of this freedom of intercourse between our girls and young men, we would have a considerably less number of sour, disappointed virgins in our annual census; and, less vice and dissipation on the part of hot-brained youths, who, frequently, only give way to "fast life," through feeling a void in their daily routine of existence that stereotyped fashion is unable to fill. Besides, it would be a perfect godsend to thousands of unhappy bachelors, who sigh for the realities of domesticity amidst the artificiality and rottenness of London society.

Some good-natured Mayfair dame, I believe, introduced the "Kettledrum" for the especial saving of poor young men who did not know what to do with their afternoons in our arid Belgravian desert. But, a little more is wanted besides five-o'clock tea; and, until it is granted, we will continue to have matrimonial infelicity, marriages "of convenience," and, no marriages at all!

Now, I think, I have dilated enough upon the great question matrimonial. I will not apologise for my digression, because I've only said what I have long wished and intended to say about it on the first convenient opportunity. However, as I have at last succeeded in making a clean breast of the matter, I will revert to my original case.

Owing to the fact of our suburb being unfashionable, and our society humdrum, as already explained, I had the pleasure of associating more fully with Min, and seeing more of her domestic character than I might have done if we had been both of "the world," worldly; although, as I have also mentioned, I was not able to adore her at home very often, in consequence of my noticing that her mother did not like me--seeing which, of course I did not push my welcome at her house to too fine a point.

Don't think that Mrs Clyde was inhospitable. Nothing of the sort. She gave me a general invitation, on the contrary, to come in whenever I pleased of an evening "to have a little music;" giving expression at the same time to the sentiment, that she would be "very happy" to see me. But, after that affair connected with Dicky Chips, I learnt caution. I thought it better for me to make my approaches warily. Even to have the gratification of gazing on one's heart's darling, it is not comfortable, for a sensitive person, to accept too often the courtesies of a hostess, by whom you are inwardly conscious that you are not welcomed.

Still, I did see her at home sometimes.

I used to go there, at first only occasionally; and then, when I found Mrs Clyde did not quite eat me up, in spite of her cold manner, I went regularly once a fortnight--always making my visit on the same day and at the same hour of the evening; so, that Min learnt to expect me when the evening came round, and told me that she would have recognised my modest knock at the door, out of a hundred others.

Sometimes she and her mother and myself were all alone; but, more frequently, other casual visitors would drop in, too, like me.

I liked the former evenings the best, however, as I had her all to myself, comparatively speaking.

I could then watch her varying moods more attentively--the tender solicitude and earnest affection she evinced for her mother:--the piquant coquetry with which she treated me.

She had such dear little, characteristic ways about her--ways that were quite peculiar to herself.

I got to know them all.

When she was specially interested in anything that one was saying, she would lean forwards, with a deep, reflective look in her clear grey eyes, in rapt attention, resting her little dimpled chin on her bent hand:--when she disagreed with something you said, she would make such a pretty

quaint moue, tossing her head defiantly, and raise her curving eyebrows in astonishment that you should dare to differ from her.

She seldom laughed--I hate to hear girls continually giggling and guffawing at the merest nothings so long as they proceed from male lips!

When Min laughed, her laughter was just like the rippling of silvery music and of the most catching, contagious nature. She generally only smiled, at even the most humorous incidents; and her smile was the sweetest I ever saw in anyone. It lit up her whole face with merriment, giving the grey eyes the most bewitching expression, and bringing into prominent notice a tiny, dear little dimple in her chin, which you might not have previously observed.

Her smile it was that completed my captivation, that first time that I saw her in church and lost my heart in a moment:--her smile was ever and always her greatest charm.

Of course I remember all her little darling ways and coquetries.

Love is a great master of the art of mnemonics, and might be quoted by Mr Stokes as one of the greatest "aids to memory" that is known.

Trifling trivialities, by others passed by unobserved, are graphically jotted down with indelible ink in his cordal note-book--

"For indeed I know Of no more subtle master under heaven, Than is the maiden passion for a maid."

When no other people came in, Min would always, on the evening of my visit, make a rule of turning out her workbox, and arranging its contents over again--"in order," as she told me, although I had thought it the picture of neatness and tidiness in its original state.

She was in the habit on these occasions of restoring to her mother sundry little articles which she confessed to having purloined during the week. I recollect how there used to be a regular little joke at her

expense on the subject of kleptomania.

How well I remember that little workbox, and its arrangements! I could tell you, now, every item of its varied contents,--the perfumed sachet, the ugly little pincushion which she had had since dollhood, the little scraps from her favourite poets, which she had copied out and kept in this sacred repository, never revealing them save to sympathising eyes. How angry she was with me once, for not thinking, with her, that Longfellow's "Psalm of Life" was the "nicest" thing ever written:--what a long time it was afterwards before she would again allow me to inspect her secret treasures and pet things, as she had previously permitted me to do!

This all used to go on while her mother was playing; and then, when the workbox was arranged in apple-pie order, Min herself would go to the piano and sing my favourite ballads, I listening to her from the opposite corner of the room, for she hated having her music turned over by any one.

In addition to these rare opportunities of studying my darling and feeding my love for her, I used to see her at church every Sunday.

From her window, also, when dog Catch and I took our walks abroad, I often had a bright smile from "somebody," who happened always to be tending her cherished plants just at the moment when I passed by.

Sometimes, too, I met her at Miss Pimpernell's, or out walking:--thus, in a short time, I learnt to know all her little plans and wishes, and her sentiments about everything.

Her likes and dislikes were my own. It was a strange coincidence, that if Min should express some opinion one day, I found, when we next met, that I seemed to have involuntarily come round to her view; while, if I let fall any casual remark, Min was certain, on some future occasion, to repeat it as if it were her own.

I suppose the coincidence was owing to our mental "rapport," as the French express it.

The only drawback to my happiness, was Mr Mawley, whom I disliked now more than ever.

Although he had all the rest of the week in which to pay his devoirs, having carte blanche from Mrs Clyde to run in and out of her house whenever he so pleased--he took it into his head to drop in regularly on the very evening that I had selected and thought especially mine. I believe he only did it to spite me, being of a most aggravating temperament!

When he was there, too, he was constantly endeavouring to make me appear ridiculous.

As certainly as I said anything, or advanced an opinion, he, as certainly, contradicted me, taking the opposite side of the question. This, of course, made me angry and unamiable. He was so obstinately obtuse, too, that he would not take a hint. He must have seen that his company was not wanted, by me at least, and that I did not desire any conversation with him. I've no doubt of his doing it on purpose!

He prided himself on his eminently practical mind, being incapable of seeing romance even in the works of nature and nature's God; and he was continually cutting jokes at my "sentimentality," as he was pleased to style my more poetical views of life and its surroundings.

Whenever I gave him the chance, he was safe to slide in some of his vulgar bathos after any heroic sentiment or personal opinion I may have uttered. This, naturally, would rouse my temper, never very pacific; and made me so cross, that I was often on the verge of quarrelling with Min on his account!

The worst of it was, also, that he was always so confoundedly cool and collected, that he generally came out of these encounters in the character of an injured martyr or inoffensive person, who had to bear the unprovoked assaults of my bearish brusquerie--making me, as a matter of course, appear in a very unfavourable light.

I remember, one day in particular, when he was so exceedingly

irritating to me, that he goaded me on into addressing him quite rudely.

Min was very much distressed at my behaviour, remonstrating with me for it; and this did not of course make me feel more kindly-disposed towards the curate, who had now become my perfect antipathy.

We had been down to the church--Miss Pimpernell, the Dasher girls, Min, and myself,--to hear the organist make trial of a new stop which had been lately added to his instrument. Listening to the small sacred concert that thereupon ensued, we had remained until quite late in the evening; and, on our way home through the churchyard, as we loitered along, looking at the graves, and trying to decipher by the slowly waning light the half illegible inscriptions on the headstones, we came across Mr Mawley.

Min and I were walking in front, talking seriously and reflectively, as befitted the time and place.

We were moralising how--

"Side by side The poor man and the son of pride Lie calm and still."

"I wonder," said Min, "whether it is true that the dust of the departed dead blossoms out again in flowers and trees, replenishing the earth? Just fancy, how many illustrious persons even have died since the beginning of the world! Why, in England alone we could number our heroes by thousands; and it is nice to think that they may still flourish perhaps in these old oak trees above us!"

"Ah," said I, "don't you recollect those lines about England;--

"`Beneath each swinging forest bough, Some arm as stout in death reposes-- From wave-washed foot to heaven-kissed brow, Her valour's life-blood runs in roses; Nay, let our brothers of the West Write, smiling, in their florid pages, One half her soil has walked the rest, In poets, heroes, martyrs, sages!'"

"What!" exclaimed Mr Mawley, who had come up close behind us

before we perceived him, and at once pushed into the conversation. "`One half our soil has walked the rest,' Lorton? That's a palpable absurdity! We'll take England to be three hundred miles long and two hundred broad, on an average; and, allowing a uniform depth of twelve feet throughout for cultivable soil, that calculation will give us some--let me see, three hundred by two hundred, multiplied by seventeen hundred and sixty to bring it into yards, and then by three to reduce it to feet, when we multiply it again by twelve to get the solidity--that gives us nearly four billions cubic feet of soil, one-half of which would be two billions. Fancy, Lorton, two thousand millions cubic feet of heroes, eh! But, you havn't told us what amount of dust and ashes you would apportion to each separate hero--" he thus proceeded, with his caustic wit, seeing that Bessie Dasher and her sister were both laughing; and even Min was smiling, at his absurdities. "Strange, perhaps Oliver Cromwell is now a mangel wurzel, and poor King Charles the First an apple tree! Depend upon it, Lorton, that is the origin of what is called the King Pippin!"

He made me "as mad as a hatter," with his "chaff" at my favourite quotation.

I was almost boiling over with rage.

I restrained myself, however, at the moment, and answered him in, for me, comparatively mild terms.

"Mr Mawley," said I, "you have no more imagination than a turnip-top! You must possess the taste of a Goth or Vandal, to turn such noble lines into your low ridicule!"

He did not mind my retort a bit, however. He seemed to think it beneath his notice; for, he only said "Thank you, Lorton!" and dropped back behind us again with Bessie Dasher, while Seraphine joined company with little Miss Pimpernell--Min and I being still together in front.

By-and-by our talk was resumed in the same strain from which the curate's interpellation had diverted it. I had just spoken of Gay the

fabulist. I told her of his sad history:--how it was shown in the bitter epitaph which he had composed for his own tomb--

"Life's a jest, and all things show it; I *thought* so once, and now I *know* it!"

From this we drifted on to Gray's Elegy, through the near similarity of the two poets' names.

"I think," said Min, "that that unadded verse of his which is always left out of the published poem, is nicer than any of the regular ones; for it touches on two of my favourites, the violet and the dear little robin redbreast!"

"You mean, I suppose," said I, "the one commencing--

"`There, scatter'd oft, the earliest of the year--'"

"Yes," said Min, continuing it in her low, sweet voice--

"`By hands unseen, are showers of violets found; The redbreast loves to build and warble there, And little footsteps lightly print the ground.'"

"You like violets, then?" I asked. "I think you told me you did, though, before."

"Yes," she said impulsively, "I love them, I love them, I love them!"

"Ah!" thought I to myself, determining that she should never from henceforth be without an ample supply of violets, if I could help it, "Ah, I wish you would love *me*!" But, I did not give utterance to the thought, contenting myself with keeping up the conversation respecting the Elegy. "It is generally considered," said I aloud, "that the best verse of Gray's is that in which he says--

"`Some village Hampden, that with dauntless breast, The little tyrant of his fields withstood, Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest, Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood!'"

"Hullo, Lorton!" shouted out Mr Mawley again close at my back, when I had believed him to be some distance off. "Hullo, Lorton! Don't you get into heroics, my boy. Does not the `noble bard' make the Prince of Denmark say, that the dust of Alexander the Great might have served to fill the bung of a cask and that--

"`Imperial Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay, Might stop a hole to keep the wind away!'"

This was too much of a good thing.

I made up my mind to stand his nonsense no longer.

"I wish you would mind your own business," said I, as rudely as possible, "and keep your ridiculous conversation to yourself; I want none of it; I hate to hear fools prating about things they cannot understand."

He got quite red in the face; but he kept his temper admirably.

"When you are cool again, Lorton," he said to me, with an expression of amiability and mingled pity on his face, that made him look to me like Mephistopheles, "you will, I know, be sorry for what you've said; and when you learn good manners I will be glad to speak to you again!" and, he walked back to the church, with the air of a person who had been deeply injured, but who had yet the magnanimity to forgive if he could not forget--wishing adieu to our little party, of whom none but Min had overheard what I had said, with his usual cordiality, as if nothing had happened to disturb him.

"Oh, Frank!" exclaimed Min, when he had got out of sight and we were once more alone, "how could you be so rude and un-courteous--to a clergyman, too! I'm ashamed of you! I am hurt at any friend of mine acting like that!"

"But he was so provoking," I stammered, trying to excuse myself. The tone of Min's voice pained me. It was full of grief and reproach: I knew its every intonation. "He's always worrying me and rubbing against me

the wrong way!"

"That does not matter, Frank," she replied in the same grave accents, as coldly as if she was speaking to a stranger--"a gentleman should be a gentleman always. I tell you what,"--she continued, turning away as she spoke--"I will never speak to you again, Frank, until you apologise to Mr Mawley for the language you have used!"

She then left my side, taking Miss Pimpernell's arm and saying something about having a long chat with her.

The end of it was that she had her way.

I had to go back to search for the curate and ask his pardon, like a dog with its tail between its legs.

I was certain he would exult over it, and he did.

He had not the generosity to meet me half-way and accept my apology frankly at once.

He made me humble myself to the full, seizing the opportunity to read me a long homily on Christian forbearance, in which, I fervently believed at the time, he was almost as deficient as myself.

However, I had the consolation of knowing that my apology was not made on his account, but entirely for the sake of my darling Min; although, I confess, I did not like to see her taking such an interest in him as to ask it of me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN.

JEALOUSY.

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

Some weeks after our conversation in the churchyard, I met old Shuffler one day waddling along the Terrace in a state of great excitement.

He told me he was going to an auction, and pressed me to accompany him, that he might have the benefit of my advice and opinion concerning certain objects of "bigotry and virtue," as he styled them, which he designed purchasing--should he be able to get them knocked down cheap.

On asking the reason for such an unwonted outlay on his part, he said that he was about furnishing a new villa for which he had just found a tenant.

"A fresh tenant!" said I with surprise, a newcomer in our suburb being always regarded as a sort of rare bird. "A fresh tenant! Who is he, or she, or whoever it may be?"

"Well, sir," said Shuffler, "it's a secret as yet; but I don't mind telling you, Mr Lorton, as I know you won't let it out--Mr Mawley, the parsun, has took the villa!"

"Mr Mawley!" I exclaimed, with redoubled astonishment. "Why, what on earth does *he* want a house for?"

"I believe, sir," said Shuffler, blinking his sound eye furiously the while, to give a facetious effect to his words, "he's agoin' to get married. So my missus says at least, sir; and she gen'rally knows wot's agoin' on. Wemmenfolk finds out them things somehow or other!"

"Mawley going to be married!" I repeated. "Nonsense, Shuffler! it is probably some mistake. You and your wife must have let your brains run wool-gathering, and made the story up between you!"

"No, sir," he replied, "it's as true as you are a standin' there. We've no call to tell a lie about the matter, sir," and he drew himself up with native dignity.

"And you have really heard it for a fact, Shuffler?"

"I 'ave so, sir; and I could tell you, too, the party as he is agoin' to join!"

"Can you?" I asked. "Who *is* the favoured she?"

"Well, sir," said he with a sly wink, screwing up his mouth tightly as if wild horses would not tear the information from him against his will, "that would be tellin'?"

"I know it would," said I, "but as you have already told me so much, I think you might now let me know the lady's name."

"Mr Lorton," he answered, "you know I would do anything for you I honestly could, for you 'ave been a friend to me many a time, specially when I got into that row with the tax collector, when you be'aved 'andsome. But to speak to the rights of the matter, I can't say I *know* the lady's name wot the parsun is agoin' to marry: I only has my suspicions like."

"Well, and whom do you think to be the one?" said I.

"She don't live far from here!" he said in a stage whisper, dropping his voice, and looking round cautiously, as he pointed along the row of houses composing "the Terrace," where our most fashionable parishioners resided--our Belgravia, so to speak.

"You don't mean one of the Miss Dashers?" I said, thinking of Bessie.

"Lord, no!" he replied, "it ain't one of `my lady's' young ladies!"

"Then who is it?" I said, getting quite impatient at his tergiversation.

"Oh! she comed here later than them!" he answered, still beating about the bush; "she comed here later than them," he repeated, nodding his head knowingly.

A sudden fear shot through me. "Is it?--no, it cannot be--is it Miss Clyde?" I asked.

"Ah!" he grunted, oracularly. "You knows best about that, sir!"

"Well, don't you dare, Shuffler," I savagely retorted, "to couple that lady's name with Mr Mawley's!" I was literally boiling over with fury at the very suspicion:--it was the realisation of my worst fears!

"You've no cause to get angry, Mr Lorton," said he. "I didn't name no names, sir; tho' you might be further out, as far as that goes! I didn't know as you was interested in the lady, or I shouldn't 'a mentioned it."

"You're quite wrong--quite wrong altogether, Shuffler. Why, the thing's absurd!" I said.

"Well, you know you axed me, sir; and what could I say?" he said apologetically.

"That may be," I said, less hotly. "But you had better not couple people's names together in that way. Why, it's actionable!" I added, knowing the house-agent's mortal dread of anything connected with the law.

"But you won't spread it no further, Mr Lorton?" he said, anxiously, the sound eye looking at me with a beseeching expression.

"*I* won't, Shuffler," I answered; "take care that *you* don't!"

"I'll take my davy, sir, as how it shan't cross my lips again," he replied in a convincing tone.

"Very well, Shuffler," I replied, turning away from him. "Only keep to that, and it will be best for you. Good day!"

"Good day, sir; and you won't come to the auction along o' me?"

"No," said I. "I can't spare the time to-day. I'll try and come to- morrow, if that will do as well."

I did not wish to be angry with him; for, after all, I had brought the bitter information he conveyed entirely upon myself. He was only

repeating what was, probably, already the gossip of the whole suburb. Besides, he really had mentioned no names:--the allusion to Min, had been as much my suggestion as his; so, I tried to be affable with him before we parted. "I'll try and come to-morrow, Shuffler, if that will do as well, to look at the things you want me," I said, more cordially than I had previously spoken to him.

"All right, sir," he replied, all beaming once more, with *the* eye as jovial as ever. "That'll suit me jest as well, sir; and I'm very much obleeged, too, I'm sure."

He, thereupon and then, waddled off on his mission of beating down opposition brokers; while I paced along sadly, thinking about the news I had just heard.

I was going to call on Lady Dasher, who would be able to confirm it, or settle that it was a mere idle report; consequently, I would not have to remain long in suspense.

I would soon know the truth, one way or the other.

Prior, however, to my reaching this haven of rumour, I met little Miss Pimpernell. She was trotting along, with a basket on her arm, according to her usual wont when district visiting.

"Hi! Frank," she exclaimed, on seeing me. "What is the matter with you now? Why, my dear boy, you've got a face as long as my arm, and look the picture of misery!"

"Oh, I've just heard something that surprised me," I said. "I've been told that Mr Mawley is going to get married."

"Well, that's news to me," she said. "I haven't heard it before. But what if he *is* going to be married--are you so sorry on his account, or for the lady?" she continued, in a bantering tone--she always liked a bit of a joke--"I never thought you took such an interest in Mr Mawley!"

"I'm sure I don't know," I said. "It has surprised me, that's all."

"*So* it has me, Frank," said she. "Who told you?"

"I don't know whether I ought to tell, Miss Pimpernell," I replied, hesitatingly. "It was disclosed to me in confidence, and--"

"No matter, no matter, my clear boy," said the old lady briskly. "Then you ought *not* to tell me. But, at the same time, Frank, I don't believe a word of it! If Mr Mawley had been meditating anything of the sort, *I* would have been his first confidante! I don't think there's a word of truth in it, Frank, no matter who your informant was. I daresay the rumour has got about just because he has taken a house, which he can very well afford, having got tired of living in lodgings; and small blame to him, say I! He's no more going to get married than *I* am, Frank; and I do not believe that likely, do you?"

She laughed cheerily, tapping me on the cheek with her glove.

She was always petting and caressing me; and, I believe, considered me a sort of big baby exclusively her own property.

"But his taking a house looks suspicious," I said, willing to be more convinced.

"Not a bit of it," said Miss Pimpernell, sturdily. "Why, if Monsieur Parole d'Honneur took a house, would that be any reason for *his* getting married? Ah, I know, Frank, who has put all this nonsense in your head! It is that gossiping old Shuffler. I'll give him a lecture when I next catch him," and she shook her fist comically in the air, to the intense wonderment of Miss Spight, who was crossing the road.

"But, mind, I didn't tell you so, Miss Pimpernell. Don't tell him that I repeated what he said?"

"Stuff and nonsense," she said. "Why, he'll tell everybody he meets the news in confidence, just the same as he did you. I'll give him a good wigging, I tell you! Mr Mawley is not going to be married in a hurry; and if he is, not to the young person you think, Master Frank."

"I did not mention anybody, Miss Pimpernell," I said, in confusion; for, her keen black eyes seemed to penetrate into my very heart, and search out my secret fears.

She looked very sagacious.

"Ah! Frank, you did not *say* anything; but your looks betrayed you. So *that's* the reason why the report of the curate's marriage affected you so, is it? But you needn't blush, my dear boy! You need not blush! *I* will not tell tales out of school; so you may set your mind at rest. It is not, however, as you think, Frank. Cheer up; and good-bye, my dear boy. I must be trotting off now, or my poor blind woman will think I'm never coming to read to her."

And off she went, leaving me much happier than old Shuffler had done.

Confound him! What did he mean, with his cock-and-a-bull story?

On reaching Lady Dasher's house, however, the house-agent's rumour was, to my great distress, confirmed; and, that in the most authoritative manner.

It must be true then, in spite of Miss Pimpernell's denial!

My lady was in one of her most morbid and melancholy moods, too, which did not help to mend matters.

I praised her fuchsias on entering; but even this homage to her favourite hobby failed to rouse her.

She had heard that Mrs Clyde had some of the most beautiful pelargonia; and what were *her* paltry flowers in comparison?

Alas! she was poor, and could only afford a few miserable fuchsias to decorate her drawing-room--or rather the better to exhibit its poverty!

If her poor, dear papa had been alive, things of course would have been very different; and she could have had petunias, or orchids, or any of the rarest hot-house flowers she pleased; but, now, she was poor,

although proud, and could not afford them like that rich parvenue.

How, good things always seemed given to those who are above their need!

There was Mrs Clyde getting her only daughter engaged to be married also, she heard; while no suitor came forward for *her* two poor orphan girls!

Such was the staple of her conversation--enlivening, at any rate.

"Oh, ma!" exclaimed Bessie Dasher at this juncture; "you should not say so to Mr Lorton! He'll think you wish him to propose at once!" and both she and her sister burst out laughing at the idea.

"So I would," said I, jokingly, notwithstanding that I felt as melancholy and little inclined for raillery as their mother, whose words seemed to clinch what old Shuffler had said. "So I would, too, if there weren't a pair of you, and bigamy contrary to law. `How happy could I be with either, were t'other dear charmer away.' But," I continued, turning to Lady Dasher, with an assumption of easy indifference which I found it hard to counterfeit under the searching glances of the two wild Irish girls, her daughters, "is it really true what you said just now about Mrs Clyde's daughter, Lady Dasher?"

"Yes, Mr Lorton," she replied, "to the best of my belief it is; for, I have heard, on the most unimpeachable authority, that she is engaged to Mr Mawley. He is always going there, you know."

"But that is no proof, ma," said Bessie Dasher, who, as I have hinted before, was suspected of a slight tenderness towards the curate. "Mr Mawley is always coming here, too!"

"True, my dear," said her mother; "still there are comings and comings. You may depend he only goes there so often *for a purpose*! Indeed, I asked Mrs Clyde whether there was not something in it only yesterday, and she smiled and said nothing; and, if *that* isn't proof," she concluded, triumphantly, "I don't know *what* is!"

Bessie remained silent, but her sister said impulsively, "I don't believe it, ma--not what you say, but about Minnie Clyde's engagement. Mr Mawley's going there proves nothing, as Bessie said; and, as for Mrs Clyde, I believe she would smile in that graceful way of hers--I hate fine people!--and say nothing if you told her that her house was on fire! The curate is always gadding about, and Minnie is a pretty girl; so, of course, he likes to go there and see her; but, I know, that she does not care twopence for him."

"Ah, you may say so, my dear; but *I* know better. She would jump to have him. All girls like handsome young clergymen, as I know to my cost. Ah, Mr Lorton," went on Lady Dasher, with a sad expressive shake of her head, "marriage is a sad lottery, a sad lottery! I once thought of marrying into the church, too, when my poor dear papa was alive. Perhaps it would have been a happier lot for me if I had done so! He was such a dear, nice clergyman, and looked so well in his canonicals-- such a truly evangelical minister! I could listen to his sermons for hours without feeling the slightest fatigue!"

"Thank goodness, then, he wasn't our papa!" exclaimed the saucy Seraphine. "I'm certain that *I* wouldn't have been able to listen to his sermons so long!"

"Ah, my dear," groaned her mother at her levity, "always frivolous, Seraphine! I'm afraid you will never marry a pious, holy man, as I would wish!"

"Not if I know it, ma!" she retorted, so heartily that both her sister Bessie and I--in spite of my anxiety about Min--could not but join in her catching laughter. "No," continued the pert and impetuous young lady, "when I enter the holy estate of matrimony I shall choose a gay soldier laddie. None of your solemn-faced parsons for me! If they were all like our good old vicar, whom I would take to-morrow if he asked me, it would be quite a different thing; but they are not. They are all too steady and starch and stiff now-a-days. They look as if butter would not melt in their mouths!"

"Ah, my dear!" said her mother, "you will not think so by-and-by.

`Beggars mustn't be choosers.' You have got nothing but your face for your fortune, you know, although it would have been very different if my poor dear papa had been alive!"

"What, my face, ma?" said her dutiful daughter, "I'm sure I hope not! Really, I'm very well satisfied with it;" and, getting up and going to the mirror, she set about altering the riband in her hair, humming the while the old ballad--

"`My face is my fortune, kind sir,' she said, `Kind sir,' she said, `sir,' she said; `My face is my fortune, kind sir,' she said."

I did not like to press any more inquiries with reference to Mr Mawley's rumoured engagement, thinking they would look too pointed, disclosing my interest in the affair,--however much I was transported with the feelings of mingled jealousy, doubt, and uncertainty, that were preying on my heart; consequently, I now took my leave, all the suspicions and fears, which Shuffler's news had given rise to, more rife than ever:--the renewed hope that Miss Pimpernell's cheery address had inspired me with, completely dispelled.

I'm afraid my anxiety was only too apparent; for, Seraphine Dasher whispered to me as I went out, "I don't believe a word of it, there! It is only one of those absurd `true stories' that ma is always getting hold of."

But I wouldn't be comforted.

It was only likely enough. Mawley was constantly going there, as Lady Dasher had said, and Mrs Clyde encouraged him, there could be no doubt; there must be something in it, or these reports would never have got about. "There is never any smoke without fire."

Besides, Min herself did not dislike the curate as I did.

I could see that plainly for myself the night of that birthday party at her house. His insinuating address and treacherous advances had probably succeeded at last in entrapping her affections.

False, cruel girl that she was, how could she encourage me as she had done, to nurse delusive hopes which, as she must have known, would only end in disappointment! What had been probably sport to her was death to me!

And yet, I *could* not believe it of her.

My pure angel-natured Min, with her darling madonna-like face and honest, trustful grey eyes, to act like this?

No. It could not be. It was impossible.

Still, the very next day I saw her walking out alone with the curate.

It must be true, then, I thought; and I ground my teeth in anguish.

I determined to avoid her, never passing her house as I had been previously accustomed to; and, only bowing coldly when I met her in the street.

At last she spoke to me one day, as I was coming out of the vicarage.

She was just going to knock at the door; so I encountered her face to face on the step, without a chance of escape.

She held out her hand to me.

I took it mechanically, and then let it drop; raising my hat at the same time, without saying a word.

She addressed me with heightened colour and a wistful look in the deep, grey eyes.

"Why are you so angry with me, Frank?" she asked in her sweet, low voice, which had a slight tremble in it as she spoke. "What have I done to offend you? You never stop and speak to me now, never call at our house, and always pass me by with a cold frigid bow! Have I done anything to offend you, Frank?" she entreated again. "If so, tell me; and I will beg your pardon, for it must have been unintentional on my

part?"

I was foolish, and proud, and conceited. I thought that I would not allow myself to be deceived twice.

I was bitter and rude. I made a mockery of all the friendly overtures which she made so lovingly with all the coy bashfulness of her maiden heart.

I could have strangled myself afterwards, when I thought it all over!

"I'm not aware, Miss Clyde," said I, as stiffly as you please--just as if she were a stranger to me, and not the dear Min whom I knew and loved so well--"I am not aware that there is any necessity for your asking my forgiveness:--if you cannot suggest to yourself the reason for my altered manner, words on my part would be useless indeed!"

I spoke thus harshly to her, and coldly, when my heart was almost breaking the while.

"And is that all you have got to say to me, Frank?" she said, still in the same dear, tender, entreating voice, and with glistening eyes.

My sternness was nearly melted; but I continued to hold out and stand upon my dignity.

"I have nothing more to add, Miss Clyde," I said, with another Grandisonian bow.

"Then, Mr Lorton," she said, her grey eyes flashing, and her whole dear little self roused into a fiery, impulsive little Min--she looked glorious in her pique!--"then, Mr Lorton, I will not seek to detain you further--let me pass, sir!" she added passionately, as, relenting of my behaviour, I tried to stop her and explain my conduct--"Let me pass, sir! I do not wish to hear another word from you!"

And she walked, as stately as a little queen, into the hall of the vicarage, tossing up her sweet little dimpled chin proudly; while, I?-- went back

disconsolately home, my heart torn with conflicting emotions.

Was I right, or wrong?

Perhaps the rumour of her engagement had not the slightest foundation, in fact.

However, it was too late now to think about that!

All was over.

We were parted for ever!

CHAPTER TWELVE.

ON THE RIVER.

We left behind the painted buoy That tosses at the harbour mouth; And madly danced our heart with joy, As fast we fleeted to the south. How fresh was every sight and sound On open main, on winding shore! We knew the merry world was round, And we might sail for evermore.

"Frank, what do you mean by behaving so unkindly to Minnie Clyde?" was the opening salutation of little Miss Pimpernell to me, the same evening, when I called round again at the vicarage, like Telemachus, in search of consolation.

I was so utterly miserable and disheartened at the conviction that everything was over between Min and myself--at the sudden collapse of all my eager hopes and ardent longings--that I felt I must speak to somebody and unbosom myself; or else I should go out of my senses.

"*I* behave unkindly to Miss Clyde!" I exclaimed, in astonishment at her thus addressing me, before I could get out a word as to why I had come to see her--"I--I--I--don't know what you mean, Miss Pimpernell?"

"You know, or ought to know very well, Frank, without my telling you," she rejoined; and there was a grave tone in her voice, for which I

could not account.

However, the dear old lady did not leave me long in doubt.

She was never in the habit of "beating about the bush;" but always spoke out straight, plump and plain, to the point.

"Really, my boy," she continued, "I think there is no excuse for your acting so strangely to the poor little girl, after all your attentions and long intimacy!"

"But, Miss Pimpernell," I commenced; however, she quickly interrupted me.

"`But me no buts,' Frank Lorton," she said, with more determination and severity than she had ever used to me since I had known her. "I'm quite angry with you. You have disappointed all my expectations, when I thought I knew your character so well, too! Learn, that there is no one I despise so much as a male flirt. Oh, Frank! I did not think you had a grain of such little-mindedness in you! I believed you to be straightforward, and earnest, and true. I'm sadly disappointed in you, my boy; sadly disappointed!" and she shook her head reproachfully.

It was very hard being attacked in this way, when I had come for consolation!

I had thought myself to be the injured party, whose wounds would have been bound up, and oil and wine inpoured by the good Samaritan to whom I had always looked as my staunchest ally; yet, here she was, upbraiding me as a heartless deceiver, a role which I had never played in my life!

I did not know what to make of it.

What was she driving at?

"I assure you, Miss Pimpernell," I said with all the earnestness which the circumstances really warranted, "that I have not behaved in any way,

to my knowledge, of which you might be ashamed for my sake. I came in this evening to ask your sympathy; and, here, you accuse me like this, without waiting to hear a word I have to say! Miss Pimpernell, you are unjust to me. I will go."

And I made as if to leave the room in a huff.

"Stop, Frank," said the dear little old lady, rising to her feet, and speaking to me again with something of her old cordial manner--"You speak candidly; and I've always known you to tell the truth, so I won't doubt you now. Perhaps things have only got into a muddle after all. Let me see if I cannot get to the bottom of it, and set them straight for you! You will not deny, I suppose, Frank, that up to a short time since you've been in the habit of paying a good deal of attention to Minnie Clyde?"

"Miss Clyde is nothing to me now!" I said grandly: I did not deceive her, however, nor turn her from her purpose.

"Wait a minute, my boy, and hear me out. You won't deny that you have been what you call `spoony,' in your abominable slang, eh, Frank?" she repeated, with a knowing glance from her beady black eyes.

"Pay her attention, Miss Pimpernell," I said impetuously. "Good heavens! Why, at one time I would have died for her, and let my body be cut into little pieces, if it would only have done her any good!"

"Softly, Frank," responded the old lady. "I don't think that *would* have done her any good, or you either, for that matter! But, why have you changed towards her, Frank? I never thought you so false and fickle, my boy. She came in here to see me to-day, looking very excited and unhappy; and when she had sat down--there, in that very chair you are now sitting in," continued Miss Pimpernell, emphasising her words by pointing to the corner I occupied, "and I asked her soothingly what distressed her, she burst into tears, and sobbed as if her little heart would break. I declare, my boy," said the warm-hearted little body, with a husky cough, "I almost cried myself in company. However, I got

it all out of her afterwards. It seems to me, Frank, that you have behaved very unkindly to her. She thought she had offended you in some way of which she declared that she was perfectly ignorant: she had asked you, she said, but you would not tell her--treating her as if she were a perfect stranger. She's a sensitive girl, Frank, and you have hurt her feelings to the quick! Now, what is the reason of this--do you care for her still?"

"Care for her! Miss Pimpernell," I said. "Why I love her--although I did not intend telling you yet."

"As if I didn't know all about that already," said the old lady, laughing cheerily. "Oh, you lovers, you lovers! You are just for all the world like a herd of wild ostriches, that stick their heads in the bush, and fancy that they are completely concealed from observation! All of you imagine, that, because you do not take people into your confidence, they are as blind as you are! Can't they see all that is going on well enough; don't your very looks, much less your actions, betray you? Why, Frank, I knew all about your case weeks ago, my boy!-- without any information from you or anybody else! Besides, you know, I *ought* to have some *little* experience in such matters by this time; for, every boy and girl in the parish has made me their confidante for years and years past!" and she laughed again.

Miss Pimpernell was once more her cheery old self, quite restored to her normal condition of good humour.

No one, I believe, ever saw her "put out" for more than five minutes consecutively at the outside; and very seldom for so long, at that.

"Ah!" I ejaculated with a deep sigh, "I wish I had told you before. Now, it is too late!"

"Too late!" she rejoined, briskly. "Too late! Nonsense; it's `never too late to mend.'"

"It is in some cases," I said, as mournfully as Lady Dasher could have spoken; "and this is one of them!"

It was all over, I thought, so, why talk about it any more? What was done couldn't be helped!

"Rubbish!" replied Miss Pimpernell; "you've had a tiff with her, and think you have parted for ever! You see, I know all about it without your telling me. You lovers are ever quarrelling and making up again; though, how you manage it, I can't think. But, Frank, there must always be two to make a quarrel, and Minnie Clyde does not seem to have been one to yours. Tell me why you have altered so towards her; and, let us see whether old Sally cannot mend matters for you."

She looked at me so kindly that I made a clean breast of all my troubles.

"Well, Frank!" she exclaimed, when I had got to the end of my story, "you are a big stupid, in spite of all your cleverness! You are not a bit sharper than the rest of your sex:--a woman has twice the insight of any of you lords of creation! Did I not tell you, not to believe that absurd story about Mr Mawley long ago--that it was only a silly tale of Shuffler's, and not worth a moment's credence? But, you wouldn't believe me; and, here you have been knocking your head against a wall just on account of that cock-and-a-bull-story, and nothing else! Ah, you lovers will never learn common sense! If it wasn't for us old ladies, you would get into such fine scrapes that you would never get out of them, I can tell you!"

"And you are sure it is not true, Miss Pimpernell?" I asked, imploringly.

"Certainly, Frank. Where are your eyes? You are as blind as a mole, my boy."

"O, Miss Pimpernell!" I exclaimed, in remorse at my hasty conduct, "what shall I do to make my peace once more with her? She will never speak to me again, I know, unless you intercede for me, and tell her how the misunderstanding arose."

"You have been very foolish, Frank," said my kind old friend; "but I

will try what I can do for you. You ought to have known that she did not care for Mr Mawley--not in the way you mean; and, as for marrying him, why, the curate himself does not dream of such a thing. I cannot imagine how you could have been so blind!"

"But you *will* help me, Miss Pimpernell, won't you?" I entreated.

"Well, my boy, I will tell Minnie what you have just told me about your delusion, and say that you are very sorry for having treated her so badly."

"And tell her," I interposed, "that she's dearer to me than ever."

"I will do nothing of the sort," hastily replied the old lady. "I am not going to give Miss Spight another chance of calling me `a wretched old match-maker,' as she did once! No, Master Frank, you must do all your love-making yourself, my boy. I did not tell you that Minnie cares for you, you know; and, I can't say whether she does, or no. She's only very unhappy at your considering her no longer in the light of a friend, and has said nothing to lead me to imagine anything more than that. She would not have spoken to me at all about it, I'm confident, if she had not happened to have seen you only a moment before, and had her sensitive little heart wounded by your coldness! Why don't you tell her yourself, Frank, what you wish me to say for you?"

"So I would, Miss Pimpernell, at once," I replied, "if I only had an opportunity; but I never get a chance of seeing her alone."

"Why don't you make one, Frank?" said she. "For a young fellow of the day, you are wonderfully bashful and shy, not to be able to tell the girl of your heart that you love her! I declare, if I had only done what they wanted me, I would have proposed for half of the wives of the present married men of my acquaintance! When I was a girl, gentlemen seemed to have twice the ardour about them that they have now! You are all, now-a-days, like a pack of boarding-school misses, and have to be as tenderly coaxed on into proposing, as if *you* were the wooed and not the wooers. You don't understand what ladies like," continued the old lady, who, like most elderly maidens, had a strong spice of the

romantic in her composition; "they prefer having their affections taken by assault instead of all this shilly-shallying and faint-heartedness. If I had had my choice, when I thought, as girls will think, of such things, I would have liked my lover to carry me off like those gallant knights did in the good old days that we read of!"

"And had him prosecuted for abduction," said I, laughing at her enthusiasm.

"Well, well, Frank," she said, laughing too, "I don't mean to advise you to go to that extent; yet, you might easily find an opportunity to speak to Minnie Clyde, if you only set your wits to work. There's the school treat on Thursday, won't that do for you?"

"Really," I replied, "I never thought of that, Miss Pimpernell; indeed I had made up my mind not to go; and--"

"Why shouldn't you?" said the energetic little old lady, interrupting me. "What better chance could you have, I should like to know--a nice long day in the country, a picnic excursion, a pleasant party, with lots of openings for private conversation? Dear me, Frank, you are not half a lover! If I were a handsome young fellow like you, I would soon cut you out, my boy! Only be bold and speak out to her. Girls like boldness. I wouldn't have given twopence for a bashful man when I was young."

"So I will, Miss Pimpernell," said I, carried away by her energy and enthusiasm; "I will go to the school treat--that is, if you will only kindly see *Miss Clyde* for me"--I was rather diffident of letting Miss Pimpernell know of the friendly footing we had been on, regarding Christian nomenclature--"beforehand, and get her to forgive me. You will, won't you, dear Miss Pimpernell?"

"None of your soft-sawder, Master Frank," replied the old lady; "I will do what I can to make your peace, as I promised; but, as to anything further, you must be a man, and speak up for yourself."

"I will, you may rely," I said, determined to bring matters to an issue ere the week should close.

Before Thursday came, however, I knew that Miss Pimpernell had kept her word in interceding for me, and that Min had quite forgiven me.

She was "friends with me once more," I was assured; for, when I passed her window the next evening, in fear and trembling lest she should still be hostile and not recognise me, she bowed and smiled to me in her own old sweet way, as she used to do before my fit of jealousy and our consequent estrangement.

Oh! how ardently I looked forwards to the approaching school treat. I was then resolved to learn whether she loved me or no. "Faint heart never won fair lady," as Miss Pimpernell had told me; I would deserve her reproach no longer.

Thursday arrived at length, and with it the school treat.

This summer "outing" had been an institution of annual celebration by our vicar long before it became a habit of London clergymen to send columns of appeals to the benevolent in the daily papers to assist the poor children of their respective congregations towards having "a day's pleasuring in the country."

Our vicar, however, was not one of those who thus "passed round the hat" to strange laity! No, he made *his* institution entirely a self-supporting one; and his school-children had the additional pleasure of knowing, that, they assisted in paying for their treat themselves, earning it in advance, with no thanks to "charity," or strangers, all the same.

For some two months beforehand, the little ones used to deposit a weekly penny for this special purpose; and, when their contributions were thought to nearly amount to a shilling each, the fund was held sufficient to carry out the long-looked-for treat--although, of course, the vicar and other kindly-disposed persons would largely help to make the affair go off with the eclat and dignity suited to the occasion, all of which resulted in its being turned into a general picnic for the parish.

The anniversary of the fete this year, was celebrated with even grander

effect than any former ones had been, imposing and satisfactory though they were held at the time to be. Richmond Park was the scene of our festivities; and, not only had the vicar caused to be provided a couple of roomy four-horse omnibuses, the leading one of which sported a band, to accommodate the rank and file of the juveniles under the escort of such of their mothers as could spare the time to accompany them; but, those children who had particularly distinguished themselves during the year for good conduct, were permitted to go in the gondola, in which we oldsters proceeded, to the same destination by water. It was arranged that the "'buses" should meet us at Richmond, where both descriptions of conveyances were to disgorge their motley contents; and, the several and hitherto-severed parties, joining issue, would set about making as pleasant a day of it as could be effected under the circumstances.

A "gondola" seems at first sight an anachronism on the Thames; still, on mature reflection, there does not appear to be any reason why we should not indulge in this respect equally as well as the inhabitants of much- idealised dirty Venice.

Whether you agree with me or not, however, I can tell you that there *are* gondolas to be seen on our great watery highway--heavy barges, with bluff bows and fictitious awnings and problematical cushions, that may be had on hire for the asking, at most of the principal boating places along the banks from Chelsea to Chiswick.

On first starting, one missed the many romantic associations with which the name of our floating vehicle was generally connected; yet, suggestive fancy could readily supply their place with kindred ideas culled from our more prosaic surroundings. We had, it is true, no crimson-sashed, ragged, ballet-costumed gondolier to "ply the measured oar;" because, in the first instance, we did not row up at all. We were a trifle too wise in our generation to pull up the river in a lumbering barge under a broiling sun, and fancy we were amusing ourselves! No, we had a horse and a tow-rope; and, went on our way gaily without exertion!

Just you volunteer, for once, to row an excursion party up to

Richmond:--you'll enjoy it, I promise you! It is regular treadmill work; see, if you won't afterwards think our plan the best, and adopt it, too, or I'm no prophet, that's all!

Our gondolier "was not;" but the mounted jockey who bestrode our towing horse *was*; and, in lieu of waking the echoes with choice extracts from Tasso in the liquid Venesian or harsh, gritty Tuscan dialect, *he* occasionally beguiled his monotonous jog-trot with a plaintive ballad, in which he rehearsed the charms of a certain "Pretty little Sarah;" or else, "made the welkin ring"--though what a "welkin" is, I have never yet been able to discover--with repeated injunctions to his somewhat lazy steed to "gee whup" and "gee wo!"

We had no "Bridge of Sighs," to pursue the parallel, where the roving eye might detect "a palace and a prison on either hand;" but, in its stead, we could gaze at the festooned chains of Hammersmith Suspension Bridge in all its simple beauty, and see the Soapworks and the Mall on the hither and further shore. Our course led, not through serpentine canals and past Doges' palaces, gaudy with the lavish adornments of tricky Byzantine architecture; nor could we expect to see "lions" as historical as those which ornament the facade of Saint Mark's. However, as we glided up against the tide, in slow but steady progress, by willowy banks and osiered eyots, our boat yawning in and out and requiring a stiff weather helm to keep her course, we often caught glimpses of ivy-wreathed churches, charming villa residences and gothic summer-houses, peeping out from amidst the river-lining trees--with a verdant meadow here and there to break the view, its smoothly-mown surface sweeping down to the water's edge; while, we knew, also, that the stream which bore us on its bosom flowed over stakes and hurdles that our indigo-dyed ancestors, the ancient Britons, had planted in its bed, long before Caesar's conquering legions crossed the channel, or Venice possessed "a local habitation and a name."

You may say, probably, that all this is a regular rigmarole of nonsense; but, what else would you have?

It was a nice, beautiful, hot summer day, as our gondola glided on Richmondwards.

We were a merry party, all in all, passing the time with genial and general conversation--and, occasionally, graver talk--as the mood suited us. The cheerful voices of the children, who were packed as tightly as herrings in a barrel in the bows of our craft, and their happy laughter, chimed in with the wash of the tide as it swept by the sides of our gallant barque, hurrying down to meet the flood at Gravesend. The larks were singing madly in the blue sky overhead. Each and all completed the harmony of the scene, affording us enjoyment in turn.

Disgusted apparently with our merriment and frivolity, Miss Spight, shortly after we started, introduced a polemical discussion.

"My dear sir," said she to the vicar, our captain and coxswain in chief, who stately sat in the sternsheets of the gondola, "don't you think Romanism is getting very rife in the parish? They are building a new nunnery, I hear, in the main road; and they are going to set about a chapel, too, I'm told."

"That won't hurt us," said the vicar, sententiously. He disliked sectarian disputes excessively, and always avoided them if he could.

"But, don't you think," persisted Miss Spight, "that we ought to prevent this in some way?"

"I was going to speak to you on the very point to-day, sir," said Mr Mawley, before the vicar could answer. "Had we not better have a course of controversial lectures, each giving one in turn?"

"No, Mawley," replied the vicar, "since I have had the living, I have never yet permitted sectarian disputations to have a place in my pulpit; and, never will I do so as long as I live! We were instructed to preach the Gospel by our Saviour, not to wage war against this or that creed; and the Gospel is one of peace and love. Don't you remember how Saint John, when he was upwards of fourscore years, continually taught this by his constant text, `Little children, love one another?' Let us allow men to judge us by our works. The labour of Protestantism will not be accomplished by the pharisaical mode of priding ourselves on our faith, and damning that of every one else! Our mission is to preach

the Gospel pure and simple. Too much time, too much money, too much of true religion is wasted, in our common custom of trying to proselytise others! We should look at home first, Mawley."

"Still, sir," said the curate, "it is surely our mission to convert the heathen?"

"I do not argue against that," said the vicar. "God forbid that I should! But what I say is, that we are too apt, in seeking for foreign fields, to neglect the duty that lies nearer to us at home."

"It is a noble work, converting the heathen, though," said Miss Spight.

"That's just what I mean," responded our pastor. "All young minds are impressed with this romantic view of religion. It appears much nobler to go abroad as a missionary to the burning deserts of Africa, and to run the risk of being eaten up by cannibals, to working in this benighted land of ours, which needs conversion just as much as the negroes and Hindoos! But, there's no romance about visiting dirty alleys in London!"

"There are the Scripture readers and district visitors, are there not?" said Mr Mawley.

"True," replied the vicar, "and I would be the last to disparage their earnest efforts. What I meant was, that, while we give hundreds of pounds to foreign missions, pence are grudged for home work! There's the Society for the Conversion of the Jews, for instance, to which I have sometimes to give up my pulpit. Now, I dare say, it is a very meritorious society, but how many Jews does it gain over really to Christianity in return for the large sums that its travelling secretaries collect every year?"

"These travelling secretaries," said I, "are what the *Saturday Review* would call `spiritual bagmen,' or `commercial travellers in the missionary line.'"

"And not very far out, either," said the vicar, smiling. "They are paid a

salary, at all events, if they do not get a commission, to beg as much money as they can for the society to which they belong; and they do their work well, too! They succeed in carrying off an amount of money from poor parishes, which if laid out in the places where it is garnered, instead of being devoted to alien expenditure, would do far more good, and better advance the work of the Gospel than the conversion of a few renegade Jews, whose reclamation is, in the majority of cases, but a farce!"

"But, my dear sir!"--exclaimed Mr Mawley, completely shocked at this overturning of all his prejudices.

"Hear me out," continued the vicar; "you must not misunderstand me. I'm not opposed to the principles of missions; but, to their being promoted to the disregard of all other considerations. Saint Paul says that we should do good to all, and especially to such as are `of the household of faith.' Our missionary societies never seem to consider this. The endless number of charity sermons that we have to preach for their aid, not only extracts too much of what should be spent for the benefit of our own special communities, but militates against our getting contributions to other works of greater utility. Our congregations become so deadened by *these* repeated onslaughts on their benevolence, that they button up their pockets and respond in only a half-hearted way when we claim their assistance for *our own* poor and parish. Let us, I say, look at home first, and reclaim the lost, the fallen, the destitute in our streets; let us convert our own `heathen,'--our murderers, our drunkards, our wife-beaters, our thieves, our adulterers; and, *then*, let us talk of converting Hindoos and regenerating the Jews! Our duty, Mawley, as I hold my commission, is to preach Christ's gospel in all its truth and simplicity and love. We do not want to run down this or that creed, however reprehensible we may think it. Let us be judged by our deeds, and acts, and words. Let us show forth *our* way of salvation, as we have learnt it: another authority, greater than us, will tell the world in his own good time which is *the* faith!"

A short pause ensued, after the vicar had thus spoken; none of us cared, for the moment, to pass on to the empty nothings of every-day talk.

Seraphine Dasher was the first to break the silence.

Seeing that Miss Spight had turned to address Monsieur Parole d'Honneur, who sat by her side, the good-natured Frenchman having accompanied us, to "assist at the fete" of his friend, "the good vicaire," as he said, the wicked little seraph created a diversion.

"Gracious, Miss Spight," she exclaimed, "how you are flirting!"

The indignation of the austere virgin, and the warmth with which she repelled this accusation, caused us all so much amusement, that in another moment or two we were in the full swing again of our ordinary chatter.

As we passed under Barnes railway bridge, where the tide was rushing through the arches with all the pent-up waters of the reach beyond, Min, who had been hitherto apparently distrait, like myself, not having spoken, observed, that, the sight of a river flowing along always made her feel reflective and sad.

"It recalls to my mind," said she, "those lines of Longfellow's, from the *Coplas de Manrique*.

"`Our lives are rivers, gliding free, To that unfathom'd boundless sea, The silent grave! Thither all earthly pomp and boast Roll, to be swallowed up and lost In one dark wave.'"

"I prefer," said I, "Tennyson's *Brook*. Our laureate's description of a moving river is not so sombre as that of the American poet; and, besides, has more life and action about it."

"How many different poets have sung the praises of the Thames," said Miss Pimpernell. "I suppose more poetry,--good, bad, and indifferent--has been written about it, than for all the other rivers of the world combined."

"You are right, my dear," said the vicar; "more, by a good deal! The Jordan has been distinguished in Holy Writ especially; Horner has

celebrated the Xanthus and Simois, and Horace the tawny Tiber; the rivers of Spain have been painted by Calderon, Lope de Vega and Aldana; the Rhine and its legends sang of by Uhland and Goethe and Schiller--not to speak of the fabled Nile, as it was in the days of Sesostris, when Herodotus wrote of it; and the Danube, the Po, and the Arno,--all rivers of the old world, that have been described by a thousand poets. But, above all these, the Thames has furnished a more frequent theme, and for great poets, too! Every aspirant for the immortal bays has tried his 'prentice hand on it, from Chaucer, in excelsis, down to the poet Close at the foot of the Parnassian ladder!

"We were talking of the Thames," continued the vicar, pouring out a flood of archaeological reminiscences--"The great reason why it is so suggestive, beyond the great practical fact that it is the silent highway of the fleets of nations, is, that it is also indissolubly bound up, as well, with by-gone memories of people that have lived and died, to the glory and disgrace of history--of places whose bare names we cherish and love! Every step, almost, along its banks is sacred to some noble name. `Stat magno nominis umbra' should be its motto. Strawberry Hill reminds you of witty, keen-sighted Horace Walpole, and his gossiping chit-chat concerning wrangling princes, feeble-minded ministers, and all the other imbecilities of the last century. Twickenham brings back to one, bitter-tongued Pope, his distorted body and waspish mind. Richmond Hill recalls the Earl of Chatham in his enforced retirement, his gout, and the memorable theatrical speech he made on the floor of the House of Lords, at the time of our greatest national triumph and exertion, that closed his public life. Further up the stream, we come to old Windsor Castle, to be reminded of bluff Bluebeard, bigamous, wicked, king Hal; higher still, we are at Oxford, the nursery of our Church, the `alma mater' of our learning. Lower down, at Whitehall stairs, we are face to face again with Roundheads, and regicides, and gunpowder plots; lower still, and we are at the Tower, with its cruel tyrannies and beheadings of traitors and patriots; and then, we find ourselves amidst a sea of masts which bear the English flag to the uttermost parts of the earth. No wonder our river has been so poetical:--it has deserved it! But, really, if all the poems that have been written in its honour could be collected in one volume, what a

prodigious tome it would be!--what a medley of versification it would present!"

"Sure you've forgotten the Shannon entirely," observed Lady Dasher in her plaintive way.

She was certainly waking up from her normal melancholic condition; for, before this, she had been seen to smile--a phenomenon never noticed in her before by her oldest acquaintance.

"You have quite forgotten the Shannon! My poor dear papa, when he was alive, used to say that it was the finest river in the world. I remember he had a favourite song about it--I don't know if I quite recollect it now, but, I'll try."

"Do, Lady Dasher, do," said Mr Mawley, who, having been paying great attention to Bessie the while, wished, I suppose, to ingratiate himself with her mother.

"I must put on the brogue, you know," said she, looking round with an affectation of shyness, which was most incongruous on her melancholy visage; it was just like a death's head trying to grin, I thought to myself;--and then, she commenced, in a thin, quavering voice, the lay of the departed earl, her "poor dear papa."

"`O! Limerick is be-yewtifool, as iveryba-ady knows, And round about the city walls the reever Shannon flows; But 'tis not the reever, nor the feesh, that preys upon my mind, Nor, with the town of Limerick have I any fault to find!'"

"Ah! Very nice indeed! Thank you, Lady Dasher, thank you!" said the vicar, when she had got thus far, and succeeded in arresting the progress of her ladyship's melody; otherwise, she might have gone on the live-long summer day with the halting ditty, for it consisted, as she subsequently told us, of no less than five-and-forty verses, all in the same pleasant strain!

"I don't think," said I, to change the conversation, "that poetry is nearly

as highly regarded in the present day, as it was some forty years back or so--if one may judge by the biographies of literary men of that time."

"But, it sells more readily," said Mr Mawley; "not only do fresh debutantes appear, but new editions of the old poets come out daily."

"That may be," said I. "But they are not nearly so highly appreciated. I suppose it is because poetry is not so much a rarity now. We have so many mediocre poets, that our taste is more exigent. I dare say, if a very bright, particular star should arise, we would honour him; but we have no bright particular star; and, thus, we learn to read poetry without reflection. Forty years ago, people used to talk over the last production of the muse, and canvas its merits in coffee-rooms all over the town; now, we only dash through it, as we would take up the last new novel, or the evening paper, thinking no more about it!"

"When I was younger," said Miss Spight--she didn't say when she was "young," mark you--"no young gentlewoman's education would have been thought complete without a course of the best poets, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*."

"Which nine out of ten of the people who speak about it now, never read," said I--and, Miss Spight did not reply.

"What queer people poets are, generally speaking," said Mr Mawley.

"Do you think so?" said I.

"Yes, I do," he replied. "I would divide poets into three great classes, which I would call respectively the enthusiastic school, the water-cart school, and the horse-going-round-in-the-mill school."

"O-oh, Mr Mawley!" exclaimed Bessie Dasher, in the unmeaning manner common to young ladies, in lieu of saying anything, when they have got nothing to say: the exclamation expressing either astonishment, horror, alarm, or rebuke, as the case may require.

"Instance, instance! Name, name!" said I, keeping the curate up to the

mark.

"Well, I will give you Horner, and Dante, Goethe, Byron, and, perhaps, Tennyson, from which to take your choice amongst those whom I call the enthusiastic school; Mrs Hemans, and others of her tearful race, in the second; and, in the third order, the majority of those who have spoilt good ink and paper, from Dryden down to Martin F Tupper."

"What, no exceptions; not even my favourite Longfellow?" asked Min.

"No," said Mr Mawley, "not one--although Longfellow belongs more by rights to the water-cart line. The fact is," continued he, fairly started on his hobby, "that Pegasus, the charger of Mount Parnassus, is a most eccentric animal, who can be made to metamorphose himself so completely according to the skill and ability or weakness of his rider, that even Apollo would not recognise him sometimes! When backed by an intrepid spirit, like the grand heroic poets, Pegasus is the stately war-horse eager for the fray, and sniffing the battle from afar; or else, controlled by the nervous reins of genius like that of Shelley and Coleridge, he appears as the high-mettled racer, pure-blooded and finely-trained, who may win some great race, but is unfit for any ordinary work; or, again, when ridden by a Wordsworth, he plods along wearily, with lack-lustre eyes, dragging a heavy load, such as *The Excursion*, behind him!"

What the curate might have said further was lost to his hearers. Just at this moment, on turning a bend of the river, the pretty little low- arched bridge that spans it in front of Richmond came in sight; seeing which, the children raised such a shout of joy in the bows of the gondola, that our conversation shunted into a fresh channel, while our teamster, urging his horse by a multitude of "gee wo's," into a brisk trot, tightened our tow-rope and led us up in fine style to our goal.

A short distance from the landing-place under the bridge, we found the detachments that had gone by road, awaiting us. Joining company, we proceeded together to the park, and set about our picnic in the usual harum-scarum fashion, chasing truant children, losing one another, finding one another, making merry over the most dire mishaps, and

enjoying the whole thing hugely--elders, juveniles, and all--from beginning to end.

The vicar made a perfect boy of himself. With a charming gleefulness, he did the most outrageous things--at which Master Adolphus, aetat twelve, would have turned up his nose, as being much beneath his years and dignity. He said he did it only to amuse the children; but, he took such an active part in the games he instituted, that we declared that he joined in them for his own personal gratification.

Monsieur Parole d'Honneur, too, who was the gayest of the gay, specially distinguished himself for his vaulting powers in a sport which he entitled in his broken English manner "ze leap of ze frog;" and, as for grave Doctor Batson, whom we all thought so formal and dignified in his professional tether, why, the way in which he "stuck in his twopenny," as the boys said, and "gave a `back,'" was a caution to the lookers-on!

Then we had a substantial "soldier's tea" in and around a little cottage conveniently-situated close to the park:--there, we boiled our kettles, and brewed great jorums of straw-coloured water, at the sight of which a Chinaman would have been filled with horror, impregnated as it was with the taste of new tin and the flavour of moist brown sugar and milk. The children enjoyed it, however, in conjunction with clothes baskets full of sliced bread-and-butter, and buns and cake galore:-- so, our main consideration was satisfied.

The whole thing passed off well, the only mishap, throughout the day, arising from Horner having filled Miss Spight's galoshes with hot tea; but, as she did not happen to be wearing them at the time, the accident was not of much consequence, although she soundly rated the young gentleman for his awkwardness.

Everybody, too, was satisfied--the vicar and Miss Pimpernell, at the success of the treat and the pleasure of the school-children; the churchwardens, that the expenses did not come out of their pockets; Lady Dasher, at Mr Mawley's attentions to her daughter, which she really thought "quite marked;" and the rest of us, more youthful

members of the parish gathering, at the general delightfulness of the day's outing--the excursion by water, the picnic in the park, the gipsying, the fresh breeze, the bright sun, the everything!

I was happy, too, although I had not yet had a chance of speaking to Min privately--in the boat there were more listeners near than I cared for, and on shore she was too busy entertaining a small crowd of toddlekins, for whose delectation she told deeply-involved fairy stories, and wove unlimited daisy-chains of intricate patterns and simple workmanship. Still, I knew that before night closed, I should have the wished-for opportunity of telling my tale; and, in the meantime, I was quite contented to sit near her, and hear her sweet voice, and be certain that she did not care for Mr Mawley after all!

The day could not pass, however, without the curate and I having our customary spar; and it happened in this wise.

On our way down to the gondola, after packing up the omnibus contingent of juveniles safely, in company with their mothers and a hecatomb of emptied baskets, and seeing the party off with a parting cheer from both sides, Miss Spight amiably suggested that she thought it was going to rain; at which, of course, there arose a general outcry.

"Dear me," said Miss Pimpernell, "I believe you are right, for, there are the midges dancing, too! I hope none of you girls will get your new bonnets spoilt! But, you needn't be alarmed, my dears," she added to reassure us, "it is certain not to come down before morning, if you will take an old woman's word for it."

"You may believe Sally, and set your minds at ease," said the vicar. "She's a rare judge of the weather, and as good as a farmer or sailor in that respect."

"Are the midges a sign of rain?" asked Min; "I never heard that before."

"Yes, my dear," said Miss Pimpernell, seating herself in the gondola, which we had now reached. "They always dance about twelve hours or so before it rains."

"Are there not some other signs given by animals, also, when there is going to be a change in the weather?" asked Bessie Dasher.

"Yes," said Mr Mawley, anxious, as usual, to show off his erudition, "cows low, swallows fly near the ground, sheep bleat, and--"

"Asses bray," said I, with emphasis.

"So I hear," said he quickly. The curate was getting sharper than ever.

"Ah," said I, "*that* is only a `tu quoque!'"

"What is that?" asked Bessie Dasher, thinking I was making use of some term of virulent abuse, I verily believe.

"Oh!" said Mr Mawley, who was in high feather at having retorted my cut so brilliantly, "it is only a polite way of saying `you're another,' an expression which I dare say you have often heard vulgar little boys in the street make use of. I say, Lorton," he added, addressing me, "I think that's one to me, eh?"

"All right," said I, "score it up, if you like."

And, we started down the stream homeward bound.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN.

"GOOD-NIGHT!"

Era gia l'ora che volge 'l disio, A' naviganti e 'ntenerisce il cuore, Lo di ch' ban detto a' dolci amici addio, E che lo nuova peregrin d'amore Punge, se ode Squilla di lontano, Che paja 'l giorno pianger che si muore!

"Parting is such sweet sorrow, That I could say good-night till it be morrow!"

We were sitting side by side, Min and I, leaning over the gunwale of the "gondola" which was rapidly gliding down the river; the stream

being in our favour, and our teamster on the towing path keeping his horse up to a brisk trot, that caused us to proceed at a faster rate than we could have pulled even a lighter boat.

It was a lovely summer night, calm and still, with hardly a breath of wind in the air; although, it was not at all unpleasantly close or oppressive.

A bright crescent moon was shining, touching up the trees that skirted the bank with a flood of silvery-azure light, that brought out each twig and particle of foliage in strong relief, and cast their trunks in shade; while, the surface of the water, unstirred by the slightest ripple, gleamed like a mirror of burnished steel, winding in and out, in its serpentine course, between masses of dense shadow--until it was lost to sight in the distance, behind a sudden bend, and a dark projecting clump of willows and undergrowth.

Our boat seemed to be the only floating thing for miles!

Had it not been for an occasional twinkle from the far-off window of some riparian villa, and the "whish" of a startled swan as it swerved aside to allow the boat to sweep by, we might easily have imagined ourselves traversing the bosom of one of those vast, solitary rivers of the wilderness across the sea.

The children were nearly all asleep, tired out with happiness in excess; and, most of us were silent, being awed by the beauty of the evening into voiceless admiration.

A little girl near us, wakeful still, was breaking one of the daisy- chains that Min had woven her at Richmond, and casting the pieces one by one into the current as it hurried along:--the daisy cups sometimes keeping pace with us, as our tow-rope slackened, and then falling astern, on our horse trotting ahead once more.

"Don't you remember," said I to Min, "those lines of Schiller's *Der Jungling am Bache*? They seem appropriate to that little incident,"--I continued, pointing to the small toddlekin, who was destroying the

daisy-chain:--

"`An der Quelle sass der Knabe Blumen wand er sich zum Kranz, Und er sah sie fortgerissen Treiben in den wellen Tanz. Und so fleihen meine Tage, Wie die quelle rastlos hin! Und so bleichet meine Jugend, Wie die Kranze schnell verbluhn!'"

"They are very pretty," said Min. "Still, do you know, as a rule I do not think German poetry nice. It always sounds so harsh and guttural to me, however tender and sentimental the words may be."

"That may be true in some respects," I answered; "but if you hear it well read, or sung, there is much more pathos and softness about it than one is able to discern when simply skimming it over to oneself. Some of Goethe's little ballads, for instance, such as `The Erl King,' and others that Walter Scott has translated, are wonderfully beautiful; not to speak of Uhland's poetry, and La Motte Fouque's charming *Undine*, which is as pretty a poem as I have ever read."

"I confess," said Min, "that I have not had any general experience of German literature. Indeed, I have quite neglected it since I left school; and then I only studied heavy books--such as *The History of Frederick the Great*, that wearisome *Jungfrau von Orleans*, and others of Schiller's plays."

"Ah!" I replied, "that accounts for it, then. The more you read German, the more you will like it. I think our schoolmasters and schoolmistresses make a great mistake, generally, in the books they select for the instruction and familiarising of their pupils with foreign languages. They appear, really, to choose the driest authors they can pick out! If I had anything to do with `teaching the young idea how to shoot,' I should adopt a very different plan."

"Dear me!" she exclaimed, laughing. "I can fancy I see you, a grim old pedagogue, with a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles and a snuff-coloured coat! What would be your new system, Mr Professor?"

"Well," said I, "in the first place, I should not dream of putting books

like Schiller's dramas into their hands, as is the ordinary course, before they were able to translate pretty fluently, gathering the sense of what they read without the aid of a dictionary. I say nothing against the masterpieces of the great German classic. I like Schiller, myself. But, what boy or girl can appreciate the poetry of his descriptions, and the grandeur of his verse, when every second word they meet with is a stumbling-block, that has to be sought out diligently in the lexicon ere they can understand the context? Instead of this inculcating a love for what they read, it breeds disgust. Even now, I confess, I cannot take an interest in *William Tell*, just because he, and his fellow Switzers, of Uri and elsewhere, will always be associated in my mind with so many lines of translation and repetition that I had to learn by heart at school."

"But, what would you give your pupils to study in lieu of such works?" she asked.

"Vividly interesting stories--novels, if you like--in the language they had to learn. Not short pieces, or `elegant extracts;' but, good, long tales of thrilling adventure and well worked-up plots, whose interest, and the desire to know what was coming next, would make them read on and stammer out the sense, until they reached the denouement. And, if it should be objected that German and French novels are not exactly what you would place before young children for study, I would retort, that, the majority of the works of our best authors are now translated into both those languages almost as soon as they are published over here; let them read those! However, you were saying that you did not think German poetry pleasing or euphonious?"

"No," she said, "I do not; although, it may be owing to what you have remarked, that school study has given me a distaste for it. Still, you have now made me wish that I knew more of it. I think I will take it up again; and, perhaps, Mr Professor, under your tuition, I may learn better to like it."

"I should be only too glad, Min," I said, "to unfold its beauties to you; but, I'm the worst teacher in the world, and too impatient of blunders. Yet, I don't think I could be a very hard master to *you*" I added, lowering my voice to a whisper.

"Couldn't you?" she said. "I don't know about that, Master Frank! I well remember a particular evening, and my birthday party; and how a certain gentleman--whom I won't name--behaved then and since."

"Oh! Haven't you forgiven me yet, Min?" I exclaimed. "I thought--"

"Don't mind about that," she said, hurriedly.--"Go on with what you were telling me concerning German; the others will hear you! Do you think the language soft?"

"I can't say exactly that it *is* as soft as our own," I proceeded to say, for the benefit of Miss Spight, who appeared to be listening to our conversation.--"But, a good many people, who call the Teuton tongue uncouth, seem to forget its close resemblance both in style and expression, to English. Either language can be rendered in the vernacular of the other, without losing its force or even sound; and that is more than can be said for French or Italian. Shakspeare, for instance, in German, is almost equally as telling and forcible as Shakspeare in English; while, in French--Bah! you should just hear it as *once* I heard it, and you would laugh! Indeed, if we are strictly logical on the point of the euphony of language, the Italian dialect, which we deem so soft and liquid, sounds quite harsh, I'm told, in comparison with the labial syllables that the Polynesian islanders use in the South Seas."

We then relapsed into silence again, Min still leaning over the side of the boat and dipping her fingers in the limpid, silvery water, which sparkled with gem-like coruscations of light as she stirred it to and fro.

At Mortlake she splashed a shower of sprinkling pearls over an irate swan pater-familias, who had hurried out from the alders, to see what business we meant by coming at that time of night so near the domain of Mrs Swan and her cygnet progeny. We were both much amused at the fierce air with which he advanced, as if to eat us all up; and then, his precipitate retreat, on getting wetted so unceremoniously. He turned tail at once; and, propelling himself away with vigorous strokes of his webbed sculls, made the water foam from his prow-like curving neck, leaving a broad wake behind him of glistening sheen.

"What a nice day we have had," said Min, presently. "All has gone off so well, without a hitch. We have had such a nice talk, too. Why is it, I wonder," she continued, musingly, "that ordinary conversation is generally so empty and silly? Gentlemen appear to believe that ladies know nothing but about balls, and dancing, and the weather, and croquet! I do not mean, when we are all talking together, as to-day; but, when one is alone with them, and not one of a circle of talkers, they never say anything of any depth and reflection. Perhaps, when I go out, it is my fate to meet with exceptional partners at parties. But, I declare, they never utter a sensible remark! I suppose they think me very stupid, and not worth the trouble of seriously conversing to. Really, I imagine that gentlemen believe all girls to belong to an inferior order of intellect; and fancy that it is necessary for them to descend from their god-like level, in order to talk to them about such senseless trivialities as they think suited to their age and sex!"

"Perhaps it is not all the fault of the men," said I. "They are probably bashful, as most of us are."

"Bashful?" she replied; "I like that, Master Frank. Why, you are all a most intolerable set of conceited mortals! No, it is not that:--it is, because the `lords of creation' think us beneath the notice of their superior minds."--And she tossed her little head proudly.

"Well, then," I said, "your duty is to draw us out. Many men are diffident of speaking earnestly and showing their feelings, from the fear of being laughed at, or ridiculed, as solemn prigs and book-worms. Ladies should think of this, and encourage us."

"Yet, some of you," she replied, undauntedly, "are not so reticent and retiring. There is Mr Mawley, for instance. He always talks to me about literature and art, and politics, too--although I do not care much about *them*--just as if I were a man like himself, and blessed with the same understanding!"

"Oh," said I, "the curate is usually fond of hearing himself talk!"

"You need not abuse poor Mr Mawley," she said, laughing. "`Those

who live in glass houses,' you know, `should not throw stones!' *You* are, also, not averse to airing your opinions, Master Frank! But, don't get angry--" she continued, as I slightly withdrew from her side, in momentary pique at hearing the curate's part taken.--"I like to hear you talk of such things, Frank, far better than if you only spoke to me of commonplace matters, as most gentlemen do, or dosed me with flattery, which I detest!"

"I do not talk so to *everybody*,"--I said, meaningly, coming closer to her again and taking one of her hands captive.--"Do you know why I like to let you know my deeper thoughts, Min, and learn more of my inner nature than others?" I whispered, bending over her.

"N-o!" she said, faintly, turning away her head.

"Because, Min--" I said, hesitatingly, almost abashed at my own rashness--"because, I--I--love you!"

She said nothing in reply; but she bent her head lower, so that I could not see her face; and, the little hand I held, trembled in my grasp.

At this point, too, our conversation was interrupted by the vicar asking Bessie Dasher and her sister to start the "Canadian Boat Song," in which we all joined in harmony:--the music, borne far and wide over the expanse of resonant water, sounding like some fairy chorus of yellow- haired sea-maidens, singing fathoms deep below in ocean caves!

When I was seeing her home, however, after we had all arrived at the vicarage, and separated severally with a cheerful "good-night," I was able to prosecute my wooing.

We were walking along side by side--she declined taking my arm, being shy, and quite unlike the frank, straightforward Min whom I had before known. I was not downhearted at this change, though:--I really felt shy, and nervous, myself!

As soon as we had got a safe distance from the others, and there was no

fear of being overheard in the stillness of the night, I again spoke to her.

"Min," I said, "do you remember what I said to you just now when we were on the river?"

She made no answer; but, quickening her steps, walked on hurriedly, I still keeping pace by her side.

"Min, my darling," I said once more, "I love you dearer than life. Won't you try to like me a little in return? Won't you listen to me? Won't you hear me?"

"O-oh, Frank!" she exclaimed.

"Ever since I first saw you in church, so many long months ago, Min, I have thought of you, dreamt of you, loved you!"--I proceeded, passionately.--"O, my darling! my darling! won't you try and like me a little; or, have I been deceived in thinking that you could care for me?"

"I *do* like you, Frank," she said, softly, laying her little hand on my arm.

I seized it in transport, and put it within my arm proudly.

"Sweet!" I said, "*liking* alone will not do for me! You must learn to love me, darling, as I love you! Will it be very hard?"

"I don't know, Frank, I can try," she said, demurely; looking up at me with her deep, grey eyes, which, now suffused with a tender love-light, had a greater charm for me than ever.

I felt as if I were walking on air!

After a little pause, during which we both walked on slowly, I too happy to speak, Min squeezed my arm.

"Do you then love me so *very* much, Frank?" she said; and, there was a wistful look in her eyes, an earnest pathos in her voice, that touched me

to the heart.

"Love you, Min? I adore you! I dote on you! I worship the very ground you walk on; and, if you were cruel to me, I think I would die to-morrow!"

"Poor fellow!" she said, pressing closer to my side.

"O, Min,"--I went on,--"if you only knew the agony I have suffered in thinking that you cared for some one else! I love you so much, that I am jealous of every word you speak, every glance of your darling eyes which is not directed to me. I envied my very dog the other day because you caressed him!"

"What!" she exclaimed, "Jealous of poor Catch! Do you know, Frank, that made me ove you first, your fondness for your dog and little Dicky Chips!"

"You *do* love me, then? O, Min, my darling!" I exclaimed in ecstasy.

"I didn't say so, did I?" she said, saucily. "Well, then," I entreated, "say it now, sweet! Say that you love me, my darling!"

"You are much too exacting, sir!"--she said, drawing herself up with the air of a haughty little Empress.--"I must consider your petition first."

"But you *do* love me, darling; so why cannot you say it? Tell me, pet, `Frank, I love you;' and, you'll make me happy for ever!" I pleaded.

"I *shan't* be ordered," she said, with a piquante coquetry which made her appear all the more winning.--"I'm not going to tell you anything of the kind, for I won't be dictated to; but, I'll say `I love you, Frank.' There! sir, will that please your lordship, although it is not in the exact words you have asked me?"--and she made a pretty little gesture of affected disdain.

"O Min, my love! my pet! my darling!"--said I, rapturously--

I stopped, breathless with emotion. I could not get out a word more!

We had now reached her door, and she said she must go in. I persuaded her, however, to wait a little while longer before she knocked, as I could not say `Good-night' yet. Parting was too hard, though sweet. So, we talked on in whispers to one another for some minutes--it may have been hours, for all I know to the contrary--what might be to you only a lot of uninteresting talk, but, what was heaven to me!

"Good-night, Frank!" Min said at length. "I really must go in now, or mamma will think me lost. And, O Frank!" she exclaimed in alarm, as the sudden thought struck her--"what *will* she say when she hears of this!"

"Oh, never mind thinking of that now!" I said. "I will come round to-morrow afternoon, sweet, and ask her whether I may be allowed to hope, and win you for my own dear, darling little wife!"

We were standing close together in the porch, just under the gas-light. I was gazing into her eyes, which seemed to me ever so much brighter than the light of the lamp above us, or the stars overhead.

The little ear next me got quite pink.

She quickly bent down her head in confusion.

"You mustn't call me names, Frank!" she said. "I won't have it, sir! I won't have it! You have no right!"

I clasped her little hand firmly in mine.

"This belongs to me now, darling, does it not? You *will* be my own darling little wife, won't you?" I repeated.

She said nothing, but, after a moment, she raised her face to mine; and, as I bent down my head, and looked into her very soul, through the deep, honest, trusting, loving, grey eyes, our lips met in one long thrilling kiss.

It was a foretaste of paradise!

END OF FIRST VOLUME.

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