

Elster's Folly

Vol.II

By

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CHAPTER XI.

THE INQUEST.

On this day, Thursday, the inquest was held. Most of the gay crowd staying at Hartledon had taken flight; Mr. Carteret, and one or two more, whose testimony might be wished for, remaining. The coroner and jury assembled in the afternoon, in a large boarded apartment called the steward's room. Lord Hartledon was present with Dr. Ashton and other friends: they were naturally anxious to hear the evidence that could be collected, and gather any light that might be thrown upon the accident. The doors were not closed to the public, and a crowd, gentle and simple, pressed in.

The surgeon spoke to the supposed cause of deathdrowning: the miller spoke to his house and mill having been that afternoon shut up. He and his wife went over in their springcart to Garchester, and left the place locked up, he said. The coroner asked whether it was his custom to lock up his place when he went out; he replied that it was, when they went out together; but that event rarely happened. Upon his return at dusk, he found the little skiff loose in the stream, and secured it. It was his servantboy, David Ripper, who called his attention to it first of all. He saw nothing of Lord Hartledon, and had not very long secured the skiff when Mr. Percival Elster came up in the ponycarriage, asking if his brother was there. He looked at the skiff, and said it was the one his lordship had been in. Mr. Elster said he supposed his brother was walking home, and he should drive slowly back and look out for him. Later Mr. Elster returned: he had several servants with him then and lanterns; they had come out to look for Lord Hartledon, but could not find him. It was only just after they had gone away again that the Irish harvestmen came up and found the body.

This was the substance of the miller's evidence; it was all he knew: and the next witness called was the boy David Ripper, popularly styled in the neighbourhood young Rip, in contradistinction to his father, a daylabourer. He was an urchin of ten or twelve, with a red, round face; quite ludicrous from its present expression of terrified consternation. The coroner sharply inquired what he was frightened at; and the boy burst into a roar by way of answer. He didn't know nothing, and hadn't seen nothing, and it wasn't him that drowned his lordship; and he couldn't tell more if they hanged him for it.

The miller interposed. The boy was one of the idlest young vagabonds he had ever had the luck to be troubled with; and he thought it exceedingly likely he had been off that afternoon and not near the mill at all. He had ordered him to take two sacks into Calne;

but when he reached home he found the sacks untouched, lying where he had placed them outside. Mr. Ripper had no doubt been playing truant on his own account.

"Where did you pass Tuesday afternoon during your master's absence?" sternly demanded the coroner. "Take your hands from your face and answer me, boy."

David Ripper obeyed in the best manner he was capable of, considering his agitation. "I dun know now where I was," he said. "I was about."

"About where?"

Mr. Ripper apparently could not say where. He thought he was "setting his birdtrap" in the stubblefield; and he see a partridge, and watched where it scudded to; but he wasn't nigh the mill the whole time.

"Did you see anything of Lord Hartledon when he was in the skiff?"

"I never saw him," he sobbed. "I wasn't nigh the mill at all, and never saw him nor the skiff."

"What time did you get back to the mill?" asked the coroner.

He didn't know what time it was; his master and missis had come home.

This was true, Mr. Floyd said. They had been back some little time before Ripper showed himself. The first intimation he received of that truant's presence was when he drew his attention to the loose skiff.

"How came you to see the skiff?" sharply asked the coroner.

Ripper spoke up with trembling lips. He was waiting outside after he came up, and afraid to go in lest his master should beat him for not taking the sacks, which went clean out of his mind, they did, and then he saw the little boat; upon which he called out and told his master.

"And it was also you who first saw the body in the water," observed the coroner, regarding the reluctant witness curiously. "How came you to see that? Were you looking for something of the sort?"

The witness shivered. He didn't know how he come to see it. He was on the strade, not looking for nothing, when he saw some'at dark among the reeds, and told the harvesters

when they come by. They said it was a man, got him out, and then found it was his lordship.

There was only one peculiarity about the boy's evidencehis manner. All he said was feasible enough; indeed, what would be most likely to happen under the circumstances. But whence arose his terror? Had he been of a timid temperament, it might have been natural; but the miller had spoken the truthhe was audacious and hardy. Only upon one or two, however, did the manner leave any impression. Pike, who made one of the crowd in the inquestroom, was one of these. His experience of human nature was tolerably keen, and he felt sure the boy was keeping something behind that he did not dare to tell. The coroner and jury were not so clearsighted, and dismissed him with the remark that he was a "little fool."

"Call George Gorton," said the coroner, looking at his notes.

Very much to Lord Hartledon's surprisemaybe somewhat to his annoyancethe man answering to this name was the one who had originally come to Calne on a special mission to himself. Some feeling caused him to turn from the man whilst he gave his evidence, a thing easily done in the crowded room.

It appeared that amidst the stirring excitement in the neighbourhood on the Tuesday night when the death became known, this stranger happened to avow in the publichouse which he made his quarters that he had seen Lord Hartledon in his skiff just before the event must have happened. The information was reported, and the man received a summons to appear before the coroner.

And it may be as well to remark now, that his second appearance was owing to a little cowardice on his own part. He had felt perfectly satisfied at the time with the promise given him by Lord Hartledon to see the debt paidgiven also in the presence of the Rectorand took his departure in the train, just as Pike had subsequently told Mr. Elster. But ere he had gone two stages on his journey, he began to think he might have been too precipitate, and to ask himself whether his employers would not tell him so when he appeared before them, unbacked by any guarantee from Lord Hartledon; for this, by a strange oversight, he had omitted to ask for. He halted at once, and went back by the next return train. The following day, Tuesday, he spent looking after Lord Hartledon, but, as it happened, did not meet him.

The mana dissipated young man, now that his hat was offcame forward in his long coat, his red hair and whiskers. But it seemed that he had really very little information to give. He was on the banks of the river when Lord Hartledon passed in the skiff, and noticed how strangely he was rowing, one arm apparently lying useless. What part of the river

was this, the coroner asked; and the witness avowed that he could not describe it. He was a stranger, never there but that once; all he knew was, that it was higher up, beyond Hartledon House. What might he have been doing there, demanded the coroner. Only strolling about, was the answer. What was his business at Calne? came the next question; and as it was put, the witness caught the eye of the new Lord Hartledon through an opening in the crowd. His business, the witness replied to the coroner, was his own business, and did not concern the public, and he respectfully declined to state it. He presumed Calne was a free place like other places, where a stranger might spend a few days without question, if he pleased.

Pike chuckled at this: incipient resistance to authority cheered that lawless man's heart. He had stood throughout, in the shadow of the crowd, just within the door, attentively watching the witnesses as they gave their evidence: but he was not prepared for what was to come next.

Did the witness see any other spectators on the bank? continued the coroner. Only one, was the answer: a man called Pike, or some such name. Pike was watching the little boat on the river when he got up to him; he remarked to Pike that his lordship's arm seemed tired; and he and Pike had walked back to Calne together.

Pike would have got away had he been able, but the coroner whispered to an officer. For one single moment Mr. Pike seemed inclined to show fight; he began struggling, not gently, to reach the door; the next he gave it up, and resigned himself to his fate. There was a little hubbub, in the midst of which a slip of paper with a pencilled line from Lord Hartledon, was handed to the coroner.

"Press this point, whether they returned to Calne at once and together."

"George Gorton," cried the coroner, as he crushed the paper in his hand, "at what hour did you return to Calne?"

"I went at once. As soon as the little boat was out of sight."

"Went alone?"

"No, sir. I and the man Pike walked together. I've said so already."

"What made you go together?"

"Nothing in particular. We were both going back, I suppose, and strolled along talking."

It appeared to be all that the witness had to tell, and Mr. Pike came forward perforce. As he stood there, his elegant wideawake bent in his hand, he looked more like the wild man of the woods he had been compared to, than a civilized being. Rough, rude, and abrupt were his tones as he spoke, and he bent his face and eyes downwards whilst he answered. It was in those eyes that lay the look which had struck Mr. Elster as being familiar to him. He persisted in giving his name as Tom, not Thomas.

But if the stranger in the long coat had little evidence to give, Pike had even less. He had been in the woods that afternoon and sauntered to the bank of the river just as Lord Hartledon passed in the skiff; but he had taken very little notice of him. It was only when the last witness, who came up at the moment, remarked upon the queer manner in which his lordship held his arm, that he saw it was lying idle.

Not a thing more could he or would he tell. It was all he knew, he said, and would swear it was all. He went back to Calne with the last witness, and never saw his lordship again alive.

It did appear to be all, just as it did in the matter of the other man. The coroner inquired whether he had seen any one else on the banks or near them, and Pike replied that he had not set eyes on another soul, which Percival knew to be false, for he had seen him. He was told to put his signature to his evidence, which the clerk had taken down, and affixed a cross.

"Can't you write?" asked the coroner.

Pike shook his head negatively. "Never learnt," he curtly said. And Percival believed that to be an untruth equally with the other. He could not help thinking that the avowal of their immediate return might also be false: it was just as possible that one or other, or both, had followed the course of the boat.

Mr. Carteret was examined. He could tell no more than he had already told. They started together, but he had soon got beyond his lordship, and had never seen him again alive. There was nothing more to be gleaned or gathered. Not the smallest suspicion of foul play, or of its being anything but a most unfortunate accident, was entertained for a moment by any one who heard the evidence, and the verdict of the jury was to that effect: Accidental Death.

As the crowd pressed out of the inquestroom, jostling one another in the gloom of the evening, and went their several ways, Lord Hartledon found himself close to Gorton, his coat flapping as he walked. The man was looking round for Pike: but Mr. Pike, the instant his forced evidence was given, had slunk away from the gaze of his fellowmen to

ensconce himself in his solitary shed. To all appearance Lord Hartledon had overtaken Gorton by accident: the man turned aside in obedience to a signal, and halted. They could not see much of each other's faces in the twilight.

"I wish to ask you a question," said Percival in low, impressive, and not unkindly tones. "Did you speak with my brother, Lord Hartledon, at all on Tuesday?"

"No, my lord, I did not," was the ready answer. "I was trying to get to see his lordship, but did not."

"What did you want with him? What brought you back to Calne?"

"I wanted to get from him a guarantee for what your lordship knows of; which he had omitted to give, and I had not thought to ask for," civilly replied the man. "I was looking about for his lordship on the Tuesday morning, but did not get to see him. In the afternoon, when the boatrace was over, I made bold to call at Hartledon, but the servants said his lordship wasn't in. As I came away, I saw him, as I thought, pass the lodge and go up the road, and I cut after him, but couldn't overtake him, and at last lost sight of him. I struck into a tangled sort of pathway through the gorse, or whatever it's called down here, and it brought me out near the river. His lordship was just sculling down, and then I knew it was some one else had gone by the lodge, and not him. Perhaps it was your lordship?"

"You knew it was Lord Hartledon in the boat? I mean, you recognized him? You did not mistake him for me?"

"I knew him, my lord. If I'd been a bit nearer the lodge, I shouldn't have been likely to mistake even your lordship for him."

Lord Hartledon was gazing into the man's face still; never once had his eyes been removed from it.

"You did not see Lord Hartledon later?"

"I never saw him all day but that once when he passed in the skiff."

"You did not follow him, then?"

"Of what use?" debated the man. "I couldn't call out my business from the banks, and didn't know his lordship was going to land lower down. I went straight back to Calne, my lord, walking with that man Pike who is a rum fellow, and has a history behind him,

unless I'm mistaken; but it's no business of mine. I made my mind up to another night of it in Calne, thinking I'd get to Hartledon early next morning before his lordship had time to go out; and I was sitting comfortably with a pipe and a glass of beer, when news came of the accident."

Lord Hartledon believed the man to be telling the truth; and a weight the source of which he did not stay to analyse was lifted from his mind. But he asked another question.

"Why are you still in Calne?"

"I waited for orders. After his lordship died I couldn't go away without them carrying with me nothing but the word of a dead man. The orders came this morning, safe enough; but I had the summons served on me then to attend the inquest, and had to stay for it. I'm going away now, my lord, by the first train."

Lord Hartledon was satisfied, and nodded his head. As he turned back he met Dr. Ashton.

"I was looking for you, Lord Hartledon. If you require any assistance or information in the various arrangements that now devolve upon you, I shall be happy to render both. There will be a good deal to do one way or another; more, I dare say, than your inexperience has the least idea of. You will have your solicitor at hand, of course; but if you want me, you know where to find me."

The Rector's words were courteous, but the tone was not warm, and the title "Lord Hartledon" grated on Val's ear. In his impulse he grasped the speaker's hand, pouring forth a heartfelt prayer.

"Oh, Dr. Ashton, will you not forgive me? The horrible trouble I brought upon myself is over now. I don't rejoice in it under the circumstances, Heaven knows; I only speak of the fact. Let me come to your house again! Forgive me for the past."

"In one sense the trouble is over, because the debts that were a formidable embarrassment to Mr. Elster are as nothing to Lord Hartledon," was the reply. "But let me assure you of one thing: that your being Lord Hartledon will not make the slightest difference to my decision not to give you my daughter, unless your line of conduct shall change."

"It is changed. Dr. Ashton, on my word of honour, I will never be guilty of carelessness again. One thing will be my safeguard, though all else should fail the fact that I passed

my word for this to my dear brother not many hours before his death. For my sake, for Anne's sake, you will forgive me!"

Was it possible to resist the persuasive tones, the earnestness of the honest, darkblue eyes? If ever Percival Elster was to make an effort for good, and succeed, it must be now. The doctor knew it; and he knew that Anne's happiness was at stake. But he did not thaw immediately.

"You know, Lord Hartledon"

"Call me Val, as you used to do," came the pleading interruption; and Dr. Ashton smiled in spite of himself.

"Percival, you know it is against my nature to be harsh or unforgiving; just as I believe it contrary to your nature to be guilty of deliberate wrong. If you will only be true to yourself, I would rather have you for my son-in-law than any other man in England; as I would have had when you were Val Elster. Do you note my words? true to yourself."

"As I will be from henceforth," whispered Val, earnest tears rising to his eyes.

And as he would have been but for his besetting sin.

CHAPTER XII.

LATER IN THE DAY.

It happened that Clerk Gum had business on hand the day of the inquest, which obliged him to go to Garchester. He reached home after dark; and the first thing he saw was his wife, in what he was pleased to call a state of semiidiocy. The teathings were laid on the table, and substantial refreshment in the shape of cold meat, and a plate of muffins ready for toasting, all for the clerk's regalement. But Mrs. Gum herself sat on a low chair by the fire, her eyes swollen with crying.

"What's the matter now?" was the clerk's first question.

"Oh, Gum, I told you you ought not to have gone off today. You might have stayed for the inquest."

"Much good I should do the inquest, or the inquest do me," retorted the clerk. "Has Becky gone?"

"Long ago. Gum, that dream's coming round. I said it would. I told you there was ill in store for Lord Hartledon; and that Pike was mixed up in it, and Mr. Elster also in some way. If you'd only listen to me"

The clerk, who had been brushing his hat and shaking the dust from his outer coat for he was a careful man with his clothes, and always well dressed brought down his hand upon the table with some temper.

"Just stop that. I've heard enough of that dream, and of all your dreams. Confounded folly! Haven't I trouble and worry enough upon my mind, without your worrying me every time I come in about your idiotic dreams?"

"Well," returned Mrs. Gum, "if the dream's nothing, I'd like to ask why they had Pike up today before them all?"

"Who had him up?" asked the clerk, after a pause. "Had him up where?"

"Before the people sitting on the body of Lord Hartledon. Lydia Jones brought me the news just now. 'They had Pike the poacher up,' says she. 'He was up before the jury, and had to confess to it.' 'Confess to what,' said I. 'Why, that he was about in the woods when my lord met his end,' said she; 'and it's to know how my lord did meet it, and whether the poacher mightn't have dealt that blow on his temple and robbed him after it.' Gum"

"There's no suspicion of foul play, is there?" interrupted the clerk, in strangely subdued tones.

"Not that I know of, except in Lydia's temper," answered Mrs. Gum. "But I don't like to hear he was up there at all."

"Lydia Jones is a fountongued woman, capable of swearing away any man's life. Is Pike in custody?"

"Not yet. They've let him off for the present. Oh, Gum, often and often do I wish my days were ended!"

"Often and often do I wish I'd a quiet house to come to, and not be bothered with dreams," was the scornful retort. "Suppose you toast the muffins."

She gave a sigh or two, put her cap straight, smoothed her ragged hair, and meekly rose to obey. The clerk was carefully folding up the outer coat, for it was one he wore only on highdays, when he felt something in the pocket a small parcel.

"I'd almost forgotten this," he exclaimed, taking it out. "Thanks to you, Nance! What with your dreams and other worryings I can't think of my proper business."

"What is it?" she asked.

"A deed Dr. Ashton's lawyer got me to bring and save his clerk a journey if you must know. I'll take it over at once, while the tea's brewing."

As Jabez Gum passed through his own gate he looked towards Mr. Pike's dwelling; it was only natural he should do so after the recent conversation; and he saw that worthy gentleman come stealing across the waste ground, with his usual cautious step. Although not given to exchanging courtesies with his neighbour, the clerk walked briskly towards him now, and waited at the hurdles which divided the waste ground from the road.

"I hear you were prowling about the mill when Lord Hartledon met with his accident," began the clerk, in low, condemning tones.

"And what if I was," asked Pike, leaning his arms on the hurdles and facing the clerk. "Near the mill I wasn't; about the woods and river I was; and I saw him pass down in the sculling boat with his disabled arm. What of it, I ask?"

Pike's tone, though short, was civil enough. The forced appearance before the coroner and public had disturbed his equanimity in no slight degree, and taken for the present all insolence out of him.

"Should any doubt get afloat that his lordship's death might not have been accidental, your presence at the spot would tell against you."

"No, it wouldn't. I left the spot before the accident could have happened; and I came back to Calne with a witness. As to the death having been something worse than accident, not a soul in the place has dreamt of such a thing except me."

"Except you! What do you mean?"

Pike leaned more over the hurdles, so as to bring his disreputable face closer to Mr. Gum, who slightly recoiled as he caught the low whisper.

"I don't think the death was accidental. I believe his lordship was just put out of the way quietly."

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed the shocked clerk. "By whom? By you?" he added, in his bewilderment.

"No," returned the man. "If I'd done it, I shouldn't talk about it."

"What do you mean?" cried Mr. Gum.

"I mean that I have my suspicions; and good suspicions they are. Many a man has been hung on less. I am not going to tell them; perhaps not ever. I shall wait and keep my eyes open, and bring them, if I can, to certainties. Time enough to talk then, or keep silent, as circumstances may dictate."

"And you tell me you were not near the place at the time of the accident?"

"I wasn't," replied Mr. Pike, with emphasis.

"Who was?"

"That's my secret. And as I've a little matter of business on hand tonight, I don't care to be further delayed, if it's all the same to you, neighbour. And instead of your accusing me of prowling about the mill again, perhaps you'll just give a thought occasionally to

what I have now said, keeping it to yourself. I'm not afraid of your spreading it in Calne; for it might bring a hornets' nest about your head, and about some other heads that you wouldn't like to injure."

With the last words Mr. Pike crossed the hurdles and went off in the direction of Hartledon. It was a light night, and the clerk stood and stared after him. To say that Jabez Gum in his astonishment was uncertain whether he stood on his head or his heels, would be saying little; and how much of these assertions he might believe, and what mischief Mr. Pike might be going after tonight, he knew not. Drawing a long sigh, which did not sound very much like a sigh of relief, he at length turned off to Dr. Ashton's, and the man disappeared.

We must follow Pike. He went stealthily up the road past Hartledon, keeping in the shade of the hedge, and shrinking into it when he saw any one coming. Striking off when he neared the mill, he approached it cautiously, and halted amidst some trees, whence he had a view of the milldoor.

He was waiting for the boy, David Ripper. Fully convinced by the lad's manner at the inquest that he had not told all he knew, but was keeping something back in fear, Mr. Pike, for reasons of his own, resolved to come at it if he could. He knew that the boy would be at work later than usual that night, having been hindered in the afternoon.

Imagine yourself standing with your back to the river, reader, and take a view of the premises as they face you. The cottage is a square building, and has four good rooms on the ground floor. The miller's thrifty wife generally locked all these rooms up if she went out, and carried the keys away in her pocket. The parlour window was an ordinary sashwindow, with outside shutters; the kitchen window a small casement, protected by a fixed network of strong wire. No one could get in or out, even when the casement was open, without tearing this wire away, which would not be a difficult matter to accomplish. On the left of the cottage, but to your right as you face it, stands the mill, to which you ascend by steps. It communicates inside with the upper floor of the cottage, which is used as a storeroom for corn; and from this storeroom a flight of stairs descends to the kitchen below. Another flight of stairs from this storeroom communicated with the open passage leading from the backdoor to the stable. This is all that need be said: and you may think it superfluous to have described it at all: but it is not so.

The boy Ripper at length came forth. With a shuddering avoidance of the water he came tearing along as one running from a ghost, and was darting past the trees, when he found himself detained by an arm of great strength. Mr. Pike clapped his other hand upon the boy's mouth, stifling a howl of terror.

"Do you see this, Rip?" cried he.

Rip did see it. It was a pistol held rather inconveniently close to the boy's breast. Rip dearly loved his life; but it nearly went out of him then with fear.

"Now," said Pike, "I've come up to know about this business of Lord Hartledon's, and I will know it, or leave you as dead as he is. And I'll have you took up for murder, into the bargain," he rather illogically continued, "as an accessory to the fact."

David Ripper was in a state of horror; all idea of concealment gone out of him. "I couldn't help it," he gasped. "I couldn't get out to him; I was locked up in the mill. Don't shoot me."

"I'll spare you on one condition," decided Pike. "Disclose the whole of this from first to last, and then we may part friends. But try to palm off one lie upon me, and I'll riddle you through. To begin with: what brought you locked up in the mill?"

It was a wicked tale of a wicked young jailbird, as Mr. Pike (probably the worse jailbird by far of the two) phrased it. Master Ripper had purposely caused himself to be locked in the mill, his object being to supply himself with as much corn as he could carry about him for the benefit of his rabbits and pigeons and other live stock at home. He had done it twice before, he avowed, in dread of the pistol, and had got away safe through the square hole in the passage at the foot of the back staircase, whence he had dropped to the ground. To his consternation on this occasion, however, he had found the door at the foot of the stairs bolted, as it never had been before, and he could not get to the passage. So he was a prisoner all the afternoon, and had exercised his legs between the storeroom and kitchen, both of which were open to him.

If ever a man showed virtuous indignation at a sinner's confession, Mr. Pike showed it now. "That's how you were about in the stubblefield setting your traps, you young villain! I saw the coroner look at you. And now about Lord Hartledon. What did you see?"

Master Ripper rubbed the perspiration from his face as he went on with his tale. Pike listened with all the ears he possessed and said not a word, beyond sundry rough exclamations, until the tale was done.

"You awful young dog! You saw all that from the kitchenwindow, and never tried to get out of it!"

"I couldn't get out of it," pleaded the boy. "It's got a wirenet before it, and I couldn't break that."

"You are strong enough to break it ten times over," retorted Pike.

"But then master would ha' known I'd been in the mill!" cried the boy, a gleam of cunning in his eyes.

"Ugh," grunted Pike. "And you saw exactly what you've told me?"

"I saw it and heard the cries."

"Did he see you?"

"No; I was afeard to show myself. When master come home, the first thing he did was t' unlock that there staircase door, and I got out without his seeing me"

"Where did you hide the grain you were loaded with?" demanded Pike.

"I'd emptied it out again in the storeroom," returned the boy. "I told master there were a loose skiff out there, and he come out and secured it. Them harvesters come up next and got him out of the water."

"Yes, you could see fast enough what you were looking for! Well, young Rip," continued Mr. Pike, consolingly, "you stand about as rich a chance of being hanged as ever you'll stand in all your born days. If you'd jumped through that wire you'd have saved my lord, and he'd have made it right for you with old Floyd. I'd advise you to keep a silent tongue in your head, if you want to save your neck."

"I was keeping it, till you come and made me tell with that there pistol," howled the boy. "You won't go and split on me?" he asked, with trembling lips.

"I won't split on you about the grain," graciously promised Pike. "It's no business of mine. As to the other matterwell, I'll not say anything about that; at any rate, yet awhile. You keep it a secret; so will I."

Without another word, Pike extended his hand as a signal that the culprit was at liberty to depart; and he did so as fast as his legs would carry him. Pike then returned the pistol to his pocket and took his way back to Calne in a thoughtful and particularly ungenial mood. There was a doubt within him whether the boy had disclosed the truth, even to him.

Perhaps on no one with the exception of Percival did the death of Lord Hartledon leave its effects as it did on Lady Kirton and her daughter Maude. To the one it brought embarrassment; to the other, what seemed very like a broken heart. The countess dowager's tactics must change as by magic. She had to transfer the affection and consideration evinced for Edward Lord Hartledon to his brother; and to do it easily and naturally. She had to obliterate from the mind of the latter her overbearing dislike to him, cause her insults to be remembered no more. A difficult task, even for her, wily woman as she was.

How was it to be done? For three long hours the night after Lord Hartledon's death, she lay awake, thinking out her plans; perhaps for the first time in her life, for obtuse natures do not lie awake. The death had affected her only as regarded her own interests; she could feel for none and regret none in her utter selfishness. One was fallen, but another had risen up. "Le roi est mort: vive le roi!"

On the day following the death she had sought an interview with Percival. Never a woman evinced better tact than she. There was no violent change in her manner, no apologies for the past, or display of sudden affection. She spoke quietly and sensibly of passing topics: the death, and what could have led to it; the immediate business on hand, some of the changes it entailed in the future. "I'll stay with you still, Percival," she said, "and look after things a bit for you, as I have been doing for your brother. It is an awful shock, and we must all have time to get over it. If I had only foreseen this, how I might have spared my temper and poor Maude's feelings!"

She looked out of the corner of her eye at the young man; but he betrayed no curiosity to hear more, and she went on unasked.

"You know, Val, for a portionless girl, as Maude is, it was a great blow to me when I found her fixing her heart upon a younger son. How cross and unjust it made me I couldn't conceal: mothers are mothers. I wanted her to take a fancy to Hartledon, dear fellow, and I suppose she could not, and it rendered me cross; and I know I worried her and worried my own temper, till at times I was not conscious of what I said. Poor Maude! she did not rebel openly, but I could see her struggles. Only a week ago, when Hartledon was talking about his marrying sometime, and hinting that she might care for him if she tried, she scored her beautiful drawing all over with ugly marks; ran the pencil through it"

"But why do you tell me this now?" asked Val.

"Hartledon dear me! I wonder how long I shall be getting accustomed to your name? there's only you and me and Maude left now of the family," cried the dowager; "and if I speak of such things, it is in fulness of heart. And now about these letters: do you care how they are worded?"

"I don't seem to care about anything," listlessly answered the young man. "As to the letters, I think I'd rather write them myself, Lady Kirton."

"Indeed you shall not have any trouble of that sort today. I'll write the letters, and you may indulge yourself in doing nothing."

He yielded in his unstable nature. She spoke of business letters, and it was better that he should write them; he wished to write them; but she carried her point, and his will yielded to hers. Would it be a type of the future? would he yield to her in other things in defiance of his better judgment? Alas! alas!

She picked up her skirts and left him, and went sailing upstairs to her daughter's room. Maude was sitting shivering in a shawl, though the day was hot.

"I've paved the way," nodded the old woman, in meaning tones. "And there's one fortunate thing about Val: he is so truthful himself, one may take him in with his eyes open."

Maude turned her eyes upon her mother: very languid and unspeculative eyes just then.

"I gave him a hint, Maude, that you had been unable to bring yourself to like Hartledon, but had fixed your mind on a younger son. Later, we'll let him suspect who the younger son was."

The words aroused Maude; she started up and stood staring at her mother, her eyes dilating with a sort of horror; her pale cheeks slowly turning crimson.

"I don't understand," she gasped; "I hope I don't understand. You you do not mean that I am to try to like Val Elster?"

"Now, Maude, no heroics. I'll not see you make a fool of yourself as your sisters have done. He's not Val Elster any longer; he is Lord Hartledon: better looking than ever his brother was, and will make a better husband, for he'll be more easily led."

"I would not marry Val for the whole world," she said, with strong emotion. "I dislike him; I hate him; I never could be a wife to Val Elster."

"We'll see," said the dowager, pushing up her front, of which she had just caught sight in a glass.

"Thank Heaven, there's no fear of it!" resumed Maude, collecting her senses, and sitting down again with a relieved sigh; "he is to marry Anne Ashton. Thank Heaven that he loves her!"

"Anne Ashton!" scornfully returned the countessdowager. "She might have been tolerated when he was Val Elster, not now he is Lord Hartledon. What notions you have, Maude!"

Maude burst into tears. "Mamma, I think it is fearfully indecent for you to begin upon these things already! It only happened last night, andand it sounds quite horrible."

"When one has to live as I do, one has to do many things decent and indecent," retorted the countessdowager sharply. "He has had his hint, and you've got yours: and you are no true girl if you suffer yourself now to be triumphed over by Anne Ashton."

Maude cried on silently, thinking how cruel fate was to have taken one brother and spared the other. Whosave Anne Ashtonwould have missed Val Elster; while Lord Hartledonat least he had made the life of one heart. A poor bruised heart now; never, never to be made quite whole again.

Thus the dowager, in her blindness, began her plans. In her blindness! If we could only foresee the ending of some of the unholy schemes that many of us are apt to weave, we might be more willing to leave them humbly in a higher Hand than ours. Do they ever bring forth good, these plans, born of our evil passionshatred, malice, utter selfishness? I think not. They may seem to succeed triumphantly, butwatch the triumph to the end.

CHAPTER XIII.

FEVER.

The dews of an October evening were falling upon Calne, as Lord Hartledon walked from the railwaystation. Just as unexpectedly as he had arrived the morning you first saw him, when he was only Val Elster, had he arrived now. By the merest accident one of the Hartledon servants happened to be at the station when the train arrived, and took charge of his master's luggage.

"All well at home, James?"

"All quite well, my lord."

Several weeks had elapsed since his brother's death, and Lord Hartledon had spent them in London. He went up on business the week after the funeral, and did not return again. In one respect he had no inducement to return; for the Ashtons, including Anne, were on a visit in Wales. They were at home now, as he knew well; and perhaps that had brought him down.

He went in unannounced, finding his way to the inner drawingroom. A large fire blazed in the grate, and Lady Maude sat by it so intent in thought as not to observe his entrance. She wore a black crêpe dress, with a little white trimming on its low body and sleeves. The firelight played on her beautiful features; and her eyelashes glistened as if with tears: she was thinner and paler; he saw it at once. The countessdowager kept to Hartledon and showed no intention of moving from it: she and her daughter had been there alone all these weeks.

"How are you, Maude?"

She looked round and started up, backing from him with a face of alarm. Ah, was it instinct caused her so to receive him? What, or who, was she thinking of; holding her hands before her with that face of horror?

"Maude, have I so startled you?"

"Percival! I beg your pardon. I believe I was thinking ofof your brother, and I really did not know you in the uncertain light. We don't have the rooms lighted early," she added, with a little laugh.

He took her hands in his. Now that she knew him, and the alarm was over, she seemed really pleased to see him: the dark eyes were raised to his with a frank smile.

"May I take a cousin's greeting, Maude?"

Without waiting for yes or no, he stooped and took the kiss. Maude flung his hands away. He should have left out the "cousin," or not have taken the kiss.

He went and stood with his elbow on the mantelpiece, soberly, as if he had only kissed a sister. Maude sat down again.

"Why did you not send us word you were coming?" she asked.

"There was no necessity for it. And I only made my mind up this morning."

"What a long time you have been away! I thought you went for a week."

"I did not get my business over very quickly; and waited afterwards to see Thomas Carr, who was out of town. The Ashtons were away, you know; so I had no inducement to hurry back again."

"Very complimentary to her. Who's Thomas Carr?" asked Maude.

"A barrister; the greatest friend I possess in this world. We were at college together, and he used to keep me straight."

"Keep you straight! Val!"

"It's quite true. I went to him in all my scrapes and troubles. He is the most honourable, upright, straightforward man I know; and, as such, possesses a talent for serving"

"Hartledon! Is it you?"

The interruption came from the dowager. She and the butler came in together, both looking equally astonished at the appearance of Lord Hartledon. The former said dinner was served.

"Will you let me sit down in this coat?" asked Val.

The countessdowager would willingly have allowed him to sit down without any. Her welcome was demonstrative; her display of affection quite warm, and she called him

"Val," tenderly. He escaped for a minute to his room, washed his hands, brushed his hair, and was down again, and taking the head of his own table.

It was pleasant to have him there a welcome change from Hartledon's recent monotony; and even Maude, with her boasted dislike, felt prejudice melting away. Boasted dislike, not real, it had been. None could dislike Percival. He was not Edward, and it was him Maude had loved. Percival she never would love, but she might learn to like him. As he sat near her, in his plain black morning attire, courteous, genuinely sweettempered, his good looks conspicuous, a smile on his delicate, refined, but vacillating lips, and his honest darkblue eyes bent upon her in kindness, Maude for the first time admitted a vision of the possible future, together with a dim consciousness that it might not be intolerable. Half the world, of her age and sex, would have deemed it indeed a triumph to be made the wife of that attractive man.

He had cautiously stood aside for Lady Kirton to take the head of the table; but the dowager had positively refused, and subsided into the chair at the foot. She did not fill it in dear Edward's time, she said; neither should she in dear Val's; he had come home to occupy his own place. And oh, thank goodness he was come! She and Maude had been so lonely and miserable, growing thinner daily from sheer ennui. So she faced Lord Hartledon at the end of the table, her flaxen curls surmounted by an array of black plumes, and looking very like a substantial female mute.

"What an awful thing that is about the Rectory!" exclaimed she, when they were more than half through dinner.

Lord Hartledon looked up quietly. "What is the matter at the Rectory?"

"Fever has broken out."

"Is that all!" he exclaimed, some amusement on his face. "I thought it must have taken fire."

"A fever's worse than a fire."

"Do you think so?"

"Think so!" echoed the dowager. "You can run away from a fire; but a fever may take you before you are aware of it. Every soul in the Rectory may die; it may spread to the parish; it may spread here. I have kept tar burning outside the house the last two days."

"You are not serious, Lady Kirton!"

"I am serious. I wouldn't catch a fever for the whole world. I should die of fright before it had time to kill me. Besides I have Maude to guard. You were forgetting her."

"There's no danger at all. One of the servants became ill after they returned home, and it proved to be fever. I don't suppose it will spread."

"How did you hear about it?"

"From Miss Ashton. She mentioned it in her last letter to me."

"I didn't know you corresponded with her," cried the dowager, her tones rather shrill.

"Not correspond with Miss Ashton!" he repeated. "Of course I do."

The old dowager had a fit of choking: something had gone the wrong way, she said. Lord Hartledon resumed.

"It is an awful shame of those seaside lodginghouse people! Did you hear the particulars, Maude? After the Ashtons concluded their visit in Wales, they went for a fortnight to the seaside, on their way home, taking lodgings. Some days after they had been settled in the rooms they discovered that some fever was in the house; a family who occupied another set of apartments being ill with it, and had been ill before the Ashtons went in. Dr. Ashton told the landlady what he thought of her conduct, and then they left the house for home. But Mrs. Ashton's maid, Matilda, had already taken it."

"Did Miss Ashton give you these particulars?" asked Maude, toying with a late rose that lay beside her plate.

"Yes. I should feel inclined to prosecute the woman, were I Dr. Ashton, for having been so wickedly inconsiderate. But I hope Matilda is better, and that the alarm will end with her. It is four days since I had Anne's letter."

"Then, Lord Hartledon, I can tell you the alarm's worse, and another has taken it, and the parish is up in arms," said the countessdowager, tartly. "It has proved to be fever of a most malignant type, and not a soul but Hillary the surgeon goes near the Rectory, You must not venture within halfamile of it. Dr. Ashton was so careless as to occupy his pulpit on Sunday; but, thank goodness, I did not venture to church, or allow Maude to go. Your Miss Ashton will be having it next."

"Of course they have advice from Garchester?" he exclaimed.

"How should I know? My opinion is that the parson himself might be prosecuted for bringing the fever into a healthy neighbourhood. Port, Hedges! One has need of a double portion of tonics in a time like this."

The countessdowager's alarms were not feignedno, nor exaggerated. She had an intense, selfish fear of any sort of illness; she had a worse fear of death. In any time of public epidemic her terrors would have been almost ludicrous in their absurdity but that they were so real. And she "fortified" herself against infection by eating and drinking more than ever.

Nothing else was said: she shunned allusion to it when she could: and presently she and Maude left the diningroom. "You won't be long, Hartledon?" she observed, sweetly, as she passed him. Val only bowed in answer, closed the door upon them, and rang for Hedges.

"Is there much alarm regarding this fever at the Rectory?" he asked of the butler.

"Not very much, I think, my lord. A few are timid about it; as is always the case. One of the other servants has taken it; but Mr. Hillary told me when he was here this morning that he hoped it would not spread beyond the Rectory."

"Was Hillary here this morning? Nobody's ill?" asked Lord Hartledon, quickly.

"No one at all, my lord. The countessdowager sent for him, to ask what her diet had better be, and how she could guard against infection more effectually than she was doing. She did not allow him to come in, but spoke to him from one of the upper windows, with a cloak and respirator on."

Lord Hartledon looked at his butler; the man was suppressing a grim smile.

"Nonsense, Hedges!"

"It's quite true, my lord. Mrs. Mirrable says she has five bowls of disinfectant in their rooms."

Lord Hartledon broke into a laugh, not suppressed.

"And in the courtyard, looking towards the Rectory, as may be said, there's several pitchpots alight night and day," added Hedges. "We have had a host of people up, wanting to know if the place is on fire."

"What a joke!" cried Val who was not yet beyond the age to enjoy such jokes. "Hedges," he resumed, in a more confidential tone, "no strangers have been here inquiring for me, I suppose?"

He alluded to creditors, or people acting for them. To a careless man, as Val had been, it was a difficult matter to know whether all his debts were paid or not. He had settled what he remembered; but there might be others. Hedges understood; and his voice fell to the same low tone: he had been pretty cognizant of the embarrassments of Mr. Percival Elster.

"Nobody at all, my lord. They wouldn't have got much information out of me, if they had come."

Lord Hartledon laughed. "Things are changed now, Hedges, and they may have as much information as they choose. Bring me coffee here; make haste."

Coffee was brought, and he went out as soon as he had taken it, following the road to the Rectory. It was a calm, still night, the moon tolerably bright; not a breath of wind stirred the air, warm and oppressive for October; not by any means the sort of night doctors covet when fever is in the atmosphere.

He turned in at the Rectory gates, and was crossing to the house, when a rustling of leaves in a shrubbery path caused him to look over the dwarf laurels, and there stood Anne. He was at her side in an instant. She had nothing on her head, as though she had just come forth from the rooms for a breath of air. As indeed was the case.

"My darling!"

"I heard you had come," she whispered, as he held both her hands in his, and her heart bounded with an exquisite flutter of delight.

"How did you hear that?" he said, placing her hand within his arm, that he might pace the walk with her.

"Papa heard it. Some one had seen you walking home from the train: I think it was Mr. Hillary. But, Percival, ought you to have come here?" she added in alarm. "This is infected ground, you know."

"Not for me. I have no more fear of fever than I have of moonstroke. Anne, I hope you will not take it," he gravely added.

"I hope not, either. Like you, I have no fear of it. I am so glad Arthur is away. Was it not wrong of that landlady to let her rooms to us when she had fever in them?"

"Infamously wrong," said Lord Hartledon warmly.

"She excused herself afterwards by saying, that as the people who had the fever were in quite a different part of the house from ours, she thought there could be no danger. Papa was so angry. He told her he was sorry the law did not take cognizance of such an offence. We had been a week in the house before we knew of it."

"How did you find it out?"

"The lady who was ill with it died, and Matilda saw the coffin going up the back stairs. She questioned the servants of the house, and one of them told her all about it then, bit by bit. Another lady was lying ill, and a third was recovering. The landlady, by way of excuse, said the greatest wrong had been done to herself, for these ladies had brought the fever into her house, and brought it deliberately. Fever had broken out in their own home, some long way off, and they ran away from it, and took her apartments, saying nothing; which was true, we found."

"Two wrongs don't make a right," observed Lord Hartledon. "Their bringing the fever into her house was no justification for receiving you into it when it was there. It's the way of the world, Anne: one wrong leading to others. Is Matilda getting over it?"

"I hardly know. She is not out of danger; but Mr. Hillary has hopes of her. One of the other servants has taken it, and is worse than Matilda. Mr. Hillary has been with her three times today, and is coming again. She was ill when I last wrote to you, Val; but we did not know it."

"Which of them is it?" he asked.

"The dairymaid; a stout girl, who has never had a day's illness before. I don't suppose you know her. There was some trouble with her. She would not take any medicine; would not do anything she ought to have done, and the consequence is that the fever has got dangerously ahead. I am sure she is very ill."

"I hope it will not spread beyond the Rectory."

"Oh, Val, that is our one great hope," she said, turning her earnest face to him in the moonlight. "We are taking all possible precautions. None of us are going beyond the grounds, except papa, and we do not receive any one here. I don't know what papa will say to your coming."

He smiled. "But you can't keep all the world away!"

"We do very nearly. Mr. Hillary comes, and Dr. Beamish from Garchester, and one or two people have been here on business. If any one calls at the gate, they are not asked in; and I don't suppose they would come in if asked. Jabez Gum's the most obstinate. He comes in just as usual."

"Lady Kirton is in an awful fright," said Val, in an amused tone.

"Oh, I have heard of it," cried Anne, clasping her hands in laughter. "She is burning tar outside the house; and she spoke to Mr. Hillary this morning through the window muffled up in a cloak and respirator. What a strange old thing she is!"

Val shrugged his shoulders. "I don't think she means badly *au fond*; and she has no home, poor creature."

"Is that why she remains at Hartledon?"

"I suppose so. Reigning at Hartledon must be something like a glimpse of Paradise to her. She won't quit it in a hurry."

"I wonder you like to have her there."

"I know I shall never have courage to tell her to go," was the candid and characteristic answer. "I was afraid of her as a boy, and I'm not sure but I'm afraid of her still."

"I don't like her I don't like either of them," said Anne in a low tone.

"Don't you like Maude?"

"No. I am sure she is not true. To my mind there is something very false about them both."

"I think you are wrong, Anne; certainly as regards Maude."

Miss Ashton did not press her opinion: they were his relatives. "But I should have pitied poor Edward had he lived and married her," she said, following out her thoughts.

"I was mistaken when I thought Maude cared for Edward," observed Lord Hartledon. "I'm sure I did think it. I used to tell Edward so; but a day or two after he died I found I was wrong. The dowager had been urging Maude to like him, and she could not, and it made her miserable."

"Did Maude tell you this?" inquired Anne; her radiant eyes full of surprise.

"Not Maude: she never said a word to me upon the subject. It was the dowager."

"Then, Val, she must have said it with an object in view. I am sure Maude did love him. I know she did."

He shook his head. "You are wrong, Anne, depend upon it. She did not like him, and she and her mother were at variance upon the point. However, it is of no moment to discuss it now: and it might never have come to an issue had Edward lived, for he did not care for her; and I dare say never would have cared for her."

Anne said no more. It was of no moment as he observed; but she retained her own opinion. They strolled to the end of the short walk in silence, and Anne said she must go in.

"Am I quite forgiven?" whispered Lord Hartledon, bending his head down to her.

"I never thought I had very much to forgive," she rejoined, after a pause.

"My darling! I mean by your father."

"Ah, I don't know. You must talk to him. He knows we have been writing to each other. I think he means to trust you."

"The best plan will be for you to come soon to Hartledon, Anne. I shall never go wrong when once you are my wife."

"Do you go so very wrong now?" she asked.

"On my honour, no! You need not doubt me, Anne; now or ever. I have paid up what I owed, and will take very good care to keep out of trouble for the future. I incurred debts

for others, more than for myself, and have bought experience dearly. My darling, surely you can trust me now?"

"I always did trust you," she murmured.

He took a long, fervent kiss from her lips, and then led her to the open lawn and across to the house.

"Ought you to come in, Percival?"

"Certainly. One word, Anne; because I may be speaking to the Rector I don't mean tonight. You will make no objection to coming soon to Hartledon?"

"I can't come, you know, as long as Lady Kirton is its mistress," she said, half seriously, half jestingly.

He laughed at the notion. Lady Kirton must be going soon of her own accord; if not, he should have to pluck up courage and give her a hint, was his answer. At any rate, she'd surely take herself off before Christmas. The old dowager at Hartledon after he had Anne there! Not if he knew it, he added, as he went on with her into the presence of Dr. and Mrs. Ashton. The Rector started from his seat, at once telling him that he ought not to have come in. Which Val did not see at all, and decidedly refused to go out again.

Meanwhile the countessdowager and Maude were wondering what had become of him. They supposed he was still sitting in the diningroom. The old dowager fidgeted about, her fingers ominously near the bell. She was burning to send to him, but hardly knew how he might take the message: it might be that he would object to leading strings, and her attempt to put them on would ruin all. But the time went on; grew late; and she was dying for her tea, which she had chosen should wait also. Maude sat before the fire in a large chair; her eyes, her hands, her whole air supremely listless.

"Don't you want tea, Maude?" suddenly cried her mother, who had cast innumerable glances at her from time to time.

"I have wanted it for hours as it seems to me."

"It's a horrid custom for young men, this sitting long after dinner. If he gets into it But you must see to that, and stop it, if ever you reign at Hartledon. I dare say he's smoking."

"If ever I reign at Hartledon which I am not likely to do I'll take care not to wait tea for any one, as you have made me wait for it this evening," was Maude's rejoinder, spoken with apathy.

"I'll send a message to him," decided Lady Kirton, ringing rather fiercely.

A servant appeared.

"Tell Lord Hartledon we are waiting tea for him."

"His lordship's not in, my lady."

"Not in!"

"He went out directly after dinner, as soon as he had taken coffee."

"Oh," said the countess dowager. And she began to make the tea with vehemence for it did not please her to have it brought in made and knocked down and broke one of the delicate china cups.

CHAPTER XIV.

ANOTHER PATIENT.

It was eleven o'clock when Lord Hartledon entered. Lady Kirton was fanning herself vehemently. Maude had gone upstairs for the night.

"Where have you been?" she asked, laying down her fan. "We waited tea for you until poor Maude got quite exhausted."

"Did you? I am sorry for that. Never wait for me, pray, Lady Kirton. I took tea at the Rectory."

"Tookteawhere?"

"At the Rectory."

With a shriek the countessdowager darted to the far end of the room, turning up her gown as she went, and muffling it over her head and face, so that only the little eyes, round now with horror, were seen. Lord Hartledon gazed in amazement.

"You have been at the Rectory, when I warned you not to go! You have been inside that house of infection, and come homehereto meto my darling Maude! May heaven forgive you, Hartledon!"

"Why, what have I done? What harm will it do?" exclaimed the astonished man. He would have approached her, but she warned him from her piteously with her hands. She was at the upper end of the room, and he near the door, so that she could not leave it without passing him. Hedges came in, and stood staring in the same wondering astonishment as his master.

"For mercy's sake, take off every shred of your clothes!" she cried. "You may have brought home death in them. They shall be thrown into the burning tar. Do you want to kill us? What has Maude done to you that you behave in this way?"

"I do think you must be going mad!" cried Lord Hartledon, in bewilderment; "and I hope you'll forgive me for saying so. I"

"Go and change your clothes!" was all she could reiterate. "Every minute you stand in them is fraught with danger. If you choose to die yourself, it's downright wicked to bring death to us. Oh, go, that I may get out of here."

Lord Hartledon, to pacify her, left the room, and the countessdowager rushed forth and bolted herself into her own apartments.

Was she mad, or making a display of affectation, or genuinely afraid? wondered Lord Hartledon aloud, as he went up to his chamber. Hedges gave it as his opinion that she was really afraid, because she had been as bad as this when she first heard of the illness, before his lordship arrived. Val retired to rest laughing: it was a good joke to him.

But it was no joke to the countessdowager, as he found to his cost when the morning came. She got him out of his chamber betimes, and commenced a "fumigating" process. The clothes he had worn she insisted should be burnt; pleading so piteously that he yielded in his good nature.

But there was to be a battle on another score. She forbade him, in the most positive terms, to go again to the Rectory to approach within half a mile of it. Lord Hartledon civilly told her he could not comply; he hinted that if her alarms were so great, she had better leave the place until all danger was over, and thereby nearly entailed on himself another wardance.

News that came up that morning from the Rectory did not tend to assuage her fears. The poor dairymaid had died in the night, and another servant, one of the men, was sickening. Even Lord Hartledon looked grave: and the countessdowager wormed a half promise from him, in the softened feelings of the moment, that he would not visit the infected house.

Before an hour was over he came to her to retract it. "I cannot be so unfeeling, so unneighbourly, as not to call," he said. "Even were my relations not what they are with Miss Ashton, I could not do it. It's of no use talking, ma'am; I am too restless to stay away."

A little skirmish of words ensued. Lady Kirton accused him of wishing to sacrifice them to his own selfish gratification. Lord Hartledon felt uncomfortable at the accusation. One of the besthearted men living, he did nothing in his vacillation. He would go in the evening, he said to himself, when they could not watch him from the house.

But she was clever at carrying out her own will, that countessdowager; more than a match for the singleminded young man. She wrote an urgent letter to Dr. Ashton, setting forth her own and her daughter's danger if her nephew, as she styled him, was received at the Rectory; and she despatched it privately.

It brought forth a letter from Dr. Ashton to Lord Hartledon; a kind but peremptory mandate, forbidding him to show himself at the Rectory until the illness was over. Dr. Ashton reminded his future son-in-law that it was not particularly on his own account he interposed this veto, but for the sake of the neighbourhood generally. If they were to prevent the fever from spreading, it was absolutely necessary that no chance visitors should be running into the Rectory and out of it again, to carry possible infection to the parish.

Lord Hartledon could only acquiesce. The note was written in terms so positive as rather to surprise him; but he never suspected the undercurrent that had been at work. In his straightforwardness he showed the letter to the dowager, who nodded her head approvingly, but told no tales.

And so his days went on in the society of the two women at Hartledon; and if he found himself oppressed with ennui at first, he subsided into a flirtation with Maude, and forgot care. Elster's folly! He was not hearing from Anne, for it was thought better that even notes should not pass out of the Rectory.

Curiously to relate, the first person beyond the Rectory to take the illness was the man Pike. How he could have caught it was a marvel to Calne. And yet, if Lady Kirton's theory were correct, that infection was conveyed by clothes, it might be accounted for, and Clerk Gum be deemed the culprit. One evening after the clerk had been for some little time at the Rectory with Dr. Ashton, he met Pike in going out; had brushed close to him in passing, as he well remembered. However it might have been, in a few days after that Pike was found to be suffering from the fever.

Whether he would have died, lying alone in that shed, Calne did not decide; and some thought he would, making no sign; some thought not, but would have called in assistance. Mr. Hillary, an observant man, as perhaps it was requisite he should be in time of public danger, halted one morning to speak to Clerk Gum, who was standing at his own gate.

"Have you seen anything lately of that neighbour of yours, Gum?"

"Which neighbour?" asked the clerk, in tones that seemed to resent the question.

Mr. Hillary pointed his umbrella in the direction of the shed. "Pike."

"No, I've seen nothing of him, that I remember."

"Neither have I. What's more, I've seen no smoke coming out of the chimney these two days. It strikes me he's ill. It may be the fever."

"Gone away, possibly," remarked the clerk, after a moment's pause; "in the same unceremonious manner that he came."

"I think somebody ought to see. He may be lying there helpless."

"Little matter if he is," growled the clerk, who seemed put out about something or other.

"It's not like you to say so, Gum. You might step over the stile and see; you're nearest to him. Nobody knows what the man is, or what he may have been; but humanity does not let even the worst die unaided."

"What makes you think he has the fever?" asked the clerk.

"I only say he may have it; having seen neither him nor his smoke these two days. Never mind; if it annoys you to do this, I'll look in myself some time today."

"You wouldn't get admitted; he keeps his door fastened," returned Gum. "The only way to get at him is to shout out to him through that glazed aperture he calls his window."

"Will you do it or shall I?"

"I'll do it," said the clerk; "and tell you if your services are wanted."

Mr. Hillary walked off at a quick pace. There was a good deal of illness in Calne at that season, though the fever had not spread.

Whether Clerk Gum kept his word, or whether he did not, certain it was that Mr. Hillary heard nothing from him that day. In the evening the clerk was sitting in his office in a thoughtful mood, busy over some accounts connected with an insurance company for which he was agent, when he heard a quick sharp knock at the frontdoor.

"I wonder if it's Hillary?" he muttered, as he took the candle and rose to open it.

Instead of the surgeon, there entered a lady, with much energy. It was the *bête noire* of Clerk Gum's life, Mrs. Jones.

"What's the house shut up for at this early hour?" she began. "The door locked, the shutters up, and the blinds down, just as if everybody was dead or asleep. Where's Nance?"

"She's out," said the clerk. "I suppose she shut up before she went, and I've been in my office all the afternoon. Do you want anything?"

"Do I want anything!" retorted Mrs. Jones. "I've come in to shelter from the rain. It's been threatening all the evening, and it's coming down now like cats and dogs."

The clerk was leading the way to the little parlour; but she ignored the movement, and went on to the kitchen. He could only follow her. "It's a pity you came out when it threatened rain," said he.

"Business took me out," replied Mrs. Jones. "I've been up to the mill. I heard young Rip was ill, and going to leave; so I went up to ask if they'd try our Jim. But young Rip isn't going to leave, and isn't ill, mother Floyd says, though it's certain he's not well. She can't think what's the matter with the boy; he's always fancying he sees ghosts in the river. I've had my trapes for nothing."

She had given her gown a good shake from the raindrops in the middle of the kitchen, and was now seated before the fire. The clerk stood by the table, occasionally snuffing the candle, and wishing she'd take herself off again.

"Where's Nancy gone?" asked she.

"I didn't hear her say."

"And she'll be gone a month of Sundays, I suppose. I shan't wait for her, if the rain gives over."

"You'd be more comfortable in the small parlour," said the clerk, who seemed rather fidgety; "there's a nice bit of fire there."

"I'm more comfortable here," contradicted Mrs. Jones. "Where's the good of a bit of fire for a gown as wet as mine?"

Jabez Gum made no response. There was the lady, a fixture; and he could only resign himself to the situation.

"How's your friend at the next housePike?" she began again sarcastically.

"He's no friend of mine," said the clerk.

"It looks like it, at all events; or you'd have given him into custody long ago. I wouldn't let a man harbour himself so close to me. He's taken to a new dodge now: going about with a pistol to shoot people."

"Who says so?" asked the clerk.

"I say so. He frightened that boy Ripper pretty near to death. The boy tore home one night in a state of terror, and all they could get out of him was that he'd met Pike with a pistol. It's weeks ago, and he hasn't got over it yet."

"Did Pike level it at him?"

"I tell you that's all they could get out of the boy. He's a nice jailbird too, that young Rip, unless I'm mistaken. They might as well send him away, and make room for our Jim."

"I think you are about the most fanciful, unjust, selfish woman in Calne!" exclaimed the clerk, unable to keep down his anger any longer. "You'd take young Ripper's character away without scruple, just because his place might suit your Jim!"

"I'm what?" shrieked Mrs. Jones. "I'm unjust, am I?"

An interruption occurred, and Mrs. Jones subsided into silence. The backdoor suddenly opened, not a couple of yards from that lady's head, and in came Mrs. Gum in her ordinary indoor dress, two basins in her hand. The sight of her visitor appeared to occasion her surprise; she uttered a faint scream, and nearly dropped the basins.

"Lawk a mercy! Is it Lydia Jones?"

Mrs. Jones had been drawing a quiet deduction the clerk had said his wife was out only to deceive her. She rose from her chair, and faced him.

"I thought you told me she was gone out?"

The clerk coughed. He looked at his wife, as if asking an explanation. The meeker of the two women hastily put her basins down, and stood looking from one to the other, apparently recovering breath.

"Didn't you go out?" asked the clerk.

"I was going, Gum, but stepped out first to collect my basins, and then the rain came down. I had to shelter under the woodshed, it was peppering so."

"Collect your basins!" interjected Mrs. Jones. "Where from?"

"I put them out with scraps for the cats."

"The cats must be well off in your quarter; better than some children in others," was the rejoinder, delivered with an unnecessary amount of spite. "What makes you so out of breath?" she tartly asked.

"I had a bit of a fright," said the woman, simply. "My breath seems to get affected at nothing of late, Lydia."

"A pity but you'd your hands full of work, as mine are: that's the best remedy for fright," said Mrs. Jones sarcastically. "What might your fright have been, pray?"

"I was standing, waiting to dart over here, when I saw a man come across the waste land and make for Pike's shed," said Mrs. Gum, looking at her husband. "It gave me a turn. We've never seen a soul go near the place of an evening since Pike has been there."

"Why should it give you a turn?" asked Mrs. Jones, who was in a mood to contradict everything. "You've seen Pike often enough not to be frightened at him when he keeps his distance."

"It wasn't Pike, Lydia. The man had an umbrella over him, and he looked like a gentleman. Fancy Pike with an umbrella!"

"Was it Mr. Hillary?" interposed the clerk.

She shook her head. "I don't think so; but it was getting too dark to see. Any way, it gave me a turn; and he's gone right up to Pike's shed."

"Gave you a turn, indeed!" scornfully repeated Mrs. Jones. "I think you're getting more of an idiot every day, Nance. It's to be hoped somebody's gone to take him up; that's what is to be hoped."

But Mr. Hillary it was. Hearing nothing from Jabez Gum all day, he had come to the conclusion that that respectable man had ignored his promise, and, unable to divest

himself of the idea that Pike was ill, in the evening, having a minute to spare, he went forth to see for himself.

The sheddoor was closed, but not fastened, and Mr. Hillary went in at once without ceremony. A lighted candle shed its rays around the rude dwellingroom: and the first thing he saw was a young man, who did not look in the least like Pike, stretched upon a mattress; the second was a bushy black wig and appurtenances lying on a chair; and the third was a formidablelooking pistol, conveniently close to the prostrate invalid.

Quick as thought, the surgeon laid his hand upon the pistol and removed it to a safe distance. He then bent over the sick man, examining him with his penetrating eyes; and what he saw struck him with consternation so great, that he sat down on a chair to recover himself, albeit not liable to be overcome by emotion.

When he left the shedwhich was not for nearly halfanhour after he had entered ithe heard voices at Clerk Gum's frontdoor. The storm was over, and their visitor was departing. Mr. Hillary took a moment's counsel with himself, then crossed the stile and appeared amongst them. Nodding to the three collectively, he gravely addressed the clerk and his wife.

"I have come here to ask, in the name of our common humanity, whether you will put aside your prejudices, and be Christians in a case of need," he began. "I don't forget that once, when an epidemic was raging in Calne, you"turning to the wife"were active and fearless, going about and nursing the sick when almost all others held aloof. Will you do the same now by a helpless man?"

The woman trembled all over. Clerk Gum looked questioningly at the doctor. Mrs. Jones was taking in everything with eyes and ears.

"This neighbour of yours has caught the fever. Some one must attend to him, or he will lie there and die. I thought perhaps you'd do it, Mrs. Gum, for our Saviour's sakeif from no other motive."

She trembled excessively. "I always was terribly afraid of that man, sir, since he came," said she, with marked hesitation.

"But he cannot harm you now. I don't ask you to go in to him one day after he is well againif he recovers. Neither need you be with him as a regular nurse: only step in now and then to give him his physic, or change the wet cloths on his burning head."

Mrs. Jones found her voice. The enormous impudence of the surgeon's request had caused its temporary extinction.

"I'd see Pike in his coffin before I'd go anigh him as a nurse! What on earth will you be asking next, Mr. Hillary?"

"I didn't ask you, Mrs. Jones: you have your children to attend to; full employment for one pair of arms. Mrs. Gum has nothing to do with her time; and is near at hand besides. Gum, you stand in your place by Dr. Ashton every Sunday, and read out to us of the loving mercy of God: will you urge your wife to this little work of charity for His sake?"

Jabez Gum evidently did not know what to answer. On the one hand, he could hardly go against the precepts he had to respond to as clerk; on the other, there was his scorn and hatred of the disreputable Arab.

"He's such a loose character, sir," he debated at length.

"Possibly: when he is well. But he is ill now, and could not be loose if he tried. Some one must go in now and then to see after him: it struck me that perhaps your wife would do it, for humanity's sake; and I thought I'd ask her before going further."

"She can do as she likes," said Jabez.

Mrs. Gum as unresisting in her nature as ever was Percival Elster yielded to the prayer of the surgeon, and said she would do what she could. But she had never shown more nervousness over anything than she was showing as she gave her answer.

"Then I will step indoors and give you a few plain directions," said the surgeon. "Mrs. Jones has taken her departure, I perceive."

Mrs. Gum was as good as her word, and went in with dire trepidation. Calne's sentiments, on the whole, resembled Mrs. Jones's, and the woman was blamed for her yielding nature. But she contrived, with the help of Mr. Hillary's skill, to bring the man through the fever; and it was very singular that no other person out of the Rectory took it.

The last one to take it at the Rectory was Mrs. Ashton. Of the three servants who had it, one had died; the other two recovered. Mrs. Ashton did not take it until the rest were well, and she had it lightly. Anne nursed her and would do so; and it was an additional reason for prolonging the veto against Lord Hartledon.

One morning in December, Val, in passing down the road, saw the Rectory turned, as he called it, inside out. Every window was thrown open; curtains were taken down; altogether there seemed to be a comprehensive cleaning going on. At that moment Mr. Hillary passed, and Val arrested him, pointing to the Rectory.

"Yes, they are having a cleansing and purification. The family went away this morning."

"Went where?" exclaimed Hartledon, in amazement.

"Dr. Ashton has taken a cottage near Ventnor."

"Had Mrs. Ashton quite recovered?"

"Quite: or they would not have gone. The Rectory has had a clean bill of health for some time past."

"Then why did they not let me know it?" exclaimed Val, in his astonishment and anger.

"Perhaps you didn't ask," said the surgeon. "But no visitors were sought. Time enough for that when the house shall have been fumigated."

"They might have sent to me," he cried, in resentment. "To go away and never let me know it!"

"They may have thought you were too agreeably engaged to care to be disturbed," remarked the surgeon.

"What do you mean?" demanded Val, hotly.

Mr. Hillary laughed. "People will talk, you know; and rumour has it that Lord Hartledon has found attractions in his own home, whilst the Rectory was debarred to him."

Val wheeled round on his heel, and walked away in displeasure. Home truths are never palatable. But the kindly disposition of the man resumed its sway immediately: he turned back, and pointed to the shed.

"Is that interesting patient of yours on his legs again?"

"He is getting better. The disease attacked him fiercely and was unusually prolonged. It's strange he should have been the only one to take it."

"Gum's wife has been nursing him, I hear?"

"She has gone in and out to do such necessary offices as the sick require. I put it to her from a Christian point of view, you see, and on the score of humanity. She was at hand; and that's a great thing where the nurse is only a visiting one."

"Look here, Hillary; don't let the man want for anything; see that he has all he needs. He is a black sheep, no doubt; but illness levels us all to one standard. Good day."

"Good day, Lord Hartledon."

And when the surgeon had got to a distance with his quick step, Lord Hartledon turned back to the Rectory.

CHAPTER XV.

VAL'S DILEMMA.

It was a mild day in spring. The air was balmy, but the skies were grey and lowering; and as a gentleman strolled across a field adjoining Hartledon Park he looked up at them more than once, as if asking whether they threatened rain.

Not that he had any great personal interest in the question. Whether the skies gave forth sunshine or rain is of little moment to a mind not at rest. He had only looked up in listlessness. A stranger might have taken him at a distance for a gamekeeper: his coat was of velveteen; his boots were muddy: but a nearer inspection would have removed the impression.

It was Lord Hartledon; but changed since you last saw him. For some time past there had been a worn, weary look upon his face, bespeaking a mind ill at ease; the truth is, his conscience was not at rest, and in time that tells on the countenance.

He had been by the fishpond for an hour. But the fish had not shown themselves inclined to bite, and he grew too impatient to remain. Not altogether impatient at the wary fish, but in his own mental restlessness. The fishingrod was carried in his hand in pieces; and he splashed along, in a brown study, on the wet ground, flinging himself over the haha with an ungracious movement. Some one was approaching across the park from the house, and Lord Hartledon walked on to a gate, and waited there for him to come up. He began beating the bars with the thin end of the rod, and broke it!

"That's the way you use your fishingrods," cried the free, pleasant voice of the newcomer. "I shouldn't mind being appointed purveyor of tackle to your lordship."

The stranger was an active little man, older than Hartledon; his features were thin, his eyes dark and luminous. I think you have heard his name Thomas Carr. Lord Hartledon once called him the greatest friend he possessed on earth. He had been wont to fly to him in his past dilemmas, and the habit was strong upon him still. A mandate that would have been peremptory, but for the beseeching terms in which it was couched, had reached Mr. Carr on circuit; and he had hastened across country to obey it, reaching Hartledon the previous evening. That something was wrong, Mr. Carr of course was aware; but what, he did not yet know. Lord Hartledon, with his natural vacillation, his usual shrinking from the discussion of unpleasant topics relating to himself, had not entered upon it at all on the previous night; and when breakfast was over that morning, Mr. Carr had craved an hour alone for letterwriting. It was the first time Mr. Carr had visited his friend at his new inheritance; indeed the first time he had been at all at

Hartledon. Lord Hartledon seated himself on the gate; the barrister leaned his arms on the top bar whilst he talked to him.

"What is the matter?" asked the latter.

"Not much."

"I have finished my letters, so I came out to look for you. You are not changed, Elster."

"What should change me in so short a time?it's only six months since you last saw me," retorted Hartledon, curtly.

"I alluded to your nature. I had to worm the troubles out of you in the old days, each one as it arose. I see I shall have to do the same now. Don't say there's not much the matter, for I am sure there is."

Lord Hartledon jerked his handkerchief out of his pocket, passed it over his face, and put it back again.

"What fresh folly have you got into?as I used to ask you at Oxford. You are in some mess."

"I suppose it's of no use denying that I am in one. An awful mess, too."

"Well, I have pulled you out of many a one in my time. Let me hear it."

"There are some things one does not like to talk about, Carr. I sent for you in my perplexity; but I believe you can be of no use to me."

"So you have said before now. But it generally turned out that I was of use to you, and cleared you from your nightmare."

"All those were minor difficulties; this is different."

"I cannot understand your 'not liking' to speak of things to me. Why don't you begin?"

"Because I shall prove myself worse than a fool. You'll despise me to your heart's core. Carr, I think I shall go mad!"

"Tell me the cause first, and go mad afterwards. Come, Val; I am your true friend."

"I have made an offer of marriage to two women," said Hartledon, desperately plunging into the revelation. "Never was such a born idiot in the world as I have been. I can't marry both."

"I imagine not," quietly replied Mr. Carr.

"You knew I was engaged to Miss Ashton?"

"Yes."

"And I'm sure I loved her with all my"he seemed to hesitate for a strong term"might and main; and do still. But I have managed to get into mischief elsewhere."

"Elster's folly, as usual. What sort of mischief?"

"The worst sort, for there can be no slipping out of it. When that fever broke out at Doctor Ashton'syou heard us talking of it last night, CarrI went to the Rectory just as usual. What did I care for fever?it was not likely to attack me. But the countessdowager found it out"

"Why do they stay here so long?" interrupted Thomas Carr. "They have been here ever since your brother died."

"And before it. The old woman likes her quarters, and has no settled home. She makes a merit of stopping, and says I ought to feel under eternal obligation to her and Maude for sacrificing themselves to a solitary man and his household. But you should have heard the uproar she made upon discovering I had been to the Rectory. She had my room fumigated and my clothes burnt."

"Foolish old creature!"

"The best of it was, I pointed out by mistake the wrong coat, and the offending one is upstairs now. I shall show it her some day. She reproached me with holding her life and her daughter's dirtcheap, and wormed a promise out of me not to visit the Rectory as long as fever was in it."

"Which you gave?"

"She wormed it out of me, I tell you. I don't know that I should have kept it, but Dr. Ashton put in his veto also; and between the two I was kept away. For many weeks

afterwards I never saw or spoke to Anne. She did not come out at all, even to church; they were so anxious the fever should not spread."

"Well? Go on, Val."

"Well: how does that proverb run, about idleness being the root of all evil? During those weeks I was an idle man, wretchedly bored; and I fell into a flirtation with Maude. She began it, Carr, on my solemn word of honour though it's a shame to tell these tales of a woman; and I joined in from sheer weariness, to kill time. But you know how one gets led on in such things or I do, if you, you cautious fellow, don't and we both went in pretty deep."

"Elster's folly again! How deep?"

"As deep as I well could, short of committing myself to a proposal. You see the illluck of it was, those two and I being alone in the house. I may as well say Maude and I alone; for the old woman kept her room very much; she had a cold, she said, and was afraid of the fever."

"Tush!" cried Thomas Carr angrily. "And you made love to the young lady?"

"As fast as I could make it. What a fool I was! But I protest I only did it in amusement; I never thought of her supplanting Anne Ashton. Now, Carr, you are looking as you used to look at Oxford; get your brow smooth again. You just shut up yourself for weeks with a fascinating girl, and see if you wouldn't find yourself in some horrible entanglement, proof against such as you think you are."

"As I am obliged to be. I should take care not to lay myself open to the temptation. Neither need you have done it."

"I don't see how I was to help myself. Often and often I wished to have visitors in the house, but the old woman met me with reproaches that I was forgetting the recent death of my brother. She won't have any one now if she knows it, and I had to send for you quietly. Did you see how she stared last night when you came in?"

Mr. Carr drew down his lips. "You might have gone away yourself, Elster."

"Of course I might," was the testy reply. "But I was a fool, and didn't. Carr, I swear to you I fell into the trap unconsciously; I did not foresee danger. Maude is a charming girl, there's no denying it; but as to love, I never glanced at it."

"Was it not suspected in town last year that Lady Maude had a liking for your brother?"

"It was suspected there and here; I thought it myself. We were mistaken. One day lately Maude offended me, and I hinted at something of the sort: she turned red and white with indignation, saying she wished he could rise from his grave to refute it. I only wish he could!" added the unhappy man.

"Have you told me all?"

"All! I wish I had. In December I was passing the Rectory, and saw it dismantled. Hillary, whom I met, said the family had gone to Ventnor. I went in, but could not learn any particulars, or get the address. I chanced a letter, written I confess in anger, directing it Ventnor only, and it found them. Anne's answer was cool: mischiefmaking tongues had been talking about me and Maude; I learned so much from Hillary; and Anne no doubt resented it. I resented that can you follow me, Carr? and I said to myself I wouldn't write again for some time to come. Before that time came the climax had occurred."

"And while you were waiting for your temper to come round in regard to Miss Ashton, you continued to make love to the Lady Maude?" remarked Mr. Carr. "On the face of things, I should say your love had been transferred to her."

"Indeed it hadn't. Next to Anne, she's the most charming girl I know; that's all. Between the two it will be awful work for me."

"So I should think," returned Mr. Carr. "The ass between two bundles of hay was nothing to it."

"He was not an ass at all, compared with what I am," assented Val, gloomily.

"Well, if a man behaves like an ass"

"Don't moralize," interrupted Hartledon; "but rather advise me how to get out of my dilemma. The morning's drawing on, and I have promised to ride with Maude."

"You had better ride alone. All the advice I can give you is to draw back by degrees, and so let the flirtation subside. If there is no actual entanglement"

"Stop a bit, Carr; I had not come to it," interrupted Lord Hartledon, who in point of fact had been holding back what he called the climax, in his usual vacillating manner. "One illstarred day, when it was pouring cats and dogs, and I could not get out, I challenged

Maude to a game at billiards. Maude lost. I said she should pay me, and put my arm round her waist and snatched a kiss. Just at that moment in came the dowager, who I believe must have been listening"

"Not improbably," interrupted Mr. Carr, significantly.

"'Oh, you two dear turtledoves,' cried she, 'Hartledon, you have made me so happy! I have seen for some weeks what you were thinking of. There's nobody living I'd confide that dear child to but yourself: you shall have her, and my blessing shall be upon you both.'

"Carr," continued poor Val, "I was struck dumb. All the absurdity of the thing rose up before me. In my confusion I could not utter a word. A man with more moral courage might have spoken out; acknowledged the shame and folly of his conduct and apologized. I could not."

"Elster's folly! Elster's folly!" thought the barrister. "You never had the slightest spark of moral courage," he observed aloud, in pained tones. "What did you say?"

"Nothing. There's the worst of it. I neither denied the dowager's assumption, nor confirmed it. Of course I cannot now."

"When was this?"

"In December."

"And how have things gone on since? How do you stand with them?"

"Things have gone on as they went on before; and I stand engaged to Maude, in her mother's opinion; perhaps in hers: never having said myself one word to support the engagement."

"Only continued to 'make love,' and 'snatch a kiss,'" sarcastically rejoined Mr. Carr.

"Once in a way. What is a man to do, exposed to the witchery of a pretty girl?"

"Oh, Percival! You are worse than I thought for. Where is Miss Ashton?"

"Coming home next Friday," groaned Val. "And the dowager asked me yesterday whether Maude and I had arranged the time for our marriage. What on earth I shall do,

I don't know. I might sail for some remote land and convert myself into a savage, where I should never be found or recognized; there's no other escape for me."

"How much does Miss Ashton know of this?"

"Nothing. I had a letter from her this morning, more kindly than her letters have been of late."

"Lord Hartledon!" exclaimed Mr. Carr, in startled tones. "Is it possible that you are carrying on a correspondence with Miss Ashton, and your lovemaking with Lady Maude?"

Val nodded assent, looking really ashamed of himself.

"And you call yourself a man of honour! Why, you are the greatest humbug"

"That's enough; no need to sum it up. I see all I've been."

"I understood you to imply that your correspondence with Miss Ashton had ceased."

"It was renewed. Dr. Ashton came up to preach one Sunday, just before Christmas, and he and I got friendly again; you know I never can be unfriendly with any one long. The next day I wrote to Anne, and we have corresponded since; more coolly though than we used to do. Circumstances have been really against me. Had they continued at Ventnor, I should have gone down and spent my Christmas with them, and nothing of this would have happened; but they must needs go to Dr. Ashton's sister's in Yorkshire for Christmas; and there they are still. It was in that miserable Christmas week that the mischief occurred. And now you have the whole, Carr. I know I've been a fool; but what is to be done?"

"Lord Hartledon," was the grave rejoinder, "I am unable to give you advice in this. Your conduct is indefensible."

"Don't 'Lord Hartledon' me: I won't stand it. Carr?"

"Well?"

"If you bring up against me a string of reproaches lasting until night will that mend matters? I am conscious of possessing but one true friend in the world, and that's yourself. You must stand by me."

"I was your friend; never a truer. But I believed you to be a man of honour."

Hartledon lifted his hat from his brow; as though the brow alone were heavy enough just then. At least the thought struck Mr. Carr.

"I have been drawn unwittingly into this, as I have into other things. I never meant to do wrong. As to dishonour, Heaven knows my nature shrinks from it."

"If your nature does, you don't," came the severe answer. "I should feel ashamed to put forth the same plea always of 'falling unwittingly' into disgrace. You have done it ever since you were a schoolboy. Talk of the Elster folly! this has gone beyond it. This is dishonour. Engaged to one girl, and corresponding with her; making hourly love for weeks to another! May I inquire which of the two you really care for?"

"Anne I suppose."

"You suppose!"

"You make me wild, talking like this. Of course it's Anne. Maude has managed to creep into my regard, though, in no common degree. She is very lovely, very fascinating and amiable."

"May I ask which of the two you intend to marry!" continued the barrister, neither suppressing nor attempting to soften his indignant tones. "As this country's laws are against a plurality of wives, you will be unable, I imagine, to espouse them both."

Hartledon looked at him, beseechingly, and a sudden compassion came over Mr. Carr. He asked himself whether it was quite the way to treat a perplexed man who was very dear to him.

"If I am severe, it is for your sake. I assure you I scarcely know what advice to give. It is Miss Ashton, of course, whom you intend to make Lady Hartledon?"

"Of course it is. The difficulty in the matter is getting clear of Maude."

"And the formidable countess dowager. You must tell Maude the truth."

"Impossible, Carr. I might have done it once; but the thing has gone on so long. The dowager would devour me."

"Let her try to. I should speak to Maude alone, and put her upon her generosity to release you. Tell her you presumed upon your cousinship; and confess that you have long been engaged to marry Miss Ashton."

"She knows that: they have both known it all along. My brother was the first to tell them, before he died."

"They knew it?" inquired Mr. Carr, believing he had not heard correctly.

"Certainly. There has been no secret made of my engagement to Anne. All the world knows of that."

"Then though I do not in the least defend or excuse your breaking with Lady Maude may be more pardonable. They are poor, are they not, this Dowager Kirton and Lady Maude?"

"Poor as Job. Hard up, I think."

"Then they are angling for the broad lands of Hartledon. I see it all. You have been a victim to fortune hunting."

"There you are wrong, Carr. I can't answer for the dowager one way or the other; but Maude is the most disinterested"

"Of course: girls on the lookout for establishments always are. Have it as you like."

He spoke in tones of ridicule; and Hartledon jumped off the stile and led the way home.

That Lord Hartledon had got himself into a very serious predicament, Mr. Carr plainly saw. His good nature, his sensitive regard for the feelings of others, rendering it so impossible for him to say no, and above all his vacillating disposition, were his paramount characteristics still: in a degree they ever would be. Easily led as ever, he was as a very reed in the hands of the crafty old woman of the world, located with him. She had determined that he should become the husband of her daughter; and was as certain of accomplishing her end as if she had foreseen the future. Lord Hartledon himself afterwards, in his bitter repentance, said, over and over again, that circumstances were against him; and they certainly were so, as you will find.

Lord Hartledon thought he was making headway against it now, in sending for his old friend, and resolving to be guided by his advice.

"I will take an opportunity of speaking to Maude, Carr," he resumed. "I would rather not do it, of course; but I see there's no help for it."

"Make the opportunity," said Mr. Carr, with emphasis. "Don't delay a day; I shall expect you to write me a letter tomorrow saying you've done it."

"But you won't leave today," said Hartledon, entreatingly, feeling an instant prevision that with the departure of Thomas Carr all his courage would ignominiously desert him.

"I must go. You know I told you last night that my stay could only be four and twenty hours. You can accomplish it whilst I am here, if you like, and get it over; the longer a nauseous medicine is held to the lips the more difficult it is to swallow it. You say you are going to ride with Lady Maude presently; let that be your opportunity."

And get it over! Words that sounded as emancipation in Val's ear. But somehow he did not accomplish it in that ride. Excuses were on his lips five hundred times, but his hesitating lips never formed them. He really was on the point of speaking; at least he said so to himself; when Mr. Hillary overtook them on horseback, and rode with them some distance. After that, Maude put her horse to a canter, and so they reached home.

"Well?" said Mr. Carr.

"Not yet," answered Hartledon; "there was no opportunity."

"My suggestion was to make your opportunity."

"And so I will. I'll speak to her either tonight or tomorrow. She chose to ride fast today; and Hillary joined us part of the way. Don't look as if you doubted me, Carr: I shall be sure to speak."

"Will he?" thought Thomas Carr, as he took his departure by the evening train, having promised to run down the following Saturday for a few hours. "It is an even bet, I think. Poor Val!"

Poor Val indeed! Vacillating, attractive, handsome Val! shrinking, sensitive Val! The nauseous medicine was never taken. And when the Ashtons returned to the Rectory on the Friday night he had not spoken.

And the very day of their return a rumour reached his ear that Mrs. Ashton's health was seriously if not fatally shattered, and she was departing immediately for the South of France.

CHAPTER XVI.

BETWEEN THE TWO.

Not in the Rectory drawingroom, but in a pretty little sittingroom attached to her bedchamber, where the temperature was regulated, and no draughts could penetrate, reclined Mrs. Ashton. Her invalid gown sat loosely upon her shrunken form, her delicate, lace cap shaded a fading face. Anne sat by her side in all her loveliness, ostensibly working; but her fingers trembled, and her face looked flushed and pained.

It was the morning after their return, and Mrs. Graves had called in to see Mrs. Ashtongossiping Mrs. Graves, who knew all that took place in the parish, and a great deal of what never did take place. She had just been telling it all unreservedly in her hard way; things that might be said, and things that might as well have been left unsaid. She went out leaving a whirr and a buzz behind her and an awful sickness of desolation upon one heart.

"Give me my little writingcase, Anne," said Mrs. Ashton, waking up from a reverie and sitting forward on her sofa.

Anne took the pretty toy from the sidetable, opened it, and laid it on the table before her mother.

"Is it nothing I can write for you, mamma?"

"No, child."

Anne bent her hot face over her work again. It had not occurred to her that it could concern herself; and Mrs. Ashton wrote a few rapid lines:

"My Dear Percival,

"Can you spare me a fiveminutes' visit? I wish to speak with you. We go away again on Monday.

"Ever sincerely yours,

"Catherine Ashton."

She folded it, enclosed it in an envelope, and addressed it to the Earl of Hartledon. Pushing away the writingtable, she held out the note to her daughter.

"Seal it for me, Anne. I am tired. Let it go at once."

"Mamma!" exclaimed Anne, as her eye caught the address. "Surely you are not writing to him! You are not asking him to come here?"

"You see that I am writing to him, Anne. And it is to ask him to come here. My dear, you may safely leave me to act according to my own judgment. But as to what Mrs. Graves has said, I don't believe a word of it."

"I scarcely think I do," murmured Anne; a smile hovering on her troubled countenance, like sunshine after rain.

Anne had the taper alight, and the wax held to it, the note ready in her hand, when the roomdoor was thrown open by Mrs. Ashton's maid.

"Lord Hartledon."

He came in in a hurried manner, talking fast, making too much fuss; it was unlike his usual quiet movements, and Mrs. Ashton noticed it. As he shook hands with her, she held the note before him.

"See, Percival! I was writing to ask you to call upon me."

Anne had put out the light, and her hand was in Lord Hartledon's before she well knew anything, save that her heart was beating tumultuously. Mrs. Ashton made a place for him on the sofa, and Anne quietly left the room.

"I should have been here earlier," he began, "but I had the steward with me on business; it is little enough I have attended to since my brother's death. Dear Mrs. Ashton! I grieve to hear this poor account of you. You are indeed looking ill."

"I am so ill, Percival, that I doubt whether I shall ever be better in this world. It is my last chance, this going away to a warmer place until winter has passed."

He was bending towards her in earnest sympathy, all himself again; his dark blue eyes very tender, his pleasant features full of concern as he gazed on her face. And somehow, looking at that attractive countenance, Mrs. Ashton's doubts went from her.

"But what I have said is to you alone," she resumed. "My husband and children do not see the worst, and I refrain from telling them. A little word of confidence between us, Val."

"I hope and trust you may come back cured!" he said, very fervently. "Is it the fever that has so shattered you?"

"It is the result of it. I have never since been able to recover strength, but have become weaker and more weak. And you know I was in ill health before. We leave on Monday morning for Cannes."

"For Cannes?" he exclaimed.

"Yes. A place not so warm as some I might have gone to; but the doctors say that will be all the better. It is not heat I need; only shelter from our cold northern winds until I can get a little strength into me. There's nothing the matter with my lungs; indeed, I don't know that anything is the matter with me except this terrible weakness."

"I suppose Anne goes with you?"

"Oh yes. I could not go without Anne. The doctor will see us settled there, and then he returns."

A thought crossed Lord Hartledon: how pleasant if he and Anne could have been married, and have made this their wedding tour. He did not speak it: Mrs. Ashton would have laughed at his haste.

"How long shall you remain away?" he asked.

"Ah, I cannot tell you. I may not live to return. If all goes well that is, if there should be a speedy change for the better, as the medical men who have been attending me think there may be I shall be back perhaps in April or May. Val I cannot forget the old familiar name, you see"

"I hope you never will forget it," he warmly interposed.

"I wanted very particularly to see you. A strange report was brought here this morning and I determined to mention it to you. You know what an old-fashioned, direct way I have of doing things; never choosing a roundabout road if I can take a straight one. This note was a line asking you to call upon me," she added, taking it from her lap, where it had been lying, and tossing it on to the table, whilst her hearer, his conscience rising up,

began to feel a very little uncomfortable. "We heard you had proposed marriage to Lady Maude Kirton."

Lord Hartledon's face became crimson. "Who on earth could have invented that?" cried he, having no better answer at hand.

"Mrs. Graves mentioned it to me. She was dining at Hartledon last week, and the countessdowager spoke about it openly."

Mrs. Ashton looked at him; and he, confused and taken aback, looked down on the carpet, devoutly wishing himself in the remote regions he had spoken of to Mr. Carr. Anywhere, so that he should never be seen or recognized again.

"What am I to do?" thought he. "I wish Mother Graves was hanged!"

"You do not speak, Percival!"

"Well, I was wondering what could have given rise to this," he stammered. "I believe the old dowager would like to see her daughter mistress of Hartledon: and suppose she gave utterance to her thoughts."

"Very strange that she should!" observed Mrs. Ashton.

"I think she's a little cracked sometimes," coughed Val; and, in truth, he now and then did think so. "I hope you have not told Anne?"

"I have told no one. And had I not felt sure it had no foundation, I should have told the doctor, not you. But Anne was in the room when Mrs. Graves mentioned it."

"What a blessing it would be if Mrs. Graves were out of the parish!" exclaimed Val, hotly. "I wonder Dr. Ashton keeps Graves on, with such a mother! No one ever had such a mischiefmaking tongue as hers."

"Percival, may I say something to you?" asked Mrs. Ashton, who was devouring him with her eyes. "Your manner would almost lead me to believe that there is something in it. Tell me the truth; I can never be anything but your friend."

"Believe one thing, dear Mrs. Ashton that I have no intention of marrying anyone but Anne; and I wish with all my heart and soul you'd give her to me today. Shut up with those two women, the one pretty, the other watching any chance word to turn it to her own use, I dare say the Mrs. Graveses of the place have talked, forgetting that Maude is

my cousin. I believe I paid some attention to Maude because I was angry at being kept out of the Rectory; but my attentions meant nothing, upon my honour."

"Elster's folly, Val! Lady Maude may have thought they did."

"At any rate she knew of my engagement to Anne."

"Then there is nothing in it?"

"There shall be nothing in it," was the emphatic answer. "Anne was my first love, and she will be my last. You must promise to give her to me as soon as you return from Cannes."

"About that you must ask her father. I dare say he will do so."

Lord Hartledon rose from his seat; held Mrs. Ashton's hand between his whilst he said his adieu, and stooped to kiss her with a son's affection. She was a little surprised to find it was his final farewell. They were not going to start until Monday. But Hartledon could not have risked that crossquestioning again; rather would he have sailed away for the savage territories at once. He went downstairs searching for Anne, and found her in the room where you first saw herher own. She looked up with quite an affectation of surprise when he entered, although she had probably gone there to await him. The best of girls are human.

"You ran away, Anne, whilst mamma and I held our conference?"

"I hope it has been satisfactory," she answered demurely, not looking up, and wondering whether he suspected how violently her heart was beating.

"Partly so. The end was all right. Shall I tell it you?"

"The end! Yes, if you will," she replied unsuspectingly.

"The decision come to is, that a certain young friend of ours is to be converted, with as little delay as circumstances may permit, into Lady Hartledon."

Of course there came no answer except a succession of blushes. Anne's work, which she had carried with her, took all her attention just then.

"Can you guess her name, Anne?"

"I don't know. Is it Maude Kirton?"

He winced. "If you have been told that abominable rubbish, Anne, it is not necessary to repeat it. It's not so pleasant a theme that you need make a joke of it."

"Is it rubbish?" asked Anne, lifting her eyes.

"I think you ought to know that if any one does. But had anything happened, Anne, recollect it would have been your fault. You have been very cool to me of late. You forbid me the house for weeks and weeks; you went away for an indefinite period without letting me know, or giving me the chance of seeing you; and when the correspondence was at length renewed, your letters were cold and formal quite different from what they used to be. It almost looks as if you wished to part from me."

Repentance was stealing over her: why had she ever doubted him?

"And now you are going away again! And although this interview may be our last for months, you scarcely deign to give me a word or a look of farewell."

Anne had already been terribly tried by Mrs. Graves: this was the climax: she lost her selfcontrol and burst into tears. Lord Hartledon was softened at once. He took her two hands in his; he clasped her to his heart, half devouring her face with passionate kisses. Ah, Lady Maude! this impassioned love was never felt for you.

"You don't love her?" whispered Anne.

"Love her! I never loved but you, my best and dearest. I never shall, or can, love another."

He spoke in all good faith; fully believing what he said; and it was indeed true. And Anne? As though a prevision had been upon her of the future, she remained passively in his arms sobbing hysterically, and suffering his kisses; not drawing away from him in maiden modesty, as was her wont. She had never clung to him like this.

"You will write to me often?" he whispered.

"Yes. Won't you come to Cannes?"

"I don't know that it will be possible, unless you remain beyond the spring. And should that be the case, Anne, I shall pray your father and mother that the marriage may take place there. I am going up to town next month to take my seat in the House. It will be a

busy session; and I want to see if I can't become a useful public man. I think it would please the doctor to find I've some stuff in me; and a man must have a laudable object in life."

"I would rather die," murmured Anne, passionately in her turn, "than hear again what Mrs. Graves said."

"My darling, we cannot stop people's gossip. Believe in me; I will not fail you. Oh, Anne, I wish you were already my wife!" he aspired fervently, his perplexities again presenting themselves to his mind.

"The time will come," she whispered.

Lord Hartledon walked home full of loyal thought, saying to himself what an utter idiot he had been in regard to Maude, and determined to lose no time in getting clear of the entanglement. He sought an opportunity of speaking to her that afternoon; he really did; but could not find it. The dowager had taken her out to pay a visit.

Mr. Carr was as good as his word, and got down in time for dinner. One glance at Lord Hartledon's face told him what he half expected to see that the word of emancipation had not yet been spoken.

"Don't blame me, Carr. I shall speak tonight before I sleep, on my word of honour. Things have come to a crisis now; and if I wished to hold back I could not. I would say what a fool I have been not to speak before; only you know I'm one already."

Thomas Carr laughed.

"Mrs. Ashton has heard some tattle about Maude, and spoke to me this afternoon. Of course I could only deny it, my face feeling on fire with its sense of dishonour, for I don't think I ever told a deliberate lie in my life; and and, in short, I should like my marriage with Anne to take place as soon as possible."

"Well, there's only one course to pursue, as I told you when I was down before. Tell Lady Maude the candid truth, and take shame and blame to yourself, as you deserve. Her having known of the engagement to Miss Ashton renders your task the easier."

Very restless was Lord Hartledon until the moment came. He knew the best time to speak to Maude would be immediately after dinner, whilst the countess dowager took her usual nap. There was no hesitation now; and he speedily followed them upstairs, leaving his friend at the dinner table.

He went up, feeling a desperate man. To those of his temperament having to make a disagreeable communication such as this is almost as cruel as parting with life.

No one was in the drawingroom but Lady Kirton stretched upon a sofa and apparently fast asleep. Val crossed the carpet with softened tread to the adjoining rooms: small, comfortable rooms, used by the dowager in preference to the more stately rooms below. Maude had drawn aside the curtain and was peering out into the frosty night.

"Why, how soon you are up!" she cried, turning at his entrance.

"I came on purpose, Maude. I want to speak to you."

"Are you well?" she asked, coming forward to the fire, and taking her seat on a sofa. In truth, he did not look very well just then. "What is it?"

"Maude," he answered, his fair face flushing a dark red as he plunged into it blindfold: "I am a rogue and a fool!"

Lady Maude laughed. "Elster's folly!"

"Yes. You know all this time that wethat I" (Val thought he should never flounder through this first moment, and did not remain an instant in one place as he talked)"have been going on so foolishly, I wasalmost as good as a married man."

"Were you?" said she, quietly. "Married to whom?"

"I said as good as married, Maude. You know I have been engaged for years to Miss Ashton; otherwise I would have knelt to ask you to become my wife, so earnestly should I desire it."

Her calm imperturbability presented a curious contrast to his agitation. She was regarding him with an amused smile.

"And, Maude, I have come now to ask you to release me. Indeed, I"

"What's all this about?" broke in the countessdowager, darting upon the conference, her face flushed and her headdress awry. "Are you two quarrelling?"

"Val was attempting to explain something about Miss Ashton," answered Maude, rising from the sofa, and drawing herself up to her stately height. "He had better do it to you instead, mamma; I don't understand it."

She stood up by the mantelpiece, in the ray of the lustres. They fell across her dark, smooth hair, her flushed cheeks, her exquisite features. Her dress was of flowing white crêpe, with jet ornaments; and Lord Hartledon, even in the midst of his perplexity, thought how beautiful she was, and what a sad thing it was to lose her. The truth was, his senses had been caught by the girl's beauty although his heart was elsewhere. It is a very common case.

"The fact is, ma'am," he stammered, turning to the dowager in his desperation, "I have been behaving very foolishly of late, and am asking your daughter's pardon. I should have remembered my engagement to Miss Ashton."

"Remembered your engagement to Miss Ashton!" echoed the dowager, her voice becoming a little shrill. "What engagement?"

Lord Hartledon began to recover himself, though he looked foolish still. With these nervous men it is the first plunge that tells; get that over and they are brave as their fellows.

"I cannot marry two women, Lady Kirton, and I am bound to Anne."

The old dowager's voice toned down, and she pulled her black feathers straight upon her head.

"My dear Hartledon, I don't think you know what you are talking about. You engaged yourself to Maude some weeks ago."

"Wellbutwhatever may have passed, engagement or no engagement, I could not legally do it," returned the unhappy young man, too considerate to say the engagement was hers, not his. "You knew I was bound to Anne, Lady Kirton."

"Bound to a fiddlestick!" said the dowager. "Excuse my plainness, Hartledon. When you engaged yourself to the young woman you were poor and a nobody, and the step was perhaps excusable. Lord Hartledon is not bound by the promises of Val Elster. All the young women in the kingdom, who have parsons for fathers, could not oblige him to be so."

"I am bound to her in honour; and" in love he was going to say, but let the words die away unspoken.

"Hartledon, you are bound in honour to my daughter; you have sought her affections, and gained them. Ah, Percival, don't you know that it is you she has loved all along? In the days when I was worrying her about your brother, she cared only for you. You cannot be so infamous as to desert her."

"I wish to Heaven she had never seen me!" cried the unfortunate man, beginning to wonder whether he could break through these trammels. "I'd sacrifice myself willingly, if that would put things straight."

"You cannot sacrifice Maude. Look at her!" and the crafty old dowager flourished her hand towards the fireplace, where Maude stood in all her beauty. "A daughter of the house of Kirton cannot be taken up and cast aside at will. What would the world say of her?"

"The world need never know."

"Not know!" shrieked the dowager; "not know! Why, her trousseau is ordered, and some of the things have arrived. Good Heavens, Hartledon, you dare not trifle with Maude in this way. You could never show your face amongst men again."

"But neither dare I trifle with Anne Ashton," said Lord Hartledon, completely broken down by the gratuitous information. He saw that the situation was worse than even he had bargained for, and all his irresolution began to return upon him. "If I knew what was right to be done, I'm sure I'd do it."

"Right, did you say? Right? There cannot be a question about that. Which is the more fitting to grace your coronet: Maude, or a country parson's daughter?"

"I'm sure if this goes on I shall shoot myself," cried Val. "Taken to task at the Rectory, taken to task hereshooting would be bliss to it."

"No doubt," returned the dowager. "It can't be a very pleasant position for you. Any one but you would get out of it, and set the matter at rest."

"I should like to know how."

"So long as you are a single man they naturally remain on the high ropes at the Rectory, with their fine visions for Anne"

"I wish you would understand once for all, Lady Kirton, that the Ashtons are our equals in every way," he interrupted: "and," he added, "in worth and goodness infinitely our superiors."

The dowager gave a sniff. "You think so, I know, Hart. Well, the only plan to bring you peace is this: make Maude your wife. At once; without delay."

The proposition took away Val's breath. "I could not do it, Lady Kirton. To begin with, they'd bring an action against me for breach of promise."

"Breach of nonsense!" wrathfully returned the dowager. "Was ever such a thing heard of yet, as a doctor of divinity bringing an action of that nature? He'd lose his gown."

"I wish I was at the bottom of a deep well, never to come up again!" mentally aspirated the unfortunate man.

"WillyoumarryMaude?" demanded the dowager, with a fixed denunciation in every word, which was as so much slow torture to her victim.

"I wish I could. You must see for yourself, Lady Kirton, that I cannot. Maude must see it."

"I see nothing of the sort. You are bound to her in honour."

"All I can do is to remain single to the end of my days," said Val, after a pause. "I have been a great villain to both, and I cannot repair it to either. The one stands in the way of the other."

"But"

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," he interrupted, so peremptorily that the old woman trembled for her power. "This is my final decision, and I will not hear another word. I feel ready to hang myself, as it is. You tell me I cannot marry any other than Maude without being a scoundrel; the same thing precisely applies to Anne. I shall remain single."

"You will give me one promisefor Maude's sake. Not, after this, to marry Anne Ashton."

"Why, how can I do it?" asked he, in tones of exasperation. "Don't you see that it is impossible? I shall not see the Ashtons again, ma'am; I would rather go a hundred miles the other way than face them."

The countessdowager probably deemed she had said sufficient for safety; for she went out and shut the door after her. Lord Hartledon dashed his hair from his brow with a hasty hand, and was about to leave the room by the other door, when Maude came up to him.

"Is this to be the end of it, Percival?"

She spoke in tones of pain, of tremulous tenderness; all her pride gone out of her. Lord Hartledon laid his hand upon her shoulder, meeting the dark eyes that were raised to his through tears.

"Do you indeed love me like this, Maude? Somehow I never thought it."

"I love you better than the whole world. I love you enough to give up everything for you."

The emphasis conveyed a reproach that he did not "give up everything" for her. But Lord Hartledon kept his head for once.

"Heaven knows my bitter repentance. If I could repair this folly of mine by any sacrifice on my own part, I would gladly do it. Let me go, Maude! I have been here long enough, unless I were more worthy. I would ask you to forgive me if I knew how to frame the petition."

She released the hand of which she had made a prisoner released it with a movement of petulance; and Lord Hartledon quitted the room, the words she had just spoken beating their refrain on his brain. It did not occur to him in his gratified vanity to remember that Anne Ashton, about whose love there could be no doubt, never avowed it in those pretty speeches.

"Well?" said Mr. Carr, when he got back to the diningroom.

"It is not well, Carr; it is ill. There can be no release. The old dowager won't have it."

"But surely you will not resign Miss Ashton for Lady Maude!" cried the barrister, after a pause of amazement.

"I resign both; I see that I cannot do anything else in honour. Excuse me, Carr, but I'd rather not say any more about it just now; I feel half maddened."

"Elster's folly," mentally spoke Thomas Carr.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN AGREEABLE WEDDING.

That circumstances, combined with the countessdowager, worked terribly against Lord Hartledon, events proved. Had the Ashtons remained at the Rectory all might have been well; but they went away, and he was left to any influence that might be brought to bear upon him.

How the climax was accomplished the world never knew. Lord Hartledon himself did not know the whole of it for a long while. As if unwilling to trust himself longer in dangerous companionship, he went up to town with Thomas Carr. Whilst there he received a letter from Cannes, written by Dr. Ashton; a letter that angered him.

It was a cool letter, a vein of contemptuous anger running through it; meant to be hidden, but nevertheless perceptible to Lord Hartledon. Its purport was to forbid all correspondence between him and Miss Ashton: things had better "remain in abeyance" until they met, ran the words, "if indeed any relations were ever renewed between them again."

It might have angered Lord Hartledon more than it did, but for the hopelessness which had taken up its abode within him. Nevertheless he resented it. He did not suppose it possible that the Ashtons could have heard of the dilemma he was in, or that he should be unable to fulfil his engagement with Anne, having with his usual vacillation put off any explanation with them; which of course must come sometime. He had taken an idea into his head long before, that Dr. Ashton wished to part them, and he looked upon the letter as resulting from that. Hartledon was feeling weary of the world.

How little did he divine that the letter of the doctor was called forth by a communication from the countessdowager. An artful communication, with a charming candour lying on its surface. She askedshe actually asked that Dr. Ashton would allow "fair play;" she said the "deepest affection" had grown up between Lord Hartledon and Lady Maude; and she only craved that the young man might not be coerced either way, but might be allowed to choose between them. The field after Miss Ashton's return would be open to the two, and ought to be left so.

You may imagine the effect this missive produced upon the proud, highminded doctor of divinity. He took a sheet of paper and wrote a stinging letter to Lord Hartledon, forbidding him to think again of Anne. But when he was in the act of sealing it a sudden doubt like an instinct rushed over him, whether it might not be a ruse, and nothing else, of the crafty old dowager's. The doubt was sufficiently strong to cause him to tear up the

letter. But he was not satisfied with Lord Hartledon's own behaviour; had not been for some few months; and he then wrote a second letter, suspending matters until they should meet again. It was in effect what was asked for by the countessdowager; and he wrote a cold proud letter to that lady, stating what he had done. Of course any honourable womanany woman with a spark of justice in her heartwould have also forbidden all intercourse with Lady Maude. The countessdowager's policy lay in the opposite direction.

But Lord Hartledon remained in London, utterly oblivious to the hints and baits held out for his return to Calne. He chiefly divided his time between the House of Lords and sitting at home, lamenting over his own illstarred existence. He was living quite en garçon, with only one man, his house having been let for the season. We always want what we cannot obtain, and because marriage was denied him, he fell into the habit of dwelling upon it as the only boon in life. Thomas Carr was on circuit, so that Hartledon was alone.

Easter was early that year, the latter end of March. On the Monday in Passionweek there arrived a telegram for Lord Hartledon sent apparently by the butler, Hedges. It was vaguely worded; spoke of a railway accident and somebody dying. Who he could not make out, except that it was a Kirton: and it prayed him to hasten down immediately. All his goodness of heart aroused, Val lost not a moment. He had been engaged to spend Easter with some people in Essex, but dispatched a line of apology, and hastened down to Calne, wondering whether it was the dowager or Maude, and whether death would have taken place before his arrival.

"What accident has there been?" he demanded, leaping out of the carriage at Calne Station; and the man he addressed happened to be the porter, Jones.

"Accident?" returned Jones, touching his cap.

"An accident on the line; somewhere about here, I conclude. People wounded; dying."

"There has been no accident here," said Jones, in his sulky way. "Maybe your lordship's thinking of the one on the branch line, the bridge that fell in?"

"Nonsense," said Lord Hartledon, "that took place a fortnight ago. I received a telegram this morning from my butler, saying some one was dying at Hartledon from a railway accident," he impatiently added. "I took it to be either Lady Kirton or her daughter."

Mr. Jones swung round a large iron key he held in his hand, and light dawned upon him.

"I know now," he said. "There was a private accident at the station here last night; your lordship must mean that. A gentleman got out of a carriage before it stopped, and fell between the rail and the platform. His name was Kirton. I saw it on his portmanteau."

"Lord Kirton?"

"No, my lord. Captain Kirton."

"Was he seriously hurt?"

"Well, it was thought so. Mr. Hillary feared the leg would have to come off. He was carried to Hartledon."

Very much relieved, Lord Hartledon jumped into a fly and was driven home. The countessdowager embraced him and fell into hysterics.

The crafty old dowager, whose displayed emotion was as genuine as she was! She had sent for this son of hers, hoping he might be a decoyduck to draw Hartledon home again, for she was losing heart; and the accident, which she had not bargained for, was a very godsend to her.

"Why don't you word your telegrams more clearly, Hedges?" asked Lord Hartledon of his butler.

"It wasn't me worded it at all, my lord. Lady Kirton went to the station herself. She informed me she had sent it in my name."

"Has Hillary told you privately what the surgeons think of the case?"

"Better of it than they did at first, my lord. They are trying to save the leg."

This Captain Kirton was really the best of the Kirton bunch: a quiet, unassuming young man, somewhat delicate in health. Lord Hartledon was grieved for his accident, and helped to nurse him with the best heart in the world.

And now what devilry (there were people in Calne who called it nothing less) the old countessdowager set afloat to secure her ends I am unable to tell you. She was a perfectly unscrupulous womanpoverty had rendered her wits keen; and her captured lion was only feebly struggling to escape from the net. He was to blame also. Thrown again into the society of Maude and her beauty, Val basked in its sunshine, and went drifting down the stream, never heeding where the current led him. One day the

countessdowager put it upon his honourhe must marry Maude. He might have held out longer but for a letter that came from some friend of the dowager's opportunely located at Cannes; a letter that spoke of the approaching marriage of Miss Ashton to Colonel Barnaby, eldest son of a wealthy old baronet, who was sojourning there with his mother. No doubt was implied or expressed; the marriage was set forth as an assured fact.

"And I believe you meant to wait for her?" said the countessdowager, as she put the letter into his hand, with a little laugh. "You are free now for my darling Maude."

"This may not be true," observed Lord Hartledon, with compressed lips. "Every one knows what this sort of gossip is worth."

"I happen to know that it is true," spoke Lady Kirton, in a whisper. "I have known of it for some time past, but would not vex you with it."

Well, she convinced him; and from that moment had it all her own way, and carried out her plots and plans according to her own crafty fancy. Lord Hartledon yielded; for the ascendancy of Maude was strong upon him. And yetand yetwhilst he gave all sorts of hard names to Anne Ashton's perfidy, lying down deep in his heart was a suspicion that the news was not true. How he hated himself for his wicked assumption of belief in afteryears!

"You will be free as air," said the dowager, joyously. "You and Maude shall get ahead of Miss Ashton and her colonel, and have the laugh at them. The marriage shall be on Saturday, and you can go away together for months if you like, and get up your spirits again; I'm sure you have both been dull enough."

Lord Hartledon was certainly caught by the words "free as air;" as he had been once before. But he stared at the early day mentioned.

"Marriages can't be got up as soon as that."

"They can be got up in a day if people choose, with a special license; which, of course, you will have," said the dowager. "I'll arrange things, my dear Val; leave it all to me. I intend Maude to be married in the little chapel."

"What little chapel?"

"Your own private chapel."

Lord Hartledon stared with all his eyes. The private chapel, built out from the house on the side next Calne, had not been used for years and years.

"Why, it's all dust and rust inside; its cushions moth-eaten and fallen to pieces."

"Is it all dust and rust!" returned the dowager. "That shows how observant you are. I had it put in order whilst you were in London; it was a shame to let a sacred place remain in such a state. I should like it to be used for Maude; and mind, I'll see to everything; you need not give yourself any trouble at all. There's only one thing I must enjoin on you."

"What's that?"

"Secrecy. Don't let a hint of your intentions get abroad. Whatever you do, don't write a word to that Carr friend of yours; he's as sharp as a two-edged sword. As well let things be done privately; it is Maude's wish."

"I shall not write to him," cried Hartledon, feeling a sudden heat upon his face, "or to any one else."

"Here's Maude. Step this way, Maude. Hartledon wants the ceremony to take place on Saturday, and I have promised for you."

Lady Maude advanced; she had really come in by accident; her head was bent, her eyelashes rested on her flushed cheeks. A fair prize; very, very fair! The old dowager put her hand into Lord Hartledon's.

"You will love her and cherish her, Percival?"

What was the young man to do? He murmured some unintelligible assent, and bent forward to kiss her. But not until that moment had he positively realized the fact that there would be any marriage.

Time went on swimmingly until the Saturday, and everything was in progress. The old dowager deserved to be made commander of a garrison for her comprehensive strategy, the readiness and skill she displayed in carrying out her arrangements. For what reason, perhaps she could not have explained to herself; but an instinct was upon her that secrecy in all ways was necessary; at any rate, she felt surer of success whilst it was maintained. Hence her decision in regard to the unused little chapel; and that this one particular portion of the project had been long floating in her mind was proved by the fact that she had previously caused the chapel to be renovated. But that it was to serve her own turn, she would have let it remain choked up with dust for ever.

The special license had arrived; the young clergyman who was to perform the service was located at Hartledon. Seven o'clock was the hour fixed for the marriage: it would be twilight then, and dinner over. Immediately afterwards the bride and bridegroom were to depart. So far, so good. But Lady Kirton was not to have it quite her own way on this same Saturday, although she had enjoyed it hitherto.

A rumour reached her ears in the afternoon that Dr. Ashton was at the Rectory. The doctor had been spending Easter at Cannes, and the dowager had devoutly prayed that he might not yet return. The news turned her cheeks blue and yellow; a prevision rushing over her that if he and Lord Hartledon met there might be no wedding after all. She did her best to keep Lord Hartledon indoors, and the fact of the Rector's return from him.

Now who is going to defend Lord Hartledon? Not you or I. More foolish, more culpable weakness was never shown than in thus yielding to these schemes. Though ensnared by Maude's beauty, that was no excuse for him.

An accident or what may be called a delayed dinner. Two county friends of Hartledon's, jolly foxhunters in the season, had come riding a long way across country, and looked in to beg some refreshment. The dowager fumed, and was not decently civil; but she did not see her way to turning them out.

They talked and laughed and ate; and dinner was indefinitely prolonged. When the dowager and Lady Maude rose from table the former cast a meaning look at Lord Hartledon. "Get rid of them as soon as you can," it plainly said.

But the foxhunters liked good drinking as well as good eating, and sat on, enjoying their wine; their host, one of the most courteous of living men, giving no sign, by word or look, that he wished for their departure. He was rather silent, they observed; but the young clergyman, who made the fourth at the table, was voluble by nature. Captain Kirton had not yet left his sick bed.

Lady Maude sat alone in her room; the white robes upon her, the orthodox veil, meant to shade her fair face thrown back from it. She had sent away her attendants, bolted the door against her mother, and sat waiting her summons. Waiting and thinking. Her cheek rested on her hand, and her eyes were dreamy.

Is it true that whenever we are about to do an ill or unjust deed a shadow of the fruits it will bring comes over us as a warning? Some people will tell you so. A vision of the future seemed to rest on Maude Kirton as she sat there; and for the first time all the

injustice of the approaching act rose in her mind as a solemn omen. The true facts were terribly distinct. Her own dislike (it was indeed no less than dislike) of the living lord, her lasting love for the dead one. All the miserable stratagems they had been guilty of to win him; the dishonest plotting and planning. What was she about to do? For her own advancement, to secure herself a position in the great world, and not for love, she was about to separate two hearts, which but for her would have been united in this world and the next. She was thrusting herself upon Lord Hartledon, knowing that in his true heart it was another that he loved, not her. Yes, she knew that full well. He admired her beauty, and was marrying her; marrying partly in pique against Anne Ashton; partly in blindfold submission to the deep schemes of her mother, brought to bear on his yielding nature. All the injustice done to Anne Ashton was in that moment beating its refrain upon her heart; and a thought crossed her would God not avenge it? Another time she might have smiled at the thought as fanciful: it seemed awfully real now. "I might give Val up yet," she murmured; "there's just time."

She did not act upon the suggestion. Whether it was her warning, or whether it was not, she allowed it to slip from her. Hartledon's broad lands and coronet resumed their fascination over her soul; and when her door was tried, Lady Maude had lost herself in that famous Spanish château we have all occupied on occasion, touching the alterations she had mentally planned in their townhouse.

"Goodness, Maude, what do you lock yourself in for?"

Maude opened the door, and the countessdowager floundered in. She was resplendent in one of her old yellow satin gowns, a white turban with a silver feather, and a pink scarf thrown on for ornament. The colours would no doubt blend well by candlelight.

"Come, Maude. There's no time to be lost."

"Are the men gone?"

"Yes, they are gone; no thanks to Hartledon, though. He sat mooning on, never giving them the least hint to depart. Priddon told me so. I'll tell you what it is, Maude, you'll have to shake your husband out of no end of ridiculous habits."

"It is growing dark," exclaimed Maude, as she stepped into the corridor.

"Dark! of course it's dark," was the irascible answer; "and they have had to light up the chapel, or Priddon couldn't have seen to read his book. And all through those confounded foxhunters!"

Lord Hartledon was not in the drawingroom, where Lady Kirton had left him only a minute before; and she looked round sharply.

"Has he gone on to the chapel?" she asked of the young clergyman.

"No, I think not," replied Mr. Priddon, who was already in his canonicals. "Hedges came in and said something to him, and they went out together."

A minute or two of impatience she was in no mood to wait long and then she rang the bell. It should be remarked that the old lady, either from excitement or some apprehension of failure, was shaking and jumping as if she had St. Vitus's dance. Hedges came in.

"Where's your master?" she tartly asked.

"With Mr. Carr, my lady."

"With Mr. What did you say?"

"My lord is with Mr. Carr. He has just arrived."

A moment given to startled consternation and then the fury broke forth. The young parson had never had the pleasure of seeing one of these wardances before, and backed against the wall in his starched surplice.

"What brings him here? How dare he come uninvited?"

"I heard him say, my lady, that finding he had a Sunday to spare, he thought he would come and pass it at Hartledon," said the well-trained Hedges.

Ere the words had left his lips Lord Hartledon and Mr. Carr were present; the latter in a state of utter amazement and in his travelling dress, having only removed his overcoat.

"You'll be my groomsman, Carr," said Hartledon. "We have no adherents; this is a strictly private affair."

"Did you send for Mr. Carr?" whispered the countess dowager, looking white through her rouge.

"No; his coming has taken me by surprise," replied Hartledon, with a nervousness he could not wholly conceal.

They passed rapidly through the passages, marshalled by Hedges. Lord Hartledon led his bride, the countessdowager walked with the clergyman, and Mr. Carr brought up the rear. The latter gentleman was wondering whether he had fallen into a dream that he should wake up from in the morning. The mode of procession was a little out of the common order of such affairs; but so was the marriage.

Now it happened, not very long before this, that Dr. Ashton was on his way home from a visit to a sick parishioner a poor man, who said he believed life had been prolonged in him that his many years' minister should be at his deathbed. Dr. Ashton's road lay beyond Hartledon, and in returning he crossed the road, which brought him out near the river, between Hartledon and the Rectory. Happening to cast his eyes that way, he saw a light where he had never seen one before in the little unused chapel. Peering through the trees at the two low diamondpaned windows, to make sure he was not mistaken, Dr. Ashton quickened his pace: his thoughts glancing at fire.

He was well acquainted with Hartledon; and making his way in by the nearest entrance, he dashed along the passages to the chapel, meeting at length one of the servants.

"John," he panted, quite out of breath with hurrying, "there's a light in the chapel. I fear it is on fire."

"Not at all, sir," replied the man. "We have been lighting it up for my lord's marriage. They have just gone in."

"Lighting it up for what?" exclaimed Dr. Ashton.

"For my lord's marriage, sir. He's marrying Lady Maude. It's the old dowager, sir, who has got it up in this queer way," continued the man, venturing on a little confidential gossip with his Rector.

Dr. Ashton paused to collect his wits ere he walked into the chapel. The few waxcandles the servants had been able to put about only served to make the gloom visible. The party were taking their places, the young clergyman directing them where to stand. He opened his book and was commencing, when a hand was laid upon Hartledon's shoulder.

"Lord Hartledon, what is the meaning of this?"

Lord Hartledon recognised the voice, and broke into a cold perspiration. He gave no answer; but the countessdowager made up for his silence. Her temper, none of the mildest, had been considerably exasperated by the visit of the foxhunters; it was made

worse by the arrival of Mr. Carr. When she turned and saw what this formidable interruption was, she lost it altogether, as few, calling themselves gentlewomen, can lose it. As she peered into the face of Dr. Ashton, her own was scarlet and yellow, and her voice rose to a shriek.

"You prying parson, where did you spring from? Are you not ashamed to dodge Lord Hartledon in his own house? You might be taken up and imprisoned for it."

"Lord Hartledon," said Dr. Ashton, "I"

"How dare you persist, I ask you?" shrieked the old woman, whilst the young clergyman stood aghast, and Mr. Carr folded his arms, and resolutely fixed his eyes on the floor. "Because Hartledon once had a flirtation with your daughter, does that give you leave to haunt him as if you were his double?"

"Madam," said Dr. Ashton, contriving still to subdue his anger, "I must, I will speak to Lord Hartledon. Allow me to do so without disturbance. Lord Hartledon, I wait for an answer: Are you about to marry this young lady?"

"Yes, he is," foamed the dowager; "I tell you so. Now then?"

"Then, madam," proceeded the doctor, "this marriage owes its rise to you. You will do well to consider whether you are doing them a kindness or an injury in permitting it. You have deliberately set yourself to frustrate the hopes of Lord Hartledon and my daughter: will a marriage, thus treacherously entered into, bring happiness with it?"

"Oh, you wicked man!" cried the dowager. "You would like to call a curse upon them."

"No," shuddered Dr. Ashton; "if a curse ever attends them, it will not be through any wish of mine. Lord Hartledon, I knew you as a boy; I have loved you as a son; and if I speak now, it is as your pastor, and for your own sake. This marriage looks very like a clandestine one, as though you were ashamed of the step you are taking, and dared not enter on it in the clear face of day. I would have you consider that this sort of proceeding does not usually bring a blessing with it."

If ever Val felt convicted of utter cowardice, he felt so then. All the wretched sophistry by which he had been beguiled into the step, by which he had beguiled himself; all the iniquity of his past conduct to Miss Ashton, rose up before his mind in its naked truth. He dared not reply to the doctor for very shame. A sorry figure he cut, standing there, Lady Maude beside him.

"The last time you entered my house, Lord Hartledon, it was to speak of your coming marriage with Anne"

"And you would like him to go there again and arrange it," interrupted the incensed dowager, whose head had begun to nod so vehemently that she could not stop it. "Oh yes, I dare say!"

"By what right have you thus trifled with her?" continued the Rector, ignoring the nodding woman and her words, and confronting Lord Hartledon. "Is it a light matter, think you, to gain a maiden's best love, and then to desert her for a fresh face? You have been playing fastandloose for some little time: and I gave you more than one opportunity of retiring, if you so willed itof openly retiring, you understand; not of doing so in this secret, disreputable manner. Your conscience will prick you in afterlife, unless I am mistaken."

Val opened his lips, but the Rector put up his hand.

"A moment yet. That I am not endeavouring to recall Anne's claims on you in saying this, I am sure you are perfectly aware, knowing me as you do. I never deemed you worthy of heryou know that, Lord Hartledon; and you never were so. Were you a free man at this moment, and went down on your knees to implore me to give you Anne, I would not do it. You have forfeited her; you have forfeited the esteem of all good men. But that I am a Christian minister, I should visit your dishonour upon you as you deserve."

"Will you cease?" raved the dowager; and Dr. Ashton wheeled round upon her.

"There is less excuse for your past conduct, madam, than for his. You have played on Lord Hartledon's known irresolution to mould him to your will. I see now the aim of the letter you favoured me with at Cannes, when you requested, with so much candour, that he might be left for a time unfettered by any correspondence with Miss Ashton. Well, you have obtained your ends. Your covetous wish that you and your daughter should reign at Hartledon is on the point of being gratified. The honour of marrying Lady Maude was intended both by you and her for the late Lord Hartledon. Failing him, you transferred your hopes to the present one, regardless of who suffered, or what hearts or honour might be broken in the process."

"Will nobody put this disreputable parson outside?" raved the dowager.

"I do not seek to bring reproach home to you; let that, ladies, lie between yourselves and conscience. I only draw your attention to the facts; which have been sufficiently patent

to the world, whatever Lord Hartledon may think. And now I have said my say, and leave you; but I declare that were I performing this burlesque of a marriage, as that young clergyman is about to do, I should feel my prayers for the divine blessing to attend it were but a vain mockery."

He turned to leave the chapel with quick steps, when Lord Hartledon, shaking off Maude, darted forward and caught his arm.

"You will tell me one thing at least: Is Anne not going to marry Colonel Barnaby?"

"Sir!" thundered the doctor. "Going to marry whom?"

"I heard it," he faltered. "I believed it to be the truth."

"You may have heard it, but you did not believe it, Lord Hartledon. You knew Anne better. Do not add this false excuse to the rest."

Pleasant! Infinitely so for the bridegroom's tingling ears. Dr. Ashton walked out of the chapel, and Val stood for a few moments where he was, looking up and down in the dim light. It might be that in his mental confusion he was deliberating what his course should be; but thought and common sense came to him, and he knew he could not desert Lady Maude, having brought matters so far to an end.

"Proceed," he said to the young clergyman, stalking back to the altar. "Getitover quickly."

Mr. Carr unfolded his arms and approached Lord Hartledon. He was the only one who had caught the expression of the bride's face when Hartledon dropped her arm. It spoke of bitter malice; it spoke, now that he had returned to her, of an evil triumph; and it occurred to Thomas Carr to think that he should not like a wife of his to be seen with that expression on her bridal face.

"Lord Hartledon, you must excuse me if I do not remain to countenance this wedding," he said in low but distinct tones. "Before hearing what I have heard from that good man, I had hesitated about it; but I was lost in surprise. Fare you well. I shall have left by the time you quit the chapel."

He held out his hand, and Val mechanically shook it. The retreating steps of Mr. Carr, following in the wake of Dr. Ashton, were heard, as Lord Hartledon spoke again to the clergyman with irritable sharpness:

"Why don't you begin?"

And the countessdowager fanned herself complacently, and neither she nor Maude cared for the absence of a groomsman. But Maude was not quite hardened yet; and the shame of her situation was tingeing her eyelids.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE STRANGER.

Lord Hartledon was leading his bride through the chapel at the conclusion of the ceremony, when his attention was caught by something outside one of the windows. At first he thought it was a black cat curled up in some impossible fashion, but soon saw it was a dark human face. And that face he discovered to be Mr. Pike's, peering earnestly in.

"Hedges, send that man away. How dare he intrude himself in this manner? How has he got up to the window?"

For these windows were high beyond the ordinary height of man. Hedges went out, a sharp reprimand on his tongue, and found that Mr. Pike had been at the trouble of carrying a heap of stones from a distance and piling them up to stand upon.

"Well, you must have a curiosity!" he exclaimed, in his surprise. "Just put those stones back in their places, and take yourself away."

"You are right," said the man. "I have a curiosity in all that concerns the new lord. But I am going away now."

He leaped down as he spoke, and began to replace the stones. Hedges went in again.

The carriage, waiting to convey them away, was already at the door, the impatient horses pawing the ground. Maude changed her dress with all speed; and in driving down the road by starlight they overtook Thomas Carr, carrying his own portmanteau. Lord Hartledon let down the window impulsively, as if he would have spoken, but seemed to recollect himself, and drew it up again.

"What is it?" asked Maude.

"Mr. Carr."

It was the first word he had spoken to her since the ceremony. His silence had frightened her: what if he should resent on her the cruel words spoken by Dr. Ashton? Sick, trembling, her beautiful face humble and tearful enough now, she bent it on his shoulder in a shower of bitter tears.

"Oh, Percival, Percival! surely you are not going to punish me for what has passed?"

A moment's struggle with himself, and he turned and took both her hands in his.

"It may be that neither of us is free from blame, Maude, in regard to the past. All we can now do, as it seems to me, is to forget it together, and make the best of the future."

"And you will forget Anne Ashton?" she whispered.

"Of course I shall forget her. I ask nothing better than to forget her from this moment. I have made you my wife; and I will try to make your happiness."

He bent and kissed her face. Maude, in some restlessness, as it seemed, withdrew to her own corner of the carriage and cried softly; and Lord Hartledon let down the glass again to look back after Thomas Carr and his portmanteau in the starlight.

The only perfectly satisfied person was the countessdowager. All the little annoying hindrances went for nothing now that the desired end was accomplished, and she was in high feather when she bade adieu to the amiable young clergyman, who had to depart that night for his curacy, ten miles away, to be in readiness for the morrow's services.

"If you please, my lady, Captain Kirton has been asking for you once or twice," said Hedges, entering the dowager's private sittingroom.

"Then Captain Kirton must ask," retorted the dowager, who was sitting down to her letters, which she had left unopened since their arrival in the morning, in her anxiety for other interests. "Hedges, I should like some supper: I had only a scrambling sort of dinner. You can bring it up here. Something nice; and a bottle of champagne."

Hedges withdrew with the order, and Lady Kirton applied herself to her letters. The first she opened was from the daughter who had married the French count. It told a pitiful tale of distress, and humbly craved to be permitted to come over on a fortnight's visit, she and her two sickly children, "for a little change."

"I dare say!" emphatically cried the dowager. "What next? No, thank you, my lady; now that I have at least a firm footing in this house as that blessed parson said I am not going to risk it by filling it with every bothering child I possess. Bob departs as soon as his leg's well. Why what's this?"

She had come upon a concluding line as she was returning the letter to the envelope. "P.S. If I don't hear from you very decisively to the contrary, I shall come, and trust to your good nature to forgive it. I want to see Bob."

"Oh, that's it, is it!" said the dowager. "She means to come, whether I will or no. That girl always had enough impudence for a dozen."

Drawing a sheet of paper out of her desk, she wrote a few rapid lines.

"Dear Jane,

"For mercy's sake keep those poor children and yourself away! We have had an awful infectious fever raging in the place, which it was thought to be cured, but it's on the break out againseveral deaths, Hartledon and Maude (married of course) have gone out of its reach and I'm thinking of it if Bob's leg which is better permits. You'd not like I dare say to see the children in a coffin apiece and yourself in a third, as might be the end. Smallpox is raging at Garchester a neighbouring town, that will be awful if it gets to us and I hear it's on the road and with kind love believe me your affectionate

"MOTHER.

"P.S. I am sorry for what you tell me about Ugo and the state of affairs chey vous. But you know you would marry him so there's nobody to blame. Ah! Maude has gone by my advice and done as I said and the consequence is she's a peeress for life and got a handsome young husband without a will of his own."

The countessdowager was not very adroit at spelling and composition, whether French or English, as you observe. She made an end of her correspondence, and sat down to a delicious little supper alone; as she best liked to enjoy these treats. The champagne was excellent, and she poured out a full tumbler of it at once, by way of wishing good luck to Maude's triumphant wedding.

"And it is a triumph!" she said, as she put down the empty glass. "I hope it will bring Jane and the rest to a sense of their folly."

A triumph? If you could only have looked into the future, Lady Kirton! A triumph!

The above was not the only letter written that evening. At the hotel where Lord and Lady Hartledon halted for the night, when she had retired under convoy of her maid, then Val's restrained remorse broke out. He paced the room in a sort of mad restlessness; in the midst of which he suddenly sat down to a table on which lay pens, ink, and paper, and poured forth hasty sentences in his mind's wretched tumult.

"My Dear Mrs. Ashton,

"I cannot address you in any more formal words, although you will have reason to fling down the letter at my presuming to use these now for dear, most dear, you will ever be to me.

"What can I say? Why do I write to you? Indeed to the latter question I can only answer I do not know, save that some instinct of good feeling, not utterly dead within me, is urging me to it.

"Will you let me for a moment throw conventionality aside; will you for that brief space of time let me speak truly and freely to you, as one might speak who has passed the confines of this world?

"When a man behaves to a woman as I, to my eternal shame, have this day behaved to Anne, it is, I think, a common custom to regard the false man as having achieved a sort of triumph; to attribute somewhat of humiliation to the other.

"Dear Mrs. Ashton, I cannot sleep until I have said to you that in my case the very contrary is the fact. A more abject, humiliated man than I stand at this hour in my own eyes never yet took his sins upon his soul. Even you might be appeased if you could look into mine and see its sense of degradation.

"That my punishment has already come home to me is only just; that I shall have to conceal it from all the world, including my wife, will not lessen its sting.

"I have this evening married Maude Kirton. I might tell you of unfair play brought to bear upon me, of a positive assurance, apparently well grounded, that Anne had entered into an engagement to wed another, could I admit that these facts were any excuse for me. They are no excuse; not the slightest palliation. My own yielding folly alone is to blame, and I shall take shame to myself for ever.

"I write this to you as I might have written it to my own mother, were she living; not as an expiation; only to tell of my pain; that I am not utterly hardened; that I would sue on my knees for pardon, were it not shut out from me by my own act. There is no pardon for such as I. When you have torn it in pieces, you will, I trust, forget the writer.

"God bless you, dear Mrs. Ashton! God bless and comfort another who is dear to you! and believe me with true undying remorse your once attached friend,

"Hartledon."

It was a curious letter to write; but men of Lord Hartledon's sensitive temperament in regard to others' feelings often do strange things; things the world at large would stare at in their inability to understand them. The remorse might not have come home to him quite so soon as this, his weddingday, but for the inopportune appearance of Dr. Ashton in the chapel, speaking those words that told home so forcibly. Such reproach on these vacillating men inflicts a torture that burns into the heart like living fire.

He sealed the letter, addressing it to Cannes; called a waiter, late as it was, and desired him to post it. And then he walked about the room, reflecting on the curse of his life his besetting sin irresolution. It seemed almost an anomaly for him to make resolves; but he did make one then; that he would, with the help of Heaven, be a MAN from henceforth, however it might crucify his sensitive feelings. And for the future, the obligation he had that day taken upon himself he determined to fulfil to his uttermost in all honour and love; to cherish his wife as he would have cherished Anne Ashton. For the past but Lord Hartledon rose up now with a start. There was one item of that past he dared not glance at, which did not, however, relate to Miss Ashton: and it appeared inclined to thrust itself prominently forward tonight.

Could Lord Hartledon have borrowed somewhat of the easy indifference of the countess dowager, he had been a happier man. That lady would have made a female Nero, enjoying herself while Rome was burning. She remained on in her snug quarters at Hartledon, and lived in clover.

One evening, rather more than a week after the marriage, Hedges had been on an errand to Calne, and was hastening home. In the lonely part of the road near Hartledon, upon turning a sharp corner, he came upon Mirrable, who was standing talking to Pike, very much to the butler's surprise. Pike walked away at once; and the butler spoke.

"He is not an acquaintance of yours, that man, Mrs. Mirrable?"

"Indeed no," she answered, tossing her head. "It was like his impudence to stop me. Rather flurried me too," she continued: and indeed Hedges noticed that she seemed flurried.

"What did he stop you for? To beg?"

"Not that. I've never heard that he does beg. He accosted me with a cool question as to when his lordship was coming back to Hartledon. I answered that it could not be any business of his. And then you came up."

"He is uncommon curious as to my lord. I can't make it out. I've seen him prowling about the grounds: and the night of the marriage he was mounted up at the chapel window. Lord Hartledon saw him, too. I should like to know what he wants."

"By a halfword he let drop, I fancy he has a crotchet in his head that his lordship will find him some work when he comes home. But I must go on my way," added Mirrable. "Mrs. Gum's not well, and I sent word I'd look in for halfanhour this evening."

Hedges had to go on his way also, for it was close upon the countessdowager's dinnerhour, at which ceremony he must attend. Putting his best foot forward, he walked at more than an ordinary pace, and overtook a gentleman almost at the very door of Hartledon. The stranger was approaching the front entrance, Hedges was wheeling off to the back; but the former turned and spoke. A tall, broadshouldered, greyhaired man, with high cheekbones. Hedges took him for a clergyman from his attire; black, with a white neckcloth.

"This is Hartledon House, I believe," he said, speaking with a Scotch accent.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you belong to it?"

"I am Lord Hartledon's butler."

"Is Lord Hartledon at home?"

"No, sir. He is in France."

"I read a notice of his marriage in the public papers," continued the stranger, whose eyes were fixed on Hedges. "It was, I suppose, a correct one?"

"My lord was married the week before last: about ten or eleven days ago."

"Ay; April the fourteenth, the paper said. She is one of the Kirton family. When do you expect him home?"

"I don't know at all, sir. I've not heard anything about it."

"He is in France, you say, Paris, I suppose. Can you furnish me with his address?"

Up to this point the colloquy had proceeded smoothly on both sides: but it suddenly flashed into the mind of Hedges that the stranger's manner was somewhat mysterious, though in what the mystery lay he could not have defined. The communicative man, true to the interests of his master, became cautious at once: he supposed some of Lord Hartledon's worries, contracted when he was Mr. Elster, were returning upon him.

"I cannot give his address, sir. And for the matter of that, it might not be of use if I could. Lord and Lady Hartledon did not intend remaining any length of time in one place."

The stranger had dug the point of his umbrella into the level greensward that bounded the gravel, and swayed the handle about with his hand, pausing in thought.

"I have come a long way to see Lord Hartledon," he observed. "It might be less trouble and cost for me to go on to Paris and see him there, than to start back for home, and come here again when he returns to England. Are you sure you can't give me his address?"

"I'm very sorry I can't, sir. There was a talk of their going on to Switzerland," continued Hedges, improvising the journey, "and so coming back through Germany; and there was a talk of their making Italy before the heat came on, and stopping there. Any way, sir, I dare say they are already away from Paris."

The stranger regarded Hedges attentively, rather to the discomfiture of that functionary, who thought he was doubted. He then asked a great many questions, some about Lord Hartledon's personal habits, some about Lady Maude: the butler answered them freely or cautiously, as he thought he might, feeling inclined all the while to chase the intruder off the premises. Presently he turned his attention on the house.

"A fine old place, this, Mr. Butler."

"Yes, sir."

"I suppose I could look over it, if I wished?"

Hedges hesitated. He was privately asking himself whether the law would allow the stranger, if he had come after any debt of Lord Hartledon's, to refuse to leave the house, once he got into it.

"I could ask Lady Kirton, sir, if you particularly wished it."

"Lady Kirton? You have some one in the house, then!"

"The Dowager Lady Kirton's here, sir. One of her sons also Captain Kirton; but he is confined to his room."

"Then I would rather not go in," said the stranger quickly. "I'm very disappointed to have come all this way and not find Lord Hartledon."

"Can I forward any letter for you, sir? If you'd like to intrust one to me, I'll send it as soon as we know of any certain address."

"Nono, I think not," said the stranger, musingly. "There might be danger," he muttered to himself, but Hedges caught the words.

He stood swaying the umbrella handle about, looking down at it, as if that would assist his decision. Then he looked at Hedges.

"My business with Lord Hartledon is quite private, and I would rather not write. I'll wait until he is back in England: and see him then."

"What name, sir?" asked Hedges, as the stranger turned away.

"I would prefer not to leave my name," was the candid answer. "Good evening."

He walked briskly down the avenue, and Hedges stood looking after him, slightly puzzled in his mind.

"I don't believe it's a creditor; that I don't. He looks like a parson to me. But it's some trouble though, if it's not debt. 'Danger' was the word: 'there might be danger.' Danger in writing, he meant. Any way, I'm glad he didn't go in to that ferreting old dowager. And whatever it may be, his lordship's able to pay it now."

CHAPTER XIX.

A CHANCE MEETING.

Some few weeks went by. On a fine June morning Lord and Lady Hartledon were breakfasting at their hotel in the Rue Rivoli. She was listlessly playing with her cup; he was glancing over Galignani's.

"Maude," he suddenly exclaimed, "the fountains are to play on Sunday at Versailles. Will you go to see them?"

"I am tired of sightseeing, and tired of Paris too," was Lady Hartledon's answer, spoken with apathy.

"Are you?" he returned, with animation, as though not sorry to hear the avowal. "Then we won't stay in Paris any longer. When shall we leave?"

"Are the letters not late this morning?" she asked, allowing the question to pass.

Lord Hartledon glanced at the clock. "Very late: and we are late also. Are you expecting any in particular?"

"I don't know. This chocolate is cold."

"That is easily remedied," said he, rising to ring the bell. "They can bring in some fresh."

"And keep us waiting halfanhour!" she grumbled.

"The hotel is crammed up to the mansarde," said goodnatured Lord Hartledon, who was easily pleased, and rather tolerant of neglect in French hotels. "Is not that the right word, Maude? You took me to task yesterday for saying garret. The servants are run off their legs."

"Then the hotel should keep more servants. I am quite sick of having to ring twice. A week ago I wished I was out of the place."

"My dear Maude, why did you not say so? If you'd like to go on at once to Germany"

"Lettres et journal pour monsieur," interrupted a waiter, entering with two letters and the Times.

"One for you, Maude," handing a letter to his wife. "Don't go," he continued to the waiter; "we want some more chocolate; this is cold. Tell him in French, Maude."

But Lady Hartledon did not hear; or if she heard, did not heed; she was already absorbed in the contents of her letter.

"Ici," said Hartledon, pushing the chocolatepot towards the man, and rallying the best French he could command, "encore du chocolat. Toute froide, this. Et puis dépêchez vous; il est tarde, et nous avons besoin de sortir."

The man was accustomed to the French of Englishmen, and withdrew without moving a muscle of his face. But Lady Hartledon's ears had been set on edge.

"Don't attempt French again, Val. They'll understand you if you speak in English."

"Did I make any mistake?" he asked goodhumouredly. "I could speak French once; but am out of practice. It's the genders bother one."

"Fine French it must have been!" thought her ladyship. "Who is your letter from?"

"My bankers, I think. About Germany, Maude would you like to go there?"

"Yes. Later. After we have been to London."

"To London!"

"We will go to London at once, Percival; stay there for the rest of the season, and then"

"My dear," he interrupted, his face overcast, "the season is nearly over. It will be of no use going there now."

"Plenty of use. We shall have quite six weeks of it. Don't look cross, Val; I have set my heart upon it."

"But have you considered the difficulties? In the first place, we have no house in town; in the second"

"Oh yes we have: a very good house."

Lord Hartledon paused, and looked at her; he thought she was joking. "Where is it?" he asked in merry tones; "at the top of the Monument?"

"It is in Piccadilly," she coolly replied. "Do you remember, some days ago, I read out an advertisement of a house that was to be let there for the remainder of the season, and remarked that it would suit us?"

"That it might suit us, had we wanted one," put in Val.

"I wrote off at once to mamma, and begged her to see after it and engage it for us," she continued, disregarding her husband's amendment. "She now tells me she has done so, and ordered servants up from Hartledon. By the time this letter reaches me she says it will be in readiness."

Lord Hartledon in his astonishment could scarcely find words to reply. "You wrote yourself and ordered the house to be taken?"

"Yes. You are difficult to convince, Val."

"Then I think it was your duty to have first consulted me, Lady Maude," he said, feeling deeply mortified.

"Thank you," she laughed. "I have not been Lady Maude this two months."

"I beg your pardon, Lady Hartledon."

"Now don't pretend to be offended, Val. I have only saved you trouble."

"Maude," he said, rallying his good humour, "it was not right. Let us for Heaven's sake let us begin as we mean to go on: our interests must be one, not separate. Why did you not tell me you wished to return to London, and allow me to see after an abode for us? It would have been the proper way."

"Well, the truth is, I saw you did not want to go; you kept holding back from it; and if I had spoken you would have shillyshallied over it until the season was over. Every one I know is in London now."

The waiter entered with the fresh chocolate, and retired again. Lord Hartledon was standing at the window then. His wife went up to him, and stole her hand within his arm.

"I'm sorry if I have offended you, Val. It's no great matter to have done."

"I think it was, Maude. However don't act for yourself in future; let me know your wishes. I do not think you have expressed a wish, or half a wish, since our marriage, but I have felt a pleasure in gratifying it."

"You good old fellow! But I am given to having a will of my own, and to act independently. I'm like mamma in that. Val, we will start tomorrow: have you any orders for the servants? I can transmit them through mamma."

"I have no orders. This is your expedition, Maude, not mine; and, I assure you, I feel like a man in utter darkness in regard to it. Allow me to see your mother's letter."

Lady Hartledon had put the letter safely into her pocket.

"I would rather not, Percival: it contains a few private words to myself, and mamma has always an objection to her letters being shown. I'll read you all necessary particulars. You must let me have some money today."

"How much?" asked he, from between his compressed lips.

"Oceans. I owe for millinery and things. And, Val, I'll go to Versailles this afternoon, if you like. I want to see some of the rooms again."

"Very well," he answered.

She poured out some chocolate, took it hurriedly, and quitted the room, leaving her husband in a disheartening reverie. That Lady Hartledon and Maude Kirton were two very distinct persons he had discovered already; the one had been all gentleness and childlike suavity, the other was positive, extravagant, and selfwilled; the one had made a pretence of loving him beyond all other things in life, the other was making very little show of loving him at all, or of concealing her indifference. Lord Hartledon was not the only husband who has been disagreeably astonished by a similar metamorphosis.

The following was the letter of the countessdowager:

"Darling Maude,

"I have secured the house you write about and send by this post for Hedges and a few of the rest from Hartledon. It won't accommodate a large establishment I can tell you and you'll be disappointed when you come over to take possession which you can do when you choose. Val was a fool for letting his town house in the spring but of course we know he is one and must put up with it. Whatever you do, don't consult him about any earthly

thing take your own way, he never did have much of a will and you must let him have none for the future. You've got a splendid chance can spend what you like and rule in society and he'll subside into a tame spaniel.

"Maude if you are such an idiot I'll shake you. Find you've made a dreadful mistake? can't bear your husband? keep thinking always of Edward? A child might write such utter rubbish but not you, what does it matter whether one's husband is liked or disliked, provided he gives one position and wealth? Go to Amiens and stop with Jane for a week and see her plight and then grumble at your own, you are an idiot.

"I'm quite glad about your taking this townhouse, and shall enter into possession myself as soon as the servants are up, and await you. Bob's quite well and joins today and of course gives up his lodgings, which have been wretchedly confined and uncomfortable and where I should have gone to but for this move of yours I don't know. Mind you bring me over a Parisian bonnet or two or some articles of that sort. I'm nearly in rags, Kirton's as undutiful as he can be but it's that wife of his.

"Your affectionate mother,

"C. Kirton."

The letter will give you some guide to the policy of Maude Hartledon since her marriage. She did find she had made a mistake. She cared no more for her husband now than she had cared for him before; and it was a positive fact that she despised him for walking so tamely into the snare laid for him by herself and her mother. Nevertheless she triumphed; he had made her a peeress, and she did care for that; she cared also for the broad lands of Hartledon. That she was unwise in assuming her own will so promptly, with little regard to consulting his, she might yet discover.

At Versailles that day to which place they went in accordance with Maude's wish there occurred a rencontre which Lord Hartledon would willingly have gone to the very ends of the earth to avoid. It happened to be rather full for Versailles; many of the visitors in Paris apparently having taken it into their minds to go; indeed, Maude's wish was induced by the fact that some of her acquaintances in the gay capital were going also.

You may possibly remember a very small room in the galleries, exceedingly small as compared with the rest, chiefly hung with English portraits. They were in this room, amidst the little crowd that filled it, when Lord Hartledon became aware that his wife had encountered some longlost friend. There was much greeting and shaking of hands. He caught the name Kattle; and being a somewhat singular name, he recognised it for that of the lady who had been sojourning at Cannes, and had sent the news of Miss

Ashton's supposed engagement to the countessdowager. There was the usual babble on both sides where each was staying, had been staying, would be staying; and then Lord Hartledon heard the following words from Mrs. Kattle.

"How strange I should have seen you! I have met you, the Fords, and the Ashtons here, and did not know that any of you were in Paris. It's true I only arrived yesterday. Such a long illness, my dear, I had at Turin!"

"The Ashtons!" involuntarily repeated Maude. "Are they here? in the château?" And it instantly occurred to her how she should like to meet them, and parade her triumph. If ever a spark of feeling for her husband arose within Maude's heart, it was when she thought of Anne Ashton. She was bitterly jealous of her still.

"Yes, here; I saw them not three minutes ago. They are only now on their road home from Cannes. Fancy their making so long a stay!"

"You wrote mamma word that Miss Ashton was about to marry some Colonel Barnaby."

Mrs. Kattle laughed. It is possible that written news might have been asked for by the countessdowager.

"Well, my dear, and so I did; but it turned out to be a mistake. He did admire her; there was no mistake about that; and I dare say she might have had him if she liked. How's your brother and his poor leg?"

"Oh, he is well," answered Maude. "Au revoir; I can't stand this crush any longer."

It was really a crush just then in the room; and though Maude escaped from it dexterously, Lord Hartledon did not. He was wedged in behind some stout women, and had the pleasure of hearing another word or two from Mrs. Kattle.

"Who was that?" asked a lady, who appeared to be her companion.

"Lady Hartledon. He was only the younger brother until a few months ago, but the elder one got drowned in some inexplicable manner on his own estate, and this one came into the title. The old dowager began at once to angle for him, and succeeded in hooking him. She used to write me word how it progressed."

"She is very beautiful."

"Very."

Lord Hartledon made his escape, and found his wife looking round for him. She was struck by the aspect of his face.

"Are you ill, Percival?"

"Ill? No. But I don't care how soon we get out of these rooms. I can't think what brings so many people in them today."

"He has heard that she's here, and would like to avoid her," thought Maude as she took the arm he held out. "The large rooms are empty enough, I'm sure," she remarked. "Shall we have time to go to the Trianon?"

"If you like. Yes."

He began to hurry through the rooms. Maude, however, was in no mood to be hurried, but stopped here and stopped there. All at once they met a large party of friends; those she had originally expected to meet. Quitting her husband's arm, she became lost amongst them.

There was no help for it; and Lord Hartledon, resigning himself to the detention, took up his standing before the pictures and stared at them, his back to the room. He saw a good deal to interest him, in spite of his rather tumultuous state of mind, and remained there until he found himself surrounded by other spectators. Turning hastily with a view to escaping, he trod upon a lady's dress. She looked up at his word of apology, and they stood face to face himself and Miss Ashton!

That both utterly lost their presence of mind would have been conclusive to the spectators, had any regarded them; but none did so. They were strangers amidst the crowd. For the space of a moment each gazed on the other, spellbound. Lord Hartledon's honest blue eyes were riveted on her face with a strangely yearning expression of repentance her sweet face, which had turned as white as ashes. He wore mourning still for his brother, and was the most distinguished looking man in the château that day. Anne was in a trailing lilac silk, with a white gossamer bonnet. That the heart of each went out to the other, as it had perhaps never gone out before, it may be no sin to say. Sin or no sin, it was the truth. The real value of a thing, as you know, is never felt until it is lost. For two months each had been dutifully striving to forget the other, and believed they were succeeding; and this first accidental meeting roused up the past in all its fever of passion.

No more conscious of what he did than if he had been in a dream, Lord Hartledon held out his hand; and she, quite as unconscious, mechanically met it with hers. What confused words of greeting went forth from his lips he never knew; she as little; but this state of bewildered feeling lasted only a minute; recollection came to both, and she strove to withdraw her hand to retreat.

"God bless you, Anne!" was all he whispered, his fervent words marred by their tone of pain; and he wrung her hand as he released it.

Turning away he caught the eyes of his wife riveted on them; she had evidently seen the meeting, and her colour was high. Lord Hartledon walked straight into the next room, and Maude went up to Anne.

"How do you do, Miss Ashton? I am so glad to meet you. I have just heard you were here from Mrs. Kattle. You have been speaking to my husband."

Anne bowed; she did not lose her presence of mind at this encounter. A few civil words of reply given with courteous dignity, and she moved away with a bright flush on her cheek, towards Dr. and Mrs. Ashton, who were standing arm-in-arm enraptured before a remote picture, cognizant of nothing else.

"How thin she looks!" exclaimed Maude, as she rejoined her husband, and took his arm.

"Who looks thin?"

"Miss Ashton. I wonder she did not fling your hand away, instead of putting her own into it!"

"Do you wish to see the Trianon? We shall be late."

"Yes, I do wish to see it. But you need not speak in that tone: it was not my fault that we met her."

He answered never a syllable. His lips were compressed to pain, and his face was hectic; but he would not be drawn into reproaching his wife by so much as a word, for the sort of taste she was displaying. The manner in which he had treated Miss Ashton and her family was ever in his mind, more or less, in all its bitter, humiliating disgrace. The worst part of it to Val was, that there could be no reparation.

The following day Lord Hartledon and his wife took their departure from Paris; and if anything could have imparted especial gratification on his arriving in London at the

hired house, it was to find that his wife's mother was not in it. Val had come home against his will; he had not wished to be in London that season; rather would he have buried himself and his haunting sense of shame on the tolerant Continent; and he certainly had not wished his wife to make her debut in a small hired house. When he let his own, nothing could have been further from his thoughts than marriage. As to this house Lady Kirton had told her daughter she would be disappointed in it; but when Maude saw its dimensions, its shabby entrance, its want of style altogether, she was dismayed. "And after that glowing advertisement!" she breathed resentfully. It was one of the smallest houses facing the Green Park.

Hedges came forward with an apology from the countessdowager. An apology for not invading their house and inflicting her presence upon them uninvited! A telegraphic despatch from Lord Kirton had summoned her to Ireland on the previous day; and Val's face grew bright as he heard it.

"What was the matter, Hedges?" inquired his mistress. "I'm sure my brother would not telegraph unless it was something."

"The message didn't say, my lady. It was just a few words, asking her ladyship to go off by the first train, but giving no reason."

"I wonder she went, then," observed Val to his wife, as they looked into the different rooms. But Maude did not wonder: she knew how anxious her mother was to be on good terms with her eldest son, from whom she received occasional supplies. Rather would she quarrel with the whole world than with him.

"I think it a good thing she has gone, Maude," said he. "There certainly would not have been room for her and for us in this house."

"And so do I," answered Maude, looking round her bedchamber. "If mamma fancies she's going to inflict herself upon us for good she's mistaken. She and I might quarrel, perhaps; for I know she'd try to control me. Val, what are we to do in this small house?"

"The best we can. We have made the bargain, you know, and taken possession now."

"You are laughing. I declare I think you are glad it has turned out what it is!"

"I am not sorry," he avowed. "You'll let me cater for you another time, Maude."

She put up her face to be kissed. "Don't be angry with me. It is our homecoming."

"Angry!" he repeated. "I have never shown anger to you yet, Maude. Never a woman had a more indulgent husband than you shall have in me."

"You don't say a loving one, Val!"

"And a loving one also: if you will only let me be so."

"What do you mean?"

"Love requires love in return. We shall be happy, I am sure, if you so will it. Only let us pull together; one mind, one interest. Here's your maid. I wonder where my dressing room is?"

And thus they entered on what remained of the London season. The newspapers announced the arrival of Lord and Lady Hartledon, and Maude read it aloud to her husband. She might have retained peace longer, however, had that announcement not gone forth to the four corners of the land.

"Only let us pull together!" A very few days indeed sufficed to dissipate that illusion. Lady Hartledon plunged madly into all the gaieties of the dying season, as though to make up for lost time; Lord Hartledon never felt less inclined to plunge into anything, unless it was the waters of oblivion. He held back from some places, but she did not appear to care, going her way in a very positive, offhand manner, according to her own will, and paying not the slightest deference to his.

CHAPTER XX.

THE STRANGER AGAIN.

On a burning day at the end of June, Lord Hartledon was walking towards the Temple. He had not yet sought out his friend Thomas Carr; a sense of shame held him back; but he was on his way to do so now.

Turning down Essex Street and so to the left, he traversed the courts and windings, and mounted the stairs to the barrister's rooms. Many a merry hour had he passed in those three small rooms, dignified with the name of "Mr. Carr's chambers," but which were in fact also Mr. Carr's dwellingplace and some sad ones.

Lord Hartledon knocked at the outer door with his stick a somewhat faint, doubtful knock; not with the free hand of one at ease with himself and the world. For one thing, he was uncertain as to the reception he should meet with.

Mr. Carr came to the door himself; his clerk was out. When he saw who was his visitor he stood in comic surprise. Val stepped in, extending his hand; and it was heartily taken.

"You are not offended with me, then, Carr?"

"Nay," said Mr. Carr, "I have no reason to be offended. Your sin was not against me."

"That's a strong word, 'sin.'"

"It is spoken," was the answer; "but I need not speak it again. I don't intend to quarrel with you. I was not, I repeat, the injured party."

"Yet you took yourself off in dudgeon, as though you were, leaving me without a groomsmen."

"I would not remain to witness a marriage that that you ought not to have entered upon."

"Well, it's done and over, and need not be brought up again," returned Hartledon, a shade of annoyance in his tones.

"Certainly not. I have no wish or right to bring it up. How is Lady Hartledon?"

"She is very well. And now what has kept you away, Carr? We have been in London nearly a fortnight, and you've never been near me. I thought you were going to quarrel."

"I did not know you had returned."

"Not know it! Why all the newspapers had it in amongst the 'fashionable intelligence.'"

"I have more to do with my time than to look at the fashionable portion of the papers. Not being fashionable myself, it doesn't interest me."

"Yes, it's about a fortnight since we came back to this hateful place," returned Hartledon, his light tone subsiding into seriousness. "I am out of conceit with England just now; and would far rather have gone to the Antipodes."

"Then why did you come back to it?" inquired the barrister, in surprise.

"My wife gave me no choice. She possesses a will of her own. It is the ordinary thing, perhaps, for wives to do so."

"Some do, and some don't," observed Thomas Carr, who never flattered at the expense of truth. "Are you going down to Hartledon?"

"Hartledon!" with a perceptible shiver. "In the mind I am in, I shall never visit Hartledon again; there are some in its vicinity I would rather not insult by my presence. Why do you bring up disagreeable subjects?"

"You will have to get over that feeling," observed Mr. Carr, disregarding the hint, and taking out his probingknife. "And the sooner it is got over the better for all parties. You cannot become an exile from your own place. Are they at Calne now?"

"Yes. They were in Paris just before we left it, and there was an encounter at Versailles. I wished myself dead; I declare I did. A day or two after we came to England they crossed over, and went straight down to Calne. They don't say any more."

"The longer you keep away from Hartledon the greater effort it will cost you to go down to it; and"

"I won't go to Hartledon," he interrupted, in a sort of fury; "neither perhaps would you, in my place."

"Sir," cried Mr. Carr's clerk, bustling in and addressing his master, "you are waited for at the chambers of Serjeant Gale. The consultation is on."

Lord Hartledon rose.

"I will not detain you, Carr; business must be attended to. Will you come and dine with us this evening? Only me and my wife. Here's where we are staying Piccadilly. My own house is let, you know."

"I have no engagement, and will come with pleasure," said Mr. Carr, taking the card. "What hour?"

"Ah, that's just what I can't tell you. Lady Hartledon orders dinner to suit her engagements any time between six and nine! I never know. We are a fashionable couple, don't you see?"

"Stay, though, Hartledon; I forget. I have a business appointment for halfpast eight. Perhaps I can put it off."

"Come up at six. You'll be all right, then, in any case."

Lord Hartledon left the Temple, and sauntered towards home. He had no engagement on hand nothing to kill time. He and his wife were falling naturally into the way of as he had just cynically styled it fashionable people. She went her way and he went his.

Many a cabman held up his hand or his whip; but in his present mood walking was agreeable to him: why should he hurry home, when he had nothing on earth to do there? So he stared here, and gazed there, and stopped to speak to this acquaintance, and walked a few steps with that, went into his club for ten minutes, and arrived home at last.

His wife's carriage was at the door waiting for her. She was bound on an expedition to Chiswick: Lord Hartledon had declined it. He met her hastening out as he entered, and she was looking very cross.

"How late you are going, Maude!"

"Yes, there has been a mistake," she said peevishly, turning in with him to a small room they used as a breakfastroom. "I have been waiting all this time for Lady Langton, and she, I find, has been waiting for me. I'm now going round to take her up. Oh, I have secured that operabox, Val, but at an extravagant price, considering the little time that remains of the season."

"What operabox?"

"Didn't I tell you? It's one I heard of yesterday. I was not going again to put up with the wretched little box they palmed you off with. I did tell you that."

"It was the only one I could get, Maude: there was no other choice."

"Yes, I know. Well, I have secured another for the rest of the season, and you must not talk about extravagance, please."

"Very well," said Val, with a smile. "For what hour have you ordered dinner?"

"Nine o'clock."

"Nine o'clock! That's awkward and late."

"Why awkward? You may have to wait for me even then. It is impossible to say when we shall get home from Chiswick. All the world will be there."

"I have just asked Carr to dine with us, and told him to come at six. I don't fancy these hardworking men care to wait so long for their dinner. And he has an appointment for halfpast eight."

The colour came flushing into Lady Hartledon's face, an angry light into her eyes.

"You have asked Carr to dinner! How dared you?"

Val looked up in quiet amazement.

"Dared!"

"Well yes. Dared!"

"I do not understand you, Maude. I suppose I may exercise the right of inviting a friend to dinner."

"Not when it is objectionable to me. I dislike that man Carr, and will not receive him."

"You can have no grounds for disliking him," returned Lord Hartledon warmly. "He has been a good and true friend to me ever since I knew what friendship meant; and he is a good and true man."

"Too much of a friend," she sarcastically retorted. "You don't need him now, and can drop him."

"Maude," said Lord Hartledon, very quietly, "I have fancied several times lately that you are a little mistaking me. I am not to have a will of my own; I am to bend in all things to yours; you are to be mistress and master, I a nonentity: is it not so? This is a mistake. No woman ever had a better or more indulgent husband than you shall find in me: but in all necessary things, where it is needful and expedient that I should exercise my own judgment, and act as master, I shall do it."

She paused in very astonishment: the tone was so calmly decisive.

"My dear, let us have no more of this; something must have vexed you today."

"We will have no more of it," she passionately retorted; "and I'll have no more of your Thomas Carrs. It is not right that you should bring a man here who has deliberately insulted me. Be quiet, Lord Hartledon; he has. What else was it but an insult going out of the chapel in the manner he did, when we were before the altar? It was a direct intimation that he did not countenance the marriage. He would have preferred, I suppose, that you should marry your country sweetheart, Anne Ashton."

A hot flush rose to Lord Hartledon's brow, but his tone was strangely temperate. "I have already warned you, Maude, that we shall do well to discard that name from our discussions, and if possible from our thoughts; it may prove better for both of us."

"Better for you, perhaps; but you are not going to exercise any control over my will, or words, or action; and so I tell you at once. I'm quite old enough to be out of leading strings, and I'll be mistress in my own house. You will do well to send a note to your amiable friend Carr; it may save him a useless journey; for at my table he shall not sit. Now you know, Val."

She spoke impatiently, haughtily, and swept out to her carriage. Val did not follow to place her in; he positively did not, but left her to the servants. Never in his whole life perhaps had he felt so nettled, never so resolute: the once vacillating, easily persuaded man, when face to face with people, was speedily finding the will he had only exercised behind their backs. He rang the bell for Hedges.

"Her ladyship has ordered dinner for nine o'clock," he said, when the butler appeared.

"I believe so, my lord."

"It will be inconvenient to me to wait so long today. I shall dine at seven. You can serve it in this room, leaving the diningroom for Lady Hartledon. Mr. Carr dines with me."

So Hedges gave the necessary orders, and dinner was laid in the breakfastroom. Thomas Carr came in, bringing the news that he had succeeded in putting off his appointment. Lord Hartledon received him in the same room, fearing possibly the drawingroom might be invaded by his wife. She was just as likely to be home early from Chiswick as late.

"We have it to ourselves, Carr, and I am not sorry. There was no certainty about my wife's return, so I thought we'd dine alone."

They very much enjoyed their tête-à-tête dinner; as they had enjoyed many a one in Hartledon's bachelor days. Thomas Carrone of the quiet, good men in a fast world was an admirable companion, full of intelligence and conversation. Hedges left them alone after the cloth was removed, but in a very few minutes returned; his step rather more subdued than usual, as if he came upon some secret mission.

"Here's that stranger come again, sir," he began, in low tones; and it may as well be remarked that in moments of forgetfulness he often did address his master as he used to address him in the past. "He asked if"

"What stranger?" rather testily interposed Lord Hartledon. "I am at dinner, and can't see any stranger now. What are you thinking about, Hedges?"

"It is what I said," returned Hedges; "but he would not take the answer. He said he had come a long way to see your lordship, and he would see you; his business was very important. My lady asked him"

"Has Lady Hartledon returned?"

"She came in now, my lord, while I was denying you to him. Her ladyship heard him say he would see you, and she inquired what his business was; but he did not tell her. It was private business, he remarked, and could only be entered into with your lordship."

"Who is it, Hedges? Do you know him?"

Lord Hartledon had dropped his voice to confidential tones. Hedges was faithful, and had been privy to some of his embarrassments in the old days. The man looked at the barrister, and seemed to hesitate.

"Speak out. You can say anything before Mr. Carr."

"I don't know him," answered Hedges. "It is the gentleman who came to Hartledon the week after your lordship's marriage, asking five hundred questions, and wanting"

"He, is it?" interrupted Val. "You told me about him when I came home, I remember. Go on, Hedges."

"That's all, my lord. Except that he is here now"and Hedges nodded his head towards the roomdoor. "He seems very inquisitive. When my lady went upstairs, he asked whether that was the countess, and followed her to the foot of the stairs to look after her. I never saw any gentleman stare so."

Val played with his wineglass, and pondered. "I don't believe I owe a shilling in the world," quoth hebetraying the bent of his thoughts, and speaking to no one in particular. "I have squaredup every debt, as far as I know."

"He does not look like a creditor," observed Hedges, with a fatherly air. "Quite superior to that: more like a parson. It's his manner that makes one doubt. There was a mystery about it at Hartledon that I didn't like; and he refused to give his name. His insisting on seeing your lordship now, at dinner or not at dinner, is odd too; his voice is quiet, just as if he possessed the right to do this. I didn't know what to do, and as I say, he's in the hall."

"Show him in somewhere, Hedges. Lady Hartledon is in the drawingroom, I suppose: let him go into the diningroom."

"Her ladyship's dinner is being laid there, my lord," dissented the cautious retainer. "She said it was to be served as soon as it was ready, having come home earlier than she expected."

"Deuce take it!" testily responded Val, "one can't swing a cat in these cramped hired houses. Show him into my smokingden upstairs."

"Let me go there," said Mr. Carr, "and you can see him in this room."

"No; keep to your wine, Carr. Take him up there, Hedges."

The butler retired, and Lord Hartledon turned to his guest. "Carr, can you give a guess at the fellow's business?"

"It's nothing to trouble you. If you have overlooked any old debt, you are able to give a cheque for it. But I should rather suspect your persevering friend to be some clergyman or missionary, bent on drawing a good subscription from you."

Val did not raise his eyes. He was playing again with his empty wineglass, his face grave and perplexed.

"Do they serve writs in these cases?" he suddenly asked.

Mr. Carr laughed. "Is the time so long gone by that you have forgotten yours? You have had some in your day."

"I am not thinking of debt, Carr: that is over for me. But there's no denying that I behaved disgracefully to you know and Dr. Ashton has good reason to be incensed. Can he be bringing an action against me, and is this visit in any way connected with it?"

"Nonsense," said Mr. Carr.

"Is it nonsense! I'm sure I've heard of their dressing up these serving officers as clergymen, to entrap the unwary. Well, call it nonsense, if you like. What of my suggestion in regard to Dr. Ashton?"

Thomas Carr paused to consider. That it was most improbable in all respects, he felt sure; next door to impossible.

"The doctor is too respectable a man to do anything of the sort," he answered. "He is highminded, honourable, wealthy: there's no inducement whatever. No."

"Yes, there may be one: that of punishing me by bringing my disgrace before the world."

"You forget that he would bring his daughter's name before it at the same time. It is quite out of the range of possibility. The Ashtons are not people to seek legal reparation for injury of this sort. But that your fears are blinding you, you would never suspect them of being capable of it."

"The stranger is upstairs, my lord," interrupted Hedges, coming back to the room. "I asked him what name, and he said your lordship would know him when you saw him, and there was no need to give it."

Lord Hartledon went upstairs, marshalled by the butler. Hedges was resenting the mystery; very much on his master's account, a little on his own, for it cannot be denied that he was given to curiosity. He threw open the door of the little smokingden, and in his loftiest, loudest, most uncompromising voice, announced:

"The gentleman, my lord."

Then retired, and shut them in.

Thomas Carr remained alone. He was not fond of wine, and did not help himself during his host's absence. Five minutes, ten minutes, halfanhour, an hour; and still he was alone. At the end of the first halfhour he began to think Val a long time; at the end of the hour he feared something must have happened. Could he be quarrelling with the mysterious stranger? Could he have forgotten him and gone out? Could he

The door softly opened, and Lord Hartledon came in. Was it Lord Hartledon? Thomas Carr rose from his chair in amazement and dread. It was like him, but with some awful terror upon him. His face was of an ashy whiteness; the veins of his brow stood out; his dry lips were drawn.

"Good Heavens, Hartledon!" uttered Thomas Carr. "What is it? You look as if you had been accused of murder."

"I have been accused of it," gasped the unhappy man, "of worse than murder. Ay, and I have done it."

The words called up a strange confusion of ideas in the mind of Thomas Carr. Worse than murder!

"What is it?" cried he, aloud. "I am beginning to dream."

"Will you stand by me?" rejoined Hartledon, his voice seeming to have changed into something curiously hollow. "I have asked you before for trifles; I ask you now in the extremity of need. Will you stand by me, and aid me with your advice?"

"Yes," answered Mr. Carr, his excessive astonishment causing a hesitation. "Where is your visitor?"

"Upstairs. He holds a fearful secret, and has me in his power. Do you come back with me, and combat with him against its betrayal."

"A fearful secret!" was Thomas Carr's exclamation. "What brings you with one?"

Lord Hartledon only groaned. "You will stand by me, Carr? Will you come upstairs and do what you can for me?"

"I am quite ready," replied Thomas Carr, quickly. "I will stand by you now, as ever. But I seem to be in a maze. Is it a true charge?"

"Yes, in so far as that But I had better tell you the story," he broke off, wiping his brow. "I must tell it you before you go upstairs."

He linked his arm within his friend's, and drew him to the window. It was broad daylight still, but gloomy there: the window had the pleasure of reposing under the leads, and was gloomy at noon. Lord Hartledon hesitated still. "Elster's folly!" were the words mechanically floating in the mind of Thomas Carr.

"It is an awful story, Carr; bad and wicked."

"Let me hear it at once," replied Thomas Carr.

"I am in danger of of in short, that person upstairs could have me apprehended tonight. I would not tell you but that I must do so. I must have advice, assistance; but you'll start from me when you hear it."

"I will stand by you, whatever it may be. If a man has ever need of a friend, it must be in his extremity."

Lord Hartledon stood, and whispered a strange tale. It was anything but coherent to the clearminded barrister; nevertheless, as he gathered one or two of its points he did start back, as Hartledon had foretold, and an exclamation of dismay burst from his lips.

"And you could marry with this hanging over your head!"

"Carr"

The butler came in with an interruption.

"My lady wishes to know whether your lordship is going out with her tonight."

"Not tonight," answered Lord Hartledon, pointing to the door for the man to make his exit. "It is of her I think, not of myself," he murmured to Mr. Carr.

"And he"the barrister pointed above to indicate the stranger"threatens to have you apprehended on the charge?"

"I hardly know what he threatens. You must deal with him, Carr; I cannot. Let us go; we are wasting time."

As they left the room to go upstairs Lady Hartledon came out of the diningroom and crossed their path. She was deeply mortified at her husband's bringing Mr. Carr to the house after what she had said; and most probably came out at the moment to confront them with her haughty and disapproving face. However that might have been, all other emotions gave place to surprise, when she saw their faces, each bearing a livid look of fear.

"I hope you are well, Lady Hartledon," said Mr. Carr.

She would not see the offered hand, but swept onwards with a cold curtesy, stopping just a moment to speak to her husband.

"You are not going out with me, Lord Hartledon?"

"I cannot tonight, Maude. Business detains me."

She passed up the stairs, vouchsafing no other word. They lingered a minute to let her get into the drawingroom.

"Poor Maude! What will become of her if this is brought home to me?"

"And if it is not brought home to youthe fact remains the same," said Mr. Carr, in his merciless truth.

"And our children, our children!" groaned Hartledon, a hot flush of dread arising in his white face.

They shut themselves in with the stranger, and the conference was renewed. Presently lights were rung for; Hedges brought them himself, but gained nothing by the movement; for Mr. Carr heard him coming, rose unbidden, and took them from him at the door.

Lady Hartledon's curiosity was excited. It had been aroused a little by the stranger himself; secondly by their scared faces; thirdly by this close conference.

"Who is that strange gentleman, Hedges?" she asked, from the drawingroom, as the butler descended.

"I don't know, my lady."

"What is his name?"

"I have not heard it, my lady."

"He looks like a clergyman."

"He does, my lady."

Apparently Hedges was impenetrable, and she allowed him to go down. Her curiosity was very much excited; it may be said, uneasily excited; there is no accounting for these instincts that come over us, shadowing forth a vague sense of dread. Although engaged out that night to more than one place, Lady Hartledon lingered on in the drawingroom.

They came out of the room at last and passed the drawingroom door. She pushed it to, only peeping out when they had gone by. There was nothing to hear; they were talking of ordinary matters. The stranger, in his strong Scotch accent, remarked what a hot day it had been. In travelling, no doubt very, responded Mr. Carr. Lady Hartledon condescended to cautiously put her head over the balustrades. There was no bell rung; Lord Hartledon showed his visitor out himself.

"And now for these criminal law books, Carr, that bear upon the case," he said, returning from the frontdoor.

"I must go down to my chambers for them."

"I know they can't bring it home to me; I know they can't!" he exclaimed, in tones so painfully eager as to prove to Lady Hartledon's ears that he thought they could, whatever the matter might be. "I'll go with you, Carr; this uncertainty is killing me."

"There's little uncertainty about it, I fear," was the grave reply. "You had better look the worst in the face."

They went out, intending to hail the first cab. Very much to Lord Hartledon's surprise he saw his wife's carriage waiting at the door, the impatient horses chafing at their delay.

What could have detained her? "Wait for me one moment, Carr," he said. "Stop a cab if you see one."

He dashed up to the drawingroom; his wife was coming forth then, her cloak and gloves on, her fan in her hand. "Maude, my darling," he exclaimed, "what has kept you? Surely you have not waited for me? you did not misunderstand me?"

"I hardly know what has kept me," she evasively answered. "It is late, but I'm going now."

It never occurred to Lord Hartledon that she had been watching or listening. Incapable of any meanness of the sort, he could not suspect it in another. Lady Hartledon's fertile brain had been suggesting a solution of this mystery. It was rather curious, perhaps, that her suspicions should take the same bent that her husband's did at first that of instituting law proceedings by Dr. Ashton.

She said nothing. Her husband led her out, placed her in the carriage, and saw it drive away. Then he and the barrister got into a cab and went to the Temple.

"We'll take the books home with us, Carr," he said, feverishly. "You often have fellows dropping in to your chambers at night; at my house we shall be secure from interruption."

It was midnight when Lady Hartledon returned home. She asked after her husband, and heard that he was in the breakfastroom with Mr. Carr.

She went towards it with a stealthy step, and opened the door very softly. Had Lord Hartledon not been talking, they might, however, have heard her. The table was strewn with thick musty folios; but they appeared to be done with, and Mr. Carr was leaning back in his chair with folded arms.

"I have had nothing but worry all my life," Val was saying; "but compared with this, whatever has gone before was as nothing. When I think of Maude, I feel as if I should go mad."

"You must quietly separate from her," said Mr. Carr.

A slight movement. Mr. Carr stopped, and Lord Hartledon looked round. Lady Hartledon was close behind him.

"Percival, what is the matter?" she asked, turning her back on Mr. Carr, as if ignoring his presence. "What bad news did that parson bring you? a friend, I presume, of Dr. Ashton's."

They had both risen. Lord Hartledon glanced at Mr. Carr, the perspiration breaking out on his brow. "It was not a parson," he said, in his innate adherence to truth.

"I ask you, Lord Hartledon," she resumed, having noted the silent appeal to Mr. Carr. "It requires no third person to step between man and wife. Will you come upstairs with me?"

Words and manner were too pointed, and Mr. Carr hastily stacked the books, and carried them to a sidetable.

"Allow these to remain here until tomorrow," he said to Lord Hartledon; "I'll send my clerk for them. I'm off now; it's later than I thought. Goodnight, Lady Hartledon."

He went out unmolested; Lady Hartledon did not answer him; Val nodded his goodnight.

"Are you not ashamed to face me, Lord Hartledon?" she then demanded. "I overheard what you were saying."

"Overheard what we were saying?" he repeated, gazing at her with a scared look.

"I heard that insidious man give you strange advice 'you must quietly separate from her,' he said; meaning from me. And you listened patiently, and did not knock him down!"

"Maude! Maude! was that all you heard?"

"All! I should think it was enough."

"Yes, but" He broke off, so agitated as scarcely to know what he was saying. Rallying himself somewhat, he laid his hand upon the white cloak covering her shoulders.

"Do not judge him harshly, Maude. Indeed he is a true friend to you and to me. And I have need of one just now."

"A true friend! to advise that! I never heard of anything so monstrous. You must be out of your mind."

"No, I am not, Maude. Should disgrace" he seemed to hesitate for a word "fall upon me, it must touch you as connected with me. I know, Maude, that he was thinking of your best and truest interests."

"But to talk of separating husband and wife!"

"Yes well I suppose he spoke strongly in the heat of the moment."

There was a pause. Lord Hartledon had his hand still on his wife's shoulder, but his eyes were bent on the table near which they stood. She was waiting for him to speak.

"Won't you tell me what has happened?"

"I can't tell you, Maude, tonight," he answered, great drops coming out again on his brow at the question, and knowing all the time that he should never tell her. "I must learn more first."

"You spoke of disgrace," she observed gently, swaying her fan before her by its silken cord. "An ugly word."

"It is. Heaven help me!"

"Val, I do think you are the greatest simpleton under the skies!" she exclaimed out of all patience, and flinging his hand off. "It's time you got rid of this foolish sensitiveness. I know what is the matter quite well; and it's not so very much of a disgrace after all! Those Ashtons are going to make you pay publicly for your folly. Let them do it."

He had opened his lips to undeceive her, but stopped in time. As a drowning man catches at a straw, so did he catch at this suggestion in his hopeless despair; and he suffered her to remain in it. Anything to stave off the real, dreadful truth.

"Maude," he rejoined, "it is for your sake. If I am sensitive as to any disgrace being brought home to me, I declare that I think of you more than of myself."

"Then don't think of it. It will be fun for me, rather than anything else. I did not imagine the Ashtons would have done it, though. I wonder what damages they'll go in for. Oh, Val, I should like to see you in the witnessbox!"

He did not answer.

"And it was not a parson?" she continued. "I'm sure he looked as much like one as old Ashton himself. A professional man, then, I suppose, Val?"

"Yes, a professional man." But even that little answer was given with some hesitation, as though it had evasion in it.

Maude broke into a laugh. "Your friend, Pleader Carror whatever he calls himself must be as thinskin as you are, Val, to fancy that a rubbishy action of that sort, brought against a husband, can reflect disgrace on the wife! Separate, indeed! Has he lived in a wood all his life? Well, I am going upstairs."

"A moment yet, Maude! You will take a caution from me, won't you? Don't speak of this; don't allude to it, even to me. It may be arranged yet, you know."

"So it may," acquiesced Maude. "Let your friend Carr see the doctor, and offer to pay the damages down."

He might have resented this speech for Dr. Ashton's sake, in a happier moment, but resentment had been beaten out of him now. And Lady Hartledon decided that her husband was a simpleton, for instead of going to sleep like a reasonable man, he tossed and turned by her side until daybreak.