Elster's Folly
Vol.III

By

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CHAPTER XXI.

SECRET CARE.

From that hour Lord Hartledon was a changed man. He went about as one who has some awful fear upon him, starting at shadows. That his manner was inexplicable, even allowing that he had some great crime on his conscience, a lookeron had not failed to observe. He was very tender with his wife; far more so than he had been at all; anxious, as it seemed, to indulge her every fancy, gratify her every whim. But when it came to going into society with her, then he hesitated; he would and he wouldn't, reminding Maude of his old vacillation, which indeed had seemed to have been laid aside for ever. It was as though he appeared not to know what to do; what he ought to do; his own wish or inclination having no part in it.

"Why won't you go with me?" she said to him angrily one day that he had retracted his assent at the last moment. "Is it that you care so much for Anne Ashton, that you don't care to be seen with me?"

"Oh, Maude! If you knew how little Anne Ashton is in my thoughts now! When by chance I do think of her, it is to be thankful I did not marry her," he added, in a tone of selfcommuning.

Maude laughed a light laugh. "This movement of theirs is putting you out of conceit of your old love, Val."

"What movement?" he rejoined; and he would not have asked the question had his thoughts not gone woolgathering.

"You are dreaming, Val. The action."

"Ah, yes, to be sure."

"Have you heard yet what damages they claim?"

He shook his head. "You promised not to speak of this, Maude; even to me."

"Who is to help speaking of it, when you allow it to take your ease away? I never in my life saw any one so changed as you are. I wish the thing were over and done with, though

it left you a few thousand pounds the poorer. Will you accompany me to this dinner today? I am sick of appearing alone and making excuses for you."

"I wish I knew what to do for the bestwhat my course ought to be!" thought Hartledon within his conscience. "I can't bear to be seen with her in public. When I face people with her on my arm, it seems as if they must know what sort of man she, in her unconsciousness, is leaning upon."

"I'll go with you today, Maude, as you press it. I was to have seen Mr. Carr, but can send down to him."

"Then don't be five minutes dressing: it is time we went."

She heard him despatch a footman to the Temple with a message that he should not be at Mr. Carr's chambers that evening; and she lay back in her chair, waiting for him in her dinnerdress of black and white. They were in mourning still for his brother. Lord Hartledon had not left it off, and Maude had loved him too well to grumble at the delay.

She had grown tolerant in regard to the intimacy with Mr. Carr. That her husband should escape as soon and as favourably as possible out of the dilemma in which he was plunged, she naturally wished; that he should require legal advice and assistance to accomplish it, was only reasonable, and therefore she tolerated the visits of Mr. Carr. She had even gone so far one evening as to send tea in to them when he and Val were closeted together.

But still Lady Hartledon was not quite prepared to find Mr. Carr at their house when they returned. She and Lord Hartledon went forth to the dinner; the latter behaving as though his wits were in some faroff hemisphere rather than in this one, so absentminded was he. From the dinner they proceeded to another place or two; and on getting home, towards one in the morning, there was the barrister.

"Mr. Carr is waiting to see you, my lord," said Hedges, meeting them in the passage. "He is in the diningroom."

"Mr. Carr! Now!"

The halllamp shone full on his face as he spoke. He had been momentarily forgetting care; was speaking gaily to his wife as they entered. She saw the change that came over it; the look of fear, of apprehension, that replaced its smile. He went into the diningroom, and she followed him.

"Why, Carr!" he exclaimed. "Is it you?"

Mr. Carr, bowing to Lady Hartledon, made a joke of the matter. "Having waited so long, I thought I'd wait it out, Hartledon. As good be hung for a sheep as a lamb, you know, and I have no wife sitting up for me at home."

"You had my message?"

"Yes, and that brought me here. I wanted just to say a word to you, as I am going out of town tomorrow."

"What will you take?"

"Nothing at all. Hedges has been making me munificent offers, but I declined them. I never take anything after dinner, except a cup of tea or so, as you may remember, keeping a clear head for work in the morning."

There was a slight pause. Lady Hartledon saw of course that she was de trop in the conference; that Mr. Carr would not speak his "word" whilst she was present. She had never understood why the matter should be kept apart from her; and in her heart resented it.

"You won't say to my husband before me what you have come to say, Mr. Carr."

It was strictly the truth, but the abrupt manner of bringing it home to him momentarily took away Mr. Carr's power of repartee, although he was apt enough in general, as became a special pleader.

"You have had news from the Ashtons; that is, of their cause, and you have come to tell it. I don't see why you and Lord Hartledon should so cautiously keep everything from me."

There was an eager look on Lord Hartledon's face as he stood behind his wife. It was directed to Mr. Carr, and said as plainly as look could say, "Don't undeceive her; keep up the delusion." But Thomas Carr was not so apt at keeping up delusions at the expense of truth, and he only smiled in reply.

"What damages are they suing for?"

"Oh," said Mr. Carr, with a laugh, and ready enough now: "ten thousand pounds will cover it."

"Ten thousand pounds!" she echoed. "Of course they won't get half of it. In this sort of actionbreach of promiseparties never get so much as they ask for, do they?"

"Not often."

She laughed a little as she quitted the room. It was difficult to remain longer, and it never occurred to her to suspect that any graver matter than this action was in question.

"Now, Carr?" began Lord Hartledon, seating himself near the table as he closed the door after her, and speaking in low tones.

"I received this letter by the afternoon mail," said Mr. Carr, taking one from the safe enclosure of his pocketbook. "It is satisfactory, so far as it goes."

"I call it very satisfactory," returned Hartledon, glancing through it. "I thought he'd listen to reason. What is done cannot be undone, and exposure will answer no end. I wrote him an urgent letter the other day, begging him to be silent for Maude's sake. Were I to expiate the past with my life, it could not undo it. If he brought me to the bar of my country to plead guilty or not guilty, the past would remain the same."

"And I put the matter to him in my letter somewhat in the same light, though in a more businesslike point of view," returned Mr. Carr. "There was no entreaty in mine. I left compassion, whether for you or others, out of the argument; and said to him, what will you gain by exposure, and how will you reconcile it to your conscience to inflict on innocent persons the torture exposure must bring?"

"I shall breathe freely now," said Hartledon, with a sigh of relief." If that man gives his word not to stir in the matter, not to take proceedings against me; in short, to bury what he knows in secrecy and silence, as he has hitherto done; it will be all I can hope for."

Mr. Carr lifted his eyebrows.

"I perceive what you think: that the fact remains. Carr, I know it as well as you; I know that nothing can alter it. Don't you see that remorse is ever present with me? driving me mad? killing me by inches with its pain?"

"Do you know what I should be tempted to do, were the case mine?"

"Well?"

"Tell my wife."

"Carr!"

"I almost think I should; I am not quite sure. Should the truth ever come to her"

"But I trust it never will come to her," interrupted Hartledon, his face growing hot.

"It's a delicate point to argue," acknowledged Mr. Carr, "and I cannot hope to bring you into my way of looking at it. Had you married Miss Ashton, it appears to me that you would have no resource but to tell her: the very fact of being bound to you would kill a religious, highprincipled woman."

"Not if she remained in ignorance."

"There it is. Ought she to remain in ignorance?"

Lord Hartledon leaned his head on his hand as one faint and weary. "Carr, it is of no use to go over all this ground again. If I disclose the whole to Maude, how would it make it better for her? Would it not render it a hundred times worse? She could not inform against me; it would be contrary to human nature to suppose it; and all the result would be, that she must go through life with the awful secret upon her, rendering her days a hell upon earth, as it is rendering mine. It's true she might separate from me; I dare say she would; but what satisfaction would that bring her? No; the kinder course is to allow her to remain in ignorance. Good Heavens! tell my wife! I should never dare do it!"

Mr. Carr made no reply, and a pause ensued. In truth, the matter was encompassed with difficulties on all sides; and the barrister could but acknowledge that Val's argument had some sort of reason in it. Having bound her to himself by marriage, it might be right that he should study her happiness above all things.

"It has put new life into me," Val resumed, pointing to the letter. "Now that he has promised to keep the secret, there's little to fear; and I know that he will keep his word. I must bear the burden as I best can, and keep a smiling face to the world."

"Did you read the postscript?" asked Mr. Carr; a feeling coming over him that Val had not read it.

"The postscript?"

"There's a line or two over the leaf."

Lord Hartledon glanced at it, and found it ran thus:

"You must be aware that another person knows of this besides myself. He who was a witness at the time, and from whom I heard the particulars. Of course for him I cannot answer, and I think he is in England. I allude to G.G. Lord H. will know."

"Lord H." apparently did know. He gazed down at the words with a knitted brow, in which some surprise was mingled.

"I declare that I understood him that night to say the fellow had died. Did not you?"

"I did," acquiesced Mr. Carr. "I certainly assumed it as a fact, until this letter came today. Gordon was the name, I think?"

"George Gordon."

"Since reading the letter I have been endeavouring to recollect exactly what he did say; and the impression on my mind is, that he spoke of Gordon as being probably dead; not that he knew it for a certainty. How I could overlook the point so as not to have inquired into it more fully, I cannot imagine. But, you see, we were not discussing details that night, or questioning facts: we were trying to disarm himget him not to proceed against you; and for myself, I confess I was so utterly stunned that half my wits had left me."

"What is to be done?"

"We must endeavour to ascertain where Gordon is," replied Mr. Carr, as he reenclosed the letter in his pocketbook. "I'll write and inquire what his grounds are for thinking he is in England; and then trace him outif he is to be traced. You give me carteblanche to act?"

"You know I do, Carr."

"All right."

"And when you have traced himwhat then?"

"That's an afterquestion, and I must be guided by circumstances. And now I'll wish you goodnight," continued the barrister, rising. "It's a shame to have kept you up; but the letter contains some consolation, and I knew I could not bring it you tomorrow."

The drawingroom was lighted when Lord Hartledon went upstairs; and his wife sat there with a book, as if she meant to remain up all night. She put it down as he entered.

"Are you here still, Maude! I thought you were tired when you came home."

"I felt tired because I met no one I cared for," she answered, in rather fractious tones. "Every one we know is leaving town, or has left."

"Yes, that's true."

"I shall leave too. I don't mind if we go tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!" he echoed. "Why, we have the house for three weeks longer."

"And if we have? We are not obliged to remain in it."

Lord Hartledon put back the curtain, and stood leaning out at the open window, seeking a breath of air that hot summer's night, though indeed there was none to be found; and if there had been, it could not have cooled the brow's inward fever. The Park lay before him, dark and misty; the lights of the few vehicles passing gleamed now and again; the hum of life was dying out in the streets, men's free steps, careless voices. He looked down, and wondered whether any one of those men knew what care meant as he knew it; whether the awful skeleton, that never quitted him night or day, could hold such place with another. He was Earl of Hartledon; wealthy, young, handsome; he had no bad habits to hamper him; and yet he would willingly have changed lots at hazard with any one of those passersby, could his breast, by so doing, have been eased of its burden.

"What are you looking at, Val?"

His wife had come up and stolen her arm within his, as she asked the question, looking out too.

"Not at anything in particular," he replied, making a prisoner of her hand. "The night's hot, Maude."

"Oh, I am getting tired of London!" she exclaimed. "It is always hot now; and I believe I ought to be away from it."

"Yes."

"That letter I had this morning was from Ireland, from mamma. I told her, when I wrote last, how I felt; and you never read such a lecture as she gave me in return. She asked me whether I was mad, that I should be going galvanizing about when I ought rather to be resting three parts of my time."

"Galvanizing?" said Lord Hartledon.

"So she wrote: she never waits to choose her wordsyou know mamma! I suppose she meant to imply that I was always on the move."

"Do you feel ill, Maude?"

"Not exactly ill; butI think I ought to be careful. Percival," she breathed, "mamma asked me whether I was trying to destroy the hope of an heir to Hartledon."

An icebolt shot through him at the reminder. Better an heir should never be born, if it must call him father!

"I fainted today, Val," she continued to whisper.

He passed his arm round his wife's waist, and drew her closer to him. Not upon her ought he to visit his sin: she might have enough to bear, without coldness from him; rather should he be doubly tender.

"You did not tell me about it, love. Why have you gone out this evening?" he asked reproachfully.

"It has not harmed me. Indeed I will take care, for your sake. I should never forgive myself."

"I have thought since we married, Maude, that you did not much care for me."

Maude made no immediate answer. She was looking out straight before her, her head on his shoulder, and Lord Hartledon saw that tears were glistening in her eyes.

"Yes, I do," she said at length; and as she spoke she felt very conscious that she was caring for him. His gentle kindness, his many attractions were beginning to tell upon her heart; and a vision of the possible future, when she should love him, crossed her then and there as she stood. Lord Hartledon bent his face, and let it rest on hers.

"We shall be happy yet, Val; and I will be as good as gold. To begin with, we will leave London at once. I ought not to remain, and I know you have not liked it all along. It would have been better to wait until next year, when we could have had our own house; only I was impatient. I felt proud of being married; of being your wifeI did indeed, Valand I was in a fever to be amidst my world of friends. And there's a real confession!" she concluded, laughing.

"Any more?" he asked, laughing with her.

"I don't remember any more just now. Which day shall we go? You shall manage things for me now: I won't be wilful again. Shall the servants go on first to Hartledon, or with us?"

"To Hartledon!" exclaimed Val. "Is it to Hartledon you think of going?"

"Of course it is," she said, standing up and looking at him in surprise. "Where else should I go?"

"I thought you wished to go to Germany!"

"And so I did; but that would not do now."

"Then let us go to the seaside," he rather eagerly said. "Somewhere in England."

"No, I would rather go to Hartledon. In one's own home rest and comfort can be insured; and I believe I require them. Don't you wish to go there?" she added, watching his perplexed face.

"No, I don't. The truth is, I cannot go to Hartledon."

"Is it because you do not care to face the Ashtons? I see! You would like to have this business settled first."

Lord Hartledon hardly heard the words, as he stood leaning against the open casement, gazing into the dark and misty past. No man ever shrank from a prison as he shrank from Hartledon.

"I cannot leave London at all just yet. Thomas Carr is remaining here for me, when he ought to be on circuit, and I must stay with him. I wish you would go anywhere else, rather than to Hartledon."

The tone was so painfully earnest, that a momentary suspicion crossed her of his having some other motive. It passed away almost as it arose, and she accused him of being unreasonable.

Unreasonable it did appear to be. "If you have any real reason to urge against Hartledon, tell it me," she said. But he mentioned nonesave that it was his "wish" not to go.

And Lady Hartledon, rather piqued, gave the necessary orders on the following day for the removal. No further confidential converse, or approach to it, took place between her and her husband; but up to the last moment she thought he would relent and accompany her. Nothing of the sort. He was anxious for her every comfort on the journey, and saw her off himself: nothing more.

"I never thought you would allow me to go alone," she resentfully whispered, as he held her hand after she was seated in the train.

He shook his head. "It is your fault, Maude. I told you I could not go to Hartledon."

And so she went down in rather an angry frame of mind. Many a time and oft had she pictured to herself the triumph of their first visit to Calne, the place where she had taken so much pains to win him: but the arrival was certainly shorn of its glory.

CHAPTER XXII.

ASKING THE RECTOR.

Perhaps Lady Hartledon had never in all her life been so much astonished as when she reached Hartledon, for the first person she saw there was her mother: her mother, whom she had believed to be in some remote district of Ireland. For the moment she almost wondered whether it was really herself or her ghost. The countessdowager came flying down the stepsif that term may be applied to one of her age and sizewith rather demonstrative affection; which, however, was not cordially received.

"What's the matter, Maude? How you stare!"

"Is it you, mamma? How can it be you?"

"How can it be me?" returned the dowager, giving Maude's bonnet a few kisses. "It is me, and that's enough. My goodness, Maude, how thin you look! I see what it is! you've been killing yourself in that racketing London. It's well I've come to take care of you."

Maude went in, feeling that she could have taken care of herself, and listening to the offhand explanations of the countessdowager. "Kirton offended me," she said. "He and his wife are like two bears; and so I packed up my things and came away at once, and got here straight from Liverpool. And now you know."

"And is Lady Kirton quite well again?" asked Maude, helplessly, knowing she could not turn her mother out.

"She'd be well enough but for temper. She was ill, though, when they telegraphed for me; her life for three days and nights hanging on a shred. I told that fool of a Kirton before he married her that she had no constitution. I suppose you and Hart were finely disappointed to find I was not in London when you got there."

"Agreeably disappointed, I think," said Maude, languidly.

"Indeed! It's civil of you to say so."

"On account of the smallness of the house," added Maude, endeavouring to be polite. "We hardly knew how to manage in it ourselves."

"You wrote me word to take it. As to me, I can accommodate myself to any space. Where there's plenty of room, I take plenty; where there's not, I can put up with a closet. I have made Mirrable give me my old rooms here: you of course take Hart's now."

"I am very tired," said Maude. "I think I will have some tea, and go to bed."

"Tea!" shrieked the dowager. "I have not yet had dinner. And it's waiting; that's more."

"You can dine without me, mamma," she said, walking upstairs to the new rooms. The dowager stared, and followed her. There was an indescribable something in Maude's manner that she did not like; it spoke of incipient rebellion, of an influence that had been, but was now thrown off. If she lost caste once, with Maude, she knew that she lost it for ever.

"You could surely take a little dinner, Maude. You must keep up your strength, you know."

"Not any dinner, thank you. I shall be all right tomorrow, when I've slept off my fatigue."

"Well, I know I should like mine," grumbled the countessdowager, feeling her position in the house already altered from what it had been during her former sojourn, when she assumed full authority, and ordered things as she pleased, completely ignoring the new lord.

"You can have it," said Maude.

"They won't serve it until Hartledon arrives," was the aggrieved answer. "I suppose he's walking up from the station. He always had a queer habit of doing that."

Maude lifted her eyes in slight surprise. Her solitary arrival was a matter of fact so established to herself, that it sounded strange for any one else to be in ignorance of it.

"Lord Hartledon has not come down. He is remaining in London."

The old dowager peered at Maude through her little eyes. "What's that for?"

"Business, I believe."

"Don't tell me an untruth, Maude. You have quarrelled."

"We have not quarrelled. We are perfectly good friends."

"And do you mean to tell me that he sent you down alone?"

"He sent the servants with me."

"Don't be insolent, Maude. You know what I mean."

"Why, mamma, I do not wish to be insolent. I can't tell you more, or tell it differently. Lord Hartledon did not come down with me, and the servants did."

She spoke sharply. In her tired condition the petty conversation was wearying her; and underlying everything else in her heart, was the mortifying consciousness that he had not come down with her, chafing her temper almost beyond repression. Considering that Maude did not profess to love her husband very much, it was astonishing how keenly she felt this.

"Are you and Hartledon upon good terms?" asked the countessdowager after a pause, during which she had never taken her eyes from her daughter's face.

"It would be early days to be on any other."

"Oh," said the dowager. "And you did not write me word from Paris that you found you had made a mistake, that you could not bear your husband! Eh, Maude?"

A tinge came into Maude's cheeks. "And you, mamma, told me that I was to rule my husband with an iron hand, never allowing him to have a will of his own, never consulting him! Both you and I were wrong," she continued quietly. "I wrote that letter in a moment of irritation; and you were assuming what has not proved to be a fact. I like my husband now quite well enough to keep friends with him; his kindness to me is excessive; but I find, with all my wish to rule him, if I had the wish, I could not do it. He has a will of his own, and he exerts it in spite of me; and I am quite sure he will continue to exert it, whenever he fancies he is in the right. You never saw any one so changed from what he used to be."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean in asserting his own will. But he is changed in other ways. It seems to me that he has never been quite the same man since that night in the chapel. He has been more thoughtful; and all the old vacillation is gone."

The countessdowager could not understand at all; neither did she believe; and she only stared at Maude.

"His not coming down with me is a proof that he exercises his own will now. I wished him to come very much, and he knew it; but you see he has not done so."

"And what do you say is keeping him?" repeated the countessdowager.

"Business"

"Ah," interrupted the dowager, before Maude could finish, "that's the general excuse. Always suspect it, my dear."

"Suspect what?" asked Maude.

"When a man says that, and gets his wife out of the way with it, rely upon it he is pursuing some nice little interests of his own."

Lady Hartledon understood the implication; she felt nettled, and a flush rose to her face. In her husband's loyalty (always excepting his feeling towards Miss Ashton) she rested fully assured.

"You did not allow me to finish," was the cold rejoinder. "Business is keeping him in town, for one thing; for another, I think he cannot get over his dislike to face the Ashtons."

"Rubbish!" cried the wrathful dowager. "He does not tell you what the business is, does he?" she cynically added.

"I happen to know," answered Maude. "The Ashtons are bringing an action against him for breach of promise; and he and Mr. Carr the barrister are trying to arrange it without its coming to a trial."

The old lady opened her eyes and her mouth.

"It is true. They lay the damages at ten thousand pounds!"

With a shriek the countessdowager began to dance. Ten thousand pounds! Ten thousand pounds would keep her for ever, invested at good interest. She called the parson some unworthy names.

"I cannot give you any of the details," said Maude, in answer to the questions pressed upon her. "Percival will never speak of it, or allow me to do so. I learnt itI can hardly tell you how I learnt itby implication, I think; for it was never expressly told me. We had a mysterious visit one night from some old parsonparson or lawyer; and Percival and Mr. Carr, who happened to be at our house, were closeted with him for an hour or two. I saw they were agitated, and guessed what it was; Dr. Ashton was bringing an action. They could not deny it."

"The vile old hypocrite!" cried the incensed dowager. "Ten thousand pounds! Are you sure it is as much as that, Maude?"

"Quite. Mr. Carr told me the amount."

"I wonder you encourage that man to your house."

"It was one of the things I stood out againstfruitlessly," was the quiet answer. "But I believe he means well to me; and I am sure he is doing what he can to serve my husband. They are often together about this business."

"Of course Hartledon resists the claim?"

"I don't know. I think they are trying to compromise it, so that it shall not come into court."

"What does Hartledon think of it?"

"It is worrying his life out. No, mamma, it is not too strong an expression. He says nothing; but I can see that it is half killing him. I don't believe he has slept properly since the news was brought to him."

"What a simpleton he must be! And that man will stand up in the pulpit tomorrow and preach of charity!" continued the dowager, turning her animadversions upon Dr. Ashton. "You are a hypocrite too, Maude, for trying to deceive me. You and Hartledon are not on good terms; don't tell me! He would never have let you come down alone."

Lady Hartledon would not reply. She felt vexed with her mother, vexed with her husband, vexed on all sides; and she took refuge in her fatigue and was silent.

The dowager went to church on the following day. Maude would not go. The hot anger flushed into her face at the thought of showing herself there for the first time, unaccompanied by her husband: to Maude's mind it seemed that she must look to

others so very much like a deserted wife. She comes home alone; he stays in London! "Ah, why did he not come down only for this one Sunday, and go back againif he must have gone?" she thought.

A month or two ago Maude had not cared enough for him to reason like this. The countessdowager ensconced herself in a corner of the Hartledon statepew, and from her blinking eyes looked out upon the Ashtons. Anne, with her once bright face looking rather wan, her modest demeanour; Mrs. Ashton, so essentially a gentlewoman; the doctor, sensible, clever, charitable, beyond all doubt a good mana feeling came over the mind of the sometimes obtuse woman that of all the people before her they looked the least likely to enter on the sort of lawsuit spoken of by Maude. But never a doubt occurred to her that they had entered on it.

Lady Hartledon remained at home, her prayerbook in her hand. She was thinking she could steal out to the evening service; it might not be so much noticed then, her being alone. Listlessly enough she sat, toying with her prayerbook rather than reading it. She had never pretended to be religious, had not been trained to be so; and reading a prayerbook, when not in church, was quite unusual to her. But there are seasons in a woman's life, times when peril is looked forward to, that bring thought even to the most careless nature. Maude was trying to play at "being good," and was reading the psalms for the day in an absent fashion, her thoughts elsewhere; and the morning passed on. The quiet apathy of her present state, compared with the restless fever which had stirred her during her last sojourn at Hartledon, was remarkable.

Suddenly there burst in upon her the countessdowager: that estimable lady's bonnet awry, her face scarlet, herself in a commotion.

"I didn't suppose you'd have done it, Maude! You might play tricks upon other people, I think, but not upon your own mother."

The interlude was rather welcome to Maude, rousing her from her apathy. Not for some few moments, however, could she understand the cause of complaint.

It appeared that the countessdowager, with that absence of all sense of the fitness of things which so eminently characterized her, had joined the Ashtons after service, inquiring with quite motherly solicitude after Mrs. Ashton's health, complimenting Anne upon her charming looks; making herself, in short, as agreeable as she knew how, and completely ignoring the past in regard to her soninlaw. Gentlewomen in mind and manners, they did not repulse her, were even courteously civil; and she graciously accompanied them across the road to the Rectorygate, and there took a cordial leave, saying she would look in on the morrow.

In returning she met Dr. Ashton. He was passing her with nothing but a bow; but he little knew the countessdowager. She grasped his hand; said how grieved she was not to have had an opportunity of explaining away her part in the past; hoped he would let bygones be bygones; and finally, whilst the clergyman was scheming how to get away from her without absolute rudeness, she astonished him with a communication touching the actionatlaw. There ensued a little mutual misapprehension, followed by a few emphatic words of denial from Dr. Ashton; and the countessdowager walked away with a scarlet face, and an explosion of anger against her daughter.

Lady Hartledon was not yet callous to the proprieties of life; and the intrusion on the Ashtons, which her mother confessed to, half frightened, half shamed her. But the dowager's wrath at having been misled bore down everything. Dr. Ashton had entered no action whatever against Lord Hartledon; had never thought of doing it.

"And you, you wicked, ungrateful girl, to come home to me with such an invention, and cause me to start off on a fool's errand! Do you suppose I should have gone and humbled myself to those people, but for hoping to bring the parson to a sense of what he was doing in goingin for those enormous damages?"

"I have not come home to you with any invention, mamma. Dr. Ashton has entered the action."

"He has not," raved the dowager. "It is an infamous hoax you have played off upon me. You couldn't find any excuse for your husband's staying in London, and so invented this. What with you, and what with Kirton's ingratitude, I shall be driven out of house and home!"

"I won't say another word until you are calm and can talk common sense," said Maude, leaning back in her chair, and putting down her prayerbook.

"Common sense! What am I talking but common sense? When a child begins to mislead her own mother, the world ought to come to an end."

Maude took no notice.

There happened to be some water standing on a table, and the dowager poured out a tumblerful and drank it, though not accustomed to the beverage. Untying her bonnetstrings she sat down, a little calmer.

"Perhaps you'll explain this at your convenience, Maude."

"There is nothing to explain," was the answer. "What I told you was the truth. The action has been entered by the Ashtons."

"And I tell you that the action has not."

"I assure you that it has," returned Maude. "I told you of the evening we first had notice of it, and the damages claimed; do you think I invented that, or went to sleep and dreamt it? If Val has gone down once to that Temple about it, he has gone fifty times. He would not go for pleasure."

The countessdowager sat fanning herself quietly: for her daughter's words were gaining ground.

"There's a mistake somewhere, Maude, and it is on your side and not mine. I'll lay my life that no action has been entered by Dr. Ashton. The man spoke the truth; I can read the truth when I see it as well as anyone: his face flushed with pain and anger at such a thing being said of him. It may not be difficult to explain this contradiction."

"Do you think not?" returned Maude, her indifference exciting the listener to anger.

"I should say Hartledon is deceiving you. If any action is entered against him at all, it isn't that sort of action; or perhaps the young lady is not Miss Ashton, but some other; he's just the kind of man to be drawn into promising marriage to a dozen or two. Very clever of him to palm you off with this tale: a man may get into five hundred troubles not convenient to disclose to his wife."

Except that Lady Hartledon's cheek flushed a little, she made no answer; she held firmlyat least she thought she held firmlyto her own side of the case. Her mother, on the contrary, adopted the new view, and dismissed it from her thoughts accordingly.

Maude went to church in the evening, sitting alone in the great pew, pale and quiet. Anne Ashton was also alone; and the two whilom rivals, the triumphant and the rejected, could survey each other to their heart's content.

Not very triumphant was Maude's feeling. Strange perhaps to say, the suggestion of the old dowager, like instilled poison, was making its way into her very veins. Her thoughts had been busy with the matter ever since. One positive conviction lay in her heartthat Dr. Ashton, now reading the first lesson before her, for he was taking the whole of the service that evening, could not, under any circumstance, be guilty of a false assertion or subterfuge. One solution of the difficulty presented itself to herthat her mother, in her

irascibility, had misunderstood the Rector; and yet that was improbable. As Maude half sat, half lay back in the pew, for the faint feeling was especially upon her that evening, she thought she would give a great deal to set the matter at rest.

When the service was over she took the more secluded way home; those of the servants who had attended returning as usual by the road. On reaching the turning where the three paths diverged, the faintness which had been hovering over her all the evening suddenly grew worse; and but for a friendly tree, she might have fallen. It grew better in a few moments, but she did not yet quit her support.

Very surprised was the Rector of Calne to come up and see Lady Hartledon in this position. Every Sunday evening, after service, he went to visit a man in one of the cottages, who was dying of consumption, and he was on his way there now. He would have preferred to pass without speaking: but Lady Hartledon looked in need of assistance; and in common Christian kindness he could not pass her by.

"I beg your pardon, Lady Hartledon. Are you ill?"

She took his offered arm with her disengaged hand, as an additional support; and her white face turned a shade whiter.

"A sudden faintness overtook me. I am better now," she said, when able to speak.

"Will you allow me to walk on with you?"

"Thank you; just a little way. If you will not mind it."

That he must have understood the feeling which prompted the concluding words was undoubted: and perhaps had Lady Hartledon been in possession of her keenest senses, she might never have spoken them. Pride and health go out of us together. Dr. Ashton took her on his arm, and they walked slowly in the direction of the little bridge. Colour was returning to her face, strength to her frame.

"The heat of the day has affected you, possibly?"

"Yes, perhaps; I have felt faint at times lately. The church was very hot tonight."

Nothing more was said until the bridge was gained, and then Maude released his arm.

"Dr. Ashton, I thank you very much. You have been a friend in need."

"But are you sure you are strong enough to go on alone? I will escort you to the house if you are not."

"Quite strong enough now. Thank you once again."

As he was bowing his farewell, a sudden impulse to speak, and set the matter that was troubling her at rest, came over her. Without a moment's deliberation, without weighing her words, she rushed upon it; the ostensible plea an apology for her mother's having spoken to him.

"Yes, I told Lady Kirton she was labouring under some misapprehension," he quietly answered.

"Will you forgive me also for speaking of it?" she murmured. "Since my mother came home with the news of what you said, I have been lost in a sea of conjecture: I could not attend to the service for dwelling upon it, and might as well not have been in churcha curious confession to make to you, Dr. Ashton. Is it indeed true that you know nothing of the matter?"

"Lady Kirton told me in so many words that I had entered an action against Lord Hartledon for breach of promise, and laid the damages at ten thousand pounds," returned Dr. Ashton, with a plainness of speech and a cynical manner that made her blush. And she saw at once that he had done nothing of the sort; saw it without any more decisive denial.

"But the action has been entered," said Lady Hartledon.

"I beg your pardon, madam. Lord Hartledon is, I should imagine, the only man living who could suppose me capable of such a thing."

"And you have not entered on it!" she reiterated, half bewildered by the denial.

"Most certainly not. When I parted with Lord Hartledon on a certain evening, which probably your ladyship remembers, I washed my hands of him for good, desiring never to approach him in any way whatever, never hear of him, never see him again. Your husband, madam, is safe for me: I desire nothing better than to forget that such a man is in existence."

Lifting his hat, he walked away. And Lady Hartledon stood and gazed after him as one in a dream.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MR. CARR AT WORK.

Thomas Carr was threading his way through the mazy precincts of Gray's Inn, with that quick step and absorbed manner known only, I think, to the busy man of our busy metropolis. He was on his way to make some inquiries of a firm of solicitors, Messrs. Kedge and Reck, strangers to him in all but name.

Up some dark and dingy stairs, he knocked at a dark and dingy door: which, after a minute, opened of itself by some ingenious contrivance, and let him into a passage, whence he turned into a room, where two clerks were writing at a desk.

"Can I see Mr. Kedge?"

"Not in," said one of the clerks, without looking up.

"Mr. Reck, then?"

"Not in."

"When will either of them be in?" continued the barrister; thinking that if he were Messrs. Kedge and Reck the clerk would get his discharge for incivility.

"Can't say. What's your business?"

"My business is with them: not with you."

"You can see the managing clerk."

"I wish to see one of the partners."

"Could you give your name?" continued the gentleman, equably.

Mr. Carr handed in his card. The clerk glanced at it, and surreptitiously showed it to his companion; and both of them looked up at him. Mr. Carr of the Temple was known by reputation, and they condescended to become civil.

"Take a seat for a moment, sir," said the one. "I'll inquire how long Mr. Kedge will be; but Mr. Reek's not in town today."

A few minutes, and Thomas Carr found himself in a small square room with the head of the firm, a youngish man and somewhat of a dandy, especially genial in manner, as though in contrast to his clerk. He welcomed the rising barrister.

"There's as much difficulty in getting to see you as if you were Pope of Rome," cried Mr. Carr, good humouredly.

The lawyer laughed. "Hopkins did not know you: and strangers are generally introduced to Mr. Reck, or to our managing clerk. What can I do for you, Mr. Carr?"

"I don't know that you can do anything for me," said Mr. Carr, seating himself; "but I hope you can. At the present moment I am engaged in sifting a piece of complicated business for a friend; a private matter entirely, which it is necessary to keep private. I am greatly interested in it myself, as you may readily believe, when it is keeping me from circuit. Indeed it may almost be called my own affair," he added, observing the eyes of the lawyer fixed upon him, and not caring they should see into his business too clearly. "I fancy you have a clerk, or had a clerk, who is cognizant of one or two points in regard to it: can you put me in the way of finding out where he is? His name is Gordon."

"Gordon! We have no clerk of that name. Never had one, that I remember. How came you to fancy it?"

"I heard it from my own clerk, Taylor. One day last week I happened to say before him that I'd give a fivepound note out of my pocket to get at the present whereabouts of this man Gordon. Taylor is a shrewd fellow; full of useful bits of information, and knows, I really believe, threefourths of London by name. He immediately said a young man of that name was with Messrs. Kedge and Reck, of Gray's Inn, either as clerk, or in some other capacity; and when he described this clerk of yours, I felt nearly sure that it was the man I am looking for. I got Taylor to make inquiries, and he did, I believe, of one of your clerks; but he could learn nothing, except that no one of that name was connected with you now. Taylor persists that he is or was connected with you; and so I thought the shortest plan to settle the matter was to ask yourselves."

"We have no clerk of that name," repeated Mr. Kedge, pushing back some papers on the table. "Never had one."

"Understand," said Mr. Carr, thinking it just possible the lawyer might be mistaking his motives, "I have nothing to allege against the man, and do not seek to injure him. The real fact is, that I do not want to see him or to be brought into personal contact with him; I only want to know whether he is in London, and, if so, where?"

"I assure you he is not connected with us," repeated Mr. Kedge. "I would tell you so in a moment if he were."

"Then I can only apologise for having troubled you," said the barrister, rising. "Taylor must have been mistaken. And yet I would have backed his word, when he positively asserts a thing, against the world. I hardly ever knew him wrong."

Mr. Kedge was playing with the locket on his watchchain, his head bent in thought.

"Wait a moment, Mr. Carr. I remember now that we took a clerk temporarily into the office in the latter part of last year. His writing did not suit, and we kept him only a week or two. I don't know what his name was, but it might have been Gordon."

"Do you remember what sort of a man he was?" asked Mr. Carr, somewhat eagerly.

"I really do not. You see, I don't come much into contact with our clerks. Reck does; but he's not here today. I fancy he had red hair."

"Gordon had reddish hair."

"You had better see Kimberly," said the solicitor, ringing a bell. "He is our managing clerk, and knows everything."

A greyhaired, silentlooking man came in with stooping shoulders. Mr. Kedge, without any circumlocution, asked whether he remembered any clerk of the name of Gordon having been in the house. Mr. Kimberly responded by saying that they never had one in the house of the name.

"Well, I thought not," observed the principal. "There was one had in for a short time, you know, while Hopkins was ill. I forget his name."

"His name was Druitt, sir. We employed a man of the name of Gorton to do some outdoor business for us at times," continued the managing clerk, turning his eyes on the barrister; "but not lately."

"What sort of business?"

"Serving writs."

"Gorton is not Gordon," remarked Mr. Kedge, with legal acumen. "By the way, Kimberly, I have heard nothing of Gorton lately. What has become of him?"

"I have not the least idea, sir. We parted in a huff, so he wouldn't perhaps be likely to come in my way again. Some business that he mismanaged, if you remember, sir, down at Calne."

"When he arrested one man for another," laughed the lawyer, "and got entangled in a coroner's inquest, and I don't know what all."

Mr. Carr had pricked up his ears, scarcely daring to breathe. But his manner was careless to a degree.

"The man he arrested being Lord Hartledon; the man he ought to have arrested being the Honourable Percival Elster," he interposed, laughing.

"What! do you know about it?" cried the lawyer.

"I remember hearing of it; I was intimate with Mr. Elster at the time."

"He has since become Lord Hartledon."

"Yes. But about this Gorton! I should not be in the least surprised if he is the man I am inquiring for. Can you describe him to me, Mr. Kimberly?"

"He is a short, slight man, under thirty, with red hair and whiskers."

Mr. Carr nodded.

"Light hair with a reddish tinge it has been described to me. Do you happen to be at all acquainted with his antecedents?"

"Not I; I know nothing about, the man," said Mr. Kedge. "Kimberly does, perhaps."

"No, sir," dissented Kimberly. "He had been to Australia, I believe; and that's all I know about him."

"It is the same man," said Mr. Carr, quietly. "And if you can tell me anything about him," he continued, turning to the older man, "I shall be exceedingly obliged to you. To begin withwhen did you first know him?"

But at this juncture an interruption occurred. Hopkins the discourteous came in with a card, which he presented to his principal. The gentleman was waiting to see Mr. Kedge.

Two more clients were also waiting, he added, Thomas Carr rose, and the end of it was that he went with Mr. Kimberly to his own room.

"It's Carr of the Inner Temple," whispered Mr. Kedge in his clerk's ear.

"Oh, I know him, sir."

"All right. If you can help him, do so."

"I first knew Gorton about fifteen months ago," observed the clerk, when they were shut in together. "A friend of mine, now dead, spoke of him to me as a respectable young fellow who had fallen in the world, and asked if I could help him to some employment. I think he told me somewhat of his history; but I quite forget it. I know he was very low down then, with scarcely bread to eat."

"Did this friend of yours call him Gorton or Gordon?" interrupted Mr. Carr.

"Gorton. I never heard him called Gordon at all. I remember seeing a book of his that he seemed to set some store by. It was printed in old English, and had his name on the titlepage: 'George Gorton. From his affectionate father, W. Gorton.' I employed him in some outdoor work. He knew London perfectly well, and seemed to know people too."

"And he had been to Australia?"

"He had been to Australia, I feel sure. One day he accidentally let slip some words about Melbourne, which he could not well have done unless he had seen the place. I taxed him with it, and he shuffled out of it with some excuse; but in such a manner as to convince me he had been there."

"And now, Mr. Kimberly, I am going to ask you another question. You spoke of his having been at Calne; I infer that you sent him to the place on the errand to Mr. Elster. Try to recollect whether his going there was your own spontaneous act, or whether he was the original mover in the journey?"

The greyhaired clerk looked up as though not understanding.

"You don't quite take me, I see."

"Yes I do, sir; but I was thinking. So far as I can recollect, it was our own spontaneous act. I am sure I had no reason to think otherwise at the time. We had had a deal of

trouble with the Honourable Mr. Elster; and when it was found that he had left town for the family seat, we came to the resolution to arrest him."

Thomas Carr paused. "Do you know anything of Gordon'sor Gorton's doings in Calne? Did you ever hear him speak of them afterwards?"

"I don't know that I did particularly. The excuse he made to us for arresting Lord Hartledon was, that the brothers were so much alike he mistook the one for the other."

"Which would infer that he knew Mr. Elster by sight."

"It might; yes. It was not for the mistake that we discharged him; indeed, not for anything at all connected with Calne. He did seem to have gone about his business there in a very loose way, and to have paid less attention to our interests than to the gossip of the place; of which there was a tolerable amount just then, on account of Lord Hartledon's unfortunate death. Gorton was set upon another job or two when he returned; and one of those he contrived to mismanage so woefully, that I would give him no more to do. It struck me that he must drink, or else was accessible to a bribe."

Mr. Carr nodded his head, thinking the latter more than probable. His fingers were playing with a newspaper which happened to lie on the clerk's desk; and he put the next question with a very wellassumed air of carelessness, as if it were but the passing thought of the moment.

"Did he ever talk about Mr. Elster?"

"Never but once. He came to my house one evening to tell me he had discovered the hidingplace of a gentleman we were looking for. I was taking my solitary glass of gin and water after supper, the only stimulant I ever touchand that by the doctor's ordersand I could not do less than ask him to help himself. You see, sir, we did not look upon him as a common sheriff's man: and he helped himself pretty freely. That made him talkative. I fancy his head cannot stand much; and he began rambling upon recent affairs at Calne; he had not been back above a week then"

"And he spoke of Mr. Elster?"

"He spoke a good deal of him as the new Lord Hartledon, all in a rambling sort of way. He hinted that it might be in his power to bring home to him some great crime."

"The man must have been drunk indeed!" remarked Mr. Carr, with the most perfect assumption of indifference; a very contrast to the fear that shot through his heart. "What crime, pray? I hope he particularized it."

"What he seemed to hint at was some unfair play in connection with his brother's death," said the old clerk, lowering his voice. "'A man at his wits' end for money would do many queer things,' he remarked."

Mr. Carr's eyes flashed. "What a dangerous fool he must be! You surely did not listen to him!"

"I, sir! I stopped him pretty quickly, and bade him sew up his mouth until he came to his sober senses again. Oh, they make great simpletons of themselves, some of these young fellows, when they get a little drink into them."

"They do," said the barrister. "Did he ever allude to the matter again?"

"Never; and when I saw him the next day, he seemed ashamed of himself, and asked if he had not been talking a lot of nonsense. About a fortnight after that we parted, and I have never seen him since."

"And you really do not know what has become of him?"

"Not at all. I should think he has left London."

"Why?"

"Because had he remained in it he'd be sure to have come bothering me to employ him again; unless, indeed, he has found some one else to do it."

"Well," said Mr. Carr, rising, "will you do me this favour? If you come across the man again, or learn tidings of him in any way, let me know it at once. I do not want him to hear of me, or that I have made inquiries about him. I only wish to ascertain where he is, if that be possible. Any one bringing me this information privately will find it well worth his while."

He went forth into the busy streets again, sick at heart; and upon reaching his chambers wrote a note for a detective officer, and put some business into his hands.

Meanwhile Lord Hartledon remained in London. When the term for which they had engaged the furnished house was expired he took lodgings in Grafton Street; and there

he stayed, his frame of mind restless and unsatisfactory. Lady Hartledon wrote to him sometimes, and he answered her. She said not a word about the discovery she had made in regard to the alleged actionatlaw; but she never failed in every letter to ask what he was doing, and when he was coming homemeaning to Hartledon. He put her off in the best way he could: he and Carr were very busy together, he said: as to home, he could not mention any particular time. And Lady Hartledon bottled up her curiosity and her wrath, and waited with what patience she possessed.

The truth wasand, perhaps, the reader may have divined itthat graver motives than the sensitive feeling of not liking to face the Ashtons were keeping Lord Hartledon from his wife and home. He had once, in his bachelor days, wished himself a savage in some remote desert, where his civilized acquaintance could not come near him; he had a thousand times more reason to wish himself one now.

One dusty day, when the excessive heat of summer was on the wane, he went down to Mr. Carr's chambers, and found that gentleman out. Not out for long, the clerk thought; and sat down and waited. The room he was in looked out on the cool garden, the quiet river; in the one there was not a soul except Mr. Broom himself, who had gone in to watch the progress of his chrysanthemums, and was stooping lovingly over the beds; on the other a steamer, freighted with a straggling few, was paddling up the river against the tide, and a barge with its brown sail was coming down in all its picturesque charm. The contrast between this quiet scene and the bustling, dusty, jostling world he had come in from, was grateful even to his disturbed heart; and he felt half inclined to go round to the garden and fling himself on the lawn as a man might do who was free from care.

Mr. Carr indulged in the costly luxury of three rooms in the Temple; his sittingroom, which was his workroom, a bedroom, and a little outer room, the sanctum of his clerk. Lord Hartledon was in the sittingroom, but he could hear the clerk moving about in the anteroom, as if he had no writing on hand that morning. When tired of waiting, he called him in.

"Mr. Taylor, how long do you think he will be? I've been dozing, I think."

"Well, I thought he'd have been here before now, my lord. He generally tells me if he is going out for any length of time; but he said nothing today."

"A newspaper would be something to while away one's time, or a book," grumbled Hartledon. "Not those," glancing at a bookcase full of ponderous lawvolumes.

"Your lordship has taken the cream out of them already," remarked the clerk, with a laugh; and Hartledon's brow knitted at the words. He had "taken the cream" out of those old lawbooks, if studying them could do it, for he had been at them pretty often of late.

But Mr. Taylor's remarks had no ulterior meaning. Being a shrewd man, he could not fail to suspect that Lord Hartledon was in a scrape of some sort; but from a word dropped by his master he supposed it to involve nothing more than a question of debt; and he never suspected that the word had been dropped purposely. "Scamps would claim money twice over when they could," said Mr. Carr; and Elster was a careless man, always losing his receipts. He was a short, slight man, this clerkin build something like his masterwith an intelligent, silent face, a small, sharp nose, and fair hair. He had been born a gentleman, he was wont to say; and indeed he looked one; but he had not received an education commensurate with that fact, and had to make his own way in the world. He might do it yet, perhaps, he remarked one day to Lord Hartledon; and certainly, if steady perseverance could effect it, he would: all his spare time was spent in study.

"He has not gone to one of those blessed consultations in somebody's chambers, has he?" cried Val. "I have known them last three hours."

"I have known them last longer than that," said the clerk equably. "But there are none on just now."

"I can't think what has become of him. He made an appointment with me for this morning. And where's his Times?"

Mr. Taylor could not tell where; he had been looking for the newspaper on his own account. It was not to be found; and they could only come to the conclusion that the barrister had taken it out with him.

"I wish you'd go out and buy me one," said Val.

"I'll go with pleasure, my lord. But suppose any one comes to the door?"

"Oh, I'll answer it. They'll think Carr has taken on a new clerk."

Mr. Taylor laughed, and went out. Hartledon, tired of sitting, began to pace the room and the anteroom. Most men would have taken their departure; but he had nothing to do; he had latterly shunned that portion of the world called society; and was as well in Mr. Carr's chambers as in his own lodgings, or in strolling about with his troubled heart. While thus occupied, there came a soft tap to the outer dooras was sure to be the case,

the clerk being absentand Val opened it. A middleaged, quietlooking man stood there, who had nothing specially noticeable in his appearance, except a pair of deepset dark eyes, under bushy eyebrows that were turning grey.

"Mr. Carr within?"

"Mr. Carr's not in," replied the temporary clerk. "I dare say you can wait."

"Likely to be long?"

"I should think not. I have been waiting for him these two hours."

The applicant entered, and sat down in the clerk's room. Lord Hartledon went into the other, and stood drumming on the windowpane, as he gazed out upon the Temple garden.

"I'd go, but for that note of Carr's," he said to himself. "IfHalloa! that's his voice at last."

Mr. Carr and his clerk had returned together. The former, after a few moments, came in to Lord Hartledon.

"A nice fellow you are, Carr! Sending me word to be here at eleven o'clock, and then walking off for two mortal hours!"

"I sent you word to wait for me at your own home!"

"Well, that's good!" returned Val. "It said, 'Be here at eleven,' as plainly as writing could say it."

"And there was a postscript over the leaf telling you, on second thought, not to be here, but to wait at home for me," said Mr. Carr. "I remembered a matter of business that would take me up your way this morning, and thought I'd go on to you. It's just your careless fashion, Hartledon, reading only half your letters! You should have turned it over."

"Who was to think there was anything on the other side? Folk don't turn their letters over from curiosity when they are concluded on the first page."

"I never had a letter in my life but I turned it over to make sure," observed the more careful barrister. "I have had my walk for nothing."

"And I have been cooling my heels here! And you took the newspaper with you!"

"No, I did not. Churton sent in from his rooms to borrow it."

"Well, let the misunderstanding go, and forgive me for being cross. Do you know, Carr, I think I am growing illtempered from trouble. What news have you for me?"

"I'll tell you byandby. Do you know who that is in the other room?"

"Not I. He seemed to stare me insideout in a quiet way as I let him in."

"Ay. It's Green, the detective. At times a question occurs to me whether that's his real name, or one assumed in his profession. He has come to report at last. Had you better remain?"

"Why not?"

Mr. Carr looked dubious.

"You can make some excuse for my presence."

"It's not that. I'm thinking if you let slip a word"

"Is it likely?"

"Inadvertently, I mean."

"There's no fear. You have not mentioned my name to him?"

"I retort in your own wordsIs it likely? He does not know why he is being employed or what I want with the man I wish traced. At present he is working, as far as that goes, in the dark. I might have put him on a false scent, just as cleverly and unsuspiciously as I dare say he could put me; but I've not done it. What's the matter with you today, Hartledon? You look ill."

"I only look what I am, then," was the answer. "But I'm no worse than usual. I'd rather be transportedI'd rather be hanged, for that matterthan lead the life of misery I am leading. At times I feel inclined to give in, but then comes the thought of Maude."

CHAPTER XXIV.

SOMEBODY ELSE AT WORK.

They were shut in together: the detective officer, Mr. Carr, and Lord Hartledon. "You may speak freely before this gentleman," observed Mr. Carr, as if in apology for a third being present. "He knows the parties, and is almost as much interested in the affair as I am."

The detective glanced at Lord Hartledon with his deep eyes, but he did not know him, and took out a notebook, on which some words and figures were dotted down, hieroglyphics to any one's eyes but his own. Squaring his elbows on the table, he begun abruptly; and appeared to have a habit of cutting short his words and sentences.

"Haven't succeeded yet as could wish, Mr. Carr; at least not altogether: have had to be longer over it, too, than thought for. George Gordon: Scotch birth, so far as can learn; left an orphan; lived mostly in London. Served time to medical practitioner, locality Paddington. Idle, visionary, loose in conduct, goodnatured, fond of roving. Surgeon wouldn't keep him as assistant; might have done it, he says, had G.G. been of settled disposition: saw him in drink three times. Next turns up in Scotland, assistant to a doctor there; name Mair, locality Kirkcudbrightshire. Remained less than a year; left, saying was going to Australia. So far," broke off the speaker, raising his eyes to Mr. Carr's, "particulars tally with the information supplied by you."

"Just so."

"Then my further work began," continued Mr. Green. "Afraid what I've got together won't be satisfactory; differ from you in opinion, at any rate. G.G. went to Australia; no doubt of that; friend of his got a letter or two from him while there: last one enclosed two tenpound notes, borrowed by G.G. before he went out. Last letter said been up to the diggings; very successful; coming home with his money, mentioned ship he meant to sail in. Hadn't been in Australia twelve months."

"Who was the friend?" asked Mr. Carr.

"Respectable man; gentleman; former fellowpupil with Gordon in London; in good practice for himself now; locality Kensington. After last letter, friend perpetually looking out for G.G. G.G. did not make his appearance; conclusion friend draws is he did not come back. Feels sure Gordon, whether rich or poor, in illreport or goodreport, would have come direct to him."

"I happen to know that he did come back," said Mr. Carr.

"Don't think it," was the unceremonious rejoinder.

"I know it positively. And that he was in London."

The detective looked over his notes, as if completely ignoring Mr. Carr's words.

"You heard, gentlemen, of that mutiny on board the ship Morning Star, some three years ago? Made a noise at the time."

"Well?"

"Ringleader was this same man, George Gordon."

"No!" exclaimed Mr. Carr.

"No reasonable doubt about it. Friend of his feels none: can't understand how G.G. could have turned suddenly cruel; never was that. Pooh! when men have been leading lawless lives in the bush, perhaps taken regularly to drinkingwhich G.G. was inclined to beforethey're ready for any crime under the sun."

"But how do you connect Gordon with the ringleader of that diabolical mutiny?"

"Easy enough. Same name, George Gordon: wrote to a friend the ship he was coming home inMorning Star. It was the same; price on G.G.'s head to this day: shouldn't mind getting it. Needn't pother over it, sir; 'twas Gordon: but he'd never put his foot in London."

"If true, it would account for his not showing himself to his friendassuming that he did come back," observed Mr. Carr.

"Friend says not. Sure that G.G., whatever he might have been guilty of, would go to him direct; knew he might depend on him in any trouble. A proof, he argues, that G.G. never came back."

"But I tell you he did come back," repeated the barrister. "Strange the similarity of name never struck me," he added, turning to Lord Hartledon. "I took some interest in that mutiny at the time; but it never occurred to me to connect this man or his name with it. A noted name, at any rate, if not a very common one."

Lord Hartledon nodded. He had sat silent throughout, a little apart, his face somewhat turned from them, as though the business did not concern him.

"And now I will relate to you what more I know of Gordon," resumed Mr. Carr, moving his chair nearer the detective, and so partially screening Lord Hartledon. "He was in London last year, employed by Kedge and Reck, of Gray's Inn, to serve writs. What he had done with himself from the time of the mutinyallowing that he was identical with the Gordon of that businessI dare say no one living could tell, himself excepted. He was calling himself Gorton last autumn. Not much of a change from his own name."

"George Gorton," assented the detective.

"Yes, George Gorton. I knew this much when I first applied to you. I did not mention it because I preferred to let you go to work without it. Understand me; that it is the same man, I know; but there are nevertheless discrepancies in the case that I cannot reconcile; and I thought you might possibly arrive at some knowledge of the man without this clue better than with it."

"Sorry to differ from you, Mr. Carr; must hold to the belief that George Gorton, employed at Kedge and Reck's, was not the same man at all," came the cool and obstinate rejoinder. "Have sifted the apparent similarity between the two, and drawn conclusions accordingly."

The remark implied that the detective was wiser on the subject of George Gorton than Mr. Carr had bargained for, and a shadow of apprehension stole over him. It was by no means his wish that the sharp detective and the man should come into contact with each other; all he wanted was to find out where he was at present, not that he should be meddled with. This he had fully explained in the first instance, and the other had acquiesced in his curt way.

"You are thinking me uncommon clever, getting on the track of George Gorton, when nothing on the surface connects him with the man wanted," remarked the detective, with professional vanity. "Came upon it accidentally; as well confess it; don't want to assume more credit than's due. It was in this way. Evening following your instructions, had to see managing clerk of Kedge and Reck; was engaged on a little matter for them. Business over, he asked me if I knew anything of a man named George Gorton, or Gordonas I seemed to know something of pretty well everybody. Having just been asked here about George Gordon, I naturally connected the two questions together. Inquired of Kimberly why he suspected his clerk Gorton should be Gordon; Kimberly replied he did not suspect him, but a gentleman did, who had been there that day. This put me on Gorton's track."

"And you followed it up?"

"Of course; keeping my own counsel. Took it up in haste, though; no deliberation; went off to Calne, without first comparing notes with Gordon's friend the surgeon."

"To Calne!" explained Mr. Carr, while Lord Hartledon turned his head and took a sharp look at the speaker.

A nod was the only answer. "Got down; thought at first as you do, Mr. Carr, that man was the same, and was on right track. Went to work in my own way; was a countryman just come into a snug bit of inheritance, looking out for a corner of land. Wormed out a bit here and a bit there; heard this from one, that from another; nearly got an interview with my Lord Hartledon himself, as candidate for one of his farms."

"Lord Hartledon was not at Calne, I think," interrupted Mr. Carr, speaking impulsively.

"Know it now; didn't then; and wanted, for own purposes, to get a sight of him and a word with him. Went to his place: saw a queer old creature in yellow gauze; saw my lord's wife, too, at a distance; fine woman; got intimate with butler, named Hedges; got intimate with two or three more; altogether turned the recent doings of Mr. Gorton inside out."

"Well?" said Mr. Carr, in his surprise.

"Care to hear 'em?" continued the detective, after a moment's pause; and a feeling crossed Mr. Carr, that if ever he had a deep man to deal with it was this one, in spite of his apparent simplicity. "Gorton went down on his errand for Kedge and Reck, writ in pocket for Mr. Elster; had boasted he knew him. Can't quite make out whether he did or not; any rate, served writ on Lord Hartledon by mistake. Lordship made a joke of it; took up the matter as a brother ought; wrote himself to Kedge and Reck to get it settled. Brothers quarrelled; day or two, and elder was drowned, nobody seems to know how. Gorton stopped on, against orders from Kimberly; said afterwards, by way of excuse, had been served with summons to attend inquest. Couldn't say much at inquest, or didn't; was asked if he witnessed accident; said 'No,' but some still think he did. Showed himself at Hartledon afterwards trying to get interview with new lord; new lord wouldn't see him, and butler turned him out. Gorton in a rage, went back to inn, got some drink, said he might be able to make his lordship see him yet; hinted at some secret, but too far gone to know what he said; began boasting of adventures in Australia. Loose man there, one Pike, took him in charge, and saw him off by rail for London."

"Yes?" said Mr. Carr, for the speaker had stopped.

"That's pretty near all as far as Gorton goes. Got a clue to an address in London, where he might be heard of: got it oddly, too; but that's no matter. Came up again and went to address; could learn nothing; tracked here, tracked there, both for Gordon and Gorton; found Gorton disappeared close upon time he was cast adrift by Kimberly. Not in London as far as can be traced; where gone, can't tell yet. So much done, summed up my experiences and came here today to state them."

"Proceed," said Mr. Carr.

The detective put his notebook in his pocket, and with his elbows still on the table, pressed his fingers together alternately as he stated his points, speaking less abruptly than before.

"My conclusion isthe Gordon you spoke to me about was the Gordon who led the mutiny on board the Morning Star; that he never, after that, came back to England; has never been heard of, in short, by any living soul in it. That the Gorton employed by Kedge and Reck was another man altogether. Neither is to be traced; the one may have found his grave in the sea years ago; the other has disappeared out of London life since last October, and I can't trace how or where."

Mr. Carr listened in silence. To reiterate that the two men were identical, would have been waste of time, since he could not avow how he knew it, or give the faintest clue. The detective himself had unconsciously furnished a proof.

"Will you tell me your grounds for believing them to be different men?" he asked.

"Nay," said the keen detective, "the shortest way would be for you to give me your grounds for thinking them to be the same."

"I cannot do it," said Mr. Carr. "It might involveno, I cannot do it."

"Well, I suspected so. I don't mind mentioning one or two on my side. The description of Gorton, as I had it from Kimberly, does not accord with that of Gordon as given me by his friend the surgeon. I wrote out the description of Gorton, and took it to him. 'Is this Gordon?' I asked. 'No, it is not,' said he; and I'm sure he spoke the truth."

"Gordon, on his return from Australia, might be a differentlooking man from the Gordon who went to it."

"And would be, no doubt. But see here: Gorton was not disguised; Gordon would not dare to be in London without being so; his head's not worth a day's purchase. Fancy his walking about with only one letter in his name altered! Rely upon it, Mr. Carr, you are mistaken; Gordon would no more dare come back and put his head into the lion's mouth than you'd jump into a fiery furnace. He couldn't land without being dropped upon: the man was no common offender, and we've kept our eyes open. And that's all," added the detective, after a pause. "Not very satisfactory, is it, Mr. Carr? But, such as it is, I think you may rely upon it, in spite of your own opinion. Meanwhile, I'll keep on the lookout for Gorton, and tell you if he turns up."

The conference was over, and Mr. Green took his departure. Thomas Carr saw him out himself, returned and sat down in a reverie.

"It's a curious tale," said Lord Hartledon.

"I'm thinking how the fact, now disclosed, of Gordon's being Gordon of the mutiny, affects you," remarked Mr. Carr.

"You believe him to be the same?"

"I see no reason to doubt it. It's not probable that two George Gordons should take their passage home in the Morning Star. Besides, it explains points that seemed incomprehensible. I could not understand why you were not troubled by this man, but rely upon it he has found it expedient to go into effectual hiding, and dare not yet come out of it. This fact is a very great hold upon him; and if he turns round on you, you may keep him in check with it. Only let me alight on him; I'll so frighten him as to cause him to ship himself off for life."

"I don't like that detective's having gone down to Calne," remarked Lord Hartledon.

Neither did Mr. Carr, especially if Gordon, or Gorton, should have become talkative, as there was reason to believe he had.

"Gordon is in England, and in hiding; probably in London, for there's no place where you may hide so effectually. One thing I am astonished at: that he should show himself openly as George Gorton."

"Look here, Carr," said Lord Hartledon, leaning forward; "I don't believe, in spite of you and the detective, that Gordon, our Gordon, was the one connected with the mutiny. I might possibly get a description of that man from Gum of Calne; for his son was coming home in the same shipwas one of those killed."

"Who's Gum of Calne?"

"The parish clerk, and a very respectable man. Mirrable, our housekeeper whom you have seen, is related to them. Gum went to Liverpool at the time, I know, and saw the remnant of the passengers those pirates had spared; he was sure to hear a full description of Gordon. If ever I visit Hartledon again I'll ask him."

"If ever you visit Hartledon again!" echoed Mr. Carr. "Unless you leave the countryas I advise you to doyou cannot help visiting Hartledon."

"Well, I would almost as soon be hanged!" cried Val. "And now, what do you want me for, and why have you kept me here?"

Mr. Carr drew his chair nearer to Lord Hartledon. They alone knew their own troubles, and sat talking long after the afternoon was over. Mr. Taylor came to the room; it was past his usual hour of departure.

"I suppose I can go, sir?"

"Not just yet," replied Mr. Carr.

Hartledon took out his watch, and wondered whether it had been galloping, when he saw how late it was. "You'll come home and dine with me, Carr?"

"I'll follow you, if you like," was the reply. "I have a matter or two to attend to first."

A few minutes more, and Lord Hartledon and his care went out. Mr. Carr called in his clerk.

"I want to know how you came to learn that the man I asked you about, Gordon, was employed by Kedge and Reck?"

"I heard it through a man named Druitt," was the ready answer. "Happening to ask himas I did several peoplewhether he knew any George Gordon, he at once said that a man of that name was at Kedge and Reck's, where Druitt himself had been temporarily employed."

"Ah," said Mr. Carr, remembering this same Druitt had been mentioned to him. "But the man was called Gorton, not Gordon. You must have caught up the wrong name, Taylor. Or perhaps he misunderstood you. That's all; you may go now."

The clerk departed. Mr. Carr took his hat and followed him down; but before joining Lord Hartledon he turned into the Temple Gardens, and strolled towards the river; a few moments of fresh airfresh to those hardworked denizens of close and crowded Londonseemed absolutely necessary to the barrister's heated brain.

He sat down on a bench facing the water, and bared his brow to the breeze. A cool head, his; never a cooler brought thought to bear upon perplexity; nevertheless it was not feeling very collected now. He could not reconcile sundry discrepancies in the trouble he was engaged in fathoming, and he saw no release whatever for Lord Hartledon.

"It has only complicated the affair," he said, as he watched the steamers up and down, "this calling in Green the detective, and the news he brings. Gordon the Gordon of the mutiny! I don't like it: the other Gordon, simple enough and not badhearted, was easy to deal with in comparison; this man, pirate, robber, murderer, will stand at nothing. We should have a hold on him, it's true, in his own crime; but what's to prevent his keeping himself out of the way, and selling Hartledon to another? Why he has not sold him yet, I can't think. Unless for some reason he is waiting his time."

He put on his hat and began to count the barges on the other side, to banish thought. But it would not be banished, and he fell into the train again.

"Mair's behaving well; with Christian kindness; but it's bad enough to be even in his power. There's something in Lord Hartledon he 'can't help loving,' he writes. Who can? Here am I, giving up circuitsuch a thing as never was heard ofcalling him friend still, and losing my rest at night for him! Poor Val! better he had been the one to die!"

"Please, sir, could you tell us the time?"

The spell was broken, and Mr. Carr took out his watch as he turned his eyes on a ragged urchin who had called to him from below.

The tide was down; and sundry Arabs were regaling their naked feet in the mud, sporting and shouting. The evening drew in earlier than they did, and the sun had already set.

Quitting the garden, Mr. Carr stepped into a hansom, and was conveyed to Grafton Street. He found Lord Hartledon knitting his brow over a letter.

"Maude is growing vexed in earnest," he began, looking up at Mr. Carr. "She insists upon knowing the reason that I do not go home to her."

"I don't wonder at it. You ought to do one of two things: go, or"

"Or what, Carr?"

"You know. Never go home again."

"I wish I was out of the world!" cried the unhappy man.

CHAPTER XXV.

AT HARTLEDON.

"Hartledon,

"I wonder what you think of yourself, Galloping about Rotten Row with women when your wife's dying. Of course it's not your fault that reports of your goingson reach her here oh dear no. You are a moddel husband you are, sending her down here out of the way that you may take your pleasure. Why did you marry her, nobody wanted you to she sits and mopes and weeps and she's going into the same way that her father went, you'll be glad no doubt to hear it it's what you're aiming at, once she is in Calne churchyard the field will be open for your Anne Ashton. I can tell you that if you've a spark of propper feeling you'll come down for its killing her,

"Your wicked mother,

"C. Kirton."

Lord Hartledon turned this letter about in his hand. He scarcely noticed the mistake at the conclusion: the dowager had doubtless intended to imply that he was wicked, and the slip of the pen in her temper went for nothing.

Galloping about Rotten Row with women!

Hartledon sent his thoughts back, endeavouring to recollect what could have given rise to this charge. One morning, after a sleepless night, when he had tossed and turned on his uneasy bed, and risen unrefreshed, he hired a horse, for he had none in town, and went for a long ride. Coming back he turned into Rotten Row. He could not tell why he did so, for such places, affected by the gay, emptyheaded votaries of fashion, were little consonant to his present state. He was barely in it when a lady's horse took fright: she was riding alone, with a groom following; Lord Hartledon gave her his assistance, led her horse until the animal was calm, and rode side by side with her to the end of the Row. He knew not who she was; scarcely noticed whether she was young or old; and had not given a remembrance to it since.

When your wife's dying! Accustomed to the strong expressions of the countessdowager, he passed that over. But, "going the same way that her father went;" he paused there, and tried to remember how her father did "go." All he could recollect now, indeed all he knew at the time, was, that Lord Kirton's last illness was reported to have been a lingering one.

Such missives as theseand the countessdowager favoured him with more than onecoupled with his own consciousness that he was not behaving to his wife as he ought, took him at length down to Hartledon. That his presence at the place so soon after his marriage was little short of an insult to Dr. Ashton's family, his sensitive feelings told him; but his duty to his wife was paramount, and he could not visit his sin upon her.

She was looking very ill; was lowspirited and hysterical; and when she caught sight of him she forgot her anger, and fell sobbing into his arms. The countessdowager had gone over to Garchester, and they had a few hours' peace together.

"You are not looking well, Maude!"

"I know I am not. Why do you stay away from me?"

"I could not help myself. Business has kept me in London."

"Have you been ill also? You look thin and worn."

"One does grow to look thin in heated London," he replied evasively, as he walked to the window, and stood there. "How is your brother, MaudeBob?"

"I don't want to talk about Bob yet; I have to talk to you," she said. "Percival, why did you practise that deceit upon me?"

"What deceit?"

"It was a downright falsehood; and made me look awfully foolish when I came here and spoke of it as a fact. That action."

Lord Hartledon made no reply. Here was one cause of his disinclination to meet his wifehaving to keep up the farce of Dr. Ashton's action. It seemed, however, that there would no longer be any farce to keep up. Had it exploded? He said nothing. Maude gazing at him from the sofa on which she sat, her dark eyes looking larger than of yore, with hollow circles round them, waited for his answer.

"I do not know what you mean, Maude."

"You do know. You sent me down here with a tale that the Ashtons had entered an action against you for breach of promisedamages, ten thousand pounds"

"Stay an instant, Maude. I did not 'send you down' with the tale. I particularly requested you to keep it private."

"Well, mamma drew it out of me unawares. She vexed me with her comments about your staying on in London, and it made me tell her why you had stayed. She ascertained from Dr. Ashton that there was not a word of truth in the story. Val, I betrayed it in your defence."

He stood at the window in silence, his lips compressed.

"I looked so foolish in the eyes of Dr. Ashton! The Sunday evening after I came down here I had a sort of halffaintingfit, coming home from church. He overtook me, and was very kind, and gave me his arm. I said a word to him; I could not help it; mamma had worried me on so; and I learned that no such action had ever been thought of. You had no right to subject me to the chance of such mortification. Why did you do so?"

Lord Hartledon came from the window and sat down near his wife, his elbow on the table. All he could do now was to make the best of it, and explain as near to the truth as he could.

"Maude, you must not expect full confidence on this subject, for I cannot give it you. When I found I had reason to believe that somesome legal proceedings were about to be instituted against me, just at the first intimation of the trouble, I thought it must emanate from Dr. Ashton. You took up the same idea yourself, and I did not contradict it, simply because I could not tell you the real truth"

"Yes," she interrupted. "It was the night that stranger called at our house, when you and Mr. Carr were closeted with him so long."

He could not deny it; but he had been thankful that she should forget the stranger and his visit. Maude waited.

"Then it was an action, but not brought by the Ashtons?" she resumed, finding he did not speak. "Mamma remarked that you were just the one to propose to halfadozen girls."

"It was not an action at all of that description; and I never proposed to any girl except Miss Ashton," he returned, nettled at the remark.

"Is it over?"

"Not quite;" and there was some hesitation in his tone. "Carr is settling it for me. I trust, Maude, you will never hear of it againthat it will never trouble you."

She sat looking at him with her wistful eyes.

"Won't you tell me its nature?"

"I cannot tell you, Maude, believe me. I am as candid with you as it is possible to be; but there are some things bestbest not spoken of. Maude," he repeated, rising impulsively and taking both her hands in his, "do you wish to earn my lovemy everlasting gratitude? Then you may do it by nevermore alluding to this."

It was a mistaken request; an altogether unwise emotion. Better that he had remained at the window, and drawled out a nonchalant denial. But he was apt to be as earnestly genuine on the surface as he was in reality. It set Lady Hartledon wondering; and she resolved to "bide her time."

"As you please, of course, Val. But why should it agitate you?"

"Many a little thing seems to agitate me now," he answered. "I have not felt well of late; perhaps that's the reason."

"I think you might have satisfied me a little better. I expect it is some enormous debt risen up against you."

Better she should think so! "I shall tide it over," he said aloud. "But indeed, Maude, I cannot bear for you delicate women to be brought into contact with these things; they are fit for us only. Think no more about it, and rely on me to keep trouble from you if it can be kept. Where's Bob? He is here, I suppose?"

"Bob's in his room. He is going into a way, I think. When he wrote and asked me if I would allow him to come here for a little change, the medical men saying he must have it, mamma sent a refusal by return of post; she had had enough of Bob, she said, when he was here before. But I quietly wrote a note myself, and Bob came. He looked ill, and gets worse instead of better."

"What do you mean by saying he is going into a way?" asked Lord Hartledon.

"Consumption, or something of that sort. Papa died of it. You are not angry with me for having Bob?"

"Angry! My dear Maude, the house is yours; and if poor Bob stayed with us for ever, I should welcome him as a brother. Every one likes Bob."

"Except mamma. She does not like invalids in the house, and has been saying you don't like it; that it was helping to keep you away. Poor Bob had out his portmanteau and began to pack; but I told him not to mind her; he was my guest, not hers."

"And mine also, you might have added."

He left the room, and went to the chamber Captain Kirton had occupied when he was at Hartledon in the spring. It was empty, evidently not being used; and Hartledon sent for Mirrable. She came, looking just as usual, wearing a darkgreen silk gown; for the twelvemonth had expired, and their mourning was over.

"Captain Kirton is in the small blue rooms facing south, my lord. They were warmer for him than these."

"Is he very ill, Mirrable?"

"Very, I think," was the answer. "Of course he may get better; but it does not look like it."

He was a tall, thin, handsome man, this young officera year or two older than Maude, whom he greatly resembled. Seated before a table, he was playing at that delectable game "solitaire;" and his eyes looked large and wild with surprise, and his cheeks became hectic, when Lord Hartledon entered.

"Bob, my dear fellow, I am glad to see you."

He took his hands and sat down, his face full of the concern he did not care to speak. Lady Hartledon had said he was going into a way; it was evidently the way of the grave.

He pushed the balls and the board from him, half ashamed of his employment. "To think you should catch me at this!" he exclaimed. "Maude brought it to me yesterday, thinking I was dull up here."

"As good that as anything else. I often think what a miserably restless invalid I should make. But now, what's wrong with you?"

"Well, I suppose it's the heart."

"The heart?"

"The doctors say so. No doubt they are right; those complaints are hereditary, and my father had it. I got quite unfit for duty, and they told me I must go away for change; so I wrote to Maude, and she took me in."

"Yes, yes; we are glad to have you, and must try and get you well, Bob."

"Ah, I can't tell about that. He died of it, you know."

"Who?"

"My father. He was ill for some time, and it wore him to a skeleton, so that people thought he was in a decline. If I could only get sufficiently well to go back to duty, I should not mind; it is so sad to give trouble in a strange house."

"In a strange house it might be, but it would be ungrateful to call this one strange," returned Lord Hartledon, smiling on him from his pleasant blue eyes. "We must get you to town and have good advice for you. I suppose Hillary comes up?"

"Everyday."

"Does he say it's heartdisease?"

"I believe he thinks it. It might be as much as his reputation is worth to say it in this house."

"How do you mean?"

"My mother won't have it said. She ignores the disease altogether, and will not allow it to be mentioned, or hinted at. It's bronchitis, she tells everyone; and of course bronchitis it must be. I did have a cough when I came here: my chest is not strong."

"But why should she ignore heartdisease?"

"There was a fear that Maude would be subject to it when she was a child. Should it be disclosed to her that it is my complaint, and were I to die of it, she might grow so alarmed for herself as to bring it on; and agitation, as we know, is often fatal in such cases."

Lord Hartledon sat in a sort of horror. Maude subject to heartdisease! when at any moment a certain fearful tale, of which he was the guilty centre, might be disclosed to her! Day by day, hour by hour, he lived in dread of this story's being brought to light. This little unexpected communication increased that dread fourfold.

"Have I shocked you?" asked Captain Kirton. "I may yet get the better of it."

"I believe I was thinking of Maude," answered Hartledon, slowly recovering from his stupor. "I never heardI had no idea that Maude's heart was not perfectly sound."

"And I don't know but that it is sound; it was only a fancy when she was a child, and there might have been no real grounds for it. My mother is full of crotchets on the subject of illness; and says she won't have anything about heartdisease put into Maude's head. She is right, of course, so far, in using precaution; so please remember that I am suffering from any disorder but that," concluded the young officer with a smile.

"How did yours first show itself?"

"I hardly know. I used to be subject to sudden attacks of faintness; but I am not sure that they had anything to do with the disease itself."

Just what Maude was becoming subject to! She had told him of a faintingfit in London; had told him of another now.

"I suppose the doctors warn you against sudden shocks, Bob?"

"More than against anything. I am not to agitate myself in the least; am not to run or jump, or fly into a temper. They would put me in a glass case, if they could."

"Well, we'll see what skill can do for you," said Hartledon, rousing himself. "I wonder if a warmer climate would be of service? You might have that without exertion, travelling slowly."

"Couldn't afford it," was the ingenuous answer. "I have forestalled my pay as it is."

Lord Hartledon smiled. Never a more generous disposition than his; and if money could save this poor Bob Kirton, he should not want it.

Walking forth, he strolled down the road towards Calne, intending to ask a question or two of the surgeon. Mr. Hillary was at home. His house was at this end of Calne, just past the Rectory and opposite the church, with a side view of Clerk Gum's. The door was

open, and Lord Hartledon strolled into the surgery unannounced, to the surprise of Mr. Hillary, who did not know he was at Calne.

The surgeon's opinion was not favourable. Captain Kirton had heartdisease beyond any doubt. His chest was weak also, the lungs not oversound; altogether, the Honourable Robert Kirton's might be called a bad life.

"Would a warmer climate do anything for him?" asked Lord Hartledon.

The surgeon shrugged his shoulders. "He would be better there for some things than here. On the whole it might temporarily benefit him."

"Then he shall go. And now, Hillary, I want to ask you something elseand you must answer me, mind. Captain Kirton tells me the fact of his having heartdisease is not mentioned in the house lest it should alarm Lady Hartledon, and develop the same in her. Is there any fear of this?"

"It is true that it's not spoken of; but I don't think there's any foundation for the fear."

"The old dowager's very fanciful!" cried Lord Hartledon, resentfully.

"A queer oldgirl," remarked the surgeon. "Can't help saying it, though she is your motherinlaw."

"I wish she was any one else's! She's as likely as not to let out something of this to Maude in her tantrums. But I don't believe a word of it; I never saw the least symptom of heartdisease in my wife."

"Nor I," said the doctor. "Of course I have not examined her; neither have I had much opportunity for ordinary observation."

"I wish you would contrive to get the latter. Come up and call often; make some excuse for seeing Lady Hartledon professionally, and watch her symptoms."

"I am seeing her professionally now; once or twice a week. She had one or two faintingfits after she came down, and called me in."

"Kirton says he used to have those faintingfits. Are they a symptom of heartdisease?"

"In Lady Hartledon I attribute them entirely to her present state of health. I assure you, I don't see the slightest cause for fear as regards your wife's heart. She is of a calm temperament too; as far as I can observe."

They stood talking for a minute at the door, when Lord Hartledon went out. Pike happened to pass on the other side of the road.

"He is here still, I see," remarked Hartledon.

"Oh dear, yes; and likely to be."

"I wonder how the fellow picks up a living?"

The surgeon did not answer. "Are you going to make a long stay with us?" he asked.

"A very short one. I suppose you have had no return of the fever?"

"Not any. Calne never was more healthy than it is now. As I said to Dr. Ashton yesterday, but for his own house I might put up my shutters and take a lengthened holiday."

"Who is ill at the Rectory? Mrs. Ashton?"

"Mrs. Ashton is not strong, but she's better than she was last year. I have been more concerned for Anne than for her."

"Is she ill?" cried Lord Hartledon, a spasm seizing his throat.

"Ailing. But it's an ailing I do not like."

"What's the cause?" he rejoined, feeling as if some other crime were about to be brought home to him.

"That's a question I never inquire into. I put it upon the air of the Rectory," added the surgeon in jesting tones, "and tell them they ought to go away for a time, but they have been away too much of late, they say. She's getting over it somewhat, and I take care that she goes out and takes exercise. What has it been? Well, a sort of inward fever, with flushed cheeks and unequal spirits. It takes time for these things to be got over, you know. The Rector has been anything but well, too; he is not the strong, healthy man he was."

"And all my work; my work!" cried Hartledon to himself, almost gnashing his teeth as he went back down the street. "What right had I to upset the happiness of that family? I wish it had pleased God to take me first! My father used to say that some men seem born into the world only to be a blight to it; it's what I have been, Heaven knows."

He knew only too well that Anne Ashton was suffering from the shock caused by his conduct. The love of these quiet, sensitive, refined natures, once awakened, is not given for a day, but for all time; it becomes a part of existence; and cannot be riven except by an effort that brings destruction to even future hope of happiness. Not even Mr. Hillary, not even Dr. and Mrs. Ashton, could discern the utter misery that was Anne's daily portion. She strove to conceal it all. She went about the house cheerfully, wore a smiling face when people were present, dressed well, laughed with their guests, went about the parish to rich and poor, and was altogether gay. Ah, do you know what it is, this assumption of gaiety when the heart is breaking?this dread fear lest those about you should detect the truth? Have you ever lived with this mask upon your face?which can only be thrown off at night in the privacy of your own chamber, when you may abandon yourself to your desolation, and pray heaven to take you or give you increased strength to live and bear? It may seem a light thing, this state of heart that I am telling you about; but it has killed both men and women, for all that; and killed them in silence.

Anne Ashton had never complained. She did everything she had been used to doing, was particular about all her duties; but a nervous cough attacked her, and her frame wasted, and her cheek grew hectic. Try as she would she could not eat: all she confessed to, when questioned by Mrs. Ashton, was "a pain in her throat;" and Mr. Hillary was called in. Anne laughed: there was nothing the matter with her, she said, and her throat was better; she had strained it perhaps. The doctor was a wise doctor; his professional visits were spent in gossip; and as to medicine, he sent her a tonic, and told her to take it or not as she pleased. Only time, he said to Mrs. Ashtonshe would be all right in time; the summer heat was making her languid.

The summer heat had nearly passed now, and perhaps some of the battle was passing with it. None knewlet me repeat itwhat that battle had been; none ever can know, unless they go through it themselves. In Miss Ashton's case there was a feature some are sparedher love had been knownand it increased the anguish tenfold. She would overcome it if she could only forget him; but it would take time; and she would come out of it an altogether different woman, her best hope in life gone, her heart dead.

"What brought him down here?" mentally questioned Mr. Hillary, in an explosion of wrath, as he watched his visitor down the street. "It will undo all I have been doing. He, and his wife too, might have had the grace to keep away for this year at least. I loved him once, with all his faults; but I should like to see him in the pillory now. It has told on him

also, if I'm any reader of looks. And now, Miss Anne, you go off from Calne tomorrow an I can prevail. I only hope you won't come across him in the meantime."

CHAPTER XXVI.

UNDER THE TREES.

It was the same noblelooking man Calne had ever known, as he went down the road, throwing a greeting to one and another. Lord Hartledon was not a whit less attractive than Val Elster, who had won golden opinions from all. None would have believed that the cowardly monster Fear was for ever feasting upon his heart.

He came to a standstill opposite the clerk's house, looked at it for a moment, as if deliberating whether he should enter, and crossed the road. The shades of evening had begun to fall whilst he talked with the surgeon. As he advanced up the clerk's garden, some one came out of the house with a rush and ran against him.

"Take care," he lazily said.

The girlit was no other than Miss Rebecca Jonesshrank away when she recognized her antagonist. Flying through the gate she rapidly disappeared up the street. Lord Hartledon reached the house, and made his way in without ceremony. At a table in the little parlour sat the clerk's wife, presiding at a solitary teatable by the light of a candle.

"How are you, Mrs. Gum?"

She had not heard him enter, and started at the salutation. Lord Hartledon laughed.

"Don't take me for a housebreaker. Your frontdoor was open, and I came in without knocking. Is your husband at home?"

What with shaking and curtseying, Mrs. Gum could scarcely answer. It was surprising how a little shock of this sort, or indeed of any sort, would upset her. Gum was away on some business or other, she repliedwhich caused their teahour to be delayedbut she expected him in every moment. Would his lordship please to wait in the best parlour, she asked, taking the candle to marshal him into the state sittingroom.

No; his lordship would not go into the best parlour; he would wait two or three minutes where he was, provided she did not disturb herself, and went on with her tea.

Mrs. Gum dusted a large oldfashioned oak chair with her apron; but he perched himself on one of its elbows.

"And now go on with your tea, Mrs. Gum, and I'll look on with all the envy of a thirsty man."

Mrs. Gum glanced up tremblingly. Might she dare offer his lordship a cup? She wouldn't make so bold but tea was refreshing to a parched throat.

"And mine's always parched," he returned. "I'll drink some with you, and thank you for it. It won't be the first time, will it?"

"Always parched!" remarked Mrs. Gum. "Maybe you've a touch of fever, my lord. Many folk get it at the close of summer."

Lord Hartledon sat on, and drank his tea. He said well that he was always thirsty, though Mrs. Gum's expression was the better one. That timid matron, overcome by the honour accorded her, sat on the edge of her chair, cup in hand.

"I want to ask your husband if he can give me a description of the man who was concerned in that wretched mutiny on board the Morning Star," said Lord Hartledon, somewhat abruptly. "I mean the ringleader, Gordon. WhyWhat's the matter?"

Mrs. Gum had jumped up from her chair and began looking about the room. The cat, or something else, had "rubbed against her legs."

No cat could be found, and she sat down again, her teeth chattering. Lord Hartledon came to the conclusion that she was only fit for a lunatic asylum. Why did she keep a cat, if its fancied caresses were to terrify her like that?

"It was said, you knowat least it has been always assumedthat Gordon did not come back to England," he continued, speaking openly of his business, where a more prudent man would have kept his lips closed. "But I have reason to believe that he did come back, Mrs. Gum; and I want to find him."

Mrs. Gum wiped her face, covered with drops of emotion.

"Gordon never did come back, I am sure, sir," she said, forgetting all about titles in her trepidation.

"You don't know that he did not. You may think it; the public may think it; what's of more moment to Gordon, the police may think it: but you can't know it. I know he did."

"My lord, he did not; I couldI almost think I could be upon my oath he did not," she answered, gazing at Lord Hartledon with frightened eyes and white lips, which, to say the truth, rather puzzled him as he gazed back from his perch.

"Will you tell me why you assert so confidently that Gordon did not come back?"

She could not tell, and she knew she could not.

"I can't bear to hear him spoken of, my lord," she said. "Hewe look upon him as my poor boy's murderer," she broke off, with a sob; "and it is not likely that I could."

Not very logical; but Lord Hartledon allowed for confusion of ideas following on distress of mind.

"I don't like to speak about him any more than you can like to hear," he said kindly. "Indeed I am sorry to have grieved you; but if the man is in London, and can be traced"

"In London!" she interrupted.

"He was in London last autumn, as I believeliving there."

An expression of relief passed over her features that was quite perceptible to Lord Hartledon.

"I should not like to hear of his coming near us," she sighed, dropping her voice to a whisper. "London: that's pretty far off."

"I suppose you are anxious to bring him to justice, Mrs. Gum?"

"No, sir, not now; neither me nor Gum," shaking her head. "Time was, sirmy lordthat I'd have walked barefoot to see him hanged; but the years have gone by; and if sorrow's not dead, it's less keen, and we'd be thankful to let the past rest in peace. Oh, my lord, don't rake him up again!"

The wild, imploring accents quite startled Lord Hartledon.

"You need not fear," he said, after a pause. "I do not care to see Gordon hanged either; and though I want to trace his present abodeif it can be tracedit is not with a view to injuring him."

"But we don't know his abode, my lord," she rejoined in faint remonstrance.

"I did not suppose you knew it. All I want to ask your husband is, to give me a description of Gordon. I wish to see if it tallies withwith some one I once knew," he cautiously concluded. "Perhaps you remember what the man was said to be like?"

She put her fingers up to her brow, leaning her elbow on the table. He could not help observing how the hand shook.

"I think it was said that he had red hair," she began, after a long pause; "and wastall, was it?either tall or short; one of the two. And his eyeshis eyes were dark eyes, either brown or blue."

Lord Hartledon could not avoid a smile. "That's no description at all."

"My memory is not overgood, my lord: I read his description in the handbills offering the reward; and that's some time ago now."

"The handbills!to be sure!" interrupted Lord Hartledon, springing from his perch. "I never thought of them; they'll give me the best description possible. Do you know where"

The conference was interrupted by the clerk. He came in with a large book in his hand; and a large dog, which belonged to a friend, and had followed him home. For a minute or two there was only commotion, for the dog was leaping and making friends with every one. Lord Hartledon then said a few words of explanation, and the quiet demeanour of the clerk, as he calmly listened, was in marked contrast to his wife's nervous agitation.

"Might I inquire your lordship's reasons for thinking that Gordon came back?" he quietly asked, when Lord Hartledon had ceased.

"I cannot give them in detail, Gum. That he did come back, there is no doubt about whatever, though how he succeeded in eluding the vigilance of the police, who were watching for him, is curious. His coming back, however, is not the question: I thought you might be able to give me a close description of him. You went to Liverpool when the unfortunate passengers arrived there."

But Clerk Gum was unable to give any satisfactory response. No doubt he had heard enough of what Gordon was like at the time, he observed, but it had passed out of his memory. A fair man, he thought he was described, with light hair. He had heard nothing

of Gordon since; didn't want to, if his lordship would excuse his saying it; firmly believed he was at the bottom of the sea.

Patient, respectful, apparently candid, he spoke, attending his guest, hat in hand, to the outer gate, when it pleased him to depart. But, take it for all in all, there remained a certain doubtful feeling in Lord Hartledon's mind regarding the interview; for some subtle discernment had whispered to him that both Gum and his wife could have given him the description of Gordon, and would not do so.

He turned slowly towards home, thinking of this. As he passed the waste ground and Pike's shed, he cast his eyes towards it; a curl of smoke was ascending from the extemporized chimney, still discernible in the twilight. It occurred to Lord Hartledon that this man, who had the character of being so lawless, had been rather suspiciously intimate with the man Gorton. Not that the intimacy in itself was suspicious; birds of a feather flocked together; but the most simple and natural thing connected with Gorton would have borne suspicion to Hartledon's mind now.

He had barely passed the gate when some shouting arose in the road behind him. A man, driving a cart recklessly, had almost come in contact with another cart, and some hard language ensued. Lord Hartledon turned his head quickly, and just caught Mr. Pike's head, thrust a little over the top of the gate, watching him. Pike must have crouched down when Lord Hartledon passed. He went back at once; and Pike put a bold face on the matter, and stood up.

"So you occupy your palace still, Pike?"

"Such as it is. Yes."

"I halfexpected to find that Mr. Marris had turned you from it," continued Lord Hartledon, alluding to his steward.

"He wouldn't do it, I expect, without your lordship's orders; and I don't fancy you'll give 'em," was the free answer.

"I think my brother would have given them, had he lived."

"But he didn't live," rejoined Pike. "He wasn't let live."

"What do you mean?" asked Lord Hartledon, mystified by the words.

Pike ignored the question. "'Twas nearly a smash," he said, looking at the two carts now proceeding on their different ways. "That cart of Floyd's is always in hot water; the man drinks; Floyd turned him off once."

The miller's cart was jogging up the road towards home, under convoy of the offending driver; the boy, David Ripper, sitting inside on some empty sacks, and looking over the board behind: looking very hard indeed, as it seemed, in their direction. Mr. Pike appropriated the gaze.

"Yes, you may stare, young Rip!" he apostrophized, as if the boy could hear him; "but you won't stare yourself out of my hands. You're the biggest liar in Calne, but you don't mislead me."

"Pike, when you made acquaintance with that man Gortonyou remember him?" broke off Lord Hartledon.

"Yes, I do," said Pike emphatically.

"Did he make you acquainted with any of his private affairs?his past history?"

"Not a word," answered Pike, looking still after the cart and the boy.

"Were those fine whiskers of his false? that red hair?"

Pike turned his head quickly. The question had aroused him.

"False hair and whiskers! I never knew it was the fashion to wear them."

"It may be convenient sometimes, even if not the fashion," observed Lord Hartledon, his tone full of cynical meaning; and Mr. Pike surreptitiously peered at him with his small light eyes.

"If Gorton's hair was false, I never noticed it, that's all; I never saw him without a hat, that I remember, except in that inquestroom."

"Had he been to Australia?"

Pike paused to take another surreptitious gaze.

"Can't say, my lord. Never heard."

"Was his name Gorton, or Gordon? Come, Pike," continued Lord Hartledon, goodhumouredly, "there's a sort of mutual alliance between you and me; you did me a service once unasked, and I allow you to live free and undisturbed on my ground. I think you do know something of this man; it is a fancy I have taken up."

"I never knew his name was anything but Gorton," said Pike carelessly; "never heard it nor thought it."

"Did you happen to hear him ever speak of that mutiny on board the Australian ship Morning Star? You have heard of it, I daresay: a George Gordon was the ringleader."

If ever the cool impudence was suddenly taken out of a man, this question seemed to take it out of Pike. He did not reply for some time; and when he did, it was in low and humble tones.

"My lord, I hope you'll pardon my rough thoughts and ways, which haven't been used to such as youand the sight of that boy put me up, for reasons of my own. As to GortonI never did hear him speak of the thing you mention. His name's Gorton, and nothing else, as far as I know; and his hair's his own, for all I ever saw."

"He did not give you his confidence, then?"

"No, never. Not about himself nor anything else, past or present."

"And did not let a word slip? As tofor instance, as to his having been a passenger on board the Morning Star at the time of the mutiny?"

Pike had moved away a step, and stood with his arms on the hurdles, his head bent on them, his face turned from Lord Hartledon.

"Gorton said nothing to me. As to that mutinyI think I read something about it in the newspapers, but I forget what. I was just getting up from some weeks of rheumatic fever at the time; I'd caught it working in the fields; and news don't leave much impression in illness. Gorton never spoke of it to me. I never heard him say who or what he was; and I couldn't speak more truly if your lordship offered to give me the shed as a bribe."

"Do you know where Gorton might be found at present?"

"I swear before Heaven that I know nothing of the man, and have never heard of him since he went away," cried Pike, with a burst of either fear or passion. "He was a stranger to me when he came, and he was a stranger when he left. I found out the little

game he had come about, and saved your lordship from his clutches, which he doesn't know to this day. I know nothing else about him at all."

"Well, good evening, Pike. You need not put yourself out for nothing."

He walked away, taking leave of the man as civilly as though he had been a respectable member of society. It was not in Val's nature to show discourtesy to any living being. Why Pike should have shrunk from the questions he could not tell; but that he did shrink was evident; perhaps from a surly dislike to being questioned at all; but on the whole Lord Hartledon thought he had spoken the truth as to knowing nothing about Gorton.

Crossing the road, he turned into the fieldpath near the Rectory; it was a little nearer than the roadway, and he was in a hurry, for he had not thought to ask at what hour his wife dined, and might be keeping her waiting.

Who was this Pike, he wondered as he went along; as he had wondered before now. When the man was off his guard, the roughness of his speech and demeanour was not so conspicuous; and the tone assumed a certain refinement that seemed to say he had some time been in civilized society. Again, how did he live? A tale was told in Calne of Pike's having been disturbed at supper one night by a parcel of rude boys, who had seen him seated at a luxurious table; hot steak and pudding before him. They were not believed, certainly; but still Pike must live; and how did he find the means to do so? Why did he live there at all? what had caused him to come to Calne? Who

These reflections might have lasted all the way home but for an interruption that drove every thought out of Lord Hartledon's mind, and sent the heart's blood coursing swiftly through his veins. Turning a corner of the dark winding path, he came suddenly upon a lady seated on a bench, so close to the narrow path that he almost touched her in passing. She seemed to have sat down for a moment to do something to her hat, which was lying in her lap, her hands busied with it.

A faint cry escaped her, and she rose up. It was caused partly by emotion, partly by surprise at seeing him, for she did not know he was within a hundred miles of the place. And very probably she would have liked to box her own ears for showing any. The hat fell from her knees as she rose, and both stooped for it.

"Forgive me," he said. "I fear I have startled you."

"I am waiting for papa," she answered, in hasty apology for being found there. And Lord Hartledon, casting his eyes some considerable distance ahead, discerned the indistinct

forms of two persons talking together. He understood the situation at once. Dr. Ashton and his daughter had been to the cottages; and the doctor had halted on their return to speak to a daylabourer going home from his work, Anne walking slowly on.

And there they stood face to face, Anne Ashton and her deceitful lover! How their hearts beat to pain, how utterly oblivious they were of everything in life save each other's presence, how tumultuously confused were mind and manner, both might remember afterwards, but certainly were not conscious of then. It was a little glimpse of Eden. A corner of the dark curtain thrown between them had been raised, and so unexpectedly that for the moment nothing else was discernible in the dazzling light.

Forget! Not in that instant of sweet confusion, during which nothing seemed more real than a dream. He was the husband of another; she was parted from him for ever; and neither was capable of deliberate thought or act that could intrench on the position, or tend to return, even momentarily, to the past. And yet there they stood with beating hearts, and eyes that betrayed their own talethat the marriage and the parting were in one sense but a hollow mockery, and their love was indelible as of old.

Each had been "forgetting" to the utmost of the poor power within, in accordance with the high principles enshrined in either heart. Yet what a mockery that forgetting seemed, now that it was laid before them naked and bare! The heart turning sick to faintness at the mere sight of each other, the hands trembling at the mutual touch, the wistful eyes shining with a glance that too surely spoke of undying love!

But not a word of this was spoken. However true their hearts might be, there was no fear of the tongue following up the error. Lord Hartledon would no more have allowed himself to speak than she to listen. Neither had the hands met in ordinary salutation; it was only when he resigned the hat to her that the fingers touched: a touch light, transient, almost imperceptible; nevertheless it sent a thrill through the whole frame. Not exactly knowing what to do in her confusion, Miss Ashton sat down on the bench again and put her hat on.

"I must say a word to you before I go on my way," said Lord Hartledon. "I have been wishing for such a meeting as this ever since I saw you at Versailles; and indeed I think I wished for nothing else before it. When you think of me as one utterly heartless"

"Stay, Lord Hartledon," she interrupted, with white lips. "I cannot listen to you. You must be aware that I cannot, and ought not. What are you thinking about?"

"I know that I have forfeited all right to ask you; that it is an unpardonable intrusion my presuming even to address you. Well, perhaps, you are right," he added, after a

moment's pause; "it may be better that I should not say what I was hoping to say. It cannot mend existing things; it cannot undo the past. I dare not ask your forgiveness: it would seem too much like an insult; nevertheless, I would rather have it than any earthly gift. Fare you well, Anne! I shall sometimes hear of your happiness."

"Have you been ill?" she asked in a kindly impulse, noticing his altered looks in that first calm moment.

"Nonot as the world counts illness. If remorse and shame and repentance can be called illness, I have my share. Ill deeds of more kinds than one are coming home to me. Anne," he added in a hoarse whisper; his face telling of emotion, "if there is one illumined corner in my heart, where all else is very dark, it is caused by thankfulness to Heaven that you were spared."

"Spared!" she echoed, in wonder, so completely awed by his strange manner as to forget her reserve.

"Spared the linking of your name with mine. I thank God for it, for your sake, night and day. Had trouble fallen on you through me, I don't think I could have survived it. May you be shielded from all such for ever!"

He turned abruptly away, and she looked after him, her heart beating a great deal faster than it ought to have done.

That she was his best and dearest love, in spite of his marriage, it was impossible not to see; and she strove to think him very wicked for it, and her cheek was red with a feeling that seemed akin to shame. Buttrouble?thankful for her sake, night and day, that her name was not linked with his? He must allude to debt, she supposed: some of those old embarrassments had augmented themselves into burdens too heavy to be safely borne.

The Rector was coming on now at a swift pace. He looked keenly at Lord Hartledon; looked twice, as if in surprise. A flush rose to Val's sensitive face as he passed, and lifted his hat. The Rector, dark and proud, condescended to return the courtesy: and the meeting was over.

Toiling across Lord Hartledon's path was the labourer to whom the Rector had been speaking. He had an empty bottle slung over his shoulder, and carried a sickle. The man's day's work was over, and had left fatigue behind it.

"Goodnight to your lordship!"

"Is it you, Ripper?"

He was the father of the young gentleman in the cart, whom Mr. Pike had not long before treated to his opinion: young David Ripper, the miller's boy. Old Ripper, a talkative, discontented man, stopped and ventured to enter on his grievances. His wife had been pledging things to pay for a fine gown she had bought; his two girls were down with measles; his son, young Rip, plagued his life out.

"How does he plague your life out?" asked Lord Hartledon, when he had listened patiently.

"Saying he'll go off and enlist for a soldier, my lord; he's saying it always: and means it too, only he's overyoung for't."

"Overyoung for it; I should think so. Why, he's not much more than a child. Our sergeants don't enlist little boys."

"Sometimes he says he'll drown himself by way of a change," returned old Ripper.

"Oh, does he? Folk who say it never do it. I should whip it out of him."

"He's never been the same since the lord's death that time. He's always frightened: gets fancying things, and saying sometimes he sees his shadder."

"Whose shadow?"

"His'n: the late lord's."

"Why does he fancy that?" came the question, after a perceptible pause.

Old Ripper shook his head. It was beyond his ken, he said. "There be only two things he's afeared of in life," continued the man, who, though generally called old Ripper, was not above fiveandthirty. "The one's that wild man Pike; t'other's the shadder. He'd run ten mile sooner than see either."

"Does Pike annoy the boy?"

"Never spoke to him, as I knows on, my lord. Afore that drowning of his lordship last year, Davy was the boldest rip going," added the man, who had long since fallen into the epithet popularly applied to his son. "Since then he don't dare say his soul's his own. We had him laid up before the winter, and I know 'twas nothing but fear."

Lord Hartledon could not make much of the story, and had no time to linger. Administering a word of general encouragement, he continued his way, his thoughts going back to the interview with Anne Ashton, a line or two of Longfellow's "Fire of Driftwood" rising up in his mind

"Of what had been and might have been,
And who was changed, and who was dead."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A TÊTEÀTÊTE BREAKFAST.

The DowagerCountess of Kirton stood in the sunny breakfastroom at Hartledon, surveying the wellspread table with complacency; for it appeared to be rather more elaborately set out than usual, and no one loved good cheer better than she. When she saw two cups and saucers on the cloth instead of one, it occurred to her that Maude must, by caprice, be coming down, which she had not done of late. The dowager had arrived at midnight from Garchester, in consequence of having missed the earlier train, and found nearly all the house in retirement. She was in a furious humour, and no one had told her of the arrival of her soninlaw; no one ever did tell her any more than they were obliged to do; for she was not held in estimation at Hartledon.

"Potted tongue," she exclaimed, dodging round the table, and lifting various covers. "Raised pie; I wonder what's in it? And what's that stuff in jelly? It looks delicious. This is the result of the blowingup I gave Hedges the other day; nothing like finding fault. Hot dishes too. I suppose Maude gave out that she should be down this morning. All rubbish, fancying herself ill: she's as well as I am, but gives way like a simAaaah!"

The exclamation was caused by the unexpected vision of Lord Hartledon.

"How are you, Lady Kirton?"

"Where on earth did you spring from?"

"From my room."

"What's the good of your appearing before people like a ghost, Hartledon? When did you arrive?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"And time you did, I think, with your poor wife fretting herself to death about you. How is she this morning?"

"Very well."

"Ugh!" You must imagine this sound as something between a grunt and a groan, that the estimable lady gave vent to whenever put out. It is not capable of being written. "You

might have sent word you were coming. I should think you frightened your wife to death."

"Not quite."

He walked across the room and rang the bell. Hedges appeared. It had been the dowager's pleasure that no one else should serve her at that mealperhaps on account of her peculiarities of costume.

"Will you be good enough to pour out the coffee in Maude's place today, Lady Kirton? She has promised to be down another morning."

It was making her so entirely and intentionally a guest, as she thought, that Lady Kirton did not like it. Not only did she fully intend Hartledon House to be her home, but she meant to be its one ruling power. Keep Maude just now to her invalid fancies, and later to her gay life, and there would be little fear of her asserting very much authority.

"Are you in the habit of serving this sort of breakfast, Hedges?" asked Lord Hartledon; for the board looked almost like an elaborate dinner.

"We have made some difference, my lord, this morning."

"For me, I suppose. You need not do so in future. I have got out of the habit of taking breakfast; and in any case I don't want this unnecessary display. Captain Kirton gets up later, I presume."

"He's hardly ever up before eleven," said Hedges. "But he makes a good breakfast, my lord."

"That's right. Tempt him with any delicacy you can devise. He wants strength."

The dowager was fuming. "Don't you think I'm capable of regulating these things, Hartledon, I'd beg leave to ask?"

"No doubt. I beg you will make yourself at home whilst you stay with us. Some tea, Hedges."

She could have thrown the coffeepot at him. There was incipient defiance in his every movement; latent war in his tones. He was no longer the puppet he had been; that day had gone by for ever.

Perhaps Val could not himself have explained the feeling that was this morning at work within him. It was the first time he and the dowager had met since the marriage, and she brought before him all too prominently the illomened past: her unjustifiable scheminghis own miserable weakness. If ever Lord Hartledon felt shame and repentance for his weak yielding, he felt it nowfelt it in all its bitterness; and something very like rage against the dowager was bubbling up in his spirit, which he had some trouble to suppress.

He did suppress it, however, though it rendered him less courteous than usual; and the meal proceeded partly in silence; an interchanged word, civil on the surface, passing now and then. The dowager thoroughly entered into her breakfast, and had little leisure for anything else.

"What makes you take nothing?" she asked, perceiving at length that he had only a piece of toast on his plate, and was playing with that.

"I have no appetite."

"Have you left off taking breakfast?"

"To a great extent."

"What's the matter with you?"

Lord Hartledon slightly raised his eyebrows. "One can't eat much in the heat of summer."

"Heat of summer! it's nothing more than autumn now. And you are as thin as a weasel. Try some of that excellent raised pie."

"Pray let my appetite alone, Lady Kirton. If I wanted anything I should take it."

"Let you alone! yes, of course! You don't want it noticed that you are out of sorts," snapped the dowager. "Oh, I know the signs. You've been raking about Londonthat's what you've been at."

The "raking about London" presented so complete a contrast to the lonely life he had really passed, that Hartledon smiled in very bitterness. And the smile incensed the dowager, for she misunderstood it.

"It's early days to begin! I don't think you ought to have married Maude."

"I don't think I ought."

She did not expect the rejoinder, and dropped her knife and fork. "Why did you marry her?"

"Perhaps you can tell that better than I."

The countessdowager pushed up her hair.

"Are you going to throw off the mask outright, and become a bad husband as well as a neglectful one?"

Val rose from his seat and went to the window, which opened to the ground. He did not wish to quarrel with her if he could help it. Lady Kirton raised her voice.

"Staying away, as you have, in London, and leaving Maude here to pine alone."

"Business kept me in London."

"I dare say it did!" cried the wrathful dowager. "If Maude died of ennui, you wouldn't care. She can't go about much herself just now, poor thing! I do wish Edward had lived."

"I wish he had, with all my heart!" came the answer; and the tone struck surprise on the dowager's earit was so full of pain. "Maude's coming to Hartledon without me was her own doing," he remarked. "I wished her not to come."

"I dare say you did, as her heart was set upon it. The fact of her wishing to do a thing would be the signal for your opposing it; I've gathered that much. My advice to Maude is, to assert her own will, irrespective of yours."

"Don't you think, Lady Kirton, that it may be as well if you let me and my wife alone? We shall get along, no doubt, without interference; with interference we might not do so."

What with one thing and another, the dowager's temper was inflammable that morning; and when it reached that undesirable state she was apt to say pretty free things, even for her.

"Edward would have made her the better husband."

"But she didn't like him, you know!" he returned, his eyes flashing with the remembrance of an old thought; and the countessdowager took the sentence literally, and not ironically.

"Not like him. If you had had any eyes as Val Elster, you'd have seen whether she liked him or not. She was dying for himnot for you."

He made no reply. It was only what he had suspected, in a halfdoubting sort of way, at the time. A little spaniel, belonging to one of the gardeners, ran up and licked his hand.

"The time that I had of it!" continued the dowager. "But for me, Maude never would have been forced into having you. And she shouldn't have had you if I'd thought you were going to turn out like this."

He wheeled round and faced her; his pale face working with emotion, but his voice subdued to calmness. Lady Kirton's last words halted, for his look startled even her in its resolute sternness.

"To what end are you saying this, madam? You know perfectly well that you almost moved heaven and earth to get me: you, I say; I prefer to leave my wife's name out of this: and I fell into the snare. I have not complained of my bargain; so far as I know, Maude has not done so: but if it be otherwiseif she and you repent of the union, I am willing to dissolve it, as far as it can be dissolved, and to institute measures for living apart."

Never, never had she suspected it would come to this. She sat staring at him, her eyes round, her mouth open: scarcely believing the calm resolute man before her could be the once vacillating Val Elster.

"Listen whilst I speak a word of truth," he said, his eyes bent on her with a strange fire that, if it told of undisguised earnestness, told also of inward fever. "I married your daughter, and I am ready and willing to do my duty by her in all honour, as I have done it since the day of the marriage. Whatever my follies may have been as a young man, I am at least incapable of wronging my wife as a married one. She has had no cause to complain of want of affection, but"

"Oh, what a hypocrite!" interrupted the dowager, with a shriek. "And all the time you've left her here neglected, while you were taking your amusement in London! You've been dinnergiving and Richmondgoing, and theatrefrequenting, and cardplaying, and racehorsingand I shouldn't wonder but you've been cockfighting, and a hundred other things as disreputable, and have come down here worn to a skeleton!"

"But if she is discontented, if she does not care for me, as you would seem to intimate," he resumed, passing over the attack without notice; "in short, if Maude would be happier without me, I am quite willing, as I have just said, to relieve her of her distasteful husband."

"Of all the wicked plotters, you must be the worst! My darling unoffending Maude! A divorce for her!"

"We are neither of us eligible for a divorce," he coolly rejoined. "A separation alone is open to us, and that an amicable one. Should it come to it, every possible provision can be made for your daughter's comfort; she shall retain this home; she shall have, if she wishes, a townhouse; I will deny her nothing."

Lady Kirton rubbed her face carefully with her handkerchief. Not until this moment had she believed him to be in earnest, and the conviction frightened her.

"Why do you wish to separate from her?" she asked, in a subdued tone.

"I do not wish it. I said I was willing to do so if she wished it. You have been taking pains to convince me that Maude's love was not mine, that she was only forced into the marriage with me. Should this have been the case, I must be distasteful to her still; an encumbrance she may wish to get rid of."

The countessdowager had overshot her mark, and saw it.

"Oh well! Perhaps I was mistaken about the past," she said, staring at him very hard, and in a sort of defiance. "Maude was always very close. If you said anything about separation now, I dare say it would kill her. My belief is, she does care for you, and a great deal more than you deserve."

"It may be better to ascertain the truth from Maude"

"You won't say a syllable to her!" cried the dowager, starting up in terror. "She'd never forgive me; she'd turn me out of the house. Hartledon, promise you won't say a word to her."

He stood back against the window, never speaking.

"She does love you; but I thought I'd frighten you, for you had no right to send Maude home alone; and it made me very cross, because I saw how she felt it. Separation indeed! What can you be thinking of?"

He was thinking of a great deal, no doubt; and his thoughts were as bitter as they could well be. He did not wish to separate; come what might, he felt his place should be by his wife's side as long as circumstances permitted it.

"Let me give you a word of warning, Lady Kirton. I and my wife will be happy enough together, I daresay, if we are allowed to be; but the style of conversation you have just adopted to me will not conduce to it; it might retaliate on Maude, you see. Do not again attempt it."

"How you have changed!" was her involuntary remark.

"Yes; I am not the yielding boy I was. And now I wish to speak of your son. He seems very ill."

"A troublesome intruding fellow, why can't he keep his ailments to his own barracks?" was the wrathful rejoinder. "I told Maude I wouldn't have him here, and what does she do but write off and tell him to come! I don't like sick folk about me, and never did. What do you want?"

The last question was addressed to Hedges, who had come in unsummoned. It was only a letter for his master. Lord Hartledon took it as a welcome interruption, went outside, and sat down on a gardenseat at a distance. How he hated the style of attack just made on him; the style of the dowager altogether! He asked himself in what manner he could avoid this for the future. It was a debasing, lowering occurrence, and he felt sure that it could hardly have taken place in his servants' hall. But he was glad he had said what he did about the separation. It might grieve him to part from his wife, but Mr. Carr had warned him that he ought to do it. Certainly, if she disliked him so very muchif she forced it upon himwhy, then, it would be an easier task; but he felt sure she did not dislike him. If she had done so before marriage, she had learnt to like him now; and he believed that the bare mention of parting would shock her; and sohis duty seemed to lie in remaining by her side.

He held the letter in his hand for some minutes before he opened it. The handwriting warned him that it was from Mr. Carr, and he knew that no pleasant news could be in it. In fact, he had placed himself in so unsatisfactory a position as to render anything but bad news next door to an impossibility.

It contained only a few linesa word of caution Mr. Carr had forgotten to speak when he took leave of Lord Hartledon the previous morning. "Let me advise you not to say anything to those peopleGum, I think the name isabout G.G. It might not be altogether prudent for you to do so. Should you remain any time at Hartledon, I will come down for a few days and question for myself."

"I've done it already," thought Val, as he folded the letter and returned it to his pocket. "As to my staying any time at Hartledonnot if I know it."

Looking up at the sound of footsteps, he saw Hedges approaching. Never free from a certain apprehension when any unexpected interruption occurredan apprehension that turned his heart sick, and set his pulses beatinghe waited, outwardly very calm.

"Floyd has called, my lord, and is asking to see you. He seems ratherrather concerned and put out. I think it's something aboutabout the death last summer."

Hedges hardly knew how to frame his words, and Lord Hartledon stared at him.

"Floyd can come to me here," he said.

The miller soon made his appearance, carrying a small case half purse, half pocketbook, in his hand, made of Russian leather, with rims of gold. Val knew it in a moment, in spite of its marks of defacement.

"Do you recognize it, my lord?" asked the miller.

"Yes, I do," replied Lord Hartledon. "It belonged to my brother."

"I thought so," returned the miller. "On the very day before that unfortunate race last year, his lordship was talking to me, and had this in his hand. I felt sure it was the same the moment I saw it."

"He had it with him the day of the race," observed Lord Hartledon. "Mr. Carteret said he saw it lying in the boat when they started. We always thought it had been lost in the river. Where did you find it?"

"Well, it's very odd, my lord, but I found it buried."

"Buried!"

"Buried in the ground, not far from the river, alongside the path that leads from where his lordship was found to Hartledon. I was getting up some dandelion roots for my wife this morning early, and dug up this close to one. There's where the knife touched it. My lord," added the miller, "I beg to say that I have not opened it. I wiped it, wrapped it in paper, and said nothing to anybody, but came here with it as soon as I thought you'd be up. That lad of mine, Ripper, said last night you were at Hartledon."

The miller was quite honest; and Lord Hartledon knew that when he said he had not opened it, he had not done so. It still contained some small memoranda in his brother's writing, but no money; and this was noticeable, since it was quite certain to have had money in it on that day.

"Those who buried it might have taken it out," he observed, following the bent of his thoughts.

"But who did bury it; and where did they find it, to allow of their burying it?" questioned the miller. "How did they come by it?that's the odd thing. I am certain it was not in the skiff, for I searched that over myself."

Lord Hartledon said little. He could not understand it; and the incident, with the slips of paper, was bringing his brother all too palpably before him. One of them had concerned himself, though in what manner he would never know now. It ran as follows: "Not to forget Val." Poor fellow! Poor Lord Hartledon!

"Would your lordship like to come and see the spot where I found it?" asked the miller.

Lord Hartledon said he should, and would go in the course of the day; and Floyd took his departure. Val sat on for a time where he was, and then went in, locked up the damp case with its tarnished rims, and went on to the presence of his wife.

She was dressed now, but had not left her bedroom. It was evident that she meant to be kind and pleasant with him; different from what she had been, for she smiled, and began a little apology for her tardiness, saying she would get up to breakfast in future.

He motioned her back to her seat on the sofa before the open window, and sat down near her. His face was grave; she thought she had never seen it so much sograve and firm, and his voice was grave too, but had a kindly tone in it. He took both her hands between his as he spoke; not so much, it seemed in affection, as to impress solemnity upon her.

"Maude, I'm going to ask you a question, and I beg you to answer me as truthfully as you could answer Heaven. Have you any wish that we should live apart from each other?"

"I do not understand you," she answered, after a pause, during which a flush of surprise or emotion spread itself gradually over her face.

"Nay, the question is plain. Have you any wish to separate from me?"

"I never thought of such a thing. Separate from you! What can you mean?"

"Your mother has dropped a hint that you have not been happy with me. I could almost understand her to imply that you have a positive dislike to me. She sought to explain her words away, but certainly spoke them. Is it so, Maude? I fancied something of the sort myself in the earlier days of our marriage."

He turned his head sharply at a sudden sound, but it was only the French clock on the mantelpiece striking eleven.

"Because," he resumed, having waited in vain for an answer, "if such should really be your wish, I will accede to it. I desire your comfort, your happiness beyond any earthly thing; and if living apart from me would promote it, I will sacrifice my own feelings, and you shall not hear a murmur. I would sacrifice my life for you."

She burst into tears. "Are you speaking at all for yourself? Do you wish this?" she murmured.

"No."

"Then how can you be so cruel?"

"I should have thought it unjustifiably cruel, but that it has been suggested to me. Tell me the truth, Maude."

Maude was turning sick with apprehension. She had begun to like her husband during the latter part of their sojourn in London; had missed him terribly during this long period of lonely ennui at Hartledon; and his tender kindness to her for the past few fleeting hours of this their meeting had seemed like heaven as compared with the solitary past. Her whole heart was in her words as she answered:

"When we first married I did not care for you; I almost think I did not like you. Everything was new to me, and I felt as one in an unknown sea. But it wore off; and if

you only knew how I have thought of you, and wished for you here, you would never have said anything so cruel. You are my husband, and you cannot put me from you. Percival, promise me that you will never hint at this again!"

He bent and kissed her. His course lay plain before him; and if an ugly mountain rose up before his mind's eye, shadowing forth not voluntary but forced separation, he would not look at it in that moment.

"What could mamma mean?" she asked. "I shall ask her."

"Maude, oblige me by saying nothing about it. I have already warned Lady Kirton that it must not be repeated; and I am sure it will not be. I wish you would also oblige me in another matter."

"In anything," she eagerly said, raising her tearful eyes to his. "Ask me anything."

"I intend to take your brother to the warmest seaside place England can boast of, at once; today or tomorrow. The seaair may do me good also. I want that, or something else," he added; his tone assuming a sad weariness as he remembered how futile any "seaair" would be for a mind diseased. "Won't you go with us, Maude?"

"Oh yes, gladly! I will go with you anywhere."

He left her to proceed to Captain Kirton's room, thinking that he and his wife might have been happy together yet, but for that one awful shadow of the past, which she did not know anything about; and he prayed she never might know.

But after all, it would have been a very moonlight sort of happiness.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ONCE MORE.

The months rolled on, and Lord and Lady Hartledon did not separate. They remained together, and were, so far, happy enoughthe moonlight happiness hinted at; and it is as I believe, the best and calmest sort of happiness for married life. Maude's temper was unequal, and he was subject to prolonged hours of sadness. But the time went lightly enough over their heads, for all the world saw, as it goes over the heads of most people.

And Lord Hartledon was a free man still, and stood well with the world. Whatever the mysterious accusation brought against him had been, it produced no noisy effects as yet; in popular phrase, it had come to nothing. As yet; always as yet. Whether he had shot a man, or robbed a bank, or fired a church, the incipient accusation died away. But the fear, let it be of what nature it would, never died away in his mind; and he lived as a man with a sword suspended over his head. Moreover, the sword, in his own imagination, was slipping gradually from its fastenings; his days were restless, his nights sleepless, an inward fever for ever consumed him.

As none knew better than Thomas Carr. There were two witnesses who could bring the facts home to Lord Hartledon; and, so far as was known, only two: the stranger, who had paid him a visit, and the man Gordon, or Gorton. The latter was the more dangerous; and they had not yet been able to trace him. Mr. Carr's friend, Detective Green, had furnished that gentleman with a descriptive bill of Gordon of the mutiny: "a young, slight man, with light eyes and fair hair." This did not answer exactly to the Gorton who had played his part at Calne; but then, in regard to the latter, there remained the suspicion that the red hair was false. Whether it was the same man or whether it was two menif the phrase may be allowedneither of them, to use Detective Green's expressive words, turned up. And thus the months had passed on, with nothing special to mark them. Captain Kirton had been conveyed abroad for the winter, and they had good news of him; and the countessdowager was inflicting a visit upon one of her married daughters in Germany, the baroness with the unpronounceable name.

And the matter had nearly faded from the mind of Lady Hartledon. It would quite have faded, but for certain interviews with Thomas Carr at his chambers, when Hartledon's look of care precluded the idea that they could be visits of mere idleness or pleasure; and for the secret trouble that unmistakably sat on her husband like an incubus. At times he would moan in his sleep as one in pain; but if told of this, had always some laughing answer ready for herhe had dreamed he was fighting a lion or being tossed by a bull.

This was the pleasantest phase of Lady Hartledon's married life. Her health did not allow of her entering into gaiety; and she and her husband passed their time happily together. All her worst qualities seemed to have left her, or to be dormant; she was yielding and gentle; her beauty had never been so great as now that it was subdued; her languor was an attraction, her care to please being genuine; and they were sufficiently happy. They were in their townhouse now, not having gone back to Hartledon. A large, handsome house, very different from the hired one they had first occupied.

In January the baby was born; and Maude's eyes glistened with tears of delight because it was a boy: a little heir to the broad lands of Hartledon. She was very well, and it seemed that she could never tire of fondling her child.

But in the first few days succeeding that of the birth a strange fancy took possession of her: she observed, or thought she observed, that her husband did not seem to care for the child. He did not caress it; she once heard him sighing over it; and he never announced it in the newspapers. Other infants, heirs especially, could be made known to the world, but not hers. The omission might never have come to her knowledge, since at first she was not allowed to see newspapers, but for a letter from the countessdowager. The lady wrote in a high state of wrath from Germany; she had looked every day for ten days in the Times, and saw no chronicle of the happy event; and she demanded the reason. It afforded a valve for her temper, which had been in an explosive state for some time against Lord Hartledon, that ungracious soninlaw having actually forbidden her his house until Maude's illness should be over; telling her plainly that he would not have his wife worried. Lady Hartledon said nothing for a day or two; she was watching her husband; watching for signs of the fancy which had taken possession of her.

He was in her room one dark afternoon, standing with his elbow on the mantelpiece whilst he talked to her: a room of luxury and comfort it must have been almost a pleasure to be ill in. Lady Hartledon had been allowed to get up, and sit in an easychair: she seemed to be growing strong rapidly; and the little red gentleman in the cradle, sleeping quietly, was fifteen days old.

"About his name, Percival; what is it to be?" she asked. "Your own?"

"No, no, not mine," said he, quickly; "I never liked mine. Choose some other, Maude."

"What do you wish it to be?"

"Anything."

The short answer did not please the young mother; neither did the dreamy tone in which it was spoken. "Don't you care what it is?" she asked rather plaintively.

"Not much, for myself. I wish it to be anything you shall choose."

"I thought perhaps you would have liked it named after your brother," she said, very much offended on the baby's account.

"George?"

"George, no. I never knew George; I should not be likely to think of him. Edward."

Lord Hartledon looked at the fire, absently pushing back his hair. "Yes, let it be Edward. It will do as well as anything else."

"Good gracious, Percival, one would think you had been having babies all your life!" she exclaimed resentfully. "'Do as well as anything else!' If he were our tenth son, instead of our first, you could not treat it with more indifference. I have done nothing but deliberate on the name since he was born; and I don't believe you have once given it a thought."

Lord Hartledon turned his face upon her; and when illumined with a smile, as now, it could be as bright as before care came to it. "I don't think we men attach the importance to names in a general way that you do, Maude. I shall like to have it Edward."

"Edward William Algernon"

"No, no, no," as if the number alarmed him. "Pray don't have a string of names: one's quite enough."

"Oh, very well," she returned, biting her lips. "William was your father's name. Algernon is my eldest brother's: I supposed you might like them. I thought," she added, after a pause, "we might ask Lord Kirton to be its godfather."

"I have decided on the godfathers already. Thomas Carr will be one, and I intend to be the other."

"Thomas Carr! A poor hardworking barrister, that not a soul knows, and of no family or influence whatever, godfather to the future Lord Hartledon!" uttered the offended mother.

"I wish it, Maude. Carr is the most valued friend I have in the world, or ever can have. Oblige me in this."

"Then my brother can be the other."

"No; I myself; and I wish you would be its godmother."

"Well, it's quite reversing the order of things!" she said, tacitly conceding the point.

A silence ensued. The firelight played on the lace curtains of the baby's bed, as it did on Lady Hartledon's face; a thoughtful face just now. Twilight was drawing on, and the fire lighted the room.

"Percival, do you care for the child?"

The tone had a sound of passion in it, breaking upon the silence. Lord Hartledon lifted his bent face and glanced at his wife.

"Do I care for the child, Maude? What a question! I do care for him: more than I allow to appear."

And if her voice had passion in it, his had pain. He crossed the room, and stood looking down on the sleeping baby, touching at length its cheek with his finger. He could have knelt, there and then, and wept over the child, and prayed, oh, how earnestly, that God would take it to Himself, not suffer it to live. Many and many a prayer had ascended from his heart in their earlier married days, that his wife might not bear him children; for he could only entail upon them an inheritance of shame.

"I don't think you have once taken him in your arms, Percival; you never kiss him. It's quite unnatural."

"I give my kisses in the dark," he laughed, as he returned to where she was sitting. And this was in a sense true; for once when he happened to be alone for an instant with the baby, he had clasped it and kissed it in a sort of delirious agony.

"You never had it in the Times, you know!"

"Never what?"

"Never announced its birth in the Times. Did you forget it?"

"It must have been very stupid of me," he remarked. "Never mind, Maude; he won't grow the less for the omission. When are you coming downstairs?"

"Mamma is in a rage about it; she says such neglect ought to be punished; and she knows you have done it on purpose."

"She is always in a rage with me, no matter what I do," returned Val, goodhumouredly. "She hoped to be here at this time, and sway us allyou and me and the baby; and I stopped it. Ho, ho! young sir!"

The baby had wakened with a cry, and a watchful attendant came gliding in at the sound. Lord Hartledon left the room and went straight down to the Temple to Mr. Carr's chambers. He found him in all the bustle of departure from town. A cab stood at the foot of the stairs, and Mr. Carr's laundress, a queer old body with an inverted black bonnet, was handing the cabman a parcel of books.

"A minute more and you'd have been too late," observed Mr. Carr, as Lord Hartledon met him on the stairs, a coat on his arm.

"I thought you did not start till tomorrow."

"But I found I must go today. I can give you three minutes. Is it anything particular?"

Lord Hartledon drew him into his room. "I have come to crave a favour, Carr. It has been on my lips to ask you before, but they would not frame the words. This child of mine: will you be its godfather with myself?"

One moment's hesitation, quite perceptible to the sensitive mind of Lord Hartledon, and then Mr. Carr spoke out bravely and cheerily.

"Of course I will."

"I see you hesitate: but I do not like to ask any one else."

"If I hesitated, it was at the thought of the grave responsibility attaching to the office. I believe I look upon it in a more serious light than most people do, and have never accepted the charge yet. I will be sponsor to this one with all my heart."

Lord Hartledon clasped his hand in reply, and they began to descend the stairs. "Poor Maude was dreaming of making a grand thing of the christening," he said; "she wanted to ask Lord Kirton to come to it. It will take place in about a fortnight."

"Very well; I must run up for it, unless you let me stand by proxy. I wish, Hartledon, you would hear me on another point," added the barrister, halting on the stairs, and dropping his voice to a whisper.

"Well?"

"If you are to go away at all, now's the time. Can't you be seized with an exploring fit, and sail to Africa, or some other place, where your travels would occupy years?"

Lord Hartledon shook his head. "How can I leave Maude to battle alone with the exposure, should it come?"

"It is a great deal less likely to come if you are a few thousand miles away."

"I question it. Should Gorton turn up he is just the one to frighten a defenceless woman, and purchase his own silence. No; my place is beside Maude."

"As you please. I have spoken for the last time. By the way, any letters bearing a certain postmark, that come addressed to me during my absence, Taylor has orders to send to you. Fare you well, Hartledon; I wish I could help you to peace."

Hartledon watched the cab rattle away, and then turned homewards. Peace! There was no peace for him.

Lady Hartledon was not to be thwarted on all points, and she insisted on a ceremonious christening. The countessdowager would come over for it, and did so; Lord Hartledon could not be discourteous enough to deny this; Lord and Lady Kirton came from Ireland; and for the first time since their marriage they found themselves entertaining guests. Lord Hartledon had made a faint opposition, but Maude had her own way. The countessdowager was furiously indignant when she heard of the intended sponsorsits father and mother, and that cynical wretch, Thomas Carr! Val played the hospitable host; but there was a shadow on his face that his wife did not fail to see.

It was the evening before the christening, and a very snowy evening too. Val was dressing for dinner, and Maude, herself ready, sat by him, her baby on her knee. The child was attired for the first time in a splendidlyworked robe with loopedup sleeves; and she had brought it in to challenge admiration for its pretty arms, with all the pardonable pride of a young mother.

"Won't you kiss it for once, Val?"

He took the child in his arms; it had its mother's fine dark eyes, and looked straight up from them into his. Lord Hartledon suddenly bent his own face down upon that little one with what seemed like a gesture of agony; and when he raised it his own eyes were wet with tears. Maude felt startled with a sort of terror: love was love; but she did not understand love so painful as this.

She sat down with the baby on her knee, saying nothing; he did not intend her to see the signs of emotion. And this brings us to where we were. Lord Hartledon went on with his toilette, and presently someone knocked at the door.

Two letters: they had come by the afternoon post, very much delayed on account of the snow. He came back to the gaslight, opening one. A full letter, written closely; but he had barely glanced at it when he hastily folded it again, and crammed it into his pocket. If ever a movement expressed something to be concealed, that did. And Lady Hartledon was gazing at him with her questioning eyes.

"Wasn't that letter from Thomas Carr?"

"Yes."

"Is he coming up? Or is Kirton to be proxy?"

"He iscoming, I think," said Val, evidently knowing nothing one way or the other. "He'll be here, I daresay, tomorrow morning."

Opening the other letter as he spokea foreignlooking letter this onehe put it up in the same hasty manner, with barely a glance; and then went on slowly with his dressing.

"Why don't you read your letters, Percival?"

"I haven't time. Dinner will be waiting."

She knew that he had plenty of time, and that dinner would not be waiting; she knew quite certainly that there was something in both letters she must not see. Rising from her seat in silence, she went out of the room with her baby; resentment and an unhealthy curiosity doing battle in her heart.

Lord Hartledon slipped the bolt of the door and read the letters at once; the foreign one first, over which he seemed to take an instant's counsel with himself. Before going down

he locked them up in a small ebony cabinet which stood against the wall. The room was his own exclusively; his wife had nothing to do with it.

Had they been alone he might have observed her coolness to him; but, with guests to entertain, he neither saw nor suspected it. She sat opposite him at dinner richly dressed, her jewels and smiles alike dazzling: but the smiles were not turned on him.

"Is that chosen sponsor of yours coming up for the christening; lawyer Carr?" tartly inquired the dowager from her seat, bringing her face and her turban, all scarlet together, to bear on Hartledon.

"He comes up by this evening's train; will be in London late tonight, if the snow allows him, and stay with us until Sunday night," replied Val.

"Oh! That's no doubt the reason why you settled the christening for Saturday: that your friend might have the benefit of Sunday?"

"Just so, madam."

And Lady Hartledon knew, by this, that her husband must have read the letters. "I wonder what he has done with them?" came the mental thought, shadowing forth a dim wish that she could read them too.

In the drawingroom, after dinner, someone proposed a carpet quadrille, but Lord Hartledon seemed averse to it. In his wife's present mood, his opposition was, of course, the signal for her approval, and she began pushing the chairs aside with her own hands. He approached her quietly.

"Maude, do not let them dance tonight."

"Why not?"

"I have a reason. My dear, won't you oblige me in this?"

"Tell me the reason, and perhaps I will; not otherwise."

"I will tell it you another time. Trust me, I have a good one. What is it, Hedges?"

The butler had come up to his master in the unobtrusive manner of a welltrained servant, and was waiting an opportunity to speak. He said a word in Lord Hartledon's ear, and Lady Hartledon saw a shiver of surprise run through her husband. He looked

here, looked there, as one perplexed with fear, and finally went out of the room with a calm face, but one that was turning livid.

Lady Hartledon followed in an impulse of curiosity. She looked after him over the balustrades, and saw him turn into the library below. Hedges was standing near the drawingroom door.

"Does any one want Lord Hartledon?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Who is it?"

"I don't know, my lady. Some gentleman."

She ran lightly down the stairs, pausing at the foot, as if ashamed of her persistent curiosity. The welllighted hall was before her; the diningroom on one side; the library and a small room communicating on the other. Throwing back her head, as in defiance, she boldly crossed the hall and opened the library door.

Now what Lady Hartledon had really thought was that the visitor was Mr. Carr; her husband was going to steal a quiet halfhour with him; and Hedges was in the plot. She had not lived with Hartledon the best part of a year without learning that Hedges was devoted heart and soul to his master.

She opened the librarydoor. Her husband's back was towards her; and facing him, his arms raised as if in anger or remonstrance, was the same stranger who had caused some commotion in the other house. She knew him in a moment: there he was, with his staid face, his black clothes, and his white neckcloth, looking so like a clergyman. Lord Hartledon turned his head.

"I am engaged, Maude; you can't come in," he peremptorily said; and closed the door upon her.

She went slowly up the stairs again, not choosing to meet the butler's eyes, past the drawingrooms, and up to her own. The sight of the stranger, coupled with her husband's signs of emotion, had renewed all her old suspicions, she knew not, she never had known, of what. Jumping to the conclusion that those letters must be in some way connected with the mystery, perhaps an advent of the visit, it set her thinking, and rebellion arose in her heart.

"I wonder if he put them in the ebony cabinet?" she exclaimed. "I have a key that will fit that."

Yes, she had a key to fit it. A few weeks before, Lord Hartledon mislaid his keys; he wanted something out of this cabinet, in which he did not, as a rule, keep anything of consequence, and tried hers. One was found to unlock it, and he jokingly told her she had a key to his treasures. But himself strictly honourable, he could not suspect dishonour in another; and Lord Hartledon supposed it simply impossible that she should attempt to open it of her own accord.

They were of different natures; and they had been reared in different schools. Poor Maude Kirton had learnt to be anything but scrupulous, and really thought it a very slight thing she was about to do, almost justifiable under the circumstances. Almost, if not quite. Nevertheless she would not have liked to be caught at it.

She took her bunch of keys and went into her husband's dressingroom, which opened from their bedroom: but she went on tiptoe, as one who knows she is doing wrong. It took some little time to try the keys, for there were several on the ring, and she did not know the right one: but the lid flew open at last, and disclosed the two letters lying there.

She snatched at one, either that came first, and opened it. It happened to be the one from Mr. Carr, and she began to read it, her heart beating.

"Dear Hartledon,

"I think I have at last found some trace of Gorton. There's a man of that name in the criminal calendar here, down for trial tomorrow; I shall see then whether it is the same, but the description tallies. Should it be our Gorton, I think the better plan will be to leave him entirely alone: a man undergoing a criminal sentenceand this man is sure of a long period of ithas neither the means nor the motive to be dangerous. He cannot molest you whilst he is working on Portland Island; and, so far, you may live a little eased from fear. I wish"

Mr. Carr's was a close handwriting, and this concluded the first page. She was turning it over, when Lord Hartledon's voice on the stairs caught her ear. He seemed to be coming up.

Ay, and he would have caught her at her work but for the accidental circumstance of the old dowager's happening to look out of the drawingroom and detaining him, as he was hastening onwards up the stairs. She did her daughter good service that moment, if she

had never done it before. Maude had time to fold the letter, put it back, lock the cabinet, and escape. Had she been a nervous woman, given to being flurried and to losing her presence of mind, she might not have succeeded; but she was cool and quick in emergency, her brain and fingers steady.

Nevertheless her heart beat a little as she stood within the other room, the door not latched behind her. She did not stir, lest he should hear her; and she hoped to remain unseen until he went down again. A ready excuse was on her lips, if he happened to look in, which was not probable: that she fancied she heard baby cry, and was listening.

Lord Hartledon was walking about his dressingroom, pacing it restlessly, and she very distinctly heard suppressed groans of mortal anguish breaking from his lips. How he had got rid of his visitor, and what the visitor came for, she knew not. He seemed to halt before the washhandstand, pour out some water, and dash his face into it.

"God help me! God help Maude!" he ejaculated, as he went down again to the drawingroom.

And Lady Hartledon went down also, for the interruption had frightened her, and she did not attempt to open the cabinet again. She never knew more of the contents of Mr. Carr's letter; and only the substance of the other, as communicated to her by her husband.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CROSSQUESTIONING MR. CARR.

Not until the Sunday morning did Lady Hartledon speak to her husband of the stranger's visit. There seemed to have been no previous opportunity. Mr. Carr had arrived late on the Friday night; indeed it was Saturday morning, for the trains were all detained; and he and Hartledon sat up together to an unconscionable hour. For this short visit he was Lord Hartledon's guest. Saturday seemed to have been given to preparation, to gaiety, and to nothing else. Perhaps also Lady Hartledon did not wish to mar that day by an unpleasant word. The little child was christened; the names given him being Edward Kirton: the countessdowager, who was in a chronic state of dissatisfaction with everything and every one, angrily exclaimed at the last moment, that she thought at least her family name might have been given to the child; and Lord Hartledon interposed, and said, give it. Lord and Lady Hartledon, and Mr. Carr, were the sponsors: and it would afford food for weeks of grumbling to the old dowager. Hilarity reigned, and toasts were given to the new heir of Hartledon; and the only one who seemed not to enter into the spirit of the thing, but on the contrary to be subdued, absent, nervous, was the heir's father.

And so it went on to the Sunday morning. A cold, bleak, bitter morning, the wind howling, the snow flying in drifts. Mr. Carr went to church, and he was the only one of the party in the house who did go. The countessdowager the previous night had proclaimed the fact that she meant to goas a sort of reproach to any who meant to keep away. However, when the churchbells began, she was turning round in her warm bed for another nap.

Maude did not go down early; had not yet taken to doing so. She breakfasted in her room, remained toying with her baby for some time, and then went into her own sittingroom; a small cosy apartment on the drawingroom floor, into which visitors did not intrude. It looked on to Hyde Park, and a very white and dreary park it was on that particular day.

Drawing a chair to the window, she sat looking out. That is, her eyes were given to the outer world, but she was so deep in thought as to see nothing of it. For two nights and a day, burning with curiosity, she had been putting this and that together in her own mind, and drawing conclusions according to her own light. First, there was the advent of the visitor; secondly, there was the letter she had dipped into. She connected the two with each other and wondered WHAT the secret care could be that had such telling effect upon her husband.

Gorton. The name had struck upon her memory, even whilst she read it, as one associated with that terrible timethe late Lord Hartledon's death. Gradually the floodgates of recollection opened, and she knew him for the witness at the inquest about whom some speculation had arisen as to who he was, and what his business at Calne might have been with Lord Hartledon and his brother, Val Elster.

Why should her husband be afraid of this man?as it seemed he was afraid, by Mr. Carr's letter. What power had he of injuring Lord Hartledon?what secret did he possess of his, that might be used against him? Turning it about in her mind, and turning it again, searching her imagination for a solution, Lady Hartledon at length arrived at one, in default of others. She thought this man must know some untoward fact by which the present Lord Hartledon's succession was imperilled. Possibly the late Lord Hartledon had made some covert and degrading marriage; leaving an obscure child who possessed legal rights, and might yet claim them. A romantic, farfetched idea, you will say; but she could think of no other that was in the least feasible. And she remembered some faint idea having arisen in her mind at the time, that the visit of the man Gorton was in some way connected with trouble, though she did not know with which brother.

Val came in and shut the door. He stirred the fire into a blaze, making some remark about the snow, and wondering how Carr would get down to the country again. Maude gave a slight answer, and then there was silence. Each was considering how best to say something to the other. She was the quicker.

"Lord Hartledon, what did that man want on Friday?"

"What man?" he rejoined, rather wincingfor he knew well enough to what she alluded.

"The mangentleman, or whatever he iswho had you called down to him in the library."

"By the way, Maudeyesyou should not dart in when I am engaged with visitors on business."

"Well, I thought it was Mr. Carr," she replied, glancing at his heightened colour. "What did he want?"

"Only to say a word to me on a matter of business."

"It was the same person who upset you so when he called last autumn. You have never been the same man since."

"Don't take fancies into your head, Maude."

"Fancies! you know quite well there is no fancy about it. That man holds some unpleasant secret of yours, I am certain."

"Maude!"

"Will you tell it me?"

"I have nothing to tell."

"Ah, well; I expected you wouldn't speak," she answered, with subdued bitterness; as much as to say, that she made a merit of resigning herself to an injustice she could not help. "You have been keeping things from me a long time."

"I have kept nothing from you it would give you pleasure to know. It is notMaude, pray hear meit is not always expedient for a man to make known to his wife the jars and rubs he has himself to encounter. A hundred trifles may arise that are best spared to her. That gentleman's business concerned others as well as myself, and I am not at liberty to speak of it."

"You refuse, then, to admit me to your confidence?"

"In this I do. I am the best judgeand you must allow me to be soof what ought, and what ought not, to be spoken of to you. You may always rely upon my acting for your best happiness, as far as lies in my power."

He had been pacing the room whilst he spoke. Lady Hartledon was in too resentful a mood to answer. Glancing at her, he stood by the mantelpiece and leaned his elbow upon it.

"I want to make known to you another matter, Maude. If I have kept it from you"

"Does it concern this secret business of yours?" she interrupted.

"No."

"Then let us have done with this first, if you please. Who is Gorton?"

"Who isGorton?" he repeated, after a dumbfounded pause. "What Gorton?"

"Well, I don't know; unless it's that man who gave evidence at the inquest on your brother."

Lord Hartledon stared at her, as well he might; and gulped down his breath, which seemed choking him. "But what about Gorton? Why do you ask me the question?"

"Because I fancy he is connected with this trouble. II thought I heard you and Mr. Carr mention the name yesterday when you were whispering together. I'm sure I didthere!"

As far as Lord Hartledon remembered, he and Mr. Carr had not been whispering together yesterday; had not mentioned the name of Gorton. They had done with the subject at that late sitting, the night of the barrister's arrival; who had brought news that the Gorton, that morning tried for a great crime, was not the Gorton of whom they were in search. Lord Hartledon gazed at his wife with questioning eyes, but she persisted in her assertion. It was sinfully untrue; but how else could she account for knowing the name?

"Do you suppose I dreamed it, Lord Hartledon?"

"I don't know whether you dreamed it or not, Maude. Mr. Carr has certainly spoken to me since he came of a man of that name; but as certainly not in your hearing. One Gorton was tried for his life on Fridayor almost for his lifeand he mentioned to me the circumstances of the case: housebreaking, accompanied by violence, which ended in death. I cannot understand you, Maude, or the fancies you seem to be taking up."

She saw how it washe would admit nothing: and she looked straight out across the dreary park, a certain obstinate defiance veiled in her eyes. By the help of Heaven or earth, she would find out this secret that he refused to disclose to her.

"Almost every action of your life bespeaks concealment," she resumed. "Look at those letters you received in your dressingroom on Friday night: you just opened them and thrust them unread into your pocket, because I happened to be there. And yet you talk of caring for me! I know those letters contained some secret or other you dare not tell me."

She rose in some temper, and gave the fire a fierce stir.

Lord Hartledon kept her by him.

"One of those letters was from Mr. Carr; and I presume you can make no objection to my hearing from him. The otherMaude, I have waited until now to disclose its contents to you; I would not mar your happiness yesterday."

She looked up at him. Something in his voice, a sad pitying tenderness, caused her heart to beat a shade quicker. "It was a foreign letter, Maude. I think you observed that. It bore the French postmark."

A light broke upon her. "Oh, Percival, it is about Robert! Surely he is not worse!"

He drew her closer to him: not speaking.

"He is not dead?" she said, with a rush of tears. "Ah, you need not tell me; I see it. Robert! Robert!"

"It has been a happy death, Maude, and he is better off. He was quite ready to go. I wish we were as ready!"

Lord Hartledon took out the letter and read the chief portion of it to her. One little part he dexterously omitted, describing the cause of deathdisease of the heart.

"But I thought he was getting so much better. What has killed him in this sudden manner?"

"Well, there was no great hope from the first. I confess I have entertained none. Mr. Hillary, you know, warned us it might end either way."

"Was it decline?" she asked, her tears falling.

"He has been declining gradually, no doubt."

"Oh, Percival! Why did you not tell me at once? It seems so cruel to have had all that entertainment yesterday! This is why you did not wish us to dance!"

"And if I had told you, and stopped the entertainment, allowing the poor little fellow to be christened in gloom and sorrow, you would have been the first to reproach me; you might have said it augured illluck for the child."

"Well, perhaps I should; yes, I am sure I should. You have acted rightly, after all, Val." And it was a candid admission, considering what she had been previously saying. He bent towards her with a smile, his voice quite unsteady with its earnestness.

"You see now with what motive I kept the letter from you. Maude! cannot this be an earnest that you should trust me for the rest? In all I do, as Heaven is my witness, I place your comfort first and foremost."

"Don't be angry with me," she cried, softening at the words.

He laid his hand on his wife's bent head, thinking how far he was from anger. Anger? He would have died for her then, at that moment, if it might have saved her from the sin and shame that she must share with him.

"Have you told mamma, Percival?"

"Not yet. It would not have been kept from you long had she known it. She is not up yet, I think."

"Who has written?"

"The doctor who attended him."

"You'll let me read the letter?"

"I have written to desire that full particulars may be sent to you: you shall read that one."

The tacit refusal did not strike her. She only supposed the future letter would be more explanatory. He was always anxious for her; and he had written off on the Friday night to ask for a letter giving fuller particulars, whilst avoiding mention of the cause of death.

Thus harmony for the hour was restored between them; and Lord Hartledon stood the dowager's loud reproaches with equanimity. In possession of the news of that darling angel's death ever since Friday night, and to have bottled it up within him till Sunday! She wondered what he thought of himself!

After all, Val had not quite "bottled it up." He had made it known to his brotherinlaw, Lord Kirton, and also to Mr. Carr. Both had agreed that nothing had better be said until the christeningday was over.

But there came a reaction. When Lady Hartledon had got over her first grief, the other annoyance returned to her, and she fell again to brooding over it in a very disturbing fashion. She merited blame for this in a degree; but not so much as appears on the

surface. If that idea, which she was taking up very seriously, were correctthat her husband's succession was imperilledit would be the greatest misfortune that could happen to her in life. What had she married for but position?rank, wealth, her title? any earthly misfortune would be less keen than this. Any earthly misfortune! Poor Maude!

It was a sombre dinner that evening; the news of Captain Kirton's death making it so. Besides relatives, very few guests were staying in the house; and the large and elaborate dinnerparty of the previous day was reduced to a small one on this. The first to come into the drawingroom afterwards, following pretty closely on the ladies, was Mr. Carr. The dowager, who rarely paid attention to appearances, or to anything else, except her own comfort, had her feet up on a sofa, and was fast asleep; two ladies were standing in front of the fire, talking in undertones; Lady Hartledon sat on a sofa a little apart, her baby on her knee; and her sisterinlaw, Lady Kirton, a fragile and rather crosslooking young woman, who looked as if a breath would blow her away, was standing over her, studying the infant's face. The latter lady moved away and joined the group at the fire as Mr. Carr approached Lady Hartledon.

"You have your little charge here, I see!"

"Please excuse it; I meant to have sent him away before any of you came up," she said, quite pleadingly. "Sarah took upon herself to proclaim aloud that his eyes were not straight, and I could not help having him brought down to refute her words. Not straight, indeed! She's only envious of him."

Sarah was Lady Kirton. Mr. Carr smiled.

"She has no children herself. I think you might be proud of your godson, Mr. Carr. But he ought not to have been here to receive you, for all that."

"I have come up soon to say goodbye, Lady Hartledon. In ten minutes I must be gone."

"In all this snow! What a night to travel in!"

"Necessity has no law. So, sir, you'd imprison my finger, would you!"

He had touched the child's hand, and in a moment it was clasped round his finger. Lady Hartledon laughed.

"Lady Kirtonthe most superstitious woman in the worldwould say that was an omen: you are destined to be his friend through life."

"As I will be," said the barrister, his tone more earnest than the occasion seemed to call for.

Lady Hartledon, with a graciousness she was little in the habit of showing to Mr. Carr, made room for him beside her, and he sat down. The baby lay on his back, his wideopen eyes looking upwards, good as gold.

"How quiet he is! How he stares!" reiterated the barrister, who did not understand much about babies, except for a shadowy idea that they lived in a state of crying for the first six months.

"He is the best child in the world; every one says so," she returned. "He is not the leastHeyday! what do you mean by contradicting mamma like that? Behave yourself, sir."

For the infant, as if to deny his goodness, set up a sudden cry. Mr. Carr laughed. He put down his finger again, and the little fingers clasped round it, and the cry ceased.

"He does not like to lose his friend, you see, Lady Hartledon."

"I wish you would be my friend as well as his," she rejoined; and the low meaning tones struck on Mr. Carr's ear.

"I trust I am your friend," he answered.

She was still for a few moments; her pale beautiful face inclining towards the child's; her large dark eyes bent upon him. She turned them on Mr. Carr.

"This has been a sad day."

"Yes, for you. It is grievous to lose a brother."

"And to lose him without the opportunity of a last look, a last farewell. Robert was my best and favourite brother. But the day has been marked as unhappy for other causes than that."

Was it an uncomfortable prevision of what was coming that caused Mr. Carr not to answer her? He talked to the unconscious baby, and played with its cheeks.

"What secret is this that you and my husband have between you, Mr. Carr?" she asked abruptly.

He ceased his laughing with the baby, said something about its soft face, was altogether easy and careless in his manner, and then answered in halfjesting tones:

"Which one, Lady Hartledon?"

"Which one! Have you more than one?" she continued, taking the words literally.

"We might count up halfadozen, I daresay. I cannot tell you how many things I have not confided to him. We are quite"

"I mean the secret that affects him" she interrupted, in aggrieved tones, feeling that Mr. Carr was playing with her.

"There is some dread upon him that's wearing him to a shadow, poisoning his happiness, making his days and nights one long restlessness. Do you think it right to keep it from me, Mr. Carr? Is it what you and he are both doingand are in league with each other to do?"

"I am not keeping any secret from you, Lady Hartledon."

"You know you are. Nonsense! Do you think I have forgotten that evening that was the beginning of it, when a tall strange man dressed as a clergyman, came here, and you both were shut up with him for I can't tell how long, and Lord Hartledon came out from it looking like a ghost? You and he both misled me, causing me to believe that the Ashtons were entering an action against him for breach of promise; laying the damages at ten thousand pounds. I mean that secret, Mr. Carr," she added with emphasis. "The same man was here on Friday night again; and when you came to the house afterwards, you and Lord Hartledon sat up until nearly daylight."

Mr. Carr, who had his eyes on the exacting baby, shook his head, and intimated that he was really unable to understand her.

"When you are in town he is always at your chambers; when you are away he receives long letters from you that I may not read."

"Yes, we have been on terms of close friendship for years. And Lord Hartledon is an idle man, you know, and looks me up."

"He said you were arranging some business for him last autumn."

"Last autumn? Let me see. Yes, I think I was."

"Mr. Carr, is it of any use playing with me? Do you think it right or kind to do so?"

His manner changed at once; he turned to her with eyes as earnest as her own.

"Lady Hartledon, I would tell you anything that I could and ought to tell you. That your husband has been engaged in some complicated business, which I have beenwhich I have taken upon myself to arrange for him, is very true. I know that he does not wish it mentioned, and therefore my lips are sealed: but it is as well you did not know it, for it would give you no satisfaction."

"Does it involve anything very frightful?"

"It might involve thethe loss of a large sum of money," he answered, making the best reply he could.

Lady Hartledon sank her voice to a whisper. "Does it involve the possible loss of his title?of Hartledon?"

"No," said Mr. Carr, looking at her with surprise.

"You are sure?"

"Certain. I give you my word. What can have got into your head, Lady Hartledon?"

She gave a sigh of relief. "I thought it just possiblebut I will not tell you why I thought itthat some claimant might be springing up to the title and property."

Mr. Carr laughed. "That would be a calamity. Hartledon is as surely your husband's as this watch"taking it out to look at the time"is mine. When his brother died, he succeeded to him of indisputable right. And now I must go, for my time is up; and when next I see you, young gentleman, I shall expect a good account of your behaviour. Why, sir, the finger's mine, not yours. Goodbye, Lady Hartledon."

She gave him her hand coolly, for she was not pleased. The baby began to cry, and was sent away with its nurse.

And then Lady Hartledon sat on alone, feeling that if she were ever to arrive at the solution of the mystery, it would not be by the help of Mr. Carr. Other questions had

been upon her lipswho the stranger waswhat he wantedfive hundred of them: but she saw that she might as well have put them to the moon.

And Lord Hartledon went out with Mr. Carr in the inclement night, and saw him off by a GreatWestern train.

CHAPTER XXX.

MAUDE'S DISOBEDIENCE.

Again the months went on, it may almost be said the years, and little took place worthy of record. Time obliterates as well as soothes; and Lady Hartledon had almost forgotten the circumstances which had perplexed and troubled her, for nothing more had come of them.

And Lord Hartledon? But for a certain restlessness, a hectic flush and a worn frame, betraying that the inward fever was not quenched, a startled movement if approached or spoken to unexpectedly, it might be thought that he also was at rest. There were no more anxious visits to Thomas Carr's chambers; he went about his ordinary duties, sat out his hours in the House of Lords, and did as other men. There was nothing very obvious to betray mental apprehension; and Maude had certainly dismissed the past, so far, from her mind.

Not again had Val gone down to Hartledon. With the exception of that short visit of a day or two, already recorded, he had not been there since his marriage. He would not go: his wife, though she had her way in most things, could not induce him to go. She went once or twice, in a spirit of defiance, it may be said, and meanwhile he remained in London, or took a short trip to the Continent, as the whim prompted him. Once they had gone abroad together, and remained for some months; taking servants and the children, for there were two children now; and the little fellow who had clasped the finger of Mr. Carr was a sturdy boy of three years old.

Lady Hartledon's health was beginning to fail. The doctors told her she must be more quiet; she went out a great deal, and seemed to live only in the world. Her husband remonstrated with her on the score of health; but she laughed, and said she was not going to give up pleasure just yet. Of course these gay habits are more easily acquired than relinquished. Lady Hartledon had faintingfits; she felt occasional pain and palpitation in the region of the heart; and she grew thin without apparent cause. She said nothing about it, lest it should be made a plea for living more quietly; never dreaming of danger. Had she known what caused her brother's death her fears might possibly have been awakened. Lord Hartledon suspected mischief might be arising, and cautiously questioned her; she denied that anything was the matter, and he felt reassured. His chief care was to keep her free from excitement; and in this hope he gave way to her more than he would otherwise have done. But alas! the moment was approaching when all his care would be in vain; when the builtup security of years was destroyed by a single act of wilful disobedience to him. The sword so long suspended over his head, was to fall on hers at last.

One spring afternoon, in London, he was in his wife's sittingroom; the little room where you have seen her before, looking upon the Park. The children were playing on the carpettwo pretty little things; the girl eighteen months old.

"Take care!" suddenly called out Lady Hartledon.

Some one was opening the door, and the little Maude was too near to it. She ran and picked up the child, and Hedges came in with a card for his master, saying at the same time that the gentleman was waiting. Lord Hartledon held it to the fire to read the name.

"Who is it?" asked Lady Hartledon, putting the little girl down by the window, and approaching her husband. But there came no answer.

Whether the silence aroused her suspicionswhether any look in her husband's face recalled that evening of terror long agoor whether some malicious instinct whispered the truth, can never be known. Certain it was that the past rose up as in a mirror before Lady Hartledon's imagination, and she connected this visitor with the former. She bent over his shoulder to peep at the card; and her husband, startled out of his presence of mind, tore it in two and threw the pieces into the fire.

"Oh, very well!" she exclaimed, mortally offended. "But you cannot blind me: it is your mysterious visitor again."

"I don't know what you mean, Maude. It is only someone on business."

"Then I will go and ask him his business," she said, moving to the door with angry resolve.

Val was too quick for her. He placed his back against the door, and lifted his hands in agitation. It was a great fault of his, or perhaps a misfortunefor he could not help itthis want of selfcontrol in moments of emergency.

"Maude, I forbid you to interfere in this; you must not. For Heaven's sake, sit down and remain quiet."

"I'll see your visitor, and know, at last, what this strange trouble is. I will, Lord Hartledon."

"You must not: do you hear me?" he reiterated with deep emotion, for she was trying to force her way out of the room. "MaudelistenI do not mean to be harsh, but for your own

good I conjure you to be still. I forbid you, by the obedience you promised me before God, to inquire into or stir in this matter. It is a private affair of my own, and not yours. Stay here until I return."

Maude drew back, as if in compliance; and Lord Hartledon, supposing he had prevailed, quitted the room and closed the door. He was quite mistaken. Never had her solemn vows of obedience been so utterly despised; never had the temptation to evil been so rife in her heart.

She unlatched the door and listened. Lord Hartledon went downstairs and into the library, just as he had done the evening before the christening. And Lady Hartledon was certain the same man awaited him there. Ringing the nurserybell, she took off her slippers, unseen, and hid them under a chair.

"Remain here with the children," was her order to the nurse who appeared, as she shut the woman into the room.

Creeping down softly she opened the door of the room behind the library, and glided in. It was a small room, used exclusively by Lord Hartledon, where he kept a heterogeneous collection of thingspapers, books, cigars, pipes, guns, scientific models, anythingand which no one but himself ever attempted to enter. The intervening door between that and the library was not quite closed; and Lady Hartledon, cautiously pushed it a little further open. Wilful, unpardonable disobedience! when he had so strongly forbidden her! It was the same tall stranger. He was speaking in low tones, and Lord Hartledon leaned against the wall with a blank expression of face.

She saw; and heard. But how she controlled her feelings, how she remained and made no sign, she never knew. But that the instinct of selfesteem was one of her strongest passions, the dread of detection in proportion to it, she never had remained. There she was, and she could not get away again. The subtle dexterity which had served her in coming might desert her in returning. Had their senses been on the alert they might have heard her poor heart beating.

The interview did not last longabout twenty minutes; and whilst Lord Hartledon was attending his visitor to the door she escaped upstairs again, motioned away the nurse, and resumed her shoes. But what did she look like? Not like Maude Hartledon. Her face was as that of one upon whom some awful doom has fallen; her breath was coming painfully; and she kneeled down on the carpet and clasped her children to her beating heart with an action of wild despair.

"Oh, my boy! my boy! Oh, my little Maude!"

Suddenly she heard her husband's step approaching, and pushing them from her, rose and stood at the window, apparently looking out on the darkening world.

Lord Hartledon came in, gaily and cheerily, his manner lighter than it had been for years.

"Well, Maude, I have not been long, you see. Why don't you have lights?"

She did not answer: only stared straight out. Her husband approached her. "What are you looking at, Maude?"

"Nothing," she answered: "my head aches. I think I shall lie down until dinnertime. Eddie, open the door, and call Nurse, as loud as you can call."

The little boy obeyed, and the nurse returned, and was ordered to take the children. Lady Hartledon was following them to go to her own room, when she fell into a chair and went off in a dead faint.

"It's that excitement," said Val. "I do wish Maude would be reasonable!"

The illness, however, appeared to be more serious than an ordinary faintingfit; and Lord Hartledon, remembering the suspicion of heartdisease, sent for the family doctor Sir Alexander Pepps, an oracle in the fashionable world.

A different result showed itselfequally caused by excitementand the countessdowager arrived in a day or two in hot haste. Lady Hartledon lay in bed, and did not attempt to get up or to get better. She lay almost as one without life, taking no notice of any one, turning her head from her husband when he entered, refusing to answer her mother, keeping the children away from the room.

"Why doesn't she get up, Pepps?" demanded the dowager, wrathfully, pouncing upon the physician one day, when he was leaving the house.

Sir Alexander, who might have been supposed to have received his baronetcy for his skill, but that titles, like kissing, go by favour, stopped short, took off his hat, and presumed that Lady Hartledon felt more comfortable in bed.

"Rubbish! We might all lie in bed if we studied comfort. Is there any earthly reason why she should stay there, Pepps?"

"Not any, except weakness."

"Except idleness, you mean. Why don't you order her to get up?"

"I have advised Lady Hartledon to do so, and she does not attend to me," replied Sir Alexander.

"Oh," said the dowager. "She was always wilful. What about her heart?"

"Her heart!" echoed Sir Alexander, looking up now as if a little aroused.

"Dear me, yes; her heart; I didn't say her liver. Is it sound, Pepps?"

"It's sound, for anything I know to the contrary. I never suspected anything the matter with her heart."

"Then you are a fool!" retorted the complimentary dowager.

Sir Alexander's temperament was remarkably calm. Nothing could rouse him out of his tame civility, which had been taken more than once for obsequiousness. The countessdowager had patronized him in earlier years, when he was not a great man, or had begun to dream of becoming one.

"Don't you recollect I once consulted you on the subjectwhat's your memory good for? She was a girl then, of fourteen or so; and you were worth fifty of what you are now, in point of discernment."

The oracle carried his thoughts back, and really could not recollect it. "Ahem! yes; and the result waswas"

"The result was that you said the heart had nothing the matter with it, and I said it had," broke in the impatient dowager.

"Ah, yes, madam, I remember. Pray, have you reason to suspect anything wrong now?"

"That's what you ought to have ascertained, Pepps, not me. What d'you mean by your neglect? What, I ask, does she lie in bed for? If her heart's right, there's nothing more the matter with her than there is with you."

"Perhaps your ladyship can persuade Lady Hartledon to exert herself," suggested the bland doctor. "I can't; and I confess I think that she only wants rousing."

With a flourish of his hat and his small goldheaded black cane the doctor bowed himself out from the formidable dowager. That lady turned her back upon him, and betook herself on the spur of the moment to Maude's room, determined to "have it out."

Curious sounds greeted her, as of some one in hysterical pain. On the bed, clasped to his mother in nervous agony, was the wondering child, little Lord Elster: words of distress, nay, of despair, breaking from her. It seemed, the little boy, who was rather selfwilled and rebellious on occasion, had escaped from the nursery, and stolen to his mother's room. The dowager halted at the door, and looked out from her astonished eyes.

"Oh, Edward, if we were but dead! Oh, my darling, if it would only please Heaven to take us both! I couldn't send for you, child; I couldn't see you; the sight of you kills me. You don't know; my babies, you don't know!"

"What on earth does all this mean?" interrupted the dowager, stepping forward. And Lady Hartledon dropped the boy, and fell back on the bed, exhausted.

"What have you done to your mamma, sir?"

The child, conscious that he had not done anything, but frightened on the whole, repented of his disobedience, and escaped from the chamber more quickly than he had entered it. The dowager hated to be puzzled, and went wrathfully up to her daughter.

"Perhaps you'll tell me what's the matter, Maude."

Lady Hartledon grew calm. The countessdowager pressed the question.

"There's nothing the matter," came the tardy and rather sullen reply.

"Why do you wish yourself dead, then?"

"Because I do."

"How dare you answer me so?"

"It's the truth. I should be spared suffering."

The countessdowager paused. "Spared suffering!" she mentally repeated; and being a woman given to arriving at rapid conclusions without rhyme or reason, she bethought

herself that Maude must have become acquainted with the suspicion regarding her heart.

"Who told you that?" shrieked the dowager. "It was that fool Hartledon."

"He has told me nothing," said Maude, in an access of resentment, all too visible. "Told me what?"

"Why, about your heart. That's what I suppose it is."

Maude raised herself upon her elbow, her wan face fixed on her mother's. "Is there anything the matter with my heart?" she calmly asked.

And then the old woman found that she had made a grievous mistake, and hastened to repair it.

"I thought there might be, and asked Pepps. I've just asked him now; and he's says there's nothing the matter with it."

"I wish there were!" said Maude.

"You wish there were! That's a pretty wish for a reasonable Christian," cried the tart dowager. "You want your husband to lecture you; saying such things."

"I wish he were hanged!" cried Maude, showing her glistening teeth.

"My gracious!" exclaimed the wondering old lady, after a pause. "What has he done?"

"Why did you urge me to marry him? Oh, mother, can't you see that I am dyingdying of horrorand shameand grief? You had better have buried me instead."

For once in her selfish and vulgar mind the countessdowager felt a feeling akin to fear. In her astonishment she thought Maude must be going mad.

"You'd do well to get some sleep, dear," she said in a subdued tone; "and tomorrow you must get up; Pepps says so; he thinks you want rousing."

"I have not slept since; it's not sleep, it's a dead stupor, in which I dream things as horrible as the reality," murmured Maude, unconscious perhaps that she spoke aloud. "I shall never sleep again."

"Not slept since when?"

"I don't know."

"Can't you say what you mean?" cried the puzzled dowager. "If you've any grievance, tell it out; if you've not, don't talk nonsense."

But Lady Hartledon, though thus sweetly allured to confession, held her tongue. Her halfscattered senses came back to her, and with them a reticence she would not break. The countessdowager hardly knew whether she deserved pitying or shaking, and went off in a fit of exasperation, breaking in upon her soninlaw as he was busy looking over some accounts in the library.

"I want to know what is the matter with Maude."

He turned round in his chair, and met the dowager's flaxen wig and crimson face. Val did not know what was the matter with his wife any more than the questioner did. He supposed she would be all right when she grew stronger.

"She says it's you" said the gentle dowager, improving upon her information. "She has just been wishing you were hanged."

"Ah, you have been teasing her," he returned, with composure. "Maude says all sorts of things when she's put out."

"Perhaps she does," was the retort; "but she meant this, for she showed her teeth when she said it. You can't blind me; and I have seen ever since I came here that there was something wrong between you and Maude."

For that matter, Val had seen it too. Since the night of his wife's faintingfit she had scarcely spoken a word to him; had appeared as if she could not tolerate his presence for an instant in her room. Lord Hartledon felt persuaded that it arose from resentment at his having refused to allow her to see the stranger. He rose from his seat.

"There's nothing wrong between me and Maude, Lady Kirton. If there were, you must pardon me for saying that I could not suffer any interference in it. But there is not."

"Something's wrong somewhere. I found her just now sobbing and moaning over Eddie, wishing they were both dead, and all the rest of it. If she goes on like this for nothing, she's losing her senses, that's all."

"She'll be all right when she's stronger. Pray don't worry her. She'll be well soon, I daresay. And now I shall be glad if you'll leave me, for I am very busy."

She did not leave him any the quicker for the request, but stayed to worry him, as it was in her nature to worry every one. Getting rid of her at last, he turned the key of the door, and wished her a hundred miles away.

The wish bore fruit. In a few days some news she heard regarding her eldest sonwho was a widower nowtook the dowager to Ireland, and Lord Hartledon wished he could as easily turn the key of the house upon her as he had turned that of the room.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE SWORD SLIPPED.

Summer dust was in the London streets, summer weather in the air, and the carriage of that fashionable practitioner, Sir Alexander Pepps, still waited before Lord Hartledon's house. It had waited there more frequently in these later weeks than of old.

The great worldher worldwondered what was the matter with her: Sir Alexander wondered also. Perhaps had he been a less courtly man he might have rapped out "obstinacy," if questioned upon the point; as it was, he murmured of "weakness." Weak she undoubtedly was; and she did not seem to try in the least to grow strong again. She did not go into society now; she dressed as usual, and sat in her drawingroom, and received visitors if the whim took her; but she was usually denied to all; and said she was not well enough to go out. From her husband she remained bitterly estranged. If he attempted to be friendly with her, to ask what was ailing her, she either sharply refused to say, or maintained a persistent silence. Lord Hartledon could not account for her behaviour, and was growing tired of it.

Poor Maude! That some grievous blow had fallen upon her was all too evident. Resentment, anguish, bitter despair alternated within her breast, and she seemed really not to care whether she lived or died. Was it for this that she had schemed, and so successfully, to wrest Lord Hartledon from his promised bride Anne Ashton? She would lie back in her chair and ask it. No labour of hers could by any possibility have brought forth a result by which Miss Ashton could be so well avenged. Heaven is true to itself, and Dr. Ashton had left vengeance with it. Lady Hartledon looked back on her fleeting triumph; a triumph at the time certainly, but a short one. It had not fulfilled its golden promises: that sort of triumph perhaps never does. It had been followed by ennui, repentance, dissatisfaction with her husband, and it had resulted in a very moonlight sort of happiness, which had at length centred only in the children. The children! Maude gave a cry of anguish as she thought of them. No; take it altogether, the play from the first had not been worth the candle. And now? She clasped her thin hands in a frenzy of impotent ragewith Anne Ashton had lain the real triumph, with herself the sacrifice. Too well Maude understood a remark her husband once made in answer to a reproach of hers in the first year of their marriagethat he was thankful not to have wedded Anne.

One morning Sir Alexander Pepps, on his way from the drawingroom to his chariota very oldfashioned chariot that all the world knew wellpaused midway in the hall, with his cane to his nose, and condescended to address the man with the powdered wig who was escorting him.

"Is his lordship at home?"

"Yes, sir."

"I wish to see him."

So the wig changed its course, and Sir Alexander was bowed into the presence. His lordship rose with what the French would call empressement, to receive the great man.

"Thank you, I have not time to sit," said he, declining the offered chair and standing, cane in hand. "I have three consultations today, and some urgent cases. I grieve to have a painful duty to fulfil; but I must inform you that Lady Hartledon's health gives me uneasiness."

Lord Hartledon did not immediately reply; but it was not from want of genuine concern.

"What is really the matter with her?"

"Debility; nothing else," replied Sir Alexander. "But these cases of extreme debility cause so much perplexity. Where there is no particular disease to treat, and the patient does not rally, why"

He understood the doctor's pause to mean something ominous. "What can be done?" he asked. "I have remarked, with pain, that she does not gain strength. Change of air? The seaside"

"She says she won't go," interrupted the physician. "In fact, her ladyship objects to everything I can suggest or propose."

"It's very strange," said Lord Hartledon.

"At times it has occurred to me that she has something on her mind," continued Sir Alexander. "Upon my delicately hinting this opinion to Lady Hartledon, she denied it with a vehemence which caused me to suspect that I was correct. Does your lordship know of anything likely toto torment her?"

"Not anything," replied Lord Hartledon, confidently. "I think I can assure you that there is nothing of the sort."

And he spoke according to his belief; for he knew of nothing. He would have supposed it simply impossible that Lady Hartledon had been made privy to the dreadful secret which had weighed on him; and he never gave that a thought.

Sir Alexander nodded, reassured on the point.

"I should wish for a consultation, if your lordship has no objection."

"Then pray call it without delay. Have anything, do anything, that may conduce to Lady Hartledon's recovery. You do not suspect heartdisease?"

"The symptoms are not those of any heartdisease known to me. Lady Kirton spoke to me of this; but I see nothing to apprehend at present on that score. If there's any latent affection, it has not yet shown itself. Then we'll arrange the consultation for tomorrow."

Sir Alexander Pepps was bowed out; and the consultation took place; which left the matter just where it was before. The wise doctors thought there was nothing radically wrong; but strongly recommended change of air. Sir Alexander confidently mentioned Torbay; he had great faith in Torbay; perhaps his lordship could induce Lady Hartledon to try it? She had flatly told the consultation that she would not try it.

Lady Hartledon was seated in the drawingroom when he went in, willing to do what he could; any urging of his had not gone far with her of late. A white silk shawl covered her dress of green check silk; she wore a shawl constantly now, having a perpetual tendency to shiver; her handsome features were white and attenuated, but her eyes were brilliant still, and her dark hair was dressed in elaborate braids.

"So you have had the doctors here, Maude," he remarked, cheerfully.

She nodded a reply, and began to fidget with the body of her gown. It seemed that she had to do something or other always to her attire whenever he spoke to herwhich partially took away her attention.

"Sir Alexander tells me they have been recommending you Torbay."

"I am not going to Torbay."

"Oh yes, you are, Maude," he soothingly said. "It will be a change for us all. The children will benefit by it as much as you, and so shall I."

"I tell you I shall not go to Torbay."

"Would you prefer any other place?"

"I will not go anywhere; I have told them so."

"Then I declare that I'll carry you off by force!" he cried, rather sharply. "Why do you vex me like this? You know you must go?"

She made no reply. He drew a chair close to her and sat down.

"Maude," he said, speaking all the more gently for his recent outbreak, "you must be aware that you do not recover as quickly as we could wish"

"I do not recover at all," she interrupted. "I don't want to recover."

"My dear, how can you talk so? There is nothing the matter with you but weakness, and that will soon be overcome if you exert yourself."

"No, it won't. I shall not leave home."

"Somewhere you must go, for the workmen are coming into the house; and for the next two months it will not be habitable."

"Who is bringing them in?" she asked, with flashing eyes.

"You know it was decided long ago that the house should be done up this summer. It wants it badly enough. Torbay"

"I will not go to Torbay, Lord Hartledon. If I am to be turned out of this house, I'll go to the other."

"What other?"

"Hartledon."

"Not to Hartledon," said he, quickly, for his dislike to the place had grown with time, and the word grated on his ear.

"Then I remain where I am."

"Maude," he resumed in quiet tones, "I will not urge you to try seaair for my sake, because you do what you can to show me I am of little moment to you; but I will say try it for the sake of the children. Surely, they are dear to you!"

A subdued sound of pain broke from her lips, as if she could not bear to hear them named.

"It's of no use prolonging this discussion," she said. "An invalid's fancies may generally be trusted, and mine point to Hartledonif I am to be disturbed at all. I should not so much mind going there."

A pause ensued. Lord Hartledon had taken her hand, and was mechanically turning round her weddingring, his thoughts far away; it hung sufficiently loosely now on the wasted finger. She lay back in her chair, looking on with apathy, too indifferent to withdraw her hand.

"Why did you put it on?" she asked, abruptly.

"Why indeed?" returned his lordship, deep in his abstraction. "What did you say, Maude?" he added, awaking in a flurry. "Put what on?"

"My weddingring."

"My dear! But about Hartledonif you fancy that, and nowhere else, I suppose we must go there."

"You also?"

"Of course."

"Ah! when your wife's chord of life is loosening what model husbands you men become!" she uttered. "You have never gone to Hartledon with me; you have suffered me to be there alone, through a ridiculous reminiscence; but now that you are about to lose me you will go!"

"Why do you encourage these gloomy thoughts about yourself, Maude?" he asked, passing over the Hartledon question. "One would think you wished to die."

"I do not know," she replied in tones of deliberation. "Of course, no one, at my age, can be tired of the world, and for some things I wish to live; but for others, I shall be glad to die."

"Maude! Maude! It is wrong to say this. You are not likely to die."

"I can't tell. All I say is, I shall be glad for some things, if I do."

"What is all this?" he exclaimed, after a bewildered pause. "Is there anything on your mind, Maude? Are you grieving after that little infant?"

"No," she answered, "not for him. I grieve for the two who remain."

Lord Hartledon looked at her. A dread, which he strove to throw from him, struggling to his conscience.

"I think you are deceived in my state of health. And if I object to going to the seaside, it is chiefly because I would not die in a strange place. If I am to die, I should like to die at Hartledon."

His hair seemed to rise up in horror at the words. "Maude! have you any disease you are concealing from me?"

"Not any. But the belief has been upon me for some time that I should not get over this. You must have seen how I appear to be sinking."

"And with no disease upon you! I don't understand it."

"No particular physical disease."

"You are weak, dispiritedI cannot pursue these questions," he broke off. "Tell me in a word: is there any cause for this?"

"Yes."

Percival gathered up his breath. "What is it?"

"What is it!" her eyes ablaze with sudden light. "What has weighed you down, not to the grave, for men are strong, but to terror, and shame, and sin? What secret is it, Lord Hartledon?"

His lips were whitening. "But iteven allowing that I have a secretneed not weigh you down."

"Not weigh me down!to terror deeper than yours; to shame more abject? Suppose I know the secret?"

"You cannot know it," he gasped. "It would have killed you."

"And what has it done? Look at me."

"Oh, Maude!" he wailed, "what is it that you do, or do not know? How did you learn anything about it?"

"I learnt it through my own folly. I am sorry for it now. My knowing it can make the fact neither better nor worse; and perhaps I might have been spared the knowledge to the end."

"But what is it that you know?" he asked, rather wishing at the moment he was dead himself.

"All."

"It is impossible."

"It is true."

And he felt that it was true; here was the solution to the conduct which had puzzled him, puzzled the doctors, puzzled the household and the countessdowager.

"And howand how?" he gasped.

"When that stranger was here last, I heard what he said to you," she replied, avowing the fact without shame in the moment's terrible anguish. "I made the third at the interview."

He looked at her in utter disbelief.

"You refused to let me go down. I followed you, and stood at the little door of the library. It was open, and Iheardevery word."

The last words were spoken with an hysterical sobbing. "Oh, Maude!" broke from the lips of Lord Hartledon.

"You will reproach me for disobedience, of course; for meanness, perhaps; but I knew there was some awful secret, and you would not tell me. I earned my punishment, if that

will be any satisfaction to you; I have never since enjoyed an instant's peace, night or day."

He hid his face in his pain. This was the moment he had dreaded for years; anything, so that it might be kept from her, he had prayed in his neverceasing fear.

"Forgive, forgive me! Oh, Maude, forgive me!"

She did not respond; she did not attempt to soothe him; if ever looks expressed reproach and aversion, hers did then.

"Have compassion upon me, Maude! I was more sinned against than sinning."

"What compassion had you for me? How dared you marry me? you, bound with crime?"

"The worst is over, Maude; the worst is over."

"It can never be over: you are guilty of wilful sophistry. The crime remains; andLord Hartledonits fruits remain."

He interrupted her excited words by voice and gesture; he took her hands in his. She snatched them from him, and burst into a fit of hysterical crying, which ended in a faintness almost as of death. He did not dare to call assistance; an unguarded word might have slipped out unawares.

Shut them in; shut them in! they had need to be alone in a scene such as that.

Lord and Lady Hartledon went down to Calne, as she wished. But not immediately; some two or three weeks elapsed, and during that time Mr. Carr was a good deal with both of them. Their sole friend: the only man cognizant of the trouble they had yet to battle with; who alone might whisper a word of something like consolation.

Lady Hartledon seemed to improve. Whether it was the country, or the sort of patchedup peace that reigned between her and her husband, she grew stronger and better, and began to go out again and enjoy life as usual. But in saying life, it must not be thought that gaiety is implied; none could shun that as Lady Hartledon now seemed to shun it. And he, for the first time since his marriage, began to take some interest in his native place, and in his own home. The old sensitive feeling in regard to meeting the Ashtons lingered still; was almost as strong as ever; and he had the good sense to see that this must be overcome, if possible, if he made Hartledon his home for the future, as his wife now talked of doing.

As a preliminary step to it, he appeared at church; one, two, three Sundays. On the second Sunday his wife went with him. Anne was in her pew, with her younger brother, but not Mrs. Ashton: she, as Lord Hartledon knew by report, was too ill now to go out. Each day Dr. Ashton did the whole duty; his curate, Mr. Graves, was taking a holiday. Lord Hartledon heard another report, that the curate had been wanting to press his attentions on Miss Ashton. The truth was, as none had known better than Val Elster, Mr. Graves had wanted to press them years and years ago. He had at length made her an offer, and she had angrily refused him. A foolish girl! said indignant Mrs. Graves, reproachfully. Her son was a model son, and would make a model husband; and he would be a wealthy man, as Anne knew, for he must sooner or later come into the entailed property of his uncle. It was not at all pleasant to Lord Hartledon to stand there in his pew, with recollection upon him, and the gaze of the Ashtons studiously turned from him, and Jabez Gum looking out at him from the corners of his eyes as he made his sonorous responses. A wish for reconciliation took strong possession of Lord Hartledon, and he wondered whether he could not bring himself to sue for it. He wanted besides to stay for the afterservice, which he had not done since he was a young mannever since his marriage. Maude had stayed occasionally, as was the fashion; but he never. I beg you not to quarrel with me for the word; some of the partakers in that afterservice remain from no higher motive. Certainly poor Maude had not.

On the third Sunday, Lord Hartledon went to church in the eveningalone; and when service was over he waited until the church had emptied itself, and then made his way into the vestry. Jabez was passing out of it, and the Rector was coming out behind him. Lord Hartledon stopped the latter, and craved a minute's conversation. Dr. Ashton bowed rather stiffly, put his hat down, and Jabez shut them in.

"Is there any service you require of me?" inquired the Rector, coldly.

It was the impulsive Val Elster of old days who answered; his hand held out pleadingly, his ingenuous soul shining forth from his blue eyes.

"Yes, there is, Doctor Ashton; I have come to pray for ityour forgiveness."

"My Christian forgiveness you have had already," returned the clergyman, after a pause.

"But I want something else. I want your pardon as a man; I want you to look at me and speak to me as you used to do. I want to hear you call me 'Val' again; to take my hand in yours, and not coldly; in short, I want you to help me to forgive myself."

In that momentand Dr. Ashton, minister of the gospel though he was, could not have explained itall the old love for Val Elster rose bubbling in his heart. A stubborn heart withal, as all hearts are since Adam sinned; he did not respond to the offered hand, nor did his features relax their sternness in spite of the pleading look.

"You must be aware, Lord Hartledon, that your conduct does not merit pardon. As to friendshipwhich is what you ask forit would be incompatible with the distance you and I must observe towards each other."

"Why need we observe itif you accord me your true forgiveness?"

The question was one not easy to respond to candidly. The doctor could not say, Your intercourse with us might still be dangerous to the peace of one heart; and in his inner conviction he believed that it might be. He only looked at Val; the yearning face, the tearful eyes; and in that moment it occurred to the doctor that something more than the ordinary wear and tear of life had worn the once smooth brow, brought streaks of silver to the still luxuriant hair.

"Do you know that you nearly killed her?" he asked, his voice softening.

"I have known that it might be so. Had any atonement lain in my power; any means by which her grief might have been soothed; I would have gone to the ends of the earth to accomplish it. I would even have died if it could have done good. But, of all the world, I alone might attempt nothing. For myself I have spent the years in misery; not on that score," he hastened to add in his truth, and a thought crossed Dr. Ashton that he must allude to unhappiness with his wife"on another. If it will be any consolation to know itif you might accept it as even the faintest shadow of atonementI can truly say that few have gone through the care that I have, and lived. Anne has been amply avenged."

The Rector laid his hand on the slender fingers, hot with fever, whiter than they ought to be, betraying life's inward care. He forgave him from that moment; and forgiveness with Dr. Ashton meant the full meaning of the word.

"You were always your own enemy, Val."

"Ay. Heaven alone knows the extent of my folly; and of my punishment."

From that hour Lord Hartledon and the Rectory were not total strangers to each other. He called there once in a way, rarely seeing any one but the doctor; now and then Mrs. Ashton; by chance, Anne. Times and again was it on Val's lips to confide to Dr. Ashton

the nature of the sin upon his conscience; but his innate sensitiveness, the shame it would reflect upon him, stepped in and sealed the secret.

Meanwhile, perhaps he and his wife had never lived on terms of truer cordiality. There were no secrets between them: and let me tell you that is one of the keys to happiness in married life. Whatever the past had been, Lady Hartledon appeared to condone it; at least she no longer openly resented it to her husband. It is just possible that a shadow of the future, a prevision of the severing of the tie, very near now, might have been unconsciously upon her, guiding her spirit to meekness, if not yet quite to peace. Lord Hartledon thought she was growing strong; and, save that she would rather often go into a passion of hysterical tears as she clasped her children to her, particularly the boy, her days passed calmly enough. She indulged the children beyond all reason, and it was of no use for their father to interfere. Once when he stepped in to prevent it, she flew out almost like a tigress, asking what business it was of his, that he should dare to come between her and them. The lesson was an effectual one; and he never interfered again. But the indulgence was telling on the boy's naturally haughty disposition; and not for good.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IN THE PARK.

As the days and weeks went on, and Lord and Lady Hartledon continued at Calne, there was one circumstance that began to impress itself on the mind of the former in a careless sort of waythat he was constantly meeting Pike. Go out when he would, he was sure to see Pike in some outoftheway spot; at a sudden turning, or peering forth from under a group of trees, or watching him from a roadside bank. One special day impressed itself on Lord Hartledon's memory. He was walking slowly along the road with Dr. Ashton, and found Pike keeping pace with them softly on the other side the hedge, listening no doubt to what he could hear. On one of these occasions Val stopped and confronted him.

"What is it you want, Mr. Pike?"

Perhaps Mr. Pike was about the last man in the world to be, as the saying runs, "taken aback," and he stood his ground, and boldly answered "Nothing."

"It seems as though you did," said Val. "Go where I will, you are sure to spring up before me, or to be peeping from some ambush as I walk along. It will not do: do you understand?"

"I was just thinking the same thing yesterdaythat your lordship was always meeting me," said Pike. "No offence on either side, I dare say."

Val walked on, throwing the man a significant look of warning, but vouchsafing no other reply. After that Pike was a little more cautious, and kept aloof for a time; but Val knew that he was still watched on occasion.

One fine October day, when the grain had been gathered in and the fields were bare with stubble, Hartledon, alone in one of the front rooms, heard a contest going on outside. Throwing up the window, he saw his young son attempting to mount the groom's pony: the latter objecting. At the door stood a low basket carriage, harnessed with the fellow pony. They belonged to Lady Hartledon; sometimes she drove only one; and the groom, a young lad of fourteen, light and slim, rode the other: sometimes both ponies were in the carriage; and on those occasions the boy sat by her side, and drove.

"What's the matter, Edward?" called out Lord Hartledon to his son.

"Young lordship wants to ride the pony, my lord," said the groom. "My lady ordered me to ride it."

At this juncture Lady Hartledon appeared on the scene, ready for her drive. She had intended to take her little son with heras she generally didbut the child boisterously demanded that he should ride the pony for once, and she weakly yielded. Lord Hartledon's private opinion, looking on, was that she was literally incapable of denying him any earthly thing he chose to demand. He went out.

"He had better go with you in the carriage, Maude."

"Not at all. He sits very well now, and the pony's perfectly quiet."

"But he is too young to ride by the side of any vehicle. It is not safe. Let him sit with you as usual."

"Nonsense! Edward, you shall ride the pony. Help him up, Ralph."

"No, Maude. He"

"Be quiet!" said Lady Hartledon, bending towards her husband and speaking in low tones. "It is not for you to interfere. Would you deny him everything?"

A strangely bitter expression sat on Val's lips. Not of anger; not even mortification, but sad, cruel pain. He said no more.

And the cavalcade started. Lady Hartledon driving, the boygroom sitting beside her, and Eddie's short legs striding the pony. They were keeping to the Park, she called to her husband, and she should drive slowly.

There was no real danger, as Val believed; only he did not like the child's wilful temper given way to. With a deep sigh he turned indoors for his hat, and went strolling down the avenue. Mrs. Capper dropped a curtsey as he passed the lodge.

"Have you heard from your son yet?" he asked.

"Yes, my lord, many thanks to you. The school suits him bravely."

Turning out of the gates, he saw Floyd, the miller, walking slowly along. The man had been confined to his bed for weeks in the summer, with an attack of acute rheumatism, and to the house afterwards. It was the first time they had met since that morning long

ago, when the miller brought up the purse. Lord Hartledon did not know him at first, he was so altered; pale and reduced.

"Is it really you, Floyd?"

"What's left of me, my lord."

"And that's not much; but I am glad to see you so far well," said Hartledon, in his usual kindly tone. "I have heard reports of you from Mr. Hillary."

"Your lordship's altered too."

"Am I?"

"Well, it seems so to me. But it's some few years now since I saw you. Nothing has ever come to light about that pocketbook, my lord."

"I conclude not, or I should have heard of it."

"And your lordship never came down to see the place!"

"No. I left Hartledon the same day, I think, or the next. After all, Floyd, I don't see that it is of any use looking into these painful things: it cannot bring the dead to life again."

"That's, true," said the miller.

He was walking into Calne. Lord Hartledon kept by his side, talking to him. He promised to be as popular a man as his father had been; and that was saying a great deal. When they came opposite the Rectory, Lord Hartledon wished him good day and more strength, in his genial manner, and turned in at the Rectory gates.

About once a week he was in the habit of calling upon Mrs. Ashton. Peace was between them; and these visits to her sickchamber were strangely welcome to her heart. She had loved Val Elster all her life, and she loved him still, in spite of the past. For Val was curiously subdued; and his present mood, sad, quiet, thoughtful, was more endearing than his gayer one had been. Mrs. Ashton did not fail to read that he was a disappointed man, one with some constant care upon him.

Anne was in the hall when he entered, talking to a poor applicant who was waiting to see the Rector. Lord Hartledon lifted his hat to her, but did not offer to shake hands. He had

never presumed to touch her hand since the reconciliation; in fact, he scarcely ever saw her.

"How is Mrs. Ashton today?"

"A little better, I think. She will be glad to see you."

He followed the servant upstairs, and Anne turned to the woman again. Mrs. Ashton was in an easychair near the window; he drew one close to her.

"You are looking wonderful today, do you know?" he began in tones almost as gay as those of the lighthearted Val Elster. "What is it? That very becoming cap?"

"The cap, of course. Don't you see its pink ribbons? Your favourite colour used to be pink, Val. Do you remember?"

"I remember everything. But indeed and in truth you look better, dear Mrs. Ashton."

"Yes, better today," she said, with a sigh. "I shall fluctuate to the end, I suppose; one day better, the next worse. Val, I think sometimes it is not far off now."

Very far off he knew it could not be. But he spoke of hope still: it was in his nature to do so. In the depths of his heart, so hidden from the world, there seemed to be hope for the whole living creation, himself excepted.

"How is your wife today?"

"Quite well. She and Edward are out with the ponies and carriage."

"She never comes to see me."

"She does not go to see anyone. Though well, she's not very strong yet."

"But she's young, and will grow strong. I shall only grow weaker. I am brave today; but you should have seen me last night. So prostrate! I almost doubted whether I should rise from my bed again. I do not think you will have to come here many more times."

"Oh, Mrs. Ashton!"

"A little sooner or a little later, what does it matter, I try to ask myself; but parting is parting, and my heart aches sometimes. One of my aches will be leaving you."

"A very minor one then," he said, with deprecation; but tears shone in his dark blue eyes.

"Not a minor one. I have loved you as a son. I never loved you more, Percival, than when that letter of yours came to me at Cannes."

It was the first time she had alluded to it: the letter written the evening of his marriage. Val's face turned red, for his perfidy rose up before him in its full extent of shame.

"I don't care to speak of that," he whispered. "If you only knew what my humiliation has been!"

"Not of that, no; I don't know why I mentioned it. But I want you to speak of something else, Val. Over and over again has it been on my lips to ask it. What secret trouble is weighing you down?"

A far greater change, than the one called up by recollection and its shame, came over his face now. He did not speak; and Mrs. Ashton continued. She held his hands as he bent towards her.

"I have seen it all along. At firstI don't mind confessing itI took it for granted that you were on bad terms with yourself on account of the past. I feared there was something wrong between you and your wife, and that you were regretting Anne. But I soon put that idea from me, to replace it with a graver one."

"What graver one?" he asked.

"Nay, I know not. I want you to tell me. Will you do so?"

He shook his head with an unmistakable gesture, unconsciously pressing her hands to pain.

"Why not?"

"You have just said I am dear to you," he whispered; "I believe I am so."

"As dear, almost, as my own children."

"Then do not even wish to know it. It is an awful secret; and I must bear it without sympathy of any sort, alone and in silence. It has been upon me for some years now,

taking the sweetness out of my daily bread; and it will, I suppose, go with me to my grave. Not scarcely to lift it off my shoulders, would I impart it to you."

She sighed deeply; and thought it must be connected with some of his youthful follies. But she loved him still; she had faith in him; she believed that he went wrong from misfortune more than from fault.

"Courage, Val," she whispered. "There is a better world than this, where sorrow and sighing cannot enter. Patienceand hopeand trust in God!always bearing onwards. In time we shall attain to it."

Lord Hartledon gently drew his hands away, and turned to the window for a moment's respite. His eyes were greeted with the sight of one of his own servants, approaching the Rectory at full speed, some halfdozen idlers behind him.

With a prevision that something was wrong, he said a word of adieu to Mrs. Ashton, went down, and met the man outside. Dr. Ashton, who had seen the approach, also hurried out.

There had been some accident in the Park, the man said. The pony had swerved and thrown little Lord Elster: thrown him right under the other pony's feet, as it seemed. The servant made rather a bungle over his news, but this was its substance.

"And the result? Is he much hurt?" asked Lord Hartledon, constraining his voice to calmness.

"Well, no; not hurt at all, my lord. He was up again soon, saying he'd lash the pony for throwing him. He don't seem hurt a bit."

"Then why need you have alarmed us so?" interrupted Dr. Ashton, reprovingly.

"Well, sir, it's her ladyship seems hurtor something," cried the man.

Lord Hartledon looked at him.

"What have you come to tell, Richard? Speak out."

Apparently Richard could not speak out. His lady had been frightened and fainted, and did not come to again. And Lord Hartledon waited to hear no more.

The people, standing about in the park here and therefor even this slight accident had gathered its idlers togetherseemed to look at Lord Hartledon curiously as he passed them. Close to the house he met Ralph the groom. The boy was crying.

"'Twasn't no fault of anybody's, my lord; and there ain't any damage to the ponies," he began, hastening to excuse himself. "The little lord only slid off, and they stood as quiet as quiet. There wasn't no cause for my lady's fear."

"Is she fainting still?"

"They say she'sdead."

Lord Hartledon pressed onwards, and met Mr. Hillary at the halldoor. The surgeon took his arm and drew him into an empty room.

"Hillary! is it true?"

"I'm afraid it is."

Lord Hartledon felt his sight failing. For a moment he was a man groping in the dark. Steadying himself against the wall, he learned the details.

The child's pony had swerved. Ralph could not tell at what, and Lady Hartledon did not survive to tell. She was looking at him at the time, and saw him flung under the feet of the other pony, and she rose up in the carriage with a scream, and then fell back into the seat again. Ralph jumped out and picked up the child, who was not hurt at all; but when he hastened to tell her this, he saw that she seemed to have no life in her. One of the servants, Richard, happened to be going through the Park, within sight; others soon came up; and whilst Lady Hartledon was being driven home Richard ran for Mr. Hillary, and then sought his master, whom he found at the Rectory. The surgeon had found her dead.

"It must have been instantaneous," he observed in low tones as he concluded these particulars. "One great consolation is, that she was spared all suffering."

"And its cause?" breathed Lord Hartledon.

"The heart. I don't entertain the least doubt about it."

"You said she had no heart disease. Others said it."

"I said, if she had it, it was not developed. Sudden death from it is not at all uncommon where disease has never been suspected."

And this was all the conclusion come to in the case of Lady Hartledon. Examination proved the surgeon's surmise to be correct; and in answer to a certain question put by Lord Hartledon, he said the death was entirely irrespective of any trouble, or care, or annoyance she might have had in the past; irrespective even of any shock, except the shock at the moment of death, caused by seeing the child thrown. That, and that alone, had been the fatal cause. Lord Hartledon listened to this, and went away to his lonely chamber and fell on his knees in devout thankfulness to Heaven that he was so far innocent.

"If she had not given way to the child!" he bitterly aspirated in the first moments of sorrow.

That the countessdowager should come down posthaste and invade Hartledon, was of course only natural; and Lord Hartledon strove not to rebel against it. But she made herself so intensely and disagreeably officious that his patience was sorely tried. Her first act was to insist on a stately funeral. He had given orders for one plain and quiet in every way; but she would have her wish carried out, and raved about the house, abusing him for his meanness and want of respect to his dead wife. For peace' sake, he was fain to give her her way; and the funeral was made as costly as she pleased. Thomas Carr came down to it; and the countessdowager was barely civil to him.

Her next care was to assume the entire management of the two children, putting Lord Hartledon's authority over them at virtual, if not actual, defiance. The death of her daughter was in truth a severe blow to the dowager; not from love, for she really possessed no natural affection at all, but from fear that she should lose her footing in the house which was so desirable a refuge. As a preliminary step against this, she began to endeavour to make it more firm and secure. Altogether she was rendering Hartledon unbearable; and Val would often escape from it, his boy in his hand, and take refuge with Mrs. Ashton.

That Lord Hartledon's love for his children was intense there could be no question about; but it was nevertheless of a peculiarly reticent nature. He had rarely, if ever, been seen to caress them. The boy told tales of how papa would kiss him, even weep over him, in solitude; but he would not give him so much as an endearing name in the presence of others. Poor Maude had called him all the pet names in a fond mother's vocabulary; Lord Hartledon always called him Edward, and nothing more.

A few evenings after the funeral had taken place, Mirrable, who had been into Calne, was hurrying back in the twilight. As she passed Jabez Gum's gate, the clerk's wife was standing at it, talking to Mrs. Jones. The two were laughing: Mrs. Gum seemed in a less depressed state than usual, and the other less snappish.

"Is it you!" exclaimed Mrs. Jones, as Mirrable stopped. "I was just saying I'd not set eyes on you in your new mourning."

"And laughing over it," returned Mirrable.

"No!" was Mrs. Jones's retort. "I'd been telling of a trick I served Jones, and Nance was laughing at that. Silk and crêpe! It's fine to be you, Mrs. Mirrable!"

"How's Jabez, Nancy?" asked Mirrable, passing over Mrs. Jones's criticism.

"He's gone to Garchester," replied Mrs. Gum, who was given to indirect answers. "I thought I was never going to see you again, Mary."

"You could not expect to see me whilst the house was in its recent state," answered Mirrable. "We have been in a bustle, as you may suppose."

"You've not had many staying there."

"Only Mr. Carr; and he left today. We've got the old countessdowager still."

"And likely to have her, if all's true that's said," put in Mrs. Jones.

Mirrable tacitly admitted the probability. Her private opinion was that nothing short of a miracle could ever remove the Dowager Kirton from the house again. Had any one told Mirrable, as she stood there, that her ladyship would be leaving of her own accord that night, she had simply said it was impossible.

"Mary," cried the weak voice of poor timid Mrs. Gum, "how was it none of the brothers came to the funeral? Jabez was wondering. She had a lot, I've heard."

"It was not convenient to them, I suppose," replied Mirrable. "The one in the Isle of Wight had gone cruising in somebody's yacht, or he'd have come with the dowager; and Lord Kirton telegraphed from Ireland that he was prevented coming. I know nothing about the rest."

"It was an awful death!" shivered Mrs. Gum. "And without cause too; for the child was not hurt after all. Isn't my lord dreadfully cut up, Mary?"

"I think so; he's very quiet and subdued. But he has seemed full of sorrow for a long while, as if he had some dreadful care upon him. I don't think he and his wife were very happy together," added Mirrable. "My lord's likely to make Hartledon his chief residence now, I fancy, forMy gracious! what's that?"

A crash as if a whole battery of crockery had come down inside the house. A moment of staring consternation ensued, and nervous Mrs. Gum looked ready to faint. The two women disappeared indoors, and Mirrable turned homewards at a brisk pace. But she was not to go on without an interruption. Pike's head suddenly appeared above the hurdles, and he began inquiring after her health. "Toothache gone?" asked he.

"Yes," she said, answering straightforwardly in her surprise. "How did you know I had toothache?" It was not the first time by several he had thus accosted her; and to give her her due, she was always civil to him. Perhaps she feared to be otherwise.

"I heard of it. And so my Lord Hartledon's like a man with some dreadful care upon him!" he went on. "What is the care?"

"You have been eavesdropping!" she angrily exclaimed.

"Not a bit of it. I was seated under the hedge with my pipe, and you three women began talking. I didn't tell you to. Well, what's his lordship's care?"

"Just mind your own business, and his lordship will mind his," she retorted. "You'll get interfered with in a way you won't like, Pike, one of these days, unless you mend your manners."

"A great care on him," nodded Pike to himself, looking after her, as she walked off in her anger. "A great care! I know. One of these fine days, my lord, I may be asking you questions about it on my own score. I might long before this, but for"

The sentence broke off abruptly, and ended with a growl at things in general. Mr. Pike was evidently not in a genial mood.

Mirrable reached home to find the countessdowager in a state more easily imagined than described. Some sprite, favourable to the peace of Hartledon, had been writing confidentially from Ireland regarding Kirton and his doings. That her eldest son was about to steal a march on her and marry again seemed almost indisputably clear; and

the miserable dowager, dancing her wardance and uttering reproaches, was repacking her boxes in haste. Those boxes, which she had fondly hoped would never again leave Hartledon, unless it might be for sojourns in Park Lane! She was going back to Ireland to mount guard, and prevent any such escapade. Only in September had she quitted himand then had been as nearly ejected as a son could eject his mother with any decencyand had taken the Isle of Wight on her way to Hartledon. The son who lived in the Isle of Wight had espoused a widow twice his own age, with eleven hundred a year, and a house and carriage; so that he had a home: which the countessdowager sometimes remembered.

Lord Hartledon was liberal. He gave her a handsome sum for her journey, and a cheque besides; most devoutly praying that she might keep guard over Kirton for ever. He escorted her to the station himself in a closed carriage, an omnibus having gone before them with a mountain of boxes, at which all Calne came out to stare.

And the same week, confiding his children to the joint care of Mirrable and their nursean efficient, kind, and judicious womanLord Hartledon departed from home and England for a sojourn on the Continent, long or short, as inclination might lead him, feeling as a bird released from its cage.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

COMING HOME.

Some eighteen months after the event recorded in the last chapter, a travelling carriage dashed up to a house in Park Lane one wet evening in spring. It contained Lord Hartledon and his second wife. They were expected, and the servants were assembled in the hall.

Lord Hartledon led her into their midst, proudly, affectionately; as he had never in his life led any other. Ah, you need not ask who she was; he had contrived to win her, to win over Dr. Ashton; and his heart had at length found rest. Her fair countenance, her thoughtful eyes and sweet smile were turned on the servants, thanking them for their greeting.

"All well, Hedges?" asked Lord Hartledon.

"Quite well, my lord. But we are not alone."

"No!" said Val, stopping in his progress. "Who's here?"

"The CountessDowager of Kirton, my lord," replied Hedges, glancing at Lady Hartledon in momentary hesitation.

"Oh, indeed!" said Val, as if not enjoying the information. "Just see, Hedges, that the things inside the carriage are all taken out. Don't come up, Mrs. Ball; I will take Lady Hartledon to her rooms."

It was the lighthearted Val of the old, old days; his face free from care, his voice gay. He did not turn into any of the receptionrooms, but led his wife at once to her chamber. It was nearly dinnertime, and he knew she was tired.

"Welcome home, my darling!" he whispered tenderly ere releasing her. "A thousand welcomes to you, my dear, dear wife!"

Tears rose to his eyes with the fervour of the wish. Heaven alone knew what the past had been; the contrast between that time and this.

"I will dress at once, Percival," she said, after a few moments' pause. "I must see your children before dinner. Heaven helping me, I shall love them and always act by them as if they were my own."

"I am so sorry she is here, Annethat terrible old woman. You heard Hedges say Lady Kirton had arrived. Her visit is illtimed."

"I shall be glad to welcome her, Val."

"It is more than I shall be," replied Val, as his wife's maid came into the room, and he quitted it. "I'll bring the children to you, Anne."

They had been married nearly five weeks. Anne had not seen the children for several months. The little child, Edward, had shown symptoms of delicacy, and for nearly a year the children had sojourned at the seaside, having been brought to the townhouse just before their father's marriage.

The nursery was empty, and Lord Hartledon went down. In the passage outside the drawingroom was Hedges, evidently waiting for his master, and with a budget to unfold.

"When did she come, Hedges?"

"My lord, it was only a few days after your marriage," replied Hedges. "She arrived in the most outrageous tantrumif I shall not offend your lordship by saying soand has been here ever since, completely upsetting everything."

"What was her tantrum about?"

"On account of your having married again, my lord. She stood in the hall for five minutes when she got here, saying the most audacious things against your lordship and Miss AshtonI mean my lady," corrected Hedges.

"The old hag!" muttered Lord Hartledon.

"I think she's insane at times, my lord; I really do. The fits of passion she flies into are quite bad enough for insanity. The housekeeper told me this morning she feared she would be capable of striking my lady, when she first saw her. I'm afraid, too, she has been schooling the children."

Lord Hartledon strode into the drawingroom. There, as large as lifeand a great deal larger than most liveswas the dowagercountess. Fortunately she had not heard the arrival: in fact, she had dropped into a doze whilst waiting for it; and she started up when Val entered.

"How are you, ma'am?" asked he. "You have taken me by surprise."

"Not half as much as your wicked letter took me," screamed the old dowager. "Oh, you vile man! to marry again in this haste! YouyouI can't find words that I should not be ashamed of; but Hamlet's mother, in the play, was nothing to it."

"It is some time since I read the play," returned Hartledon, controlling his temper under an assumption of indifference. "If my memory serves me, the 'funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage table.' My late wife has been dead eighteen months, Lady Kirton."

"Eighteen months! for such a wife as Maude was to you!" raved the dowager. "You ought to have mourned her eighteen years. Anybody else would. I wish I had never let you have her."

Lord Hartledon wished it likewise, with all his heart and soul; had wished it in his wife's lifetime.

"Lady Kirton, listen to me! Let us understand each other. Your visit here is illtimed; you ought to feel it so; nevertheless, if you stay it out, you must observe good manners. I shall be compelled to request you to terminate it if you fail one iota in the respect due to this house's mistress, my beloved and honoured wife."

"Your beloved wife! Do you dare to say it to me?"

"Ay; beloved, honoured and respected as no woman has ever been by me yet, or ever will be again," he replied, speaking too plainly in his warmth.

"What a falsehearted monster!" cried the dowager, shrilly, apostrophizing the walls and the mirrors. "What then was Maude?"

"Maude is gone, and I counsel you not to bring up her name to me," said Val, sternly. "Your treachery forced Maude upon me; and let me tell you now, Lady Kirton, if I have never told you before, that it wrought upon her the most bitter wrong possible to be inflicted; which she lived to learn. I was a vacillating simpleton, and you held me in your trammels. The less we rake up old matters the better. Things have altered. I am altered. The moral courage I once lacked does not fail me now; and I have at least sufficient to hold my own against the world, and protect from insult the lady I have made my wife. I beg your pardon if my words seem harsh; they are true; and I am sorry you have forced them from me."

She was standing still for a moment, staring at him, not altogether certain of her ground.

"Where are the children?" he asked.

"Where you can't get at them," she rejoined hotly. "You have your beloved wife; you don't want them."

He rang the bell, more loudly than he need have done; but his usually sweet temper was provoked. A footman came in.

"Tell the nurse to bring down the children."

"They are not at home, my lord."

"Not at home! Surely they are not out in this rain!and so late!"

"They went out this afternoon, my lord: and have not come in, I believe."

"There, that will do," tartly interposed the dowager. "You don't know anything about it, and you may go."

"Lady Kirton, where are the children?"

"Where you can't get at them, I say," was Lady Kirton's response. "You don't think I am going to suffer Maude's children to be domineered over by a wretch of a stepmotherperhaps poisoned."

He confronted her in his wrath, his eyes flashing.

"Madam!"

"Oh, you need not 'Madam' me. Maude's gone, and I shall act for her."

"I ask you where my children are?"

"I have sent them away; you may make the most of the information. And when I have remained here as long as I choose, I shall take them with me, and keep them, and bring them up. You can at once decide what sum you will allow me for their education and maintenance: two maids, a tutor, a governess, clothes, toys, and pocketmoney. It must be a handsome sum, paid quarterly in advance. And I mean to take a house in London for their accommodation, and shall expect you to pay the rent."

The coolness with which this was delivered turned Val's angry feelings into amusement. He could not help laughing as he looked at her.

"You cannot have my children, Lady Kirton."

"They are Maude's children," snapped the dowager.

"But I presume you admit that they are likewise mine. And I shall certainly not part with them."

"If you oppose me in this, I'll put them into Chancery," cried the dowager. "I am their nearest relative, and have a right to them."

"Nearest relative!" he repeated. "You must have lost your senses. I am their father."

"And have you lived to see thirty, and never learnt that men don't count for anything in the bringing up of infants?" shrilly asked the dowager. "If they had ten fathers, what's that to the Lord Chancellor? No more than ten blocks of wood. What they want is a mother."

"And I have now given them one."

Without another word, with the red flush of emotion on his cheek, he went up to his wife's room. She was alone then, dressed, and just coming out of it. He put his arm round her to draw her in again, as he shortly explained the annoyance their visitor was causing him.

"You must stay here, my dearest, until I can go down with you," he added. "She is in a vile humour, and I do not choose that you should encounter her, unprotected by me."

"But where are you going, Val?"

"Well, I really think I shall get a policeman in, and frighten her into saying what she has done with the children. She'll never tell unless forced into it."

Anne laughed, and Hartledon went down. He had in good truth a great mind to see what the effect would be. The old woman was not a reasonable being, and he felt disposed to show her very little consideration. As he stood at the halldoor gazing forth, who should arrive but Thomas Carr. Not altogether by accident; he had come up exploring, to see if there were any signs of Val's return.

"Ah! home at last, Hartledon!"

"Carr, what happy wind blew you hither?" cried Val, as he grasped the hands of his trusty friend. "You can terrify this woman with the thunders of the law if she persists in kidnapping children that don't belong to her." And he forthwith explained the state of affairs.

Mr. Carr laughed.

"She will not keep them away long. She is no fool, that countessdowager. It is a ruse, no doubt, to induce you to give them up to her."

"Give them up to her, indeed!" Val was beginning, when Hedges advanced to him.

"Mrs. Ball says the children have only gone to Madame Tussaud's, my lord," quoth he. "The nurse told her so when she went out."

"I wish she was herself one of Madame Tussaud's figureheads!" cried Val. "Mr. Carr dines here, Hedges. Nonsense, Carr; you can't refuse. Never mind your coat; Anne won't mind. I want you to make acquaintance with her."

"How did you contrive to win over Dr. Ashton?" asked Thomas Carr, as he went in.

"I put the matter before him in its true light," answered Val, "asking him whether, if Anne forgave me, he would condemn us to live out our lives apart from each other: or whether he would not act the part of a good Christian, and give her to me, that I might strive to atone for the past."

"And he did so?"

"After a great deal of trouble. There's no time to give you details. I had a powerful advocate in Anne's heart. She had never forgotten me, for all my misconduct."

"You have been a lucky man at last, taking one thing with another."

"You may well say so," was the answer, in tones of deep feeling. "Moments come over me when I fear I am about to awake and find the present a dream. I am only now beginning to live. The past few years have beenyou know what, Carr."

He sent the barrister into the drawing room, went upstairs for Anne, and brought her in on his arm. The dowager was in her chamber, attiring herself in haste.

"My wife, Carr," said Hartledon, with a loving emphasis on the word. She was in an evening dress of white and black, not having yet put off mourning for Mrs. Ashton, and looked very lovely; far more lovely in Thomas Carr's eyes than Lady Maude, with her dark beauty, had ever looked. She held out her hand to him with a frank smile.

"I have heard so much of you, Mr. Carr, that we seem like old friends. I am glad you have come to see me so soon."

"My being here this evening is an accident, Lady Hartledon, as you may see by my dress," he returned. "I ought rather to apologize for intruding on you in the hour of your arrival."

"Don't talk about intrusion," said Val. "You will never be an intruder in my houseand Anne's smile is telling you the same"

"Who's that, pray?"

The interruption came from the countessdowager. There she stood, near the door, in a yellow gown and green turban. Val drew himself up and approached her, his wife still on his arm. "Madam," said he, in reply to her question, "this is my wife, Lady Hartledon."

The dowager's gauzes made acquaintance with the carpet in so elaborate a curtsey as to savour of mockery, but her eyes were turned up to the ceiling; not a word or look gave she to the young lady.

"The other one, I meant," cried she, nodding towards Thomas Carr.

"It is my friend Mr. Carr. You appear to have forgotten him."

"I hope you are well, ma'am," said he, advancing towards her.

Another curtsey, and the countessdowager fanned herself, and sailed towards the fireplace.

Meanwhile the children came home in a cab from Madame Tussaud's, and dinner was announced. Lord Hartledon was obliged to take down the countessdowager, resigning his wife to Mr. Carr. Dinner passed off pretty well, the dowager being too fully occupied to be annoying; also the good cheer caused her temper to thaw a little. Afterwards, the

children came in; Edward, a bold, free boy of five, who walked straight up to his grandmother, saluting no one; and Maude, a timid, delicate little child, who stood still in the middle of the carpet where the maid placed her.

The dowager was just then too busy to pay attention to the children, but Anne held out her hand with a smile. Upon which the child drew up to her father, and hid her face in his coat.

He took her up, and carried her to his wife, placing her upon her knee. "Maude," he whispered, "this is your mamma, and you must love her very much, for she loves you."

Anne's arms fondly encircled the child; but she began to struggle to get down.

"Bad manners, Maude," said her father.

"She's afraid of her," spoke up the boy, who had the dark eyes and beautiful features of his late mother. "We are afraid of bad people."

The observation passed momentarily unnoticed, for Maude, whom Lady Hartledon had been obliged to release, would not be pacified. But when calmness ensued, Lord Hartledon turned to the boy, just then assisting himself to some pineapple.

"What did I hear you say about bad people, Edward?"

"She," answered the boy, pointing towards Lady Hartledon. "She shan't touch Maude. She's come here to beat us, and I'll kick if she touches me."

Lord Hartledon, with an unmistakable look at the countessdowager, rose from his seat in silence and rang the bell. There could be no correction in the presence of the dowager; he and Anne must undo her work alone. Carrying the little girl in one arm, he took the boy's hand, and met the servant at the door.

"Take these children back to the nursery."

"I want some strawberries," the boy called out rebelliously.

"Not today," said his father. "You know quite well that you have behaved badly."

His wife's face was painfully flushed. Mr. Carr was critically examining the painted landscape on his plate; and the turban was enjoying some fruit with perfect unconcern. Lord Hartledon stood an instant ere he resumed his seat.

"Anne," he said in a voice that trembled in spite of its displeased tones, "allow me to beg your pardon, and I do it with shame that this gratuitous insult should have been offered you in your own house. A day or two will, I hope, put matters on their right footing; the poor children, as you see, have been tutored."

"Are you going to keep the port by you all night, Hartledon?"

Need you ask from whom came the interruption? Mr. Carr passed it across to her, leaving her to help herself; and Lord Hartledon sat down, biting his delicate lips.

When the dowager seemed to have finished, Anne rose. Mr. Carr rose too as soon as they had retired.

"I have an engagement, Hartledon, and am obliged to run away. Make my adieu to your wife."

"Carr, is it not a crying shame?enough to incense any man?"

"It is. The sooner you get rid of her the better."

"That's easier said than done."

When Lord Hartledon reached the drawingroom, the dowager was sleeping comfortably. Looking about for his wife, he found her in the small room Maude used to make exclusively her own, which was not lighted up. She was standing at the window, and her tears were quietly falling. He drew her face to his own.

"My darling, don't let it grieve you! We shall soon right it all."

"Oh, Percival, if the mischief should have gone too far!if they should never look upon me except as a stepmother! You don't know how sick and troubled this has made me feel! I wanted to go to them in the nursery when I came up, and did not dare! Perhaps the nurse has also been prejudiced against me!"

"Come up with me now, love," he whispered.

They went silently upstairs, and found the children were then in bed and asleep. They were tired with sightseeing, the nurse said apologetically, curtseying to her new mistress.

The nurse withdrew, and they stood over the nursery fire, talking. Anne could scarcely account for the extreme depression the event seemed to have thrown upon her. Lord Hartledon quickly recovered his spirits, vowing he should like to "serve out" the dowager.

"I was thankful for one thing, Val; that you did not betray anger to them, poor little things. It would have made it worse."

"I was on the point of betraying something more than anger to Edward; but the thought that I should be punishing him for another's fault checked me. I wonder how we can get rid of her?"

"We must strive to please her while she stays."

"Please her!" he echoed. "Anne, my dear, that is stretching Christian charity rather too far."

Anne smiled. "I am a clergyman's daughter, you know, Val."

"If she is wise, she'll abstain from offending you in my presence. I'm not sure but I should lose command of myself, and send her off there and then."

"I don't fear that. She was quite civil when we came up from dinner, and"

"As she generally is then. She takes her share of wine."

"And asked me if I would excuse her falling into a doze, for she never felt well without it."

Anne was right. The cunning old woman changed her tactics, finding those she had started would not answer. It has been remarked before, if you remember, that she knew particularly well on which side her bread was buttered. Nothing could exceed her graciousness from that evening. The past scene might have been a dream, for all traces that remained of it. Out of the house she was determined not to go in anger; it was too desirable a refuge for that. And on the following day, upon hearing Edward attempt some impudent speech to his new mother, she put him across her knee, pulled off an old slipper she was wearing, and gave him a whipping. Anne interposed, the boy roared; but the good woman had her way.

"Don't put yourself out, dear Lady Hartledon. There's nothing so good for them as a wholesome whipping. I used to try it on my own children at times."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MR. PIKE ON THE WING.

The time went on. It may have been some twelve or thirteen months later that Mr. Carr, sitting alone in his chambers, one evening, was surprised by the entrance of his clerkwho possessed a latchkey as well as himself.

"Why, Taylor! what brings you here?"

"I thought you would most likely be in, sir," replied the clerk. "Do you remember some few years ago making inquiries about a man named Gortonand you could not find him?"

"And never have found him," was Mr. Carr's comment. "Well?"

"I have seen him this evening. He is back in London."

Thomas Carr was not a man to be startlingly affected by any communication; nevertheless he felt the importance of this, for Lord Hartledon's sake.

"I met him by chance, in a place where I sometimes go of an evening to smoke a cigar, and learned his name by accident," continued Mr. Taylor. "It's the same man that was at Kedge and Reck's, George Gorton; he acknowledged it at once, quite readily."

"And where has he been hiding himself?"

"He has been in Australia for several years, he says; went there directly after he left Kedge and Reck's that autumn."

"Could you get him here, Taylor? I must see him. Tell me: what coloured hair has he?"

"Red, sir; and plenty of it. He says he's doing very well over there, and has only come home for a short change. He does not seem to be in concealment, and gave me his address when I asked him for it."

According to Mr. Carr's wish, the man Gorton was brought to his chambers the following morning by Taylor. To the barrister's surprise, a welldressed and really rather gentlemanly man entered. He had been accustomed to picturing this Gorton as an Arab of London life. Casting a keen glance at the red hair, he saw it was indisputably his own.

A few rapid questions, which Gorton answered without the slightest demur, and Mr. Carr leaned back in his chair, knowing that all the trouble he had been at to find this man might have been spared: for he was not the George Gordon they had suspected. But Mr. Carr was cautious, and betrayed nothing.

"I am sorry to have troubled you," he said. "When I inquired for you of Kedge and Reck some years ago, it was under the impression that you were some one else. You had left; and they did not know where to find you."

"Yes, I had displeased them through arresting a wrong man, and other things. I was down in the world then, and glad to do anything for a living, even to serving writs."

"You arrested the late Lord Hartledon for his brother," observed Mr. Carr, with a careless smile. "I heard of it. I suppose you did not know them apart."

"I had never set eyes on either of them before," returned Gorton; unconsciously confirming a point in the barrister's mind; which, however, was already sufficiently obvious.

"The man I wanted to find was named Gordon. I thought it just possible that you might have changed your name temporarily: some of us finding it convenient to do so on occasion."

"I never changed mine in my life."

"And if you had, I don't suppose you'd have changed it to one so notorious as George Gordon."

"Notorious?"

"It was a George Gordon who was the hero of that piratical affair; that mutiny on board the Morning Star."

"Ah, to be sure. And an awful villain too! A man I met in Australia knew Gordon well. But he tells a curious tale, though. He was a doctor, that Gordon; had come last from somewhere in Kirkcudbrightshire."

"He did," said Thomas Carr, quietly. "What curious tale does your friend tell?"

"Well, sir, he saysor rather said, for I've not seen him since my first visit therethat George Gordon did not sail in the Morning Star. He was killed in a drunken brawl the night before he ought to have sailed: this man was present and saw him buried."

"But there's pretty good proof that Gordon did sail. He was the ringleader of the mutiny."

"Well, yes. I don't know how it could have been. The man was positive. I never knew Gordon; so that the affair did not interest me much."

"You are doing well over there?"

"Very well. I might retire now, if I chose to live in a small way, but I mean to take a few more years of it, and go on to riches. Ah! and it was just the turn of a pin whether I went over there that second time, or whether I stopped in London to serve writs and starve."

"Val was right," thought the barrister.

On the following Saturday Mr. Carr took a returnticket, and went down to Hartledon: as he had done once or twice before in the old days. The Hartledons had not come to town this season; did not intend to come: Anne was too happy in the birth of her babyboy to care for London; and Val liked Hartledon better than any other place now.

In one single respect the past year had failed to bring Anne happinessthere was not entire confidence between herself and her husband. He had something on his mind, and she could not fail to see that he had. It was not that awful dread that seemed to possess him in his first wife's time; nevertheless it was a weight which told more or less on his spirits at all times. To Anne it appeared like remorse; yet she might never have thought this, but for a word or two he let slip occasionally. Was it connected with his children? She could almost have fancied so: and yet in what manner could it be? His behaviour was peculiar. He rather avoided them than not; but when with them was almost passionately demonstrative, exactingly jealous that due attention should be paid to them: and he seemed half afraid of caressing Anne's baby, lest it should be thought he cared for it more than for the others. Altogether Lady Hartledon puzzled her brains in vain: she could not make him out. When she questioned him he would deny that there was anything the matter, and said it was her fancy.

They were at Hartledon alone: that is, without the countessdowager. That respected lady, though not actually domiciled with them during the past twelvemonth, had paid them three long visits. She was determined to retain her right in the householdif right it could be called. The dowager was by far too wary to do otherwise; and her behaviour to

Anne was exceedingly mild. But somehow she contrived to retain, or continually renew, her evil influence over the children; though so insidiously, that Lady Hartledon could never detect how or when it was done, or openly meet it. Neither could she effectually counteract it. So surely as the dowager came, so surely did the young boy and his sister become unruly with their stepmother; illnatured and rude. Lady Hartledon was kind, judicious, and good; and things would so far be remedied during the crafty dowager's absences, as to promise a complete cure; but whenever she returned the evil broke out again. Anne was sorely perplexed. She did not like to deny the children to their grandmother, who was more nearly related to them than she herself; and she could only pray that time would bring about some remedy. The dowager passed her time pretty equally between their house and her son's. Lord Kirton had not married again, owing, perhaps, to the watch and ward kept over him. But as soon as he started off to the Continent, or elsewhere, where she could not follow him, then off she came, without notice, to England and Lord Hartledon's. And Val, in his goodnature, bore the infliction passively so long as she kept civil and peaceable.

In this also her husband's behaviour puzzled Anne. Disliking the dowager beyond every other created being, he yet suffered her to indulge his children; and if any little passageatarms supervened, took her part rather than his wife's.

"I cannot understand you, Val," Anne said to him one day, in tones of pain. "You are not as you used to be." And his only answer was to strain his wife to his bosom with an impassioned gesture of love.

But these were only episodes in their generally happy life. Never more happy, more free from any external influence, than when Thomas Carr arrived there on this identical Saturday. He went in unexpectedly: and Val's violet eyes, beautiful as ever, shone out their welcome; and Anne, who happened to have her baby on her lap, blushed and smiled, as she held it out for the barrister's inspection.

"I dare not take it," said he. "You would be up in arms if it were dropped. What is its name?"

"Reginald."

A little while, and she carried the child away, leaving them alone. Mr. Carr declined refreshment for the present; and he and Val strolled out arminarm.

"I have brought you an item of news, Hartledon. Gorton has turned up."

"Not Gordon?"

"No. And what's more, Gorton never was Gordon. You were right, and I was wrong. I would have bet a tenpound notea great venture for a barristerthat the men were the same; never, in point of fact, had a doubt of it."

"You would not listen to me," said Val. "I told you I was sure I could not have failed to recognize Gordon, had he been the one who was down at Calne with the writ."

"But you acknowledged that it might have been he, nevertheless; that his red hair might have been false; that you never had a distinct view of the man's face; and that the only time you spoke to him was in the gloaming," reiterated Thomas Carr. "Well, as it turns out, we might have spared half our pains and anxiety, for Gorton was never any one but himself: an innocent sheriff's officer, as far as you are concerned, who had never, in his life set eyes on Val Elster until he went after him to Calne."

"Didn't I say so?" reiterated Val. "Gordon would have known me too well to arrest Edward for me."

"But you admitted the general likeness between you and your brother; and Gordon had not seen you for three years or more."

"Yes; I admitted all you say, and perhaps was a little doubtful myself. But I soon shook off the doubt, and of late years have been sure that Gordon was really dead. It has been more than a conviction. I always said there were no grounds for connecting the two together."

"I had my grounds for doing it," remarked the barrister. "Gorton, it seems, has been in Australia ever since. No wonder Green could not unearth him in London. He's back again on a visit, looking like a gentleman; and really I can't discover that there was ever anything against him, except that he was down in the world. Taylor met him the other day, and I had him brought to my chambers; and have told you the result."

"You do not now feel any doubt that Gordon's dead?"

"None at all. Your friend, Gordon of Kircudbright, was the one who embarked, or ought to have embarked, on the Morning Star, homeward bound," said Mr. Carr. And he forthwith told Lord Hartledon what the man had said.

A silence ensued. Lord Hartledon was in deep and evidently not pleasant thought; and the barrister stole a glance at him.

"Hartledon, take comfort. I am as cautious by nature as I believe it is possible for any one to be; and I am sure the man is dead, and can never rise up to trouble you."

"I have been sure of that for years," replied Hartledon quietly. "I have just said so."

"Then what is disturbing you?"

"Oh, Carr, how can you ask it?" came the rejoinder. "What is it lies on my mind day and night; is wearing me out before my time? Discovery may be avoided; but when I look at the childrenat the boy especiallyit would have turned some men mad," he more quietly added, passing his hand across his brow. "As long as he lives, I cannot have rest from pain. The sins of the fathers"

"Yes, yes," interposed Mr. Carr, hastily. "Still the case is light, compared with what we once dreaded."

"Light for me, heavy for him."

Mr. Carr remained with them until the Monday: he then went back to London and work; and time glided on again. An event occurred the following winter which shall be related at once; more especially as nothing of moment took place in those intervening months needing special record.

The man Pike, who still occupied his shed undisturbed, had been ailing for some time. An attack of rheumatic fever in the summer had left him little better than a cripple. He crawled abroad still when he was able, and would do so, in spite of what Mr. Hillary said; would lie about the damp ground in a lawless, gipsying sort of manner; but by the time winter came all that was over, and Mr. Pike's career, as foretold by the surgeon, was drawing rapidly to a close. Mrs. Gum was his good Samaritan, as she had been in the fever some years before, going in and out and attending to him; and in a reasonable way Pike wanted for nothing.

"How long can I last?" he abruptly asked the doctor one morning. "Needn't fear to say. She's the only one that will take on; I shan't."

He alluded to Mrs. Gum, who had just gone out. The surgeon considered.

"Two or three days."

"As much as that?"

"I think so."

"Oh!" said Pike. "When it comes to the last day I should like to see Lord Hartledon."

"Why the last day?"

The man's pinched features broke into a smile; pleasant and fair features once, with a gentle look upon them. The black wig and whiskers lay near him; but the real hair, light and scanty, was pushed back from the damp brow.

"No use, then, to think of giving me up: no time left for it."

"I question if Lord Hartledon would give you up were you in rude health. I'm sure he would not," added Mr. Hillary, endorsing his opinion rather emphatically. "If ever there was a kindly nature in the world, it's his. What do you want with him?"

"I should like to say a word to him in private," responded Pike.

"Then you'd better not wait to say it. I'll tell him of your wish. It's all safe. Why, Pike, if the police themselves came they wouldn't trouble to touch you now."

"I shouldn't much care if they did," said the man. "I haven't cared for a long while; but there were the others, you know."

"Yes," said Mr. Hillary.

"Look here," said Pike; "no need to tell him particulars; leave them till I'm gone. I don't know that I'd like him to look me in the face, knowing them."

"As you will," said Mr. Hillary, falling in with the wish more readily than he might have done for anyone but a dying man.

He had patients out of Calne, beyond Hartledon, and called in returning. It was a snowy day; and as the surgeon was winding towards the house, past the lodge, with a quick step, he saw a white figure marching across the park. It was Lord Hartledon. He had been caught in the storm, and came up laughing.

"Umbrellas are at a premium," observed Mr. Hillary, with the freedom long intimacy had sanctioned.

"It didn't snow when I came out," said Hartledon, shaking himself, and making light of the matter. "Were you coming to honour me with a morning call?"

"I was and I wasn't," returned the surgeon. "I've no time for morning calls, unless they are professional ones; but I wanted to say a word to you. Have you a mind for a further walk in the snow?"

"As far as you like."

"There's a patient of mine drawing very near the time when doctors can do no more for him. He has expressed a wish to see you, and I undertook to convey the request."

"I'll go, of course," said Val, all his kindliness on the alert. "Who is it?"

"A black sheep," answered the surgeon. "I don't know whether that will make any difference?"

"It ought not," said Val rather warmly. "Black sheep have more need of help than white ones, when it comes to the last. I suppose it's a poacher wanting to clear his conscience."

"It's Pike," said Hillary.

"Pike! What can he want with me? Is he no better?"

"He'll never be better in this world; and to speak the truth, I think it's time he left it. He'll be happier, poor fellow, let's hope, in another than he has been in this. Has it ever struck you, Lord Hartledon, that there was something strange about Pike, and his manner of coming here?"

"Very strange indeed."

"Well, Pike is not Pike, but another manwhich I suppose you will say is Irish. But that he is so ill, and it would not be worth while for the law to take him, he might be in mortal fear of your seeing him, lest you betrayed him. He wanted you not to be informed until the last hour. I told him there was no fear."

"I would not betray any living man, whatever his crime, for the whole world," returned Lord Hartledon; his voice so earnest as to amount to pain. And the surgeon looked at him; but there rose up in his remembrance how he had been avoiding betrayal for years. "Who is he?"

"Willy Gum."

Lord Hartledon turned his head sharply under cover of the surgeon's umbrella, for they were walking along together. A thought crossed him that the words might be a jest.

"Yes, Pike is Willy Gum," continued Mr. Hillary. "And there you have the explanation of the poor mother's nervous terrors. I do pity her. The clerk has taken it more philosophically, and seemed only to care lest the fact should become known. Ah, poor thing! what a life hers has been! Her fears of the wild neighbour, her basins for cats, are all explained now. She dreaded lest Calne should suspect that she occasionally stole into the shed under cover of the night with the basins containing food for its inmate. There the man has livedif you can call such an existence living; Willy Gum, concealed by his borrowed black hair and whiskers. But that he was only a boy when he went away, Calne would have recognized him in spite of them."

"And he is not a poacher and a snarer, and I don't know what all, leading a lawless life, and thieving for his living?" exclaimed Lord Hartledon, the first question that rose to the surface, amidst the many that were struggling in his mind.

"I don't believe the man has touched the worth of a pin belonging to any one since he came here, even on your preserves. People took up the notion from his wild appearance, and because he had no ostensible means of living. It would not have done to let them know that he had his suppliessometimes money, sometimes foodfrom respectable clerk Gum's."

"But why should he be in concealment at all? That bank affair was made all right at the time."

"There are other things he feared, it seems. I've not time to enter into details now; you'll know them later. There he isPike: and there he'll diePike always."

"How long have you known it?"

"Since that fever he caught from the Rectory some years ago. I recollect your telling me not to let him want for anything;" and Lord Hartledon winced at the remembrance brought before him, as he always did wince at the unhappy past. "I never shall forget it. I went in, thinking Pike was ill, and that he, wild and disreputable though he had the character of being, might want physic as well as his neighbours. Instead of the blackhaired bear I expected to see, there lay a young, light, delicate fellow, with a white brow, and cheeks pink with fever. The features seemed familiar to me; little by little recognition came to me, and I saw it was Willy Gum, whom every one had been

mourning as dead. He said a pleading word or two, that I would keep his secret, and not give him up to justice. I did not understand what there was to give him up for then. However, I promised. He was too ill to say much; and I went to the next door, and put it to Gum's wife that she should go and nurse Pike for humanity's sake. Of course it was what she wanted to do. Poor thing! she fell on her knees later, beseeching me not to betray him."

"And you have kept counsel all this time?"

"Yes," said the surgeon, laconically. "Would your lordship have done otherwise, even though it had been a question of hanging?"

"I! I wouldn't give a man a month at the treadmill if I could help it. One gets into offences so easily," he dreamily added.

They crossed over the waste land, and Mr. Hillary opened the door of the shed with a passkey. A lock had been put on when Pike was lying in rheumatic fever, lest intruders might enter unawares, and see him without his disguise.

"Pike, I have brought you my lord. He won't betray you."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE SHED RAZED.

Closing the door upon them, the surgeon went off on other business, and Lord Hartledon entered and bent over the bed; a more comfortable bed than it once had been. It was the Willy Gum of other days; the boy he had played with when they were boys together. White, wan, wasted, with the dying hectic on his cheek, the glitter already in his eye, he lay there; and Val's eyelashes shone as he took the worn hand.

"I am so sorry, Willy. I had no suspicion it was you. Why did you not confide in me?"

The invalid shook his head. "There might have been danger in it."

"Never from me," was the emphatic answer.

"Ah, my lord, you don't know. I haven't dared to make myself known to a soul. Mr. Hillary found it out, and I couldn't help myself."

Lord Hartledon glanced round at the strange place: the rafters, the rude walls. A fire was burning on the hearth, and the appliances brought to bear were more comfortable than might have been imagined; but still

"Surely you will allow yourself to be removed to a better place, Willy?" he said.

"Call me Pike," came the feverish interruption. "Never that other name again, my lord; I've done with it for ever. As to a better placeI shall have that soon enough."

"You wanted to say something to me, Mr. Hillary said."

"I've wanted to say it some time now, and to beg your lordship's pardon. It's about the late earl's death."

"My brother's?"

"Yes. I was on the wrong scent a long time. And I can tell you what nobody else will."

Lord Hartledon lifted his head quickly; thoughts were crowding impulsively into his mind, and he spoke in the moment's haste.

"Surely you had not anything to do with that!"

"No; but I thought your lordship had."

"What do you mean?" asked Lord Hartledon, quietly.

"It's for my foolish and wicked and mistaken thought that I would crave pardon before I go. I thought your lordship had killed the late lord, either by accident or maliciously."

"You must be dreaming, Pike!"

"No; but I was no better than dreaming then. I had been living amidst lawless scenes, over the seas and on the seas, where a life's not of much account, and the fancy was easy enough. I happened to overhear a quarrel between you and the earl just before his death; I saw you going towards the spot at the time the accident happened, as you may remember"

"I did not go so far," interrupted Hartledon, wondering still whether this might not be the wanderings of a dying man. "I turned back into the trees at once, and walked slowly home. Many a time have I wished I had gone on!"

"Yes, yes; I was on the wrong scent. And there was that blow on his temple to keep up the error, which I know now must have been done against the estrade. I did suspect at the time, and your lordship will perhaps not forgive me for it. I let drop a word that I suspected something before that man Gorton, and he asked me what I meant; and I explained it away, and said I was chaffing him. And I have been all this time, up to a few weeks ago, learning the true particulars of how his lordship died."

Lord Hartledon decided that the man's mind was undoubtedly wandering.

But Pike was not wandering. And he told the story of the boy Ripper having been locked up in the mill. Mr. Ripper was almost a match for Pike himself in deceit; and Pike had only learned the facts by dint of long patience and perseverance and many threats. The boy had seen the whole accident; had watched it from the window where he was enclosed, unable to get out, unless he had torn away the grating. Lord Hartledon had lost all command of the little skiff, his arm being utterly disabled; and it came drifting down towards the mill, and struck against the estrade. The skiff righted itself at once, but not its owner: there was a slight struggle, a few cries, and he lay motionless, drifting later to the place where he was found. Mr. Ripper's opinion was that he had lost his senses with the blow on the temple, and fell an easy prey to death. Had that gentleman only sacrificed the grating and his own reputation, he might have saved him easily; and

that fact had since been upon his conscience, making him fear all sorts of things, not the least of which was that he might be hanged as a murderer.

This story he had told Pike at the time, with one reservehe persisted that he had not seen, only heard. Pike saw that the boy was still not telling the whole truth, and suspected he was screening Lord Hartledonhe who now stood before him. Mr. Ripper's logic tended to the belief that he could not be punished if he stuck to the avowal of having seen nothing. He had only heard the cries; and when Pike asked if they were cries as if he were being assaulted, the boy evasively answered "happen they were." Another little item he suppressed: that he found the purse at the bottom of the skiff, after he got out of the mill, and appropriated it to himself; and when he had fairly done that, he grew more afraid of having done it than of all the rest. The money he secreted, using it when he dared, a sixpence at a time; the case, with its papers, he buried in the spot where his master afterwards found it. With all this upon the young man's conscience, no wonder he was a little confused and contradictory in his statements to Pike: no wonder he fancied the ghost of the man he could have saved and did not, might now and then be hovering about him. Pike learned the real truth at last; and a compunction had come over him, now that he was dying, for having doubted Lord Hartledon.

"My lord, I can only ask you to forgive me. I ought to have known you better. But things seemed to corroborate it so: I've heard people say the new lord was as a man who had some great care upon him. Oh, I was a fool!"

"At any rate it was not that care, Pike; I would have saved my brother's life with my own, had I been at hand to do it. As to RipperI shall never bear to look upon him again."

"He's gone away," said Pike.

"Where has he gone?"

"The miller turned him off for idleness, and he's gone away, nobody knows where, to get work: I don't suppose he'll ever come back again. This is the real truth of the matter as it occurred, my lord; and there's no more behind it. Ripper has now told all he knows, just as fully as if he had been put to torture."

Lord Hartledon remained with Pike some time longer, soothing the man as much as it was in his power and kindly nature to soothe. He whispered a word of the clergyman, Dr. Ashton.

"Father says he shall bring him tonight," was the answer. "It's all a farce."

"I am sorry to hear you say that," returned Lord Hartledon, gravely.

"If I had never said a worse thing than that, my lord, I shouldn't hurt. Unless the accounts are made up beforehand, parsons can't avail much at the twelfth hour. Mother's lessons to me when a child, and her reading the Bible as she sits here in the night, are worth more than Dr. Ashton could do. But for those old lessons' having come home to me now, I might not have cared to ask your forgiveness. Dr. Ashton! what is he? For an awful sinnerand it's what I've beenthere's only Christ. At times I think I've been too bad even for Him. I've only my sins to take to Him: never were worse in this world."

Lord Hartledon went out rather bewildered with the occurrences of the morning. Thinking it might be only kind to step into the clerk's, he crossed the stile and went in without ceremony by the open backdoor. Mrs. Gum was alone in the kitchen, crying bitterly. She dried her eyes in confusion, as she curtsied to her visitor.

"I know all," he interrupted, in low, considerate tones, to the poor suffering woman. "I have been to see him. Never mind explanations: let us think what we can best do to lighten his last hours."

Mrs. Gum burst into deeper tears. It was a relief, no doubt: but she wondered how much Lord Hartledon knew.

"I say that he ought to be got away from that place, Mrs. Gum. It's not fit for a man to die in. You might have him here. Calne! Surely my protection will sufficiently screen him against tattling Calne!"

She shook her head, saying it was of no use talking to Willy about removal; he wouldn't have it; and she thought herself it might be better not. Jabez, too; if this ever came out in Calne, it would just kill him; his lordship knew what he was, and how he had cared for appearances all his life. No; it would not be for many more hours now, and Willy must die in the shed where he had lived.

Lord Hartledon sat down on the ironingboard, the white table underneath the window, in the old familiar manner of former days; many and many a time had he perched himself there to talk to her when he was young Val Elster.

"Only fancy what my life has been, my lord," she said. "People have called me nervous and timid; but look at the cause I've had! I was just beginning to get over the grief for his death, when he came here; and to the last hour of my life I shan't get the night out of my mind! I and Jabez were together in this very kitchen. I had come in to wash up the teathings, and Jabez followed me. It was a cold, dark evening, and the parlour fire had

got low. By token, my lord, we were talking of you; you had just gone away to be an ambassador, or something, and then we spoke of the wild, strange, black man who had crept into the shed; and Jabez, I remember, said he should acquaint Mr. Marris, if the fellow did not take himself off. I had seen him that very evening, at dusk, for the first time, when his great black face rose up against mine, nearly frightening me to death. Jabez was angry at such a man's being there, and said he should go up to Hartledon in the morning and see the steward. Just then there came a tap at the kitchen door, and Jabez went to it. It was the man; he had watched the servant out, and knew we were alone; and he came into the kitchen, and asked if we did not know him. Jabez did; he had seen Willy later than I had, and he recognized him; and the man took off his black hair and great black whiskers, and I saw it was Willy, and nearly fainted dead away."

There was a pause. Lord Hartledon did not speak, and she resumed, after a little indulgence in her grief.

"And since then all our aim has been to hide the truth, to screen him, and keep up the tale that we were afraid of the wild man. How it has been done I know not: but I do know that it has nearly killed me. What a night it was! When Jabez heard his story and forced him to answer all questions, I thought he would have given Willy up to the law there and then. My lord, we have just lived since with a sword over our heads!"

Lord Hartledon remembered the sword that had been over his own head, and sympathized with them from the depths of his heart.

"Tell me all," he said. "You are quite safe with me, Mrs. Gum."

"I don't know that there's much more to tell," she sighed. "We took the best precautions we could, in a quiet way, having the holes in the shutters filled up, and new locks put on the doors, lest people might look in or step in, while he sat here of a night, which he took to do. Jabez didn't like it, but I'm afraid I encouraged it. It was so lonely for him, that shed, and so unhealthy! We sent away the regular servant, and engaged one by day, so as to have the house to ourselves at night. If a knock came to the door, Willy would slip out to the woodhouse before we opened it, lest it might be anybody coming in. He did not come in every nighttwo or three times aweek; and it never was pleasant; for Jabez would hardly open his mouth, unless it was to reproach him. Heaven alone knows what I've had to bear!"

"But, Mrs. Gum, I cannot understand. Why could not Willy have declared himself openly to the world?"

It was evidently a most painful question. Her eyes fell; the crimson of shame flushed into her cheeks; and he felt sorry to have asked it.

"Spare me, my lord, for I cannot tell you. Perhaps Jabez will: or Mr. Hillary; he knows. It doesn't much matter, now death's so near; but I think it would kill me to have to tell it."

"And no one except the doctor has ever known that it was Willy?"

"One more, my lord: Mirrable. We told her at once. I have had to hear all sorts of cruel things said of him," continued Mrs. Gum. "That he thieved and poached, and did I know not what; and we could only encourage the fancy, for it put people off the truth as to how he really lived."

"Amidst other things, they said, I believe, that he was out with the poachers the night my brother George was shot!"

"And that night, my lord, he sat over this kitchen fire, and never stirred from it. He was ill: it was rheumatism, caught in Australia, that took such a hold upon him; and I had him here by the fire till near daylight in the morning, so as to keep him out of the damp shed. What with fearing one thing and another, I grew into a state of perpetual terror."

"Then you will not have him in here now," said Lord Hartledon, rising.

"I cannot," she said, her tears falling silently.

"Well, Mrs. Gum, I came in just to say a word of true sympathy. You have it heartily, and my services also, if necessary. Tell Jabez so."

He quitted the house by the frontdoor, as if he had been honouring the clerk's wife with a morningcall, should any curious person happen to be passing, and went across through the snow to the surgeon's. Mr. Hillary, an old bachelor, was at his early dinner, and Lord Hartledon sat down and talked to him.

"It's only rump steak; but few cooks can beat mine, and it's very good. Won't your lordship take a mouthful by way of luncheon?"

"My curiosity is too strong for luncheon just now," said Val. "I have come over to know the rights and wrongs of this story. What has Willy Gum been doing in the past years that it cannot be told?"

"I am not sure that it would be safe to say while he's living."

"Not safe! with me! Was it safe with you?"

"But I don't consider myself obliged to give up to justice any poor criminal who comes in my way," said the surgeon; and Val felt a little vexed, although he saw that he was joking.

"Come, Hillary!"

"Well, then, Willy Gum was coming home in the Morning Star; and a mutiny broke outmutiny and murder, and everything else that's bad; and one George Gordon was the ringleader."

"Yes. Well?"

"Willy Gum was George Gordon."

"What!" exclaimed Hartledon, not knowing how to accept the words. "How could he be George Gordon?"

"Because the real George Gordon never sailed at all; and this fellow Gum went on board in his name, calling himself Gordon."

Lord Hartledon leaned back in his chair and listened to the explanation. A very simple one, after all. Gum, one of the wildest and most careless characters possible when in Australia, gambled away, before sailing, the money he had acquired. Accident made him acquainted with George Gordon, also going home in the same ship and with money. Gordon was killed the night before sailing(Mr. Carr had well described it as a drunken brawl)killed accidentally. Gum was present; he saw his opportunity, went on board as Gordon, and claimed the luggagesome of it goldalready on board. How the mutiny broke out was less clear; but one of the other passengers knew Gum, and threatened to expose him; and perhaps this led to it. Gum, at any rate, was the ringleader, and this passenger was one of the first killed. GumGordon as he was calledcontrived to escape in the open boat, and found his way to land; thence, disguised, to England and to Calne; and at Calne he had since lived, with the price offered for George Gordon on his head.

It was a strange and awful story: and Lord Hartledon felt a shiver run through him as he listened. In truth, that shed was the safest and fittest place for him to die in!

As die he did ere the third day was over. And was buried as Pike, the wild man, without a mourner. Clerk Gum stood over the grave in his official capacity; and Dr. Ashton, who had visited the sick man, himself read the service, which caused some wonder in Calne.

And the following week Lord Hartledon caused the shed to be cleared away, and the waste land ploughed; saying he would have no more tramps encamping next door to Mr. and Mrs. Gum.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE DOWAGER'S ALARM.

Again the years went on, bringing not altogether comfort to the house of Hartledon. As Anne's children were bornthere were three nowa sort of jealous rivalry seemed to arise between them and the two elder children; and this in spite of Anne's efforts to the contrary. The moving spring was the countessdowager, who in secret excited the elder children against their little brothers and sister; but so craftily that Anne could produce nothing tangible to remonstrate against. Things would grow tolerably smooth during the old woman's absences; but she took good care not to make those absences lengthened, and then all the illnature and rebellion reigned triumphant.

Once only Anne spoke of this, and that was to her father. She hinted at the state of things, and asked his advice. Why did not Val interpose his authority, and forbid the dowager the house, if she could not keep herself from making mischief in it, sensibly asked the Rector. But Anne said neither she nor Val liked to do this. And then the Rector fancied there was some constraint in his daughter's voice, and she was not telling him the whole case unreservedly. He inquired no further, only gave her the best advice in his power: to be watchful, and counteract the dowager's influence, as far as she could; and trust to time; doing her own duty religiously by the children.

What Anne had not mentioned to Dr. Ashton was her husband's conduct in the matter. In that one respect she could read him no better than of old. Devoted to her as he was, as she knew him to be, in the children's petty disputes he invariably took the part of his first wife'sto the glowing satisfaction of the countessdowager. No matter how glaringly wrong they might be, how tyrannical, Hartledon screened the elder, andto use the expression of the nursessnubbed the younger. Kind and good though Lady Hartledon was, she felt it acutely; and, to say the truth, was sorely puzzled and perplexed.

Lord Elster was an ailing child, and Mr. Brook, the apothecary, was always in attendance when they were in London. Lady Hartledon thought the boy's health might have been better left more to nature, but she would not have said so for the world. The dowager, on the contrary, would have preferred that half the metropolitan faculty should see him daily. She had a jealous dread of anything happening to the boy, and Anne's son becoming the heir.

Lord Hartledon was a busy man now, and had a place in the Governmentthough not as yet in the Cabinet. Whatever his secret care might have been, it was now passive; he was a general favourite, and courted in society. He was still young; the face as genial, the

manners as free, the darkblue eyes as kindly as of yore; eminently attractive in earlier days, he was so still; and his love for his wife amounted to a passion.

At the close of a sharp winter, when they had come up to town in January, that Lord Hartledon might be at his post, and the countessdowager was inflicting upon them one of her long visits, it happened that Lord Elster seemed very poorly. Mr. Brook was called in, and said he would send a powder. He was called in so often to the boy as to take it quite as a matter of course; and, truth to say, thought the present indisposition nothing but a slight cold.

Late in the evening the two boys happened to be alone in the nursery, the nurse being temporarily absent from it. Edward was now a tall, slender, handsome boy in knickerbockers; Reginald a timid little fellow, several years youngerrendered timid by Edward's perpetual tyranny, which he might not resent. Edward was quiet enough this evening; he felt ill and shivery, and sat close to the fire. Casting his eyes upwards, he espied Mr. Brook's powder on the mantelpiece, with the stereotyped direction"To be taken at bedtime." It was lying close to the jampot, which the headnurse had put ready. Of course he had the greatest possible horror of medicine, and his busy thoughts began to run upon how he might avoid that detestable powder. The little fellow was sitting on the carpet playing with his bricks. Edward turned his eyes on his brother, and a bright thought occurred to him.

"Regy," said he, taking down the pot, "come here. Look at this jam: isn't it nice? It's raspberry and currant."

The child left his bricks to bend over the tempting compound.

"I'll give it you every bit to eat before nurse comes back," continued the boy, "if you'll eat this first."

Reginald cast a look upon the powder his brother exhibited. "What is it?" he lisped; "something good?"

"Delicious. It's just come in from the sweetstuff shop. Open your mouthwide."

Reginald did as he was bid: opened his mouth to its utmost width, and the boy shot in the powder.

It happened to be a preparation of that nauseous drug familiarly known as "Dover's powder." The child found it so, and set up a succession of shrieks, which aroused the house. The nurse rushed in; and Lord and Lady Hartledon, both of whom were dressing

for dinner, appeared on the scene. There stood Reginald, coughing, choking, and roaring; and there sat the culprit, equably devouring the jam. With time and difficulty the facts were elicited from the younger child, and the elder scorned to deny them.

"What a wicked, greedy Turk you must be!" ejaculated the nurse, who was often in hot water with the elder boy.

"But Reginald need not have screamed so," testily interposed Lord Hartledon. "I thought one of them must be on fire. You naughty child, why did you scream?" he continued, giving Reginald a slight tap on the ear.

"Any child would scream at being so taken by surprise," said Lady Hartledon. "It is Edward who is in fault, not Reginald; and it is he who deserves punishment."

"And he should have it, if he were my son," boldly declared the nurse, as she picked up the unhappy Reginald. "A great greedy boy, to swallow down every bit of the jam, and never give his brother a taste, after poisoning him with that nasty powder!"

Edward rose, and gave the nurse a look of scorn. "The powder's good enough for him: he is nothing but a young brat, and I am Lord Elster."

Lady Hartledon felt provoked. "What is that you say, Edward?" she asked, laying her hand upon his shoulder in reproval.

"Let me alone, mamma. He'll never be anything but Regy Elster. I shall be Lord Hartledon, and jam's proper for me, and it's fair I should put upon him."

The nurse flounced off with Reginald, and Lady Hartledon turned to her husband. "Is this to be suffered? Will you allow it to pass without correction?"

"He means nothing," said Val. "Do you, Edward, my boy?"

"Yes, I do; I mean what I say. I shall stand up for myself and Maude."

Hartledon made no remonstrance: only drew the boy to him, with a hasty gesture, as though he would shield him from anger and the world.

Anne, hurt almost to tears, quitted the room. But she had scarcely reached her own when she remembered that she had left a diamond brooch in the nursery, which she had just been about to put into her dress when alarmed by the cries. She went back for it, and stood almost confounded by what she saw. Lord Hartledon, sitting down, had

clasped his boy in his arms, and was sobbing over him; emotion such as man rarely betrays.

"Papa, Regy and the other two are not going to put me and Maude out of our places, are they? They can't, you know. We come first."

"Yes, yes, my boy; no one shall put you out," was the answer, as he pressed passionate kisses on the boy's face. "I will stand by you for ever."

Very judicious indeed! the once sensible man seemed to ignore the evident fact that the boy had been tutored. Lady Hartledon, a fear creeping over her, she knew not of what, left her brooch where it was, and stole back to her dressingroom.

Presently Val came in, all traces of emotion removed from his features. Lady Hartledon had dismissed her maid, and stood leaning against the arm of the sofa, indulging in bitter rumination.

"Silly children!" cried he; "it's hard work to manage them. And Edward has lost his pow"

He broke off; stopped by the look of angry reproach from his wife, cast on him for the first time in their married life. He took her hand and bent down to her: fervent love, if ever she read it, in his eyes and tones.

"Forgive me, Anne; you are feeling this."

"Why do you throw these slights on my children? Why are you not more just?"

"I do not intend to slight our children, Anne, Heaven knows. But II cannot punish Edward."

"Why did you ever make me your wife?" sighed Lady Hartledon, drawing her hand away.

His poor assumption of unconcern was leaving him quickly; his face was changing to one of bitter sorrow.

"When I married you," she resumed, "I had reason to hope that should children be born to us, you would love them equally with your first; I had a right to hope it. What have I done that"

"Stay, Anne! I can bear anything better than reproach from you."

"What have I and my children done to you, I was about to ask, that you take this aversion to them? lavishing all your love on the others and upon them only injustice?"

Val bent down, agitation in his face and voice.

"Hush, Anne! you don't know. The danger is that I should love your children better, far better than Maude's. It might be so if I did not guard against it."

"I cannot understand you," she exclaimed.

"Unfortunately, I understand myself only too well. I have a heavy burden to bear; do not youmy best and dearestincrease it."

She looked at him keenly; laid her hands upon him, tears gathering in her eyes. "Tell me what the burden is; tell me, Val! Let me share it."

But Val drew in again at once, alarmed at the request: and contradicted himself in the most absurd manner.

"There's nothing to share, Anne; nothing to tell."

Certainly this change was not propitiatory. Lady Hartledon, chilled and mortified, disdained to pursue the theme. Drawing herself up, she turned to go down to dinner, remarking that he might at least treat the children with more apparent justice.

"I am just; at least, I wish to be just," he broke forth in impassioned tones. "But I cannot be severe with Edward and Maude."

Another powder was procured, and, amidst much fighting and resistance, was administered. Lady Hartledon was in the boy's room the first thing in the morning. One grand quality in her was, that she never visited her vexation on the children; and Edward, in spite of his unamiable behaviour, did at heart love her, whilst he despised his grandmother; one of his sources of amusement being to take off that estimable old lady's peculiarities behind her back, and send the servants into convulsions.

"You look very hot, Edward," exclaimed Lady Hartledon, as she kissed him. "How do you feel?"

"My throat's sore, mamma, and my legs could not find a cold place all night. Feel my hand."

It was a child's answer, sufficiently expressive. An anxious look rose to her countenance.

"Are you sure your throat is sore?"

"It's very sore. I am so thirsty."

Lady Hartledon gave him some weak tea, and sent for Mr. Brook to come round as soon as possible. At breakfast she met the dowager, who had been out the previous evening during the powder episode. Lady Hartledon mentioned to her husband that she had sent a message to the doctor, not much liking Edward's symptoms.

"What's the matter with him?" asked the dowager, quickly. "What are his symptoms?"

"Nay, I may be wrong," said Lady Hartledon, with a smile. "I won't infect you with my fears, when there may be no reason for them."

The countessdowager caught at the one word, and applied it in a manner never anticipated. She was the same foolish old woman she had ever been; indeed, her dread of catching any disorder had only grown with the years. And it happened, unfortunately for her peace, that the disorder which leaves its cruel traces on the most beautiful face was just then prevalent in London. Of all maladies the human frame is subject to, the vain old creature most dreaded that one. She rose up from her seat; her face turned pale, and her teeth began to chatter.

"It's smallpox! If I have a horror of one thing more than another, it's that dreadful, disfiguring malady. I wouldn't stay in a house where it was for a hundred thousand pounds. I might catch it and be marked for life!"

Lady Hartledon begged her to be composed, and Val smothered a laugh. The symptoms were not those of smallpox.

"How should you know?" retorted the dowager, drowning the reassuring words. "How should any one know? Get Pepps here directly. Have you sent for him?"

"No," said Anne. "I have more confidence in Mr. Brook where children are concerned."

"Confidence in Brook!" shrieked the dowager, pushing up her flaxen front. "A common, overworked apothecary! Confidence in him, Lady Hartledon! Elster's life may be in danger; he is my grandchild, and I insist on Pepps being fetched to him."

Anne sat down at once and wrote a brief note to Sir Alexander. It happened that the message sent to Mr. Brook had found that gentleman away from home, and the greater man arrived first. He looked at the child, asked a few bland questions, and wrote a prescription. He did not say what the illness might be: for he never hazarded a premature opinion. As he was leaving the chamber, a servant accosted him.

"Lady Kirton wishes to see you, sir."

"Well, Pepps," cried she, as he advanced, having loaded herself with camphor, "what is it?"

"I do not take upon myself to pronounce an opinion, Lady Kirton," rejoined the doctor, who had grown to feel irritated lately at the dowager's want of ceremony towards him. "In the early stage of a disorder it can rarely be done with certainty."

"Now don't let's have any of that professional humbug, Pepps," rejoined her ladyship. "You doctors know a common disorder as soon as you see it, only you think it looks wise not to say. Is it smallpox?"

"It's not impossible," said the doctor, in his wrath.

The dowager gasped.

"But I do not observe any symptoms of that malady developing themselves at present," added the doctor. "I think I may say it is not smallpox."

"Good patience, Pepps! you'll frighten me into it. It is and it isn'twhat do you mean? What is it, if it's not that?""I may be able to tell after a second visit. Good morning, Lady Kirton," said he, backing out. "Take care you don't do yourself an injury with too much of that camphor. It is exciting."

In a short time Mr. Brook arrived. When he had seen the child and was alone with Lady Hartledon, she explained that the countessdowager had wished Sir Alexander Pepps called in, and showed him the prescription just written. He read it and laid it down.

"Lady Hartledon," said he, "I must venture to disagree with that prescription. Lord Elster's symptoms are those of scarletfever, and it would be unwise to administer it. Sir Alexander stands of course much higher in the profession than I do, but my practice with children is larger than his."

"I feared it was scarletfever," answered Lady Hartledon. "What is to be done? I have every confidence in you, Mr. Brook; and were Edward my own child, I should know how to act. Do you think it would be dangerous to give him this prescription? You may speak confidentially."

"Not dangerous; it is a prescription that will do neither harm nor good. I suspect Sir Alexander could not detect the nature of the illness, and wrote this merely to gain time. It is not an infrequent custom to do so. In my opinion, not an hour should be lost in giving him a more efficacious medicine; early treatment is everything in scarletfever."

Lady Hartledon had been rapidly making up her mind. "Send in what you think right to be taken, immediately," she said, "and meet Sir Alexander in consultation later on."

Scarletfever it proved to be; not a mild form of it; and in a very few hours Lord Elster was in great danger, the throat being chiefly affected. The house was in commotion; the dowager worse than any one in it. A complication of fears beset her: first, terror for her own safety, and next, the less abject dread that death might remove her grandchild. In this latter fear she partly lost her personal fears, so far at any rate as to remain in the house; for it seemed to her that the child would inevitably die if she left it. Late in the afternoon she rushed into the presence of the doctors, who had just been holding a second consultation.

Sir Alexander Pepps recommended leeches to the throat: Mr. Brook disapproved of them. "It is the one chance for his life," said Sir Alexander.

"It is removing nearly all chance," said Mr. Brook.

Sir Alexander prevailed; and when they came forth it was understood that leeches were to be applied. But here Lady Hartledon stepped in.

"I dread leeches to the throat, Sir Alexander, if you will forgive me for saying so. I have twice seen them applied in scarletfever; and the patientsone a young lady, the other a childin both cases died."

"Madam, I have given my opinion," curtly returned the physician. "They are necessary in Lord Elster's case."

"Do you approve of leeches?" cried Lady Hartledon, turning to Mr. Brook.

"Not altogether," was the cautious answer.

"Answer me one question, Mr. Brook," said Lady Hartledon, in her earnestness. "Would you apply these leeches were you treating the case alone?"

"No, madam, I would not."

Anne appealed to her husband. When the medical men differed, she thought the decision lay with him.

"I'm sure I don't know," returned Val, who felt perfectly helpless to advise. "Can't you decide, Anne? You know more about children and illness than I do."

"I would do so without hesitating a moment were it my own child," she replied. "I would not allow them to be put on."

"No, you would rather see him die," interrupted the dowager, who overheard the words, and most intemperately and unjustifiably answered them.

Anne coloured with shame for the old woman, but the words silenced her: how was it possible to press her own opinion after that? Sir Alexander had it all his own way, and the leeches were applied on either side the throat, Mr. Brook emphatically asserting in Lady Hartledon's private ear that he "washed his hands" of the measure. Before they came off the consequences were apparent; the throat was swollen outwardly, on both sides; within, it appeared to be closing.

The dowager, rather beside herself on the whole, had insisted on the leeches. Any one, seeing her conduct now, might have thought the invalid boy was really dear to her. Nothing of the sort. A hazy idea had been looming through her mind for years that Val was not strong; she had been mistaking mental disease for bodily illness; and a project to have full control of her grandchild, should he come into the succession prematurely, had coloured her dreams. This charming prospect would be ignominiously cut short if the boy went first.

Sir Alexander saw his error. There must be something peculiar in Lord Elster's constitution, he blandly said; it would not have happened in another. Of course, anything that turns out a mistake always is in the constitutionnever in the treatment. Whether he lived or died now was just the turn of a straw: the chances were that he would die. All that could be done now was to endeavour to counteract the mischief by external applications.

"I wish you would let me try a remedy," said Lady Hartledon, wistfully. "A compress of cold water round the throat with oilsilk over it. I have seen it do so much good in cases of inward inflammation."

Mr. Brook smiled: if anything would do good that might, he said, speaking as if he had little faith in remedies now. Sir Alexander intimated that her ladyship might try it; graciously observing that it would do no harm.

The application was used, and the evening went on. The child had fallen into a sort of stupor, and Mr. Brook came in again before he had been away an hour, and leaned anxiously over the patient. He lay with his eyes halfclosed, and breathed with difficulty.

"I think," he exclaimed softly, "there's the slightest shade of improvement."

"In the fever, or the throat?" whispered Lady Hartledon, who had not quitted the boy's bedside.

"In the throat. If so, it is due to your remedy, Lady Hartledon."

"Is he in danger?"

"In great danger. Still, I see a gleam of hope."

After the surgeon's departure, she went down to her husband, meeting Hedges on the stairs, who was coming to inquire after the patient for his master, for about the fiftieth time. Hartledon was in the library, pacing about incessantly in the darkness, for the room was only lighted by the fire. Anne closed the door and approached him.

"Percival, I do not bring you very good tidings," she said; "and yet they might be worse. Mr. Brook tells me he is in great danger, but thinks he sees a gleam of hope."

Lord Hartledon took her hand within his arm and resumed his pacing; his eyes were fixed on the carpet, and he said nothing.

"Don't grieve as those without hope," she continued, her eyes filling with tears. "He may yet recover. I have been praying that it may be so."

"Don't pray for it," he cried, his tone one of painful entreaty. "I have been daring to pray that it might please God to take him."

"Percival!" she exclaimed, starting away from him.

"I am not mad, Anne. Death would be a more merciful fate for my boy than life. Death now, whilst he is innocent, safe in Christ's love!death, in Heaven's mercy!"

And Anne crept back to the upper chamber, sick with terror; for she did think that the trouble of his child's state was affecting her husband's brain.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A PAINFUL SCENE.

Lord and Lady Hartledon were entertaining a family group. The everlasting dowager kept to them unpleasantly; making things unbearable, and wearing out her welcome in no slight degree, if she had only been wise enough to see it. She had escaped scarletfever and other dreaded ills; and was alive still. For that matter, the little Lord Elster had come out of it also: not unscathed; for the boy remained a sickly wreck, and there was very little hope that he would really recover. The final close might be delayed, but it was not to be averted. Before Easter they had left London for Hartledon, that he might have country air. Lord Hartledon's eldest sister, Lady Margaret Cooper, came there with her husband; and on this day the other sister, Lady Laura Level, had arrived from India. Lady Margaret was an invalid, and not an agreeable woman besides; but to Laura and Anne the meeting, after so many years' separation, was one of intense pleasure. They had been close friends from childhood.

They were all gathered together in the large drawingroom after luncheon. The day was a wet one, and no one had ventured out except Sir James Cooper. Accustomed to the Scotch mists, this rain seemed a genial shower, and Sir James was enjoying it accordingly. It was a warm, close day, in spite of the rain; and the large fire in the grate made the room oppressive, so that they were glad to throw the windows open.

Lying on a sofa near the fire was the invalid boy. By merely looking at him you might see that he would never rally, though he fluctuated much. Today he was, comparatively speaking, well. Little Maude was threading beads; and the two others, much younger, stood looking onReginald and Anne. Lady Margaret Cooper, having a fellowfeeling for an invalid, sat near the sick boy. Lord Hartledon sat apart at a table reading, and making occasional notes. The dowager, more cumbersome than ever, dozed on the other side of the hearth. She was falling into the habit of taking a nap after luncheon as well as after dinner. Lady Laura was in danger of convulsions every time she looked at the dowager. Never in all her life had she seen so queer an old figure. She and Anne stood together at an open window, the one eagerly asking questions, the other answering, all in undertones. Lady Laura had been away from her own home and kindred some twelve years, and it seemed to her half a lifetime.

"Anne, how was it?" she exclaimed. "It was a thing that always puzzled me, and I never came to the bottom of it. My husband said at the time I used to talk of it in my sleep."

"What do you mean?"

"About you and Val. You were engaged to each other; you loved him, and he loved you. How came that other marriage about?"

"Well, I can hardly tell you. I was at Cannes with mamma, and he fell into the meshes. We knew nothing about it until they were married. Never mind all that now; I don't care to recall it, and it is a very sore point with Val. The blame, I believe, lay chiefly with her."

Anne glanced at the dowager, to indicate whom she meant. Lady Laura's eyes followed the same direction, and she laughed.

"A painted old guy! She looks like one who would do it. Why doesn't some one put her under a glass case and take her to the British Museum? When news of the marriage came out to India I was thunderstruck. I wrote off at once to Val, asking all sorts of questions, and received quite a savage reply, telling me to mind my own business. That letter alone would have told me how Val repented; it was so unlike him. Do you know what I did?"

"What did you do?"

"Sent him another letter by return mail with only two words in it'Elster's Folly.' Poor Val! She died of heartdisease, did she not?"

"Yes. But she seemed to have been ailing for some time. She was greatly changed."

"Val is changed. There are threads of silver in his hair; and he is so much quieter than I thought he ever would be. I wonder you took him, Anne, after all; and I wonder still more that Dr. Ashton allowed it."

A blush tinged Lady Hartledon's face as she looked out at the soft rain, and a halfsmile parted her lips.

"I see, Anne. Love once, love ever; and I suppose it was the same with Val, in spite of his folly. I should have taken out my revenge by marrying the first eligible man that offered himself. Talking of thatis poor Mr. Graves married yet?"

"Yes, at last," said Anne, laughing. "A grand match too for him, poor timid man: his wife's a lord's daughter, and as tall as a house."

"If ever man worshipped woman he worshipped you, though you were only a girl."

"Nonsense, Laura."

"Anne, you knew it quite well; and so did Val. Did he ever screw his courage up to the point of proposing?"

Anne laughed. "If he ever did, I was too vexed to answer him. He will be very happy, Laura. His wife is a meek, amiable woman, in spite of her formidable height."

"And now I want you to tell me one thingHow was it that Edward could not be saved?"

For a moment Lady Hartledon did not understand, and turned her eyes on the boy.

"I mean my brother, Anne. When news came out to India that he had died in that shocking manner, following upon poor GeorgeI don't care now to recall how I felt. Was there no one at hand to save him?"

"No one. A sad fatality seemed to attend it altogether. Val regrets his brother bitterly to this day."

"And that poor Willy Gum was killed at sea, after all!"

"Yes," said Anne, shortly. "When you spoke of Edward," returning to the other subject, "I thought you meant the boy."

Lady Laura shook her head. "He will never get well, Anne. Death is written on his face."

"You would say so, if you saw him some days. He is excitable, and your coming has roused him. I never saw any one fluctuate so; one day dying, the next better again. For myself I have very little hope, and Mr. Hillary has none; but I dare not say so to Margaret and the dowager."

"Why not?"

"It makes them angry. They cannot bear to hear there's a possibility of his death. Margaret may see the danger, but I don't believe the dowager does."

"Their wishes must blind them," observed Lady Laura. "The dowager seems all fury and folly. She scarcely gave herself time to welcome me this morning, or to inquire how I was after my long voyage; but began descanting on a host of evils, the chief being that her grandson should have had fever."

"She would like him to bear a charmed life. Not for love of him, Laura."

"What then?"

"I do not believe she has a particle of love for him. Don't think me uncharitable; it is the truth; Val will tell you the same. She is not capable of experiencing common affection for any one; every feeling of her nature is merged in selfinterest. Had her daughter left another boy she would not be dismayed at the prospect of this one's death; whether he lived or died, it would be all one to her. The grievance is that Reginald should have the chance of succeeding."

"Because he is your son. I understand. A vain, puffedup old thing! the idea of her still painting her face and wearing false curls! I wonder you tolerate her in your house, Anne! She's always here."

"How can I help myself? She considers, I believe, that she has more right in this house than I have."

"Does she make things uncomfortable?"

"More so than I have ever confessed, even to my husband. From the hour of my marriage she set the two children against me, and against my children when they came; and she never ceases to do so still."

"Why do you submit to it?"

"She is their grandmother, and I cannot well deny her the house. Val might do so, but he does not. Perhaps I should have had courage to attempt it, for the children's own sake, it is so shocking to train them to illnature, but that he appears to think as she does. The petty disputes between the children are frequentfor my two elder ones are getting of an age to turn again when put uponbut their father never corrects Edward and Maude, or allows them to be corrected; let them do what wrong they will, he takes their part. I believe that if Edward killed one of my children, he would only caress him."

Lady Laura turned her eyes on the speaker's face, on its flush of pain and mortification.

"And Val loved you: and did not love Maude! What does it mean, Anne?"

"I cannot tell you. Things altogether are growing more than I can bear."

"Margaret has been with you some time; has she not interfered, or tried to put things upon a right footing?"

Anne shook her head. "She espouses the dowager's side; upholds the two children in their petty tyranny. No one in the house takes my part, or my children's."

"That is just like Margaret. Do you remember how you and I used to dread her domineering spirit when we were girls? It's time I came, I think, to set things right."

"Laura, neither you nor any one else can set things right. They have been wrong too long. The worst is, I cannot see what the evil is, as regards Val. If I ask him he repels me, or laughs at me, and tells me I am fanciful. That he has some secret trouble I have long known: his days are unhappy, his nights restless; often when he thinks me asleep I am listening to his sighs. I am glad you have come home; I have wanted a true friend to confide these troubles to, and I could only speak of them to one of the family."

"It sounds like a romance," cried Laura. "Some secret grief! What can it be?"

They were interrupted by a commotion. Maude had been threading a splendid ring all the colours of the rainbow, and now exhibited it for the benefit of admiring beholders.

"PapaAunt Margaretlook at my ring."

Lord Hartledon nodded pleasantly at the child from his distant seat; Lady Margaret appeared not to have heard; and Maude caught up a soft ball and threw it at her aunt.

Unfortunately, it took a wrong direction, and struck the nodding dowager on the nose. She rose up in a fury and some commotion ensued.

"Make me a ring, Maude," little Anne lisped when the dowager had subsided into her chair again. Maude took no notice; her finger was still lifted with the precious ornament.

"Can you see it from your sofa, Edward?"

The boy rose and stretched himself. "Pretty well. You have put it on the wrong finger, Maude. Ladies don't wear rings on the little finger."

"But it won't go on the others," said Maude dolefully: "it's too small."

"Make a larger one."

"Make one for me, Maude," again broke in Anne's little voice.

"No, I won't!" returned Maude. "You are big enough to thread beads for yourself."

"No, she's not," said Reginald. "Make her one, Maude."

"No, don't, Maude," said Edward. "Let them do things for themselves."

"You hear!" whispered Lady Hartledon.

"I do hear. And Val sits there and never reproves them; and the old dowager's head and eyes are nodding and twinkling approval."

Lady Laura was an energetic little woman, thin, and pale, and excessively active, with a propensity for setting the world straight, and a tongue as unceremoniously free as the dowager's. In the cause of justice she would have stood up to battle with a giant. Lady Hartledon was about to make some response, but she bade her wait; her attention was absorbed by the children. Perhaps the truth was that she was burning to have a say in the matter herself.

"Maude," she called out, "if that ring is too small for you, it would do for Anne, and be kind of you to give it her."

Maude looked dubious. Left to herself, the child would have been generous enough. She glanced at the dowager.

"May I give it her, grand'ma?"

Grand'ma was conveniently deaf. She would rather have cut the ring in two than it should be given to the hated child: but, on the other hand, she did not care to offend Laura Level, who possessed inconveniently independent opinions, and did not shrink from proclaiming them. Seizing the poker, she stirred the fire, and created a divertissement.

In the midst of it, Edward left his sofa and walked up to the group and their beads. He was very weak, and tottered unintentionally against Anne. The touch destroyed her equilibrium, and she fell into Maude's lap. There was no damage done, but the box of beads was upset on to the carpet. Maude screamed at the loss of her treasures, rose up with anger, and slapped Anne. The child cried out.

"Why d'you hit her?" cried Reginald. "It was Edward's fault; he pushed her."

"What's that!" exclaimed Edward. "My fault! I'll teach you to say that," and he struck Reginald a tingling slap on the cheek.

Of course there was loud crying. The dowager looked on with a red face. Lady Margaret Cooper, who had no children of her own, stopped her ears. Lady Laura laid her hand on her sisterin law's wrist.

"And you can witness these scenes, and not check them! You are changed, indeed, Anne!"

"If I interfere to protect my children, I am checked and prevented," replied Lady Hartledon, with quivering lips. "This scene is nothing to what we have sometimes."

"Who checks youVal?"

"The dowager. But he does not interpose for me. Where the children are concerned, he tacitly lets her have sway. It is not often anything of this sort takes place in his presence."

The noise continued: all the children seemed to be fighting together. Anne went forward and drew her own two out of the fray.

"Pray send those two screamers to the nursery, Lady Hartledon," cried the dowager.

"I cannot think why they are allowed in the drawingroom at all," said Lady Margaret, addressing no one in particular, unless it was the ceiling. "Edward and Maude would be quiet enough without them."

Anne did not retort: she only glanced at her husband, silent reproach on her pale face, and took up Anne in her arms to carry her from the room. But Lady Laura, impulsive and warm, came forward and stopped the exit.

"Lady Kirton, I am ashamed of you! Margaret, I am ashamed of you! I am ashamed of you all. You are doing the children a lasting injury, and you are guilty of cruel insult to Lady Hartledon. This is the second scene I have been a witness to, when the elder children were encouraged to behave badly to the younger; the first was in the nursery this morning; and I have been here only a few hours. And you, Lord Hartledon, their head and father, responsible for your children's welfare, can tamely sit by, and suffer it, and see your wife insulted! Is this what you married Anne Ashton for?"

Lord Hartledon rose: a strange look of pain on his features. "You are mistaken, Laura. I wish every respect to be shown to my wife; respect from all. Anne knows it."

"Respect!" scornfully retorted Lady Laura. "When you do not give her so much as a voice in her own house; when you allow her children to be trampled on, and beatenbeaten, sirand she dare not interfere! I blush for you, and could never have believed you would so behave to your wife. Who are you, madam," turning again, in her anger, on the countessdowager, "and who are you, Margaret, that you should dare to encourage Edward and Maude in rebellion against their present mother?"

Taken by surprise, the dowager made no answer. Lady Margaret looked defiance.

"You and Anne have invited me to your house on a lengthened visit, Lord Hartledon," continued Laura; "but I promise you that if this is to continue I will not remain in it; I will not witness insult to my early friend; and I will not see children incited to evil passions. Undress that child, sir," she sharply added, directing Val's attention to Reginald, "and you will see bruises on his back and shoulder. I saw them this morning, and asked the nurse what caused them and was told Lord Elster kicked him."

"It was the little beggar's own fault," interposed Edward, who was standing his ground with equanimity, and seemed to enjoy the scene.

Lady Laura caught him sharply by the arm. "Of whom are you speaking! Who's a little beggar?"

"Regy is."

"Who taught you to call him one?"

"Grand'ma."

"There, go away; go away all of you," cried Lady Laura, turning the two elder ones from the room imperatively, after Anne and her children. "Oh, so you are going also, Val! No wonder you are ashamed to stay here."

He was crossing the room; a curious expression on his drawn lips. Laura watched him from it; then went and stood before the dowager; her back to her sister.

"Has it ever struck you, Lady Kirton, that you may one day have to account for this?"

"It strikes me that you are making a vast deal of unnecessary noise, Madame Laura!"

"If your daughter could look on, from the other world, at earth and its scenesand some hold a theory that such a state of things is not impossiblewhat would be her anguish, think you, at the evil you are inculcating in her children? One of them will very soon be with her"

The dowager interrupted with a sort of howl.

"He will; there is no mistaking it. You who see him constantly may not detect it; but it is evident to a stranger. Were it not beneath me, I might ask on what grounds you tutor him to call Reginald a beggar, considering that your daughter brought my brother nothing but a few debts; whilst Miss Ashton brought him a large fortune?"

"I wouldn't condescend to be mean, Laura," put in Lady Margaret, whilst the dowager fanned her hot face.

They were interrupted by Hedges, showing in visitors. How much more Lady Laura might have said must remain unknown: she was in a mood to say a great deal.

"Mr. and Mrs. Graves."

It was the curate; and the tall, meek woman spoken of by Anne. Laura laughed as she shook hands with the former; whom she had known when a girl, and been given to ridiculing more than was quite polite.

Lord Hartledon had left the room after his wife. She sent the children to the nursery; and he found her alone in her chamber sobbing bitterly.

Certainly he was a contradiction. He fondly took her in his arms, beseeching her to pardon him, if he had unwittingly slighted her, as Laura implied; and his blue eyes were beaming with affection, his voice was low with persuasive tenderness.

"There are times," she sobbed, "when I am tempted to wish myself back in my father's house!"

"I cannot think whence all this discomfort arises!" he weakly exclaimed. "Of one thing, Anne, rest assured: as soon as Edward changes for the better or the worseand one it must inevitably bethat mischiefmaking old woman shall quit my house for ever."

"Edward will never change for the better," she said. "For the worse, he may soon: for the better, never."

"I know: Hillary has told me. Bear with things a little longer, and believe that I will remedy them the moment remedy is possible. I am your husband."

Lady Hartledon lifted her eyes to his. "We cannot go on as we are going on now. Tell me what it is you have to bear. You remind me that you are my husband; I now remind you that I am your wife: confide in me. I will be true and loving to you, whatever it may be."

"Not yet; in a little time, perhaps. Bear with me still, my dear wife."

His look was haggard; his voice bore a sound of anguish; he clasped her hand to pain as he left her. Whatever might be his care, Anne could not doubt his love.

And as he went into the drawingroom, a smile on his face, chatting with the curate, laughing with his newlymarried wife, both those unsuspicious visitors could have protested when they went forth, that never was a man more free from trouble than that affable servant of her Majesty's the Earl of Hartledon.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

EXPLANATIONS.

A change for the worse occurred in the child, Lord Elster; and after two or three weeks' sinking he died, and was buried at Hartledon by the side of his mother. Hartledon's sister quitted Hartledon House for a change; but the countessdowager was there still, and disturbed its silence with moans and impromptu lamentations, especially when going up and down the staircase and along the corridors.

Mr. Carr, who had come for the funeral, also remained. On the day following it he and Lord Hartledon were taking a quiet walk together, when they met Mrs. Gum. Hartledon stopped and spoke to her in his kindly manner. She was less nervous than she used to be; and she and her husband were once more at peace in their house.

"I would not presume to say a word of sympathy, my lord," she said, curtseying, "but we felt it indeed. Jabez was cut up like anything when he came in yesterday from the funeral."

Val looked at her, a meaning she understood in his earnest eyes. "Yes, it is hard to part with our children: but when grief is over, we live in the consolation that they have only gone before us to a better place, where sin and sorrow are not. We shall join them later."

She went away, tears of joy filling her eyes. She had a son up there, waiting for her; and she knew Lord Hartledon meant her to think of him when he had so spoken.

"Carr," said Val, "I never told you the finale of that tragedy. George Gordon of the mutiny, did turn up: he lived and died in England."

"No!"

"He died at Calne. It was that poor woman's son."

Mr. Carr looked round for an explanation. He knew her as the wife of clerk Gum, and sister to Hartledon's housekeeper. Val told him all, as the facts had come out to him.

"Pike always puzzled me," he said. "Disguised as he was with his black hair, his face stained with some dark juice, there was a look in him that used to strike some chord in my memory. It lay in the eyes, I think. You'll keep these facts sacred, Carr, for the parents' sake. They are known only to four of us."

"Have you told your wife yet?" questioned Mr. Carr, recurring to a different subject.

"No. I could not, somehow, whilst the child lay dead in the house. She shall know it shortly."

"And what about dismissing the countessdowager? You will do it?"

"I shall be only too thankful to do it. All my courage has come back to me, thank Heaven!"

The CountessDowager of Kirton's reign was indeed over; never would he allow her to disturb the peace of his house again. He might have to pension her off, but that was a light matter. His intention was to speak to her in a few days' time, allowing an interval to elapse after the boy's death; but she forestalled the time herself, as Val was soon to find.

Dinner that evening was a sad mealsad and silent. The only one who did justice to it was the countessdowagerin a black gauze dress and white crêpe turban. Let what would betide, Lady Kirton never failed to enjoy her dinner. She had a scheme in her head; it had been working there since the day of her grandson's death; and when the servants withdrew, she judged it expedient to disclose it to Hartledon, hoping to gain her point, now that he was softened by sorrow.

"Hartledon, I want to talk to you," she began, critically tasting her wine; "and I must request that you'll attend to me."

Anne looked up, wondering what was coming. She wore an evening dress of black crêpe, a jet necklace on her fair neck, jet bracelets on her arms: mourning far deeper than the dowager's.

"Are you listening to me, Val?"

"I am quite ready," answered Val.

"I asked you, once before, to let me have Maude's children, and to allow me a fair income with them. Had you done so, this dreadful misfortune would not have overtaken your house: for it stands to reason that if Lord Elster had been living somewhere else with me, he could not have caught scarletfever in London."

"We never thought he did catch it," returned Hartledon. "It was not prevalent at the time; and, strange to say, none of the other children took it, nor any one else in the house."

"Then what gave it him?" sharply uttered the dowager.

What Val answered was spoken in a low tone, and she caught one word only, Providence. She gave a growl, and continued.

"At any rate, he's gone; and you have now no pretext for refusing me Maude. I shall take her, and bring her up, and you must make me a liberal allowance for her."

"I shall not part with Maude," said Val, in quiet tones of decision.

"You can't refuse her to me, I say," rejoined the dowager, nodding her head defiantly; "she's my own grandchild."

"And my child. The argument on this point years ago was unsatisfactory, Lady Kirton; I do not feel disposed to renew it. Maude will remain in her own home."

"You are a vile man!" cried the dowager, with an inflamed face. "Pass me the wine."

He filled her glass, and left the decanter with her. She resumed.

"One day, when I was with Maude, in that last illness of hers in London, when we couldn't find out what was the matter with her, poor dear, she wrote you a letter; and I know what was in it, for I read it. You had gone dancing off somewhere for a week."

"To the Isle of Wight, on your account," put in Lord Hartledon, quietly; "on that unhappy business connected with your son who lives there. Well, ma'am?"

"In that letter Maude said she wished me to have charge of her children, if she died; and begged you to take notice that she said it," continued the dowager. "Perhaps you'll say you never had that letter?"

"On the contrary, madam, I admit receiving it," he replied. "I daresay I have it still. Most of Maude's letters lie in my desk undisturbed."

"And, admitting that, you refuse to act up to it?"

"Maude wrote in a moment of pique, when she was angry with me. But"

"And I have no doubt she had good cause for anger!"

"She had great cause," was his answer, spoken with a strange sadness that surprised both the dowager and Lady Hartledon. Thomas Carr was twirling his wineglass gently round on the white cloth, neither speaking nor looking.

"Later, my wife fully retracted what she said in that letter," continued Val. "She confessed that she had written it partly at your dictation, Lady Kirton, and saidbut I had better not tell you that, perhaps."

"Then you shall tell me, Lord Hartledon; and you are a twofaced man, if you shuffle out of it."

"Very well. Maude said that she would not for the whole world allow her children to be brought up by you; she warned me also not to allow you to obtain too much influence over them."

"It's false!" said the dowager, in no way disconcerted.

"It is perfectly true: and Maude told me you knew what her sentiments were upon the point. Her real wish, as expressed to me, was, that the children should remain with me in any case, in their proper home."

"You say you have that other letter still?" cried the dowager, who was not always very clear in her conversation.

"No doubt."

"Then perhaps you'll look for it: and read over her wishes in black and white."

"To what end? It would make no difference in my decision. I tell you, ma'am, I am consulting Maude's wishes in keeping her child at home."

"I know better," retorted the dowager, completely losing her temper. "I wish your poor dear wife could rise from her grave and confute you. It's all stinginess; because you won't part with a paltry bit of money."

"No," said Val, "it's because I won't part with my child. Understand me, Lady Kirtonhad Maude's wishes even been with you in this, I should not carry them out. As to moneyI may have something to say to you on that score; but suppose we postpone it to a more fitting opportunity."

"You wouldn't carry them out!" she cried. "But you might be forced to, you mean man! That letter may be as good as a will in the eyes of the law. You daren't produce it; that's what it is."

"I'll give it you with pleasure," said Val, with a smile. "That is, if I have kept it. I am not sure."

She caught up her fan, and sat fanning herself. The reservation had suggested a meaning never intended to her crafty mind; her rebellious soninlaw meant to destroy the letter; and she began wondering how she could outwit him.

A sharp cry outside the door interrupted them. The children were only coming in to dessert now; and Reginald, taking a flying leap down the stairs, took rather too long a one, and came to grief at the bottom. Truth to say, the young gentleman, no longer kept down by poor Edward, was getting highspirited and venturesome.

"What's that?" asked Anne, as the nurse came in with them, scolding.

"Lord Elster fell down, my lady. He's getting as tiresome as can be. Only today, I caught him astride the kitchen banisters, going to slide down them."

"Oh, Regy," said his mother, holding up her reproving finger.

The boy laughed, and came forward rubbing his arm, and ashamed of his tears. Val caught him up and kissed them away, drawing Maude also to his side.

That letter! The dowager was determined to get it, if there was a possibility of doing so. A suspicion that she would not be tolerated much longer in Lady Hartledon's house was upon her, and she knew not where to go. Kirton had married again; and his new wife had fairly turned her out more unceremoniously than the late one did. By hook or by crook, she meant to obtain the guardianship of her granddaughter, because in giving her Maude, Lord Hartledon would have to allow her an income.

She was a woman to stop at nothing; and upon quitting the diningroom she betook herself to the librarya large, magnificent roomthe pride of Hartledon. She had come in search of Val's desk; which she found, and proceeded to devise means of opening it. That accomplished, she sat herself down, like a leisurely housebreaker, to examine it, putting on a pair of spectacles, which she kept surreptitiously in a pocket, and would not have worn before any one for the world. She found the letter she was in search of; and she found something else for her pains, which she had not bargained for.

Not just at first. There were many tempting odds and ends of things to dip into. For one thing, she found Val's banking book, and some old chequebooks; they served her for some time. Next she came upon two packets sealed up in white paper, with Val's own seal. On one was written, "Letters of Lady Maude;" on the other, "Letters of my dear Anne." Peering further into the desk, she came upon an obscure inner slide, which had evidently not been opened for years, and she had difficulty in undoing it. A paper was in it, superscribed, "Concerning A.W.;" on opening which she found a letter addressed to Thomas Carr, of the Temple.

Thomas Carr's letters were no more sacred with her than Lord Hartledon's. No woman living was troubled with scruples so little as she. It proved to have been written by a Dr. Mair, in Scotland, and was dated several years back.

But nowdid Lord Hartledon really know he had that dangerous letter by him? If so, what could have possessed him to preserve it? Or, did he not rather believe he had returned it to Mr. Carr at the time? The latter, indeed, proved to be the case; and never, to the end of his life, would he, in one sense, forgive his own carelessness.

Who was A.W.? thought the curious old woman, as she drew the light nearer to her, and began the tempting perusal, making the most of the little time left. They could not be at tea yet, and she had told Lady Hartledon she was going to take her nap in her own room. The gratification of rummaging false Val's desk was an ample compensation; and the countessdowager hugged herself with delight.

But what was this she had come uponthis paper "concerning A. W."? The dowager's mouth fell as she read; and gradually her little eyes opened as if they would start from their sockets, and her face grew white. Have you ever watched the livid pallor of fear struggling to one of these painted faces? She dashed off her spectacles; she got up and wrung her hands; she executed a frantic wardance; and finally she tore, with the letter, into the drawingroom, where Val and Anne and Thomas Carr were beginning tea and talking quietly.

They rose in consternation as she danced in amongst them, and held out the letter to Lord Hartledon.

He took it from her, gazing in utter bewilderment as he gathered in its contents. Was it a fresh letter, orhis face became whiter than the dowager's. In her reckless passion she avowed what she had donethe letter was secreted in his desk.

"Have you dared to visit my desk?" he gasped"break my seals? Are you mad?"

"Hark at him!" she cried. "He calls me to account for just lifting the lid of a desk! But what is he? A villaina thiefa spya murdererand worse than any of them! Ah, ha, my lady!" nodding her false front at Lady Hartledon, who stood as one petrified, "you stare there at me with your open eyes; but you don't know what you are! Ask him! What was MaudeHeaven help hermy poor Maude? What was she? And you in the plot; you vile Carr! I'll have you all hanged together!"

Lord Hartledon caught his wife's hand.

"Carr, stay here with her and tell her all. No good concealing anything now she has read this letter. Tell her for me, for she would never listen to me."

He drew his wife into an adjoining room, the one where the portrait of George Elster looked down on its guests. The time for disclosing the story to his wife had been somewhat forestalled. He would have given half his life that it had never reached that other woman, miserable old sinner though she was.

"You are trembling, Anne; you need not do so. It is not against you that I have sinned."

Yes, she was trembling very much. And Val, in his honourable, his refined, shrinking nature, would have given his life's other half not to have had the tale to tell.

It is not a pleasant one. You may skip it if you please, and go on to the last page. Val once said he had been more sinned against than sinning: it may be deemed that in that opinion he was too lenient to himself. Anne, his wife, listened with averted face and incredulous ears.

"You have wanted a solution to my conduct, Anneto the strange preference I seemed to accord the poor boy who is gone; why I could not punish him; why I was more thankful for the boon of his death than I had been for his life. He was my child, but he was not Lord Elster."

She did not understand.

"He had no right to my name; poor little Maude has no right to it. Do you understand me now?"

Not at all; it was as though he were talking Greek to her.

"Their mother, when they were born, was not my wife."

"Their mother was Lady Maude Kirton," she rejoined, in her bewilderment.

"That is exactly where it was," he answered bitterly. "Lady Maude Kirton, not Lady Hartledon."

She could not comprehend the words; her mind was full of consternation and tumult. Back went her thoughts to the past.

"Oh, Val! I remember papa's saying that a marriage in that unused chapel was only three parts legal!"

"It was legal enough, Anne: legal enough. But when that ceremony took place"his voice dropped to a miserable whisper, "I hadas they tell mea wife living."

Slowly she admitted the meaning of the words; and would have started from him with a faint cry, but that he held her to him.

"Listen to the whole, Anne, before you judge me. What has been your promise to me, over and over again?that, if I would tell you my sorrow, you would never shrink from me, whatever it might be."

She remembered it, and stood still; terribly rebellious, clasping her fingers to pain, one within the other.

"In that respect, at any rate, I did not willingly sin. When I married Maude I had no suspicion that I was not free as air; free to marry her, or any other woman in the world."

"You speak in enigmas," she said faintly.

"Sit down, Anne, whilst I give you the substance of the tale. Not its details until I am more myself, and that voice"pointing to the next room"is not sounding in my ears. You shall hear all later; at least, as much as I know myself; I have never quite believed in it, and it has been to me throughout as a horrible dream."

Indeed Mr. Carr seemed to be having no inconsiderable amount of trouble, to judge by the explosions of wrath on the part of the dowager.

She sat down as he told her, her face turned from him, rebellious at having to listen, but curious yet. Lord Hartledon stood by the mantelpiece and shaded his eyes with his hand.

"Send your thoughts into the past, Anne; you may remember that an accident happened to me in Scotland. It was before you and I were engaged, or it would not have happened. Or, let me say, it might not; for young men are reckless, and I was no better than others. Heaven have mercy on their follies!"

"The accident might not have happened?"

"I do not speak of the accident. I mean what followed. When out shooting I nearly blew off my arm. I was carried to the nearest medical man's, a Dr. Mair's, and remained there; for it was not thought safe to move me; they feared inflammation, and they feared lockedjaw. My father was written to, and came; and when he left after the danger was over he made arrangements with Dr. Mair to keep me on, for he was a skilful man, and wished to perfect the cure. I thought the prolonged stay in the strange, quiet house worse than all the rest. That feeling wore off; we grow reconciled to most conditions; and things became more tolerable as I grew better and joined the household. There was a wild, clever, random young man staying there, the doctor's assistantGeorge Gordon; and there was also a young girl, Agnes Waterlow. I used to wonder what this Agnes did there, and one day asked the old housekeeper; she said the young lady was there partly that the doctor might watch her health, partly because she was a relative of his late wife's, and had no home."

He paused, as if in thought, but soon continued.

"We grew very intimate; I, Gordon, and Miss Waterlow. Neither of them was the person I should have chosen for an intimacy; but there was, in a sense, no help for it, living together. Agnes was a wild, free, rather coarsenatured girl, and Gordon drank. That she fell in love with me there's no doubtand I grew to like her quite well enough to talk nonsense to her. Whether any plot was laid between her and Gordon to entrap me, or whether what happened arose in the recklessness of the moment, I cannot decide to this hour. It was on my twentyfirst birthday; I was almost well again; we had what the doctor called a dinner, Gordon a jollification, and Agnes a supper. It was late when we sat down to it, eight o'clock; and there was a good deal of feasting and plenty of wine. The doctor was called out afterwards to a patient several miles distant, and George Gordon made some punch; which rendered none of our heads the steadier. At least I can answer for mine: I was weak with the long illness, and not much of a drinker at any time. There was a great deal of nonsense going on, and Gordon pretended to marry me to Agnes. He said or read (I can't tell which, and never knew then) some words mockingly out of the prayerbook, and said we were man and wife. Whilst we were all laughing at the joke, the doctor's old housekeeper came in, to see what the noise was about, and I, by way of keeping it up, took Agnes by the hand, and introduced her as Mrs. Elster. I did not

understand the woman's look of astonishment then; unfortunately, I have understood it too well since."

Anne was growing painfully interested.

"Well, after that she threw herself upon me in a manner thatthat was extraordinary to me, not having the key to it; and Ilost my head. Don't frown, Anne; ninetynine men out of a hundred would have lost theirs; and you'll say so if ever I give you the details. Of course blame attached to me; to me, and not to her. Though at the time I mentally gave her, I assure you, her full share, somewhat after the manner of the Pharisee condemning the publican. That also has come home to me: she believed herself to be legally my wife; I never gave a thought to that evening's farce, and should have supposed its bearing any meaning a simple impossibility.

"A short time, and letters summoned me home; my mother was dangerously ill. I remember Agnes asked me to take her with me, and I laughed at her. I arranged to write to her, and promised to go back shortlywhich, to tell you the truth, I never meant to do. Having been mistaking her, mistaking her still, I really thought her worthy of very little consideration. Before I had been at home a fortnight I received a letter from Dr. Mair, telling me that Agnes was showing symptoms of insanity, and asking what provision I purposed making for her. My sin was finding me out; I wondered how he had found it out; I did not ask, and did not know for years. I wrote back saying I would willingly take all expenses upon myself; and inquired what sum would be required by the asylumto which he said she must be sent. He mentioned two hundred ayear, and from that time I paid it regularly."

"And was she really insane?" interrupted Lady Hartledon.

"Yes; she had been so once or twice beforeand this was what the housekeeper had meant by saying she was with the doctor that her health might be watched. It appeared that when these symptoms came on, after I left, Gordon took upon himself to disclose to the doctor that Agnes was married to me, telling the circumstances as they had occurred. Dr. Mair got frightened: it was no light matter for the son of an English peer to have been deluded into marriage with an obscure and insane girl; and the quarrel that took place between him and Gordon on the occasion resulted in the latter's leaving. I have never understood Gordon's conduct in the matter: very disagreeable thoughts in regard to it come over me sometimes."

"What thoughts?"

"Oh, never mind; they can never be set at rest now. Let me make short work of this story. I heard no more and thought no more; and the years went on, and then came my marriage with Maude. We went to Parisyou cannot have forgotten any of the details of that period, Anne; and after our return to London I was surprised by a visit from Dr. Mair. That evening, that visit and its details stamped themselves on my memory for ever in characters of living fire."

He paused for a moment, and something like a shiver seized him. Anne said nothing.

"Maude had gone with some friends to a fête at Chiswick, and Thomas Carr was dining with me. Hedges came in and said a gentleman wanted to see mewould see me, and would not be denied. I went to him, and found it was Dr. Mair. In that interview I learnt that by the laws of Scotland Miss Waterlow was my wife."

"And the suspicion that she was so had never occurred to you before?"

"Anne! Should I have been capable of marrying Maude, or any one else, if it had? On my solemn word of honour, before Heaven"he raised his right hand as if to give effect to his words"such a thought had never crossed my brain. The evening that the nonsense took place I only regarded it as a jest, a pastimewhat you will: had any one told me it was a marriage I should have laughed at them. I knew nothing then of the laws of Scotland, and should have thought it simply impossible that that minute's folly, and my calling her, to keep up the joke, Mrs. Elster, could have constituted a marriage. I think they all played a deep part, even Agnes. Not a soul had so much as hinted at the word 'marriage' to me after that evening; neither Gordon, nor she, nor Dr. Mair in his subsequent correspondence; and in that he always called her 'Agnes.' Howeverhe then told me that she was certainly my legal wife, and that Lady Maude was not.

"At first," continued Val, "I did not believe it; but Dr. Mair persisted he was right, and the horror of the situation grew upon me. I told all to Carr, and took him up to Dr. Mair. They discussed Scottish law and consulted lawbooks; and the truth, so far, became apparent. Dr. Mair was sorry for me; he saw I had not erred knowingly in marrying Maude. As to myself, I was helpless, prostrated. I asked the doctor, if it were really true, why the fact had been kept from me: he replied that he supposed I knew it, and that delicacy alone had caused him to abstain from alluding to it in his letters. He had been very angry when Gordon told him, he said; grew half frightened as to consequences; feared he should get into trouble for allowing me to be so entrapped in his house; and he and Gordon parted at once. And then Dr. Mair asked a question which I could not very well answer, why, if I did not know she was my wife, I had paid so large a sum for Agnes. He had been burying the affair in silence, as he had assumed I was doing; and it was only the announcement of my marriage with Maude in the newspapers that aroused

him. He had thought I was acting this bad part deliberately; and he went off at once to Hartledon in anger; found I had gone abroad; and now came to me on my return, still in anger, saying at first that he should proceed against me, and obtain justice for Agnes. When he found how utterly ignorant of wrong I had been, his tone changed; he was truly grieved and concerned for me. Nothing was decided: except that Dr. Mair, in his compassion towards Lady Maude, promised not to be the first to take legal steps. It seemed that there was only him to fear: George Gordon was reported to have gone to Australia; the old housekeeper was dead; Agnes was deranged. Dr. Mair left, and Carr and I sat on till midnight. Carr took what I thought a harsh view of the matter; he urged me to separate from Maude"

"I think you should have done so for her sake," came the gentle interruption.

"For her sake! the words Carr used. But, Anne, surely there were two sides to the question. If I disclosed the facts, and put her away from me, what was she? Besides, the law might be against meScotland's iniquitous law; but in Heaven's sight Maude was my wife, not the other. So I temporized, hoping that time might bring about a relief, for Dr. Mair told me that Miss Waterlow's health was failing. However, she lived on, and"

Lady Hartledon started up, her face blanching.

"Is she not dead now? Was she living when you married me? Am I your wife?"

He could hardly help smiling. His calm touch reassured her.

"Do you think you need ask, Anne? The next year Dr. Mair called upon me againit was the evening before the boy was christened; he had come to London on business of his own. To my dismay, he told me that a change for the better was appearing in Miss Waterlow's mental condition; and he thought it likely she might be restored to health. Of course, it increased the perplexities and my horror, had that been needed; but the hope or fear, or what you like to call it, was not borne out. Three years later, the doctor came to me for the third and final time, to bring me the news that Agnes was dead."

As the relief had been to him then, so did it almost seem now to Anne. A sigh of infinite pain broke from her. She had not seen where all this was tending.

"Imagine, if you can, what it was for me all those years with the knowledge daily and nightly upon me that the disgraceful truth might at any moment come out to Maudeto her children, to the world! Living in the dread of arrest myself, should the man Gordon show himself on the scene! And now you see what it is that has marred my peace, and broken the happiness of our married life. How could I bear to cross those two

deeplyinjured children, who were ever rising up in judgment against me? How take our children's part against them, little unconscious things? It seemed that I had always, daily, hourly, some wrong to make up to them. The poor boy was heir to Hartledon in the eyes of the world; but, Anne, your boy was the true heir."

"Why did you not tell me?all this time!"

"I could not. I dared not. You might not have liked to put Reginald out of his rights."

"Oh, Percival; how can you so misjudge me?" she asked, in tones of pain. "I would have guarded the secret as jealously as you. I must still do it for Maude."

"Poor Maude!" he sighed. "Her mother forgave me before she died"

"She knew it, then?"

"Yes. She learned"

Sounds of drumming on the door, and the countessdowager's voice, stopped Lord Hartledon.

"I had better face her," he said, as he unlocked it. "She will arouse the household."

Wild, intemperate, she met him with a volley of abuse that startled Lady Hartledon. He got her to a sofa, and gently held her down there.

"It's what I've been obliged to do all along," said Thomas Carr; "I don't believe she has heard ten words of my explanation."

"Pray be calm, Lady Kirton," said Hartledon, soothingly; "be calm, as you value your daughter's memory. We shall have the servants at the doors."

"I won't be calm; I will know the worst."

"I wish you to know it; but not others."

"Was Maude your wife?"

"No," he answered, in low tones. "Not"

"And you are not ashamed to confess it?" she interrupted, not allowing him to continue. But she was a little calmer in manner; and Val stood upright before her with folded arms.

"I am ashamed and grieved to confess it; but I did not knowingly inflict the injury. In Scotland"

"Don't repeat the shameful tale," she cried; "I have heard from your confederate, Carr, as much as I want to hear. What do you deserve for your treachery to Maude?"

"All I have reapedand more. But it was not intentional treachery; and Maude forgave me before she died."

"She knew it! You told her? Oh, you cruel monster!"

"I did not tell her. She did as you have just doneinterfered in what did not concern her, in direct disobedience to my desire; and she found it out for herself, as you, ma'am, have found it out."

"When?"

"The winter before her death."

"Then the knowledge killed her!"

"No. Something else killed her, as you know. It preyed upon her spirits."

"Lord Hartledon, I can have you up for fraud and forgery, and I'll do it. It will be the consideration of Maude's fame against your punishment, and I'll make a sacrifice to revenge, and prosecute you."

"There is no fraud where an offence is committed unwittingly," returned Lord Hartledon; "and forgery is certainly not amongst my catalogue of sins."

"You are liable for both," suddenly retorted the dowager; "you have stuck up 'Maude, Countess of Hartledon,' on her monument in the church; and what's that but fraud and forgery?"

"It is neither. If Maude did not live Countess of Hartledon, she at least so went to her grave. We were remarried, privately, before she died. Mr. Carr can tell you so."

"It's false!" raved the dowager.

"I arranged it, ma'am," interposed Mr. Carr. "Lord Hartledon and your daughter confided the management to me, and the ceremony was performed in secrecy in London"

The dowager looked from one to the other, as if she were bewildered.

"Married her again! why, that was making bad worse. Two false marriages! Did you do it to impose upon her?"

"I see you do not understand," said Lord Hartledon. "Themythe person in Scotland was dead then. She was dead, I am thankful to say, before Maude knew anything of the affair."

Up started the dowager. "Then is the woman dead now? was she dead when you married her?" laying her hand upon Lady Hartledon's arm. "Are her children different from Maude's?"

"They are. It could not be otherwise."

"Her boy is really Lord Elster?"

She flung Lady Hartledon's arm from her. Her voice rose to a shriek.

"Maude is not Lady Maude?"

Val shook his head sadly.

"And your children are lords and ladies and honourables," darting a look of consternation at Anne, "whilst my daughter's"

"Peace, Lady Kirton!" sternly interrupted Val. "Let the child, Maude, be Lady Maude still to the world; let your daughter's memory be held sacred. The facts need never come out: I do not fear now that they ever will. I and my wife and Thomas Carr, will guard the secret safely: take you care to do so."

"I wish you had been hung before you married Maude!" responded the aggrieved dowager.

"I wish I had," said he.

"Ugh!" she grunted wrathfully, the ready assent not pleasing her.

"With my poor boy's death the chief difficulty has passed away. How things would have turned out, or what would have been done, had he lived, it has wellnigh worn away my brain to dwell upon. Carr knows that it has nearly killed me: my wife knows it."

"Yes, you could tell her things, and keep the diabolical secret from poor Maude and from me," she returned, rather inconsistently. "I don't doubt you and your wife have exulted enough over it."

"I never knew it until tonight," said Anne, gently turning to the dowager. "It has grieved me deeply. I shall never cease to feel for your daughter's wrongs; and it will only make me more tender and loving to her child. The world will never know that she is not Lady Maude."

"And the other nameElsterbecause you know she has no right to it," was the spiteful retort. "I wish to my heart you had been drowned in your brother's place, Lord Hartledon; I wished it at the time."

"I know you did."

"You could not then have made fools of me and my dear daughter; and the darling little cherub in the churchyard would have been the real heir. There'd have been a good riddance of you."

"It might have been better for me in the long run," said he, quietly, passing over the inconsistencies of her speech. "Little peace or happiness have I had in living. Do not let us recriminate, Lady Kirton, or on some scores I might reproach you. Maude loved my brother, and you knew it; I loved Miss Ashton, and you knew that; yet from the very hour the breath was out of my brother's body you laid your plans and began your schemes upon me. I was weak as water in your hands, and fell into the snare. The marriage was your work entirely; and in the fruits it has brought forth there might arise a nice question, Lady Kirton, which of us is most to blame: I, who erred unwittingly, or you who"

"Will you have done?" she cried.

"I have nearly done. I only wish you to remember that others may have been wrong, as well as myself. Dr. Ashton warned us that night that the marriage might not bring a blessing. Anne, it was a cruel wrong upon you," he added, impulsively turning to her;

"you felt it bitterly, I shamefully; but, my dear wife, you have lived to see that it was in reality a mercy in disguise."

The countessdowager, not finding words strong enough to express her feelings at this, made a grimace at him.

"Let us be friends, Lady Kirton! Let us join together silently in guarding Maude's good name, and in burying the past. In time perhaps even I may live it down. Not a human being knows of it except we who are here and Dr. Mair, who will for his own sake guard the secret. Maude was my wife always in the eyes of the world; and Maude certainly died so: all peace and respect to her memory! As for my share, retribution has held its heavy hand upon me; it is upon me still, Heaven knows. It was for Maude I suffered; for Maude I felt; and if my life could have repaired the wrong upon her, I would willingly have sacrificed it. Let us be friends: it may be to the interest of both."

He held out his hand, and the dowager did not repulse it. She had caught the word "interest."

"Now you might allow me Maude and that income!"

"I think I had better allow you the income without Maude."

"Eh? what?" cried the dowager, briskly. "Do you mean it?"

"Indeed I do. I have been thinking for some little time that you would be more comfortable in a home of your own, and I am willing to help you to one. I'll pay the rent of a nice little place in Ireland, and give you six hundred ayear, paid quarterly, andyesmake you a yearly present of ten dozen of port wine."

Ah, the crafty man! The last item had a golden sound in it.

"Honour bright, Hartledon?"

"Honour bright! You shall never want for anything as long as you live. But you must not"he seemed to search for his words"you must undertake not to come here, upsetting and indulging the children."

"I'll undertake it. Good vintage, mind."

"The same that you have here."

The countessdowager beamed. In the midst of her happinessand it was what she had not felt for many a long day, for really the poor old creature had been put about sadlyshe bethought herself of propriety. Melting into tears, she presently bewailed her exhaustion, and said she should like some tea: perhaps good Mr. Carr would bring her a teaspoonful of brandy to put into it.

They brought her hot tea, and Mr. Carr put the brandy into it, and Anne took it to her on the sofa, and administered it, her own tears overflowing. She was thinking what an awful blow this would have been to her own mother.

"Little Maude shall be very dear to me always, Val," she whispered. "This knowledge will make me doubly tender with her."

He laid his hand fondly upon her, giving her one of his sweet sad smiles in answer. She could at length understand what feelings, in regard to the children, had actuated him. But from henceforth he would be just to all alike; and Maude would receive her share of correction for her own good.

"I always said you did not give me back the letter," observed Mr. Carr, when they were alone together later, and Val sat tearing up the letter into innumerable bits.

"And I said I did, simply because I could not find it. You were right, Carr, as you always are."

"Not always. But I am sorry it came to light in this way."

"Sorry! it is the greatest boon that could have fallen on me. The secret is, so to say, off my mind now, and I can breathe as I have not breathed for years. If ever a heartfelt thanksgiving went up to Heaven one from me will ascend tonight. And the dowager does not feel the past a bit. She cared no more for Maude than for any one else. She can't care for any one. Don't think me harsh, Carr, in saying so."

"I am sure she does not feel it," emphatically assented Mr. Carr. "Had she felt it she would have been less noisy. Thank heaven for your sake, Hartledon, that the miserable past is over."

"And over more happily than I deserved."

A silence ensued, and Lord Hartledon flung the bits of paper carefully into the fire. Presently he looked up, a strange earnestness in his face.

"It is the custom of some of our cottagers here to hang up embossed cards at the foot of their bed, with texts of Scripture written on them. There is one verse I should like to hang before every son of mine, though I had ten of them, that it might meet their eyes last ere the evening's sleeping, in the morning's first awakening. The ninth verse of the eleventh chapter of Ecclesiastes."

"I don't remember," observed Thomas Carr, after a pause of thought.

"'Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth: and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.'"

THE END