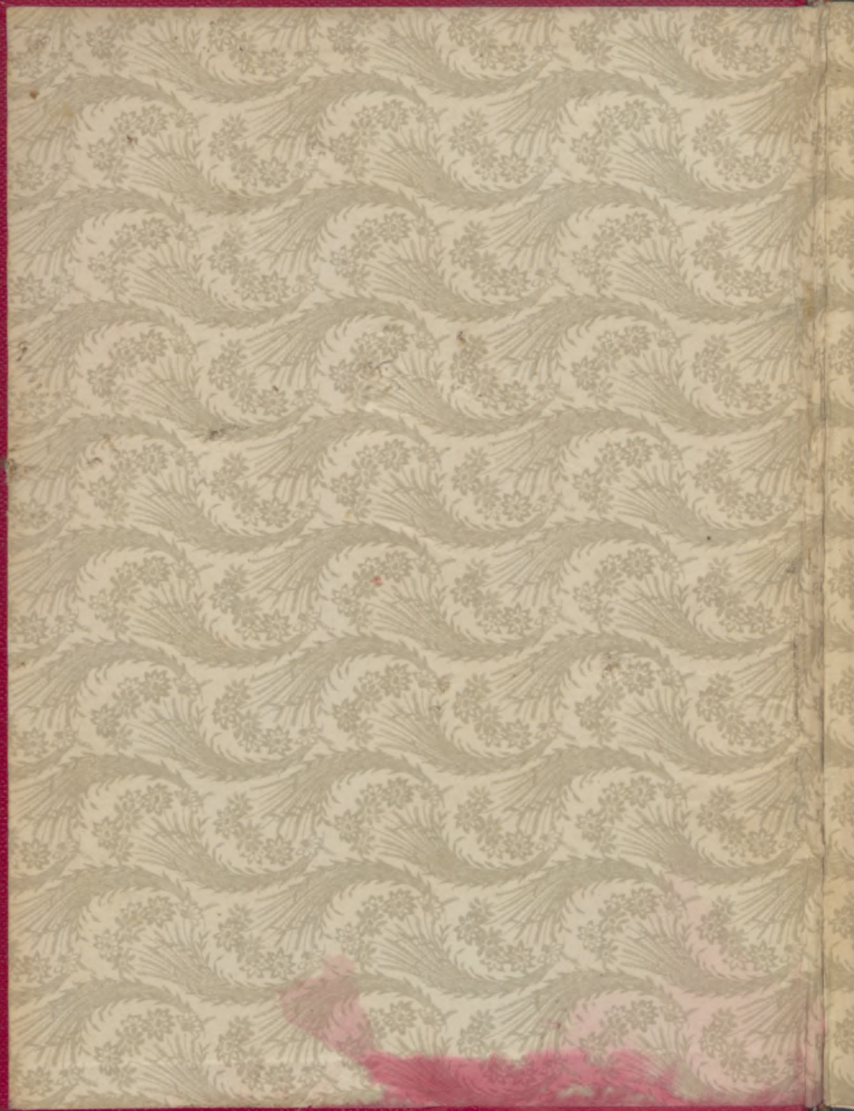
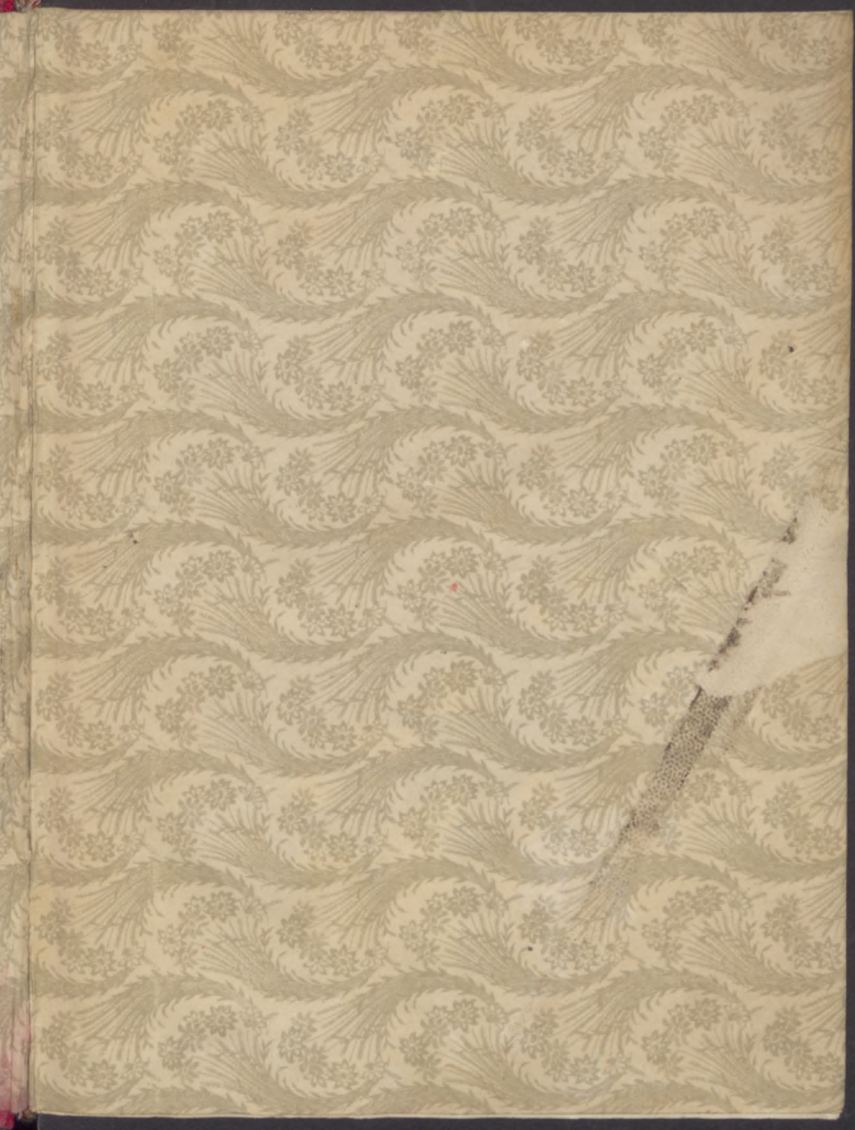
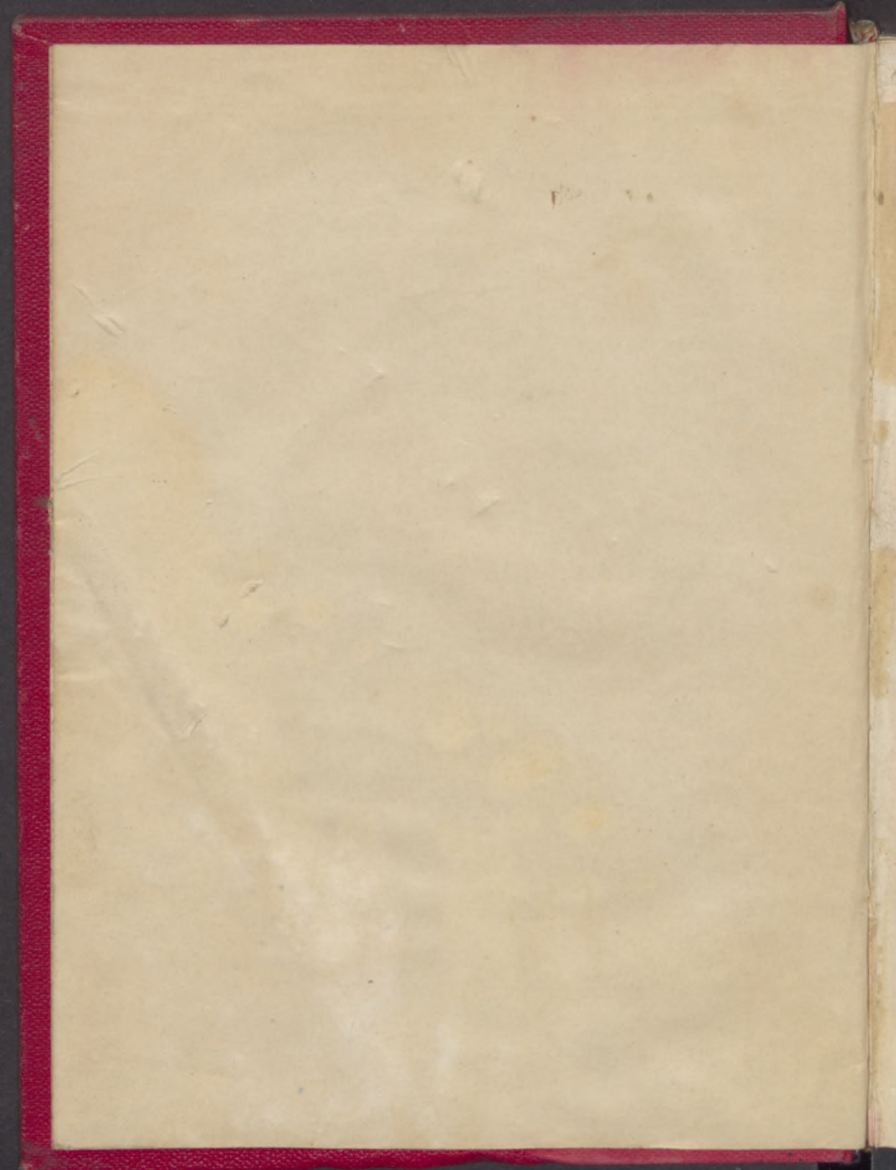


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NELLY BROOKE BY FLORENCE MARRYAT.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

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NELLY BROOKE.

A HOMELY STORY.

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT,

[MRS. ROSS CHURCH.]

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1869.

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NELLY BROOKE.

CHAPTER I.

Subdued — not Conquered.

It was with a slow step and drooping figure that Nelly Brooke, after her conversation with Mrs. Weston, returned to the solitude of her own room. The candles had been lighted and placed on the table half an hour before, but no one had attended to them since, as was plainly evinced by their long wicks, flaring in un-snuffed misery. But the girl seemed to notice neither the emptiness nor gloom of the apartment, as she sunk down on Bertie's vacated couch and buried her face in her hands. She was not more reconciled to the prospect before her than she had been two hours previously, but she no longer felt uncertain how the matter would end. Everyone was against her: everyone thought differently to what she did: and the experience of her past life taught her that she would not long be able to hold out against the wishes of her friends. In some respects she was strong; but her strength was utter weakness when opposed to the advice or persuasion of those whom she loved. She was like a captured animal that watches the net by which it is surrounded draw closer and closer together, and knows that in another minute it will be hopelessly entangled in the meshes.

And Nelly Brooke was not one of those wild impetuous women who will fight like a trapped tigress rather than yield to an untoward fate. She was far more like some timid brute that will dare to stand forth in defence of its home or young, and trembling with mortal fear the while, defiantly stamp its impotent hoof, or shake its harmless head, but which will passively endure any amount of personal molestation. She was brave and spirited when the rights of others were concerned, but she had resigned her own from the moment of her birth.

Her nature in fact, though noble, was far too gentle and yielding to contend with the things of this rough world, where the more a person quietly receives from his fellow creatures, the more will they force him to accept.

As she now sat pondering over Bertie's persuasions, Mr. Ray's advice, and Mrs. Weston's warnings, instead of ascribing selfish or worldly motives to them, she blamed herself for being so hard of heart and difficult of conviction, for since they were both hurt and astonished at her decision, it must be her judgment that was in fault, and not theirs.

She thought of Mrs. Weston's story; of the blame she encountered from her brothers and sisters, for having acted selfishly, and considered her own feelings before theirs: and of the many evils which followed her hasty step: and then, wondering if the day would come when Bertie would so reproach herself, she remembered with a shudder that it had already arrived; and that the question at issue had provoked more bitter words between them, than perhaps had ever passed before. It was hard enough to bear now; what would it be

when Bertie was an old man, and she an old woman, and they still dragged out their lives in those dull rooms; and no one more to her taste had appeared to renew the offer which Dr. Monkton had made her?

Would her brother refuse to forget that she had been selfish and obstinate then, or would he continue to reproach her, till life became unbearable, and she was glad to lay it down? or would she even come herself to regret that she had been so quick to refuse all this world's goods, and to choose a life of dull poverty before one of affluence and pleasure?

Nelly thought not, but she could not tell! If it were only — if it were *only* for herself it would not take a minute to decide; but there was Bertie — her dear Bertie's good to think of, and had not each of her advisers urged that as possessing the first claim upon her consideration.

She recalled how, when they were little children at play together, her grandfather had once cautioned her not to be too rough with her brother in these words: "Remember, Nelly, that you have all the strength and Bertie has all the weakness, so you must be extra gentle with him on that account." How often had she felt since then, as if, though innocently, she had stolen half her twin brother's life, and was in a measure, responsible for his deformity, and that when he saw her leap, or run, he must think the same himself. And she had made a silent vow, registered not once but a thousand times over, that as far as it lay in her power, she would devote her existence to repairing the deficiencies in his. And was the first sacrifice which she had been called upon to make for his sake, to prove too hard for her acceptance?

"Surely," thought the poor child to herself, "since everyone says it is the right thing for me to do, God, who is all-powerful, can make me think the same, if I only ask Him."

Thereupon she crept into her bed-room, and, falling on her knees in the dark, prayed, for guidance and direction. But whilst she prayed although she fully believed that she was addressing the Almighty with no desire but to learn His will concerning her, her thoughts were intermixed with what Mr. Ray had said and Mrs. Weston had said, and she was expecting every moment to see a miracle performed, and to find that her opinion had veered round to theirs. She was ready like many of us, to do what Heaven willed, but she wanted to be made to like to do it at the same time; and as such conformity is but the work of time she remained at the close of her prayers as comfortless and undecided as before.

But suddenly a thought of her cousin Nigel crossing her mind, roused her from her half despairing state. Not that it was an unusual occurrence for Nelly to think of him, and the days which she had spent at Orpington, but she had not yet done so in immediate reference to a contemplated marriage with Dr. Monkton.

Though it could scarcely be with reference to marriage that a vision of the scene which she had had with her cousin in the corridor on the last night she had slept at the Chase, now rose up before the eyes which were hidden in the bedclothes.

Yet, as it passed before her mental vision in all its minutiae, and her cheeks grew hot again in recalling the kiss which he had left upon her lips, the memory appeared to have some effect upon her wavering judg-

ment, for she sprung to her feet as if she had been stung, and clasping her hands together, exclaimed with energy: —

“I *can't* do it, indeed I can't do it! no! Bertie, not even for *you*.”

Her words, though full of decision, had been uttered beneath her breath, yet, had they been rung out upon the evening air, and received an instantaneous disclaimer, they could not have produced a more powerful effect than they seemed to do to Nelly, when they were answered by the sound of her brother's foot-step.

Bertie's — of a surety: for whose else could it be, moving heavily about in the adjoining room; yet very unlike his usually cautious tread in its stumbling noisy uncertainty. Nelly flew to the door which divided them, eager, notwithstanding the coldness of their parting, to express her pleasure at his return, and to offer him her assistance.

“Bertie!” she was about to ejaculate, “how is it that I never heard the wheels of your chair?” when she was struck dumb upon the threshold by the strangeness of his appearance.

With one of the flaming, unsnuffed candles in either hand; a face as white as chalk; and hair straying over his eyes, Robert Brooke turned at his sister's approach and confronted her with a sickly leer. Nelly's heart nearly stopped beating with terror: she could not imagine what had happened to him, the only idea which struck her was that he had been suddenly taken ill.

“Bertie!” she gasped, “Bertie, what is the matter?”

Still he made no answer, but stood in the same

position, swaying backwards and forwards whilst the lights he held cast a green shade over his pallid countenance, and a weak foolish smile played about the corners of his mouth. She ran up to his side and took the candles from him, and shook him almost impatiently in her unknown fear.

"Speak to me, do speak to me. Are you ill? are you in pain? You terrify me, Bertie, with your looks."

Released from the candlesticks, and somewhat roused by the energy of her demand, her brother fell back into a chair and mumbled a few incoherent words.

Then Nelly did what she was very seldom guilty of. She lost her presence of mind. All that she had ever heard respecting the symptoms of impending paralysis or epilepsy, rushed upon it to increase its terror, and without another word she ran quickly through their own apartments into the Farm kitchen, on one side of the ample fireplace of which, Aggie was privileged to keep her chair. There she found the old nurse as usual, dozing over her knitting and — since it was not quite time for the farming-men's supper, — alone. The suddenness with which Nelly roused her, was sufficient to send Aggie into a fit if no one else had one.

"Aggie! Aggie!" she exclaimed, violently shaking the woman's arm, "get up, Aggie — get up quick, Bertie is ill, he is dying."

Old people sleep lightly, and the nurse was wide-awake in a moment and trembling with the shock.

"Dying! lor! Miss Nelly — when — where? How did it happen? You've given me that start, I don't know how to stand."

"I know nothing, except that he is ill. Come with me, Aggie, come at once, I cannot stay here." And the next moment she was flying back along the white-washed passage, with the old woman hobbling after her, and "blessing and saving" herself at every step.

But when, breathless with haste and fear, they reached the apartment of the man presumed to be dying, he did not appear to have become any worse during his sister's absence. On the contrary, he was sitting on the chair, just as she had left him, and with his eyes very open, and his legs very far apart, was apostrophising the candles, which Nelly had placed upon the chest of drawers, in a cheerful, not to say, jocose manner.

"Oh! is he going out of his mind?" cried Nelly, drawing back as she caught sight of him, and clinging to the arm of her nurse.

The old woman paused for a moment, and regarded him steadfastly: noted his rolling eyes, listless arms, and vacuous look; and then, drawing a long breath as though she were greatly relieved, her own expression quickly changed from fear to one of contempt, and she limped up to the side of the chair, and grasped her master's shoulder firmly with her hand.

"Now then, Master Robert!" she said angrily, "what is all this about? You ought to be ashamed of yourself, sir, to go frightening your sister after this fashion."

Nelly had watched the change in Aggie's face with the utmost curiosity and surprise; and when she saw her thus lay violent hands upon her suffering brother, she thought everybody was going mad together and flew to his rescue.

“Aggie! for shame! how dare you speak to him so? He is ill — he is in pain, I am sure he is. Oh! good heavens! what can I do for him?” and she threw her arms around Bertie’s neck, and cushioned his head upon her warm heart, whilst his eyes rolled upwards to meet hers, and he babbled out some incoherent stuff which was intended to express his opinion of Aggie’s conduct.

But the old nurse pushed her away.

“Come now, Miss Nelly, don’t you do none of that until he deserves it. The best thing for you, my dear, is to go into the next room and bide there a bit, till I’ve put Master Robert into his bed.

“What, and leave him alone to you, when he is ill, and you speak so crossly to him; no, never, nurse.”

“Ill! my dearie! he ain’t no more ill than you are, take my word for it and ask no questions.”

To this, Nelly was about to make an indignant rejoinder, when she raised her eyes and encountered those of the old woman. There was something in them which revealed the truth. Slowly but surely, beneath the shame of that discovery the colour mounted into the poor girl’s cheeks, until her whole face was one burning blush, and yet she would not utter a syllable that should betray that she was cognisant of Aggie’s meaning. She only caught her breath once or twice as if she were choking and pressed the heavy head which she still held, closer to her faithful bosom. And then when she felt able to speak, she said very quietly —

“If Bertie is not ill, nurse, I can attend to him as

well as you, and I would rather do so by myself. I am sorry that I disturbed you for nothing."

Old Aggie was immediately all penitence.

"Lor, my blessing, what's the good of me, if not to be disturbed according to your liking. But there, Miss Nelly, I won't speak another hard word to him, and that I promise you, if you'll only let me stay a bit and help him into his bed. You'll not be able to do it alone, my dear, and 'tisin't fit as you should."

So together, the women assisted Mr. Robert Brooke into bed, where he soon sunk into a heavy slumber.

It was not likely that the news of his supposed illness could be kept entirely secret from the household, particularly as the boy who had pushed his bath chair, appeared at the Farm supper to relate how the "young master" had got out of the conveyance, and desired him to take it back to the house "better nor two hours" before he was said to have returned there himself.

Where he had spent the intervening time, no one knew or had any likelihood of ascertaining.

But the occurrence had so alarmed Nelly, that she refused to retire to rest herself that night, but kept a weary watch (which Aggie in vain asked to be allowed to share) in her brother's room, where she remained, hour after hour, wrapped in thought, as she reviewed with idly clasped hands, the events and feelings of the past day.

Of what the poor child dreamed, as Bertie slept heavily on the bed beside which she crouched, whether she really persuaded herself that her judgment was the only one at fault; or whether a fearful and shameful future seemed to open before her with the bitter know-

ledge she had attained that evening; a future which she might avert, or not averting, might feel laid at her door, was best known to herself, for she revealed the truth to no one.

Only when the day dawned, and her brother, roused from his slumbers, found that she had been watching the livelong night beside his pillow, he was so filled with shame and contrition, and self-reproach, that the real love which united the twin children, poured forth in an unchecked stream, and they revelled in a burst of mutual confidence, in which, though plentifully mingled, the sweet so predominated over the bitter that it was felt, on Nelly's side, at least, that life was too short and empty of such joy, to permit of anything which was preventible interrupting it again.

When old Aggie had the opportunity to observe her nurseling on the following day, she was surprised at the calmness which her features had assumed, and concluded in consequence that she must have failed to understand her hints respecting the cause of her brother's mysterious illness.

"And I'll bite out my tongue before I'll be the one to tell her the truth," was the nurse's mental ejaculation, "though it be easy enough to deceive her, bless her innocence. But if it go on at this rate, a blind man will be able to see it for hisself before long, so I needn't trouble my old head about the matter;" and then, addressing the object of her thoughts, "Well, Miss Nelly, my dearie, and where may you be going so early?"

"Only to the post office to post a letter for Bertie, nurse," replied the girl with a plaintive smile which ended in a plaintive sigh. "He was up the first thing

this morning to write it, and is very anxious that it should go to-day. He is asleep again now, so I think you had better not go in for fear of disturbing him, for he is rather feverish, and rest will do him good."

"And how may his head be by this time, Miss Nelly?" the old servant could not resist enquiring, as she glanced mischievously up into her young mistress's face.

The cheeks grew crimson again, and the soft eyes sought the ground, but the voice in which Nelly answered, though subdued, was womanly in its dignity.

"It is very painful, nurse, as you may guess; but I don't suppose that talking about it will do it any good. The best thing to be done now, I think, is to keep Bertie quiet; and ourselves too."

From the way in which Nelly uttered the last words, Aggie perceived her mistake in deciding that she had been less mindful of the truth than herself, and laying her wrinkled hand upon the girl's arm, she hastened, in an indirect manner, to apologise for her insinuation.

"Don't you be vexed with me, my dear! I didn't mean nothing, you may be sure, and if I'd thought that things had made themselves as plain to you as they have to me, I wouldn't have mentioned nothing, neither. But all I say is," continued the old woman, with a happy disregard of her first assertion, that she had meant nothing — "all I say is, that if that fine doctor friend of Master Robert's can't do him more good than this, why he'd better stay away from Bickton, and that's the truth, for he's making matters worse for us instead of better."

At this contemptuous mention of the "fine doctor friend," the ready flush again mounted to Nelly's face.

"It's not Dr. Monkton's fault, nurse," she answered, quickly, "no one can say but that he has done all that is possible to improve dear Bertie's health and add to his comfort."

"Well, but it don't add to ours, Miss Nelly, for him to come here putting fine ideas in the poor lad's head, which won't never come to pass, and only render him ill-contented with his home. The doctor's at the bottom of this, you may rest assured. I never liked him overmuch from the first time ——"

"Hush, hush, nurse," said the girl, laying her hand over the woman's mouth, whilst the colour flew from her face as rapidly as it had appeared there. "You mustn't say a word against Dr. Monkton, or any of his doings, because — because ——"

"Because what, my dearie?" enquired Aggie, unsuspectingly, as Nelly removed her hand from her lips to press it over her own heart.

"Because, — stop a minute, nurse, and I'll tell you, because I'm going to — to marry him."

The murder was out, and the girl and her nurse, the one, trembling from the agitation of telling the news, the other from that of hearing it, stood for a few moments, gazing steadily in each other's faces.

At last Nelly said in a very low voice —

"And don't you wish me — joy — Aggie?"

"Joy, my dear bairn, I wish you every blessing that the Lord can shower over you, both here and hereafter," exclaimed the old woman, whilst the drops ran down her furrowed cheeks; and holding out her

arms, Aggie took her "child" into her embrace, just as she had been used to do in the days of old; and the nurse and nurseling mingled their tears together.

CHAPTER II.

The Cathedral Town of Hilstone.

HILSTONE was one of those somnolent places (not singular amongst the county towns of foggy and respectable England) which, going to sleep six days in the week, wake up on the seventh, namely, their market-day, to make an extraordinary fuss over the most trivial topics and events of a commonplace existence.

But, added to being a market town, Hilstone could boast of a cathedral! and the cathedral towns of our native country possess an individuality exclusively their own, for which all those who do not dwell therein, may be thankful.

Why, in order that a collection of bricks and mortar may attain the height of respectability, it must be endowed with the extreme of dullness, no one has yet been able to determine, but the fact remains, and Hilstone was no exception to the general rule. In vain had a charitable government, in pity for its stagnant condition, established a military *dépôt* on the outskirts of the town. The proximity of the red coats had produced no better effect than to put the ecclesiastical party out of temper, and to cause the magic upspringing of half-a-dozen new public houses, to meet the increased demand for liquor.

"Sword and Gown" would not fraternise, and only

maintained the peace on protest, whilst at every turn they interfered with each other's amusements, and if by chance they agreed to mingle and try to enjoy themselves together, the influence of the Cathedral, like an austere matron clothed in black, with a rod of iron in her hand, kept guard over them, and put an effectual stop to anything like frivolity.

If the 40th Bays (which was the regiment then stationed at Hilstone) got up a dance or a pic-nic, or anything to promote a little gaiety, the clerical party thought it altogether beneath their dignity to attend it, whilst their subordinates sued the military to purchase tickets for amateur oratorios and charitable bazaars, with the same want of success.

Yet, strange to say, the feud was not between the men of each profession, for although their avocations led them into widely different paths, they could manage to meet without clashing. Neither did the ladies of the Cathedral systematically frown upon the owners of the moustaches, as how should they do, when Captain Herbert Filmer, own grandchild to the Dean of Hilstone, and the son of Mrs. Filmer, who lived at the Deanery, and "led" the town, not only honoured the 40th Bays by belonging to it, but was as often to be met in his mother's drawing-room as in the mess-room of his regiment. Indeed, nothing pleased Mrs. Filmer better than to see the Deanery table or concert-room filled with officers, and she was always especially gracious to the young, unmarried, rich colonel of the Bays, and was known to look with a very lenient eye upon his undisguised flirtation with her only daughter.

But it was the regimental ladies to whom Mrs. Filmer and all her satellites bore so unmitigated an

aversion, that it was only on one or two of those whose husbands were highest in the service, that they had even left their cards. They were the obstacle which would ever prevent the black and scarlet from mingling as freely as they should have done; for although a few of the bachelors of the corps ignored the party spirit which divided them, the husbands of the slighted women were compelled to take up arms in their defence, and to refuse to partake of any gaiety in which they were not included, or were likely to be brought in contact with those who had affronted them. It is hard to say why this female feud existed, or when it had begun; but the ladies of the Bays had been heard to affirm that the occurrence was by no means an unusual one in military experience, and that they would rather be stationed anywhere than near a Cathedral town.

Perhaps they dressed a little too smartly and fashionably to suit the quiet ideas of Hilstone, or, perhaps they had been indiscreet in averring their distaste to the place and its inhabitants, and in comparing its dullness with the remembrance of former gaieties.

For although the dullness of Hilstone was an indisputable fact, the natives refused to believe in it, and nothing offended them more than that a stranger should dare to express an opinion in the matter.

To them, the old town was a paradise; they revered its shops, its institutions, and its society; it was the healthiest place in the world, the most scientific and the most popular. Nothing that happened in Hilstone could be wrong.

They lifted up their hands at the bare idea of its sharp, cold climate disagreeing with any person, whatever his complaint; were incredulous on the possibility

of procuring articles better or cheaper elsewhere, and if any one moved from Hilstone who was not absolutely compelled by his evil fortune to do so, they simply considered that he must be insane. How far they were justified in their opinion, perhaps no one could judge who had not lived there. For on a first inspection, Hilstone did certainly appear to be a very charming old place. It possessed some great advantages, and might have possessed more had its townsmen been less arrantly conceited with respect to it and themselves. It is not unusual, in this world, to see a person with good natural abilities stop short on the road to success, because he has not sufficient discrimination to distinguish encouragement from admiration, and fancies he has arrived at the end of his task, before he has mastered the beginning. So it was with Hilstone, or rather with its inhabitants. They rested its claims to notice upon the fame which it had acquired in bye-gone days, and were content to let them rest there. Was it not one of the most ancient towns in England? were not kings and queens buried in gilded coffins in the cathedral, and did it not possess some of the finest antiquities in the country? What could people want more? This was all very true, and had modern attractions been added to its ancient interest, Hilstone might have been transformed into something more like the earthly paradise which its faithful natives believed it to be. But the ordinary soul of the nineteenth century is corrupt, and cannot be content to derive all its pleasures from contemplating the dry bones of Saxon kings, or stone effigies with their noses ground off; nor rest satisfied with the excitement attendant upon the examination of curious monuments and buildings, because they were

erected some hundred years before. And the error of the Hilstone people lay in the belief that nothing more was necessary to render the place a pleasant habitation, and the idea of any innovation, however slight, was put down with zeal worthy of a more deserving object.

Was it proposed by some enterprising member of the Town Council to build a public concert-room? What could they want better than the Mechanics' Institute, in which the concerts of the Choral Society had been held for so many years? To widen the principal street, and erect new shops? Would they destroy the appearance of a thoroughfare which had stood in its present condition for hundreds of years? To enclose a public field and turn it into a subscription cricket ground! What, deprive the national school children of their right of way, even though it were as easy for them to go by the road, and the proposal was made for the benefit of the town? Never! the whole place would rise at the mere attempt; and, indeed, on the last occasion the "place," represented by all its worst characters, did rise and threaten to burn down the house of the person who had been so unfortunate as to think of the plan. Hilstone wanted more shops, more gas, more laying on of water, and more carrying off of drains; but the Hilstonians were perfectly contented to let things remain as they were; they liked being cheated, and walking home in the dark, and having a fever break out periodically in the back slums of the town, and refused to believe that any of these evils required remedy.

The members of their Town Council and Board of Works, being invariably also members of their own

families, they always got their own way with them, and the tradesmen ruled the place and did with it as they chose. For it was a remarkable fact about Hilstone that all the so-called gentry bore the same names as the shopkeepers, although they steadily ignored any relationship between them. Thus, the five Misses Harley, daughters of old Harley the retired solicitor, who occupied one of the best houses in the town, quite tittered at the absurdity of their papa signing the same name as Harley the pork-butcher, although the pork-butcher's girls bore a striking resemblance to themselves. And the same peculiarity being traceable through several other families, the shopkeepers of Hilstone gave themselves great airs, and charged double the price they should have done for their goods on the score of their grand relations. The ladies of the 40th Bays had tried all the shops in Hilstone and come to the conclusion that it would be more economical to send for what they wanted to London; which decision being rumoured about had given great offence to the townspeople: "Not good enough for them, I suppose," had been the general remark, delivered with much acerbity and elevated noses.

It was said that the military ladies upon arrival had visited the cathedral, inspected the crypts, read the inscriptions on the tombs, tipped the verger, and then turned away to enquire who was considered the best milliner in Hilstone and when the next ball was expected to take place? expressing general dissatisfaction on being told that it was seldom thought worth while to get up a public ball there, as it would be sure not to be patronized by the cathedral party. They had attended the cathedral service every Sunday afternoon

since, but openly confessed they did so for the sake of the anthem, for they greatly preferred hearing their own chaplain read and preach; a piece of heresy which, being quickly repeated into the ear of the Dean's daughter-in-law, caused her to "sniff" palpably whenever the military ladies passed her pew, and to make whispered comments on their appearance to her daughter, or any female toady who might be in waiting on the occasion. For Mrs. Filmer was surrounded by toadies, ever ready to run messages for her, or to retail gossip: she considered herself the principal person in Hilstone, and as far as the cloisters were concerned, perhaps she was so. She was the widow of the dean's eldest son, and with her daughter Laura, had lived at the deanery ever since her husband's death; not only lived but ruled, making as free use of her father-in-law's purse as of his house. Some people might have considered this rather a dependent position in which to be placed: but no Hilstonian presumed to link the ugly word "dependence" with the sacred name of Filmer. The reverence due to the dean reflected itself on his daughter-in-law, and had she been his wife she could not have met with greater respect and honour, a homage which in her own person she was by no means entitled to, for, stripped of her temporary importance as mistress of the Deanery, Mrs. Filmer was simply a coarse-minded, ill-bred, and ill-tempered woman. The cathedral of Hilstone was so situated in the centre, or rather to the back of the town, that nothing but its spire was to be seen from the High Street. It was surrounded by the lowest and poorest habitations of the place, which clustered about it like rabble thronging a monarch; and the occupants of which defiled the

iron railings guarding the graveyard by hanging out wet garments upon them to dry, and permitted the sanctity of the cloisters to be outraged by the noisy shouts of children at play. Moreover the cathedral yard was a thoroughfare, and passengers might be seen traversing it at any hour of the day, from the butcher-boy with his tray and the nursemaid with her perambulator, down to the itinerant organ-grinder with his detestable instrument. The cathedral itself was approached on every side by heavy archways, forming the termination to high walls, and was not to be seen until the last of them had been traversed and the visitor was stepping beneath the lime avenue which led up to its massive door. It was in one of the narrow well-guarded streets leading to the cloister, that Dr. Monkton's house was situated, causing Nelly Brooke to think it looked like a prison, and that it must be difficult to breathe there.

The deanery adjoined the cathedral, and seemed almost like a continuation of it, whilst the other large houses in the cloisters, eight or ten in number, though close at hand, were disposed here and there in that fanciful bo-peep fashion in which the architects of older days loved to place their buildings, and all bore a certain similarity in being very large, draughty and damp, and covered with ivy, which rendered the low-pitched rooms still darker than they need have been. These houses were not all occupied by people attached to the cathedral, for the next in size to the deanery was rented by the Honorable Mrs. Allondale, whose three daughters, although far less attractive, and more "fast" and flirting than any lady in the 40th Bays, had been pronounced to be "dear girls," by Mrs. Filmer,

and were recognised accordingly by the Hilstone public as models of fashion and propriety.

Everybody connected with the cloister was sacred in the eyes of Hilstone, even down to the twenty decayed widows of the twenty deceased canons who lived in a set of alms houses within the sacred precincts, built after the same pattern, and not much better than those provided for the poor. But there were three especial planets round which the lower satellites revolved, and from whom they derived half their effulgence. The first of these was, of course, Mrs. Filmer; the second was Dr. Nesbitt, the cathedral organist; the third was Mr. Rumbell, a bachelor canon with a bass voice, which all the spinsters declared to be marvellous in its perfection, and who was president of the Choral Society of Hilstone.

Of the character of Mrs. Filmer sufficient has already been said to account for any future actions of which she may be guilty. That of Dr. Nesbitt was a far deeper one, though in its way, scarcely less unpleasant. He was a man of powerful intellect, and great musical ability, but with an uncertain and violent temper, and a reserved disposition which forbid his opening his heart to anyone. He was very much courted and deferred to in Hilstone, but everybody was more or less afraid of him. On his part, he treated the townspeople with politeness because it was his good will and pleasure to retain his appointment as organist amongst them; but there was ever a cynical look to be discerned lurking behind his readiest smile, and in his heart, he hated and despised them all. The town called itself a musical one; it had placed itself under the direction of one or two favourite canons, and

half a dozen choristers, and considered the Hilstone Choral Society, and the Hilstone Glee and Madrigal Union, to be two of the best organised and conducted amateur institutions of the kind.

Dr. Nesbitt had been asked to accept the conduct of one, or both of these societies, but had steadily declined to have anything to do with them. He carried on a secret feud against all the musical canons, but especially against Mr. Rumbell with his bass voice, and Mr. Pratt with his tenor voice, who had both attempted to interfere with the instruction of the cathedral choir. Dr. Nesbitt would laugh in his sleeve at the mere notion of either of these men knowing anything of music; a first rate musician himself, and with the capability of making the splendid organ under his charge sound in such a manner that all England would have been glad to crowd to hear him, he would yet on occasions mount the loft stairs in so bad a humour, that neither choristers nor canons could by any possibility follow the chords struck by his wayward fingers. And then Dr. Nesbitt would be delighted at the public failure, and before he had given the cathedral authorities time to reprimand him, would lull their anger by such exquisite music as is seldom heard upon this lower earth. He knew, too well, that however Mr. Rumbell might puff with indignation, or Mr. Pratt weep with chagrin, all Hilstone would vote against his dismissal. His fame was too wide spread for such a step to injure anybody but themselves; he would at once be gladly seized upon and engaged by some rival cathedral town, and they would have lost the glory of being able to boast that they had not only the finest organ, but the best organist in England.

And so Dr. Nesbitt played just as he liked; and even Mrs. Filmer reserved her most gracious smiles for the occasions when she asked him to take part in the private concerts at the deanery; and the Honourable Mrs. Allondale, and the Misses Harley (who, although not at all honourable, were very rich,) thought when they had managed to secure the attendance of Dr. Nesbitt at their musical parties, that there was no one else in the room worth entertaining. And yet Mr. Rumbell enjoyed almost an equal share of attention, for he possessed the extra advantage of being a bachelor, which Dr. Nesbitt was not, having an invalid wife who never went into society, stowed away somewhere in the recesses of his dark, damp house. Mr. Rumbell was fancy-free, and being president of the Choral Society, which met once a week for practice, and to which every single lady in Hilstone belonged, he had great opportunities of becoming known to the female members of his congregation.

He was fat, it is true; and pale and puffy, and his figure looked more like a pincushion stuffed with bran than a muscular living body; but still he was a canon, and single; and had a voice with such splendid low notes in it that the ladies of Hilstone declared that it almost made them cry. Dr. Nesbitt, on the contrary, affirmed that he could not hear the canon sing without laughing; but as he always played his accompaniments when asked to do so, with the utmost gravity, the Hilstone virgins could not guess that he held such heterodox sentiments regarding their favourite, and it was only to a chosen few that he had revealed them. Such were the luminaries round which the Hilstone satellites revolved adoring; such the society to which

Nelly Brooke, as Dr. Monkton's wife, would be introduced.

The doctor was a great favourite with the cathedral party, and consequently with all the town; and although the news of his contemplated marriage had cast a gloom upon the unmarried portion of his female patients, Mrs. Filmer (having higher views for her own daughter) saw nothing objectionable in the idea, and therefore his sister, Mrs. Prowse, tried to put a good face on the matter, and make the best of it.

For Mrs. Prowse, who had hitherto resided with her brother, was the wife of one of the oldest canons in Hilstone, and went hand-in-glove with Mrs. Filmer, in all her likes and dislikes, however unreasonable they might be; acted chief jackal, in fact, to the cathedral lioness, and was therefore thoroughly opposed to the ladies of the 40th Bays, and generally speaking to most new-comers. It was mainly through her influence that her brother had obtained the principal practice of the town, for she was older than himself, and had lived in it many years before he thought of settling there; though fortunately for him, soon after his arrival, the medical practitioner then most in favour, having been foolish enough to risk his popularity by helping the surgeon of the regiment then occupying the barracks to pull an officer's wife through a difficult case of fever, and found himself banished from several houses in consequence, James Monkton had nimbly stepped into the vacated position, and taken good care to maintain it since.

Mrs. Filmer had been one of those who most strongly condemned old Dr. Nash's misplaced philanthropy, and her patronage of the new candidate for

Hilstone favour had established his fortune at once. Mrs. Prowse, although she had never seen Nelly Brooke, and was not acquainted with the people of the Chase, considered that with such advantages, her brother should have looked higher for a wife; but Mrs. Filmer, only anticipating another addition to her list of worshippers, elected to pooh-pooh the fears and doubts of her jackal, and to assert that Dr. Monkton was in a position to marry whom he chose.

And so, pending the appearance of my heroine, the matter rested.

CHAPTER III.

Mrs. Filmer's Jackal.

It was market-day in Hilstone — a bright glorious Thursday in August — and the High Street had wakened up, and looked quite gay. Mr. Jenkins, the principal linen-draper, had dressed his windows with gold and silver-spotted tarlatanes, surmounted by gorgeous wreaths, and chalky white kid gloves; for though there were few respectable public balls held in Hilstone, the tradespeople occasionally indulged in capers by themselves, and there was no saying what attraction the flimsy materials might not have for the many young ladies who came in from the surrounding country to adorn the town on market-day, and who were much in the habit of congregating round Mr. Jenkins's shop, in consequence of which well-known custom a knowing seller of gingerbread and sweet stuff had pitched his tent just outside the linen-draper's door.

This pitching of booths in the public road, as if for a fair, appeared to be a legal institution in Hilstone,

for no less than six or eight blocked up the High Street alone.

Near the entrance to the grain market, itinerant vendors were selling leather gloves and gaiters, and canes and driving-whips, and vociferously pressing their wares on the stout, red-faced farmers who passed continually in and out of the building, conferring together on the price of oats and barley, and enforcing their arguments by two fat, outstretched fingers, laid cunningly across each other.

In the stable-yards of the two principal inns, ostlers were every minute being shouted for, to take the horse of some new arrival, whilst the savoury fumes of hot soups and pasties, which proceeded from the open doors of each establishment, proved that good entertainment was preparing for man as well as beast.

The confectioners, attempting to outwit the inn-keepers, had decked their windows with the most tempting hams and tongues, and delicate French rolls, and the masters of such shops as could not hope for any increase to their business on account of its being market-day, stood on their thresholds deliciously idle, but beaming with smiles, as though they drove so thriving a trade during the rest of the week, that it was rather a comfort than otherwise to have nothing to do.

The sun shone powerfully, and everybody looked happy and gay.

The ladies of Hilstone, although they complained greatly of the "awkwardness of being looked at," and the "inconvenience of being elbowed," always turned out in large numbers on Thursday mornings; and there they were as usual on this particular occasion, saunter-

ing up and down the High Street, stopping every now and then to examine some novelty in a shop-window; or rushing together in a terrified group, as a drove of dusty bullocks or unruly cart colts came lumbering down the hill on their way to the cattle market. Conspicuous among them, more on account of her sharp voice and decided manner, than of her imposing appearance, was Dr. Monkton's sister, Mrs. Prowse, and walking with her was Miss Fanny Clewson, the daughter of one of the twenty decayed widows of the twenty deceased canons, who occupied the almshouses in the cloisters.

Mrs. Prowse was a small woman, not so short as extremely narrow, and for her sex, illshaped. Captain Herbert Filmer had emphatically described her as "two planks lashed together," and there was not much more to be said for her figure. The style of her face was prim and old-maidish; few strangers would have taken her for a wife, none for a mother; and in this last conjecture they would have been right, for Mrs. Prowse was a childless, and a child hating woman.

Her eyes were large and dark, like her brother's, but they never wore the soft expression which his, at times, assumed; her nose was a small aquiline, and her mouth was hard and inflexible, with straight, thin lips, and over-sized teeth.

Whenever Mrs. Prowse made a remark there always seemed to be something more behind.

She would deliver her opinion, and apparently without reserve; but then the thin lips would resolutely close over the large teeth, whilst a look remained in the eyes which was intended to indicate that she knew more on the subject than she chose to divulge.

No one really liked Mrs. Prowse; even her brother, although he permitted himself to be much influenced by her, was rejoicing in the prospect of getting her out of his house, whilst her poor husband would have been only too thankful could he have entertained any reasonable hope of the same contingency.

Mrs. Filmer chose to make use of her; and therefore all Mrs. Filmer's cronies and toadies were compelled to accept her snappish remarks with as good a grace as they could muster; but it was only on sufferance that she maintained a circle of friends in Hilstone. Herbert and Laura Filmer were rude to her openly; most people abused her behind her back; even Fanny Clewson, who was a very snake for subtlety, could not always resist shewing what she thought of Mrs. Prowse's insinuations. Miss Fanny Clewson was of the pussy-cat order of women, soft and velvety in the extreme to all outward appearance, but possessing very sharp claws, which she could unsheathe when she thought fit.

She had been a pretty girl, and was still a pretty woman, but although evidently not young, no one knew her real age. It might have been anything from five-and-twenty to five-and-thirty, but being unmarried, she still passed in Hilstone as a girl.

She had large, sleepy, bashful looking eyes, which were generally cast upon the ground, but which could, on occasions (particularly such occasions as encountering a gentleman) glance upwards through their long lashes with the slyest look imaginable. Besides these attractions, she possessed a small, straight nose, a pursed-up rose-bud mouth, a bright complexion, and a profusion of silky hair, which she wore in long, soft

bands on either side of her face, like a spaniel's ears; and when it is added that her voice (at least the voice she kept for the public) was low and sweet, and most oily in its tone — Miss Clewson's portrait is completed. She had lived alone with her mother in the almshouses before mentioned, for any number of years, and was one of the standing dishes of Hilstone. Of course she was, or professed to be, strictly ecclesiastical in all her tastes, and totally opposed to such frivolities as bands, and balls, and uniforms; nevertheless, it had been whispered, by some of rumour's hundred tongues, that more than one imprudent subaltern had got into a scrape through Miss Fanny's bashful eyes, and only been able to wrest his billets-doux from the knowing clutches of old Mrs. Clewson, in consideration of a *quid pro quo*.

However, whether in this instance rumour spoke truth or falsehood, it is certain that such knowledge could never have reached the ears of Mrs. Filmer or her jackal, or Miss Fanny Clewson would assuredly not have been permitted to walk up the High Street by the side of a canon's wife. Yet here they were, proceeding leisurely together, and talking alternately of Dr. Monkton's marriage, which had taken place some weeks previously, and Mrs. Prowse's new house.

"I wonder you didn't go to the wedding," said Miss Fanny, twisting herself round so as to face her friend, (Miss Clewson never walked arm-in-arm with any one, it prevented her moving her body about in those snake-like evolutions with which she loved to wriggle up the High Street.) "A wedding in the country is generally such a charming sight."

"I can't say I agree with you," replied Mrs. Prowse,

in her peculiar voice, the tones of which, although not loud, were yet all treble, and never fell at the conclusion of a sentence. "I think all weddings are dreary affairs, and this one must have been especially so, because the young lady's grandfather has not been dead a year yet; and my brother tells me that it was a stipulation that the marriage should be strictly private. So I was not likely to trouble myself to go all that distance for nothing."

"Has Miss Brooke no parents then?" enquired Miss Clewson.

"No, she is an orphan. Her only near relation is her twin brother."

"A brother! oh! dear!" exclaimed Fanny Clewson, as a vision rose up before her of six feet of manly beauty, furnished with moustaches. "Then I suppose we shall see the gentleman down at Hilstone also."

"Scarcely likely, I should think," was the disheartening response, "for he is a great invalid, and has never moved out of his native village. He could find no enjoyment in the bustle of a town."

"Then he has property of his own?"

"Oh, yes, he is quite independent, he has a country place or something of the sort in Kent, which of course he will continue to reside on."

By this it will be seen, that Mrs. Prowse was not very enlightened on the subject of Nelly and Robert Brooke; indeed, her greatest private grievance was, that her brother had been so reticent with her regarding his new connections; but she was too cunning to confess this openly. It sounded well to speak of a "country place," and as if the newly made Mrs. Monk-

ton had money; and Fanny Clewson was too great a gossip not to repeat as she heard.

"Are not those rich people who are renting Orpington Chase some relations to Mrs. Monkton?" again asked the latter, who was anxious to worm out all the information she could respecting the doctor's bride.

"I believe they are; distant cousins, or something of the sort; at least James first met Miss Brooke at their house; but he has no communication with the Chase now. Mrs. Brooke was rude to him, and he very rightly refused to visit her again. James stands a great deal too high to put up with nonsense from anyone."

"Of course," was the sympathetic rejoinder; "but, dear me, then Mrs. Monkton and her cousins won't be able to associate together; that will be a pity, won't it?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I suppose Mrs. Monkton will choose to think the same as my brother does on the matter. From his description, she is quite a child, and will of course be guided in all things by his wishes. I daresay they will be more like father and daughter together, than husband and wife."

"Father and daughter, he, he, he," tittered Miss Clewson. "She must be very young indeed, if Dr. Monkton is old enough to be her father."

"How foolish you are, Fanny Clewson," was the snappish reply; "it's not likely I was alluding to their respective ages. I mean that my brother is too clever, and has too much knowledge of the world to permit any woman to take the rule over him."

"And they are really to be home to-day! Is she very pretty, Mrs. Prowse? Do tell me all about her.

How anxious you must be to see her. It will be so charming for you to have a sister."

"I'm not at all anxious to see her," replied the canon's wife, who prided herself on always saying exactly what she meant; "I'm not like some people, who are afraid to say what they think. I don't see what difference her coming will make to Hilstone; but that is James's concern and not mine."

"But you have made your own house so comfortable, and have arranged everything in it so tastefully, that I am sure it must be a pleasure only to look at it. I was saying to Miss Harley, only yesterday, that yours will be the most elegant house in Hilstone, and you will make us all jealous, though I am sure no one has a better right to be surrounded by every elegance than you have."

"There is not much difficulty in choosing a few tables and chairs, if one were only permitted ——"

"Ah, not to *you*, perhaps, who have such exquisite taste," interposed Miss Clewson.

"I wish to goodness you'd break yourself of that habit of interrupting people," said Mrs. Prowse sharply; "it's shocking bad taste, particularly in a girl. I was going to observe, that if Mr. Prowse would only allow one to —— Who's that coming towards us now?"

"Mrs. Roe, dear Mrs. Prowse, and Miss Hammond," replied Fanny Clewson, eager to atone for her error; and the next minute the four ladies had met and greeted one another, and formed a cluster on the pavement which ejected the passing passengers into the road.

Miss Hammond was a very skinny old maid with a yellow face and an undeniable wig, Mrs. Roe was a

married lady, verging on middle age, with a pair of spectacles placed across her prominent nose, and a huge roll of music beneath her arm; and both ladies talked very fast and very animatedly, as though they were a couple of frolicsome girls who had no business to be taking a walk on their own account.

"Well, dear! and how are you after your fatigues of yesterday evening, and how did you manage to get home at last?"

The speaker was Mrs. Roe, and she addressed Mrs. Prowse — her query alluding to the meeting of the choral society which always took place on a Wednesday evening; and at the termination of the last one of which, Mr. Prowse had proved delinquent, and not appeared to convey his spouse home again.

"Oh! I did very well, thank you," replied the neglected wife. "Mr. Rumbell would not permit me to wait for Mr. Prowse, but took me home himself."

"Oh! he did — did he — you naughty thing?" exclaimed Miss Hammond archly, as she playfully tapped Mrs. Prowse with her parasol. "Well! I shall take care to tell the canon next time I meet him that he had better come next Wednesday, and look after his wife himself. But what did you think of the practice? Did not the soprani go well together? and was not Mr. Pratt's solo lovely? You came in finely, too, with your recitative, and quite took the room by storm."

Mrs. Prowse had a voice something like that of a singing mouse; but in consideration of the favour in which she stood with Mrs. Filmer, the president of the society gave her a solo part whenever it was possible.

"Now, do hold your tongue, Susy," interposed

Mrs. Roe. "I have something of importance to tell Mrs. Prowse. What do you think, dear? I am afraid our good president wants a little talking to from you. Mrs. Clarence has been granted a member's ticket."

"Now Mrs. Clarence was the wife of Captain Clarence of the 40th Bays; a very nice-looking woman of five-and-twenty, with a splendid soprano voice; and although the choral society was a public one, its members had as yet been strictly confined to the cathedral party.

"Never!" exclaimed the other ladies in a breath.

"It is true, I assure you. Wright told me so himself. She was at his shop this morning with a written order from Mr. Rumbell for a soprano's ticket; so of course he sold it her. But what can Mr. Rumbell have been thinking of?"

"But it is impossible! it must be a mistake," exclaimed Mrs. Prowse with excitement; "the list is closed, and has been for two months past. Did not Mr. Rumbell give it out publicly?"

"Of course, he did. I remember it perfectly, and Miss Green wished so much to enter afterwards, that she cried when she found she was too late to obtain a ticket. Oh! there's something behind this, you may depend upon it. It should be looked into."

"It *shall* be looked into," replied Mrs. Prowse, energetically. "Mrs. Clarence must have been up to some of her nasty military tricks — I hate such chicanery; — and, by the way, here comes Mr. Rumbell himself, so I'll just put the question to him at once."

The ladies stood a little to one side to make way for the burly canon, although they had no intention that he should pass them, nor had he apparently any

wish to do so. Mr. Rumbell was in a cheery mood, consonant with the weather, but that he usually was with his female acquaintances, on week days. He stopped short on perceiving them, shook hands heartily with Mrs. Prowse, Mrs. Roe, and Miss Hammond, and would have done the same by Fanny Clewson, had not her blushing bashfulness prompted her to draw a step backwards, from which position she timidly proffered a set of trembling fingers.

"Well! ladies — how are you?" he exclaimed, not noticing that the usually beaming looks of Mrs. Prowse were overcast. "You do not seem to have suffered from your exertion of last night. A capital practice, was it not? If we had a little more strength in the soprani we should do. Have you heard from your brother, Mrs. Prowse? When is he expected to return? Hilstone misses him sadly."

"Dr. and Mrs. Monkton will be home, I believe, by this evening, Mr. Rumbell," was the measured reply.

"Indeed! So soon — that's better than I thought. And so, I suppose you and Prowse have cleared out, bag and baggage. How do you like the change?"

"We are quite satisfied, I thank you, with our new abode."

Mrs. Prowse uttered these words so stiffly, that Mr. Rumbell began to suspect that his presence was not indispensable.

"Well! I mustn't detain you this beautiful morning. I am glad to hear we are to have Monkton back so soon. Good-day, ladies." And raising his hat he essayed to move on.

"Stay! Mr. Rumbell," exclaimed Mrs. Prowse, sud-

denly regaining her animation. "I wish to ask you a question before you go. Is it true that Captain Clarence's wife is to become a member of our choral society?"

The tone and the look were unmistakable, and the unfortunate canon at once perceived the reason of his cold reception.

"Well! I believe so," he half stammered in his confusion; "at least, Mrs. Clarence asked me for an order some little while back. Has it been presented?"

"The order was dated last week!" remarked Mrs. Roe, maliciously.

"And the list was closed two months ago," continued Mrs. Prowse. "Miss Green could not obtain a ticket, although she works exclusively for the cathedral ladies; and that outsiders should be admitted when our own people are excluded seems very strange."

"Miss Green, if you mean the dressmaker," replied Mr. Rumbell, "has no voice, Mrs. Prowse, as you must allow, and has had no instruction, and one of our first rules is that no one shall become a member who has not some knowledge of music. The room is small enough already, and we must not fill it with useless voices. I have closed the list, as you say, to all ordinary candidates, but we can't afford to turn away a Jenny Lind or a Grisi, you know, should they make an application for admittance."

"And you mean to insinuate that Mrs. Clarence is a Jenny Lind, then!" wrathfully returned Mrs. Prowse.

"I mean to say that she possesses a very beautiful

voice," replied Mr. Rumbell, who could hold his own when he chose, and had to do so occasionally, amongst the Hilstone females, "and that I did not grant her the order for a ticket until I had consulted the vice-president and others; but we were all unanimous on the propriety of admitting her as a member."

"Oh! of course, if you're all agreed, it must be right," said Mrs. Prowse, tossing her head, "but I think the other members of the society will require some explanation on the subject."

"Which I shall be most willing to afford them," was the canon's reply, as he again bowed and passed on.

"Now, what can be the meaning of that?" exclaimed Mrs. Roe, as soon as he was out of hearing.

"I can see the meaning of it, well enough," replied Mrs. Prowse, indignantly; "I heard last week, that he had been dining more than once at the Clarences'. It's just like those military women, they don't care what they do or say in order to attain an object. But don't let us talk of it any more. There's Dr. Nesbitt; I daresay, if the truth were known, he was one of Mr. Rumbell's advisers, for he is always dining up at the barracks, and I wonder dear Mrs. Filmer allows it — but she is so lenient and good-natured."

The cathedral organist came shuffling down the street as she spoke, and passed through their midst, with his eyes abstractedly fixed upon the ground. The ladies all bowed to him — some spoke; and the simultaneous greeting arresting his attention, he raised his head, started, and then, without removing his hat, gave them a rough nod, and shambled on.

"Dear Dr. Nesbitt is *so* absent!" murmured Miss Clewson, plaintively.

"Thinking of Mrs. Clarence, perhaps," suggested spiteful Mrs. Prowse.

"Well, Susy! we must be trotting on," said Mrs. Roe, beginning to tire of standing still. This was the signal for breaking up the party. The friends separated, and Mrs. Prowse and Fanny Clewson were about to resume their promenade, when the younger lady observed:

"Dear me! here comes Mr. Brooke, of Orpington."

"Are you acquainted with him?" enquired the canon's wife.

"Oh! yes; I have met him several times."

"Well, I have no wish to know him — certainly not, after his mother's rude behaviour to the doctor; so if you intend to speak to him, Fanny Clewson, we had better separate at once."

"I can't very well pass on, if he chooses to stop," returned Miss Clewson. She had but faint hopes, if any, that Nigel Brooke would desire to do more than bow to her, but faint as they were, she had no intention of resigning them for the sake of Mrs. Prowse.

"You can do as you please," was that lady's tart reply; "but, when I was young, it was considered right that a girl should try to elude a gentleman's notice, instead of courting it. However, here is a shop at which I have business to transact, so that you can have your own way with respect to Mr. Brooke. Good-bye:" and Mrs. Prowse disappeared beneath a confectioner's doorway, just as Nigel Brooke's quick step had brought him face to face with Fanny Clewson.

CHAPTER IV.

Nigel Brooke thinks there is Safety in Flight.

THE Brookes of Orpington knew very few of the Hilstone people. The Chase was too far from the town for intimate intercourse, and Mrs. Brooke was too indolent to go out of her way to seek society, so she confined her hospitalities to the few families living near, who had called upon her. Her son was better known, perhaps, being familiar at the barracks, whence he had found his way into several of the best houses of Hilstone; but he cared as little for what is termed society as his mother did. He was not a "party-going" man; his long absence from England had destroyed his interest in the fashionable topics of the day; and when he found himself in the presence of ladies who wanted to be amused with small talk, he felt like a fish out of water. It had never been his element; it was less so than ever now. Even in Calcutta, where he knew everybody, he had always tried to avoid, rather than court, gaiety, and his chief reasons for making Orpington Chase his temporary abode, were the country pleasures which it promised him, and the distance which lay between it and the town.

He might have commanded a good establishment in London had he so chosen; and indeed his mother had never ceased to rail at him during the dark winter days that were past, for having brought her down into the cold and desolate country instead; but Nigel Brooke could scarcely have lived elsewhere. Without his accustomed business he found time hang heavy on his hands; without his hunting and his shooting, his horses

and his dogs, it would have hung still heavier. He told his mother and his friends that it was the lack of regular occupation which thus fretted him; but to himself he was forced to acknowledge there was another and a weightier reason for the languor of mind which he experienced. He had but to glance back to the first visit he had paid to Little Bickton, and the weeks spent in Nelly Brooke's society, by which it had been succeeded, to be convinced of the truth of his suspicion. Since the event of his grandfather's death, and the insults which he had then received at the hands of his cousin Robert, he had borne about with him in philosophic silence, a very heavy heart. After his mother's first outburst of indignation had subsided, and his own discussions with Mr. Ray had been closed, Nigel Brooke had never voluntarily mentioned the subject to anybody. So reserved, so silent was he upon this one topic, that even Mrs. Brooke had come to perceive how painful it was to him, and ceased to speak of the delinquencies of either the brother or sister. Yet day after day had the generous heart of her son pondered if there were any possible means by which the quarrel between his cousin and himself could be made up without compromising his own dignity. But he had found none.

The wound had been given and received; nothing could unmake it, and the pain must either be borne in silence, or suffered to heal itself.

And so had Nigel borne it, with a noble absence of complaint, but instead of healing it had festered, and was eating into his very heart.

For he never disguised to himself that he loved his cousin Nelly. He loved her so much that he could

not bear to think of her; that he put the thought of her sweet fresh face away from him whenever it arose, with a strong resolute hand that seemed as though it must crush out what could scarcely be more than a passing fancy. Nigel Brooke was not like poor little Nelly herself, ignorant of the reason why he suffered; he had experienced the symptoms of love before, though in a less degree, and he knew that the passion must either be his master or his slave. And since it could not be the one he would make it the other. But this resolve was only in regard to himself. He had not forgotten the earnestness with which he had vowed to be his cousins' friend, and he was ready, only too ready, to help and succour Nelly at all times, and even Robert, for her sake.

He had not been much affected, as may be supposed, by his mother's rupture with her favourite doctor, which had taken place on the occasion of the latter demanding the address of her niece in Bickton, and declining to give his reasons for the demand.

He had not even connected the fact of Dr. Monkton wanting that address with the idea that the man he so much disliked had fallen in love with the same girl as himself.

And even, had he done so, Nigel Brooke would still have failed to feel alarm, lest any persuasion should tempt Nelly to become the doctor's wife. He had so high an opinion of her straightforwardness, so low a one of her suitor's, that he would have been ready on demand, to take his oath that his innocent little cousin would prefer to remain single all her life to purchasing wealth and luxury upon such terms. He little knew the home influence to which she was sub-

jected; nor the strength of the cords of that love which drew her into a path directly opposed to her own inclinations.

When the final arrangements for the marriage were completed, Mr. Ray, without consulting either Robert or Nelly, had written to inform Nigel Brooke of the contemplated event.

He had had no particular object in doing so; he had simply considered that the attention was due to a relative who had expressed so much interest in his wards, but he had little notion what a blow for his correspondent was contained in the few words in which he stated the fact.

For a second, Nigel Brooke had felt quite stunned by the shock which this news conveyed to him; but then he had roused himself, he had determinately shaken off the despair which was beginning to creep into his heart, he had boldly spoken out the intelligence which was the death-blow to all his hopes: not only spoken of, but discussed it: not only discussed, but courted discussion on the subject.

Once convinced of the truth, he was resolved so to familiarise himself with the fact that when Nelly came back to Hilstone as Mrs. Monkton, he should be able to meet her, without shrinking, if not without pain.

He had answered Mr. Ray's letter, and sent his congratulations to his cousin, in hopes they might be accepted: he had even renewed his offers of assistance in case it should be needed: he had listened patiently to Mrs. Brooke's tirades upon the "iniquitous proceeding," as she termed the marriage of her niece with the discarded doctor: he had done all this, and suffered so much in doing it that the sense of suffering seemed

almost past, and he began to fancy that his powers of feeling were becoming blunted.

Yet he could not but confess the awkwardness of the chance which had thus cast his cousin's lot, under present circumstances, so near to Orpington: and he often meditated how he could best get rid of the Chase again, so that he might take his mother away to some place where they should not even run the risk of meeting Mrs. Monkton of Hilstone. He was thinking of something connected with the same subject as he walked down the High Street on the Thursday morning alluded to, and came across Miss Fanny Clewson as she emerged from the confectioner's shop.

He was so deep in thought that he might almost have passed without noticing her, had she not said, "Good morning, Mr. Brooke," in her soft blandishing tones, as soon as he reached her side. Then he started; and in another moment he had raised his hat, and accepted her proffered hand.

"Good morning! Miss Clewson, what a beautiful day! are you alone?"

Miss Fanny, from beneath her long eyelashes, cast a deprecating glance at him.

"Now, Mr. Brooke, how unkind! when you know what a poor solitary creature I am, and that if I did not sometimes venture to take a little stroll by myself, I should seldom get one at all; everybody has not horses and carriages at their command like your mamma, remember. But I suppose you think it very wrong that a young lady should be seen walking in the town by herself."

Unused to the devices of modern young ladies to

extract a compliment, Nigel Brooke appeared quite taken aback by this unfounded accusation.

"I beg your pardon," he stammered, "I assure you I had no ulterior motive for asking the question, excepting that were it the case, I might hope to have the pleasure of strolling a little way by your side."

He had just as much wish to stroll by her side as he had to marry her off hand, but it was the only method that occurred to him by which he could extricate himself from the difficulty her words had plunged him in, and Miss Fanny seeing nothing extraordinary in his desire, smiled a gracious acquiescence on the proposal, and commenced to saunter with him down the High Street.

"I should be more disposed to blame the lady who could be content to remain indoors during such glorious weather," he continued, accommodating his pace to hers, "the town looks quite gay, does it not?"

"It is right it should do so to-day, Mr. Brooke, for this will be an anniversary for Hilstone, you know. Of course I need not tell *you* who are expected to arrive at home this evening. You have come over yourself probably only to welcome the bride!"

She was perfectly aware, as was proved by her conversation with Mrs. Prowse, that the disagreement between Dr. Monkton and the people at Orpington would prevent any such friendly greeting passing between the cousins, at all events at first; but she longed to find out from Nigel Brooke's face whether the story, as she had heard it, was really true. To watch a family quarrel through all its phases, and gather interesting details wherewith to regale her friends' curios-

ity, was as exciting a pastime to Fanny Clewson as bull-baiting is said to be to the ladies of Madrid.

"Bride! what bride?" enquired Nigel Brooke.

The question was unaffected, for at that moment he was not thinking of his cousin Nelly; and at no time would he have given Miss Clewson credit for even knowing that they were related: so entirely had his interests been separate from those of his Hilstone acquaintances. But he was quickly undeceived.

"Why, your cousin, Mrs. James Monkton, to be sure; Miss Helen Brooke that was. She is your cousin, is she not, Mr. Brooke?"

As Fanny Clewson put this enquiry to him, her sly eyes glanced furtively upwards to watch the effect of her words, and if her desire were to read Nigel Brooke's feelings on the subject in his face, it was amply gratified.

She had great satisfaction afterwards in being able to assure her cronies that she was certain he felt the estrangement dreadfully, and was altogether opposed to his cousin marrying Dr. Monkton, for that directly she mentioned her name, he "went as pale as a sheet."

And so far she was correct; for an instant the pallor of death almost seemed to cross Nigel Brooke's countenance, and his resolute mouth was set more firmly than before, but his pride forbid his shewing any other marks of concern at the intelligence which had come to him from so unexpected a quarter. He had forgotten that whether he avoided Nelly's actual presence or not, he would be liable at every turn to hear of her sayings and doings from their mutual acquaintance. Yet so it was, and he met the first instalment of his trial bravely, for if there was any difference in the voice in which

he answered Miss Clewson's question, it was rather more lively than usual.

"My cousin! to be sure she is; why it was at our house that Monkton first met her. But your news took me rather by surprise, Miss Clewson. Are you quite sure that they return to Hilstone to-day?"

"I am quite sure that they are expected to do so, for dear Mrs. Prowse was just speaking to me about it, and she has had to turn out of her brother's house, you know, to make room for the bride. But of course you are acquainted with Mrs. Prowse, Mr. Brooke? a charming person is she not?"

"I have not that honour," he quietly remarked, alluding to the alleged acquaintanceship.

"No? — really — why how is that? You are connected now, are you not? though I'm no judge, being very stupid about relationships. But let me see! How will you and Mrs. Prowse stand with regard to one another? She being sister to your first cousin's husband, why you'll all be cousins together, won't you? How charming that will be! I suppose we shall see a great deal of you in Hilstone now, Mr. Brooke?"

There was no mistaking the intense curiosity which lurked beneath Miss Clewson's apparently innocent question, and Nigel Brooke put himself on his guard. He had no wish that the estrangement between his cousins and himself should become a topic for general discussion in Hilstone; at the same time he hardly knew how to conceal the fact and yet answer her enquiries truthfully. He began to think it was time for him to go home.

"I am afraid I have never been a great patroniser of the town, Miss Clewson; and must confess to the

open country possessing more attraction for me. However, I daresay I shall be here as often as before."

"Oh! oftener, surely! now that your cousin will be settled here. And her house is sure to be a most charming resort, for Dr. Monkton is such an *immense* favourite with all the cathedral party that I am certain dear Mrs. Filmer will call upon her directly she arrives, and then of course, everyone will follow suit."

Nigel Brooke felt his lip curling at the idea of Mrs. Filmer's powerful patronage being extended to Nelly; but the thought possessed too much real pain to lose itself in sarcasm. For added to the burden of his misplaced love, he experienced a terrible feeling of soreness and jealousy whenever he remembered on whom Nelly's choice had fallen. And the remembrance caused his present answer to be delivered with much bitterness.

"Doubtless, Miss Clewson, and also that the fact will be so grateful to my charming little cousin, that she will find quite sufficient to engross her attention on first arrival, without *my* intruding myself upon her presence; besides, newly married persons are generally supposed to wish to see no one but each other, and I conclude these will be no exception to the rule; eh, Miss Clewson?"

At this, Miss Clewson giggled tremendously, declaring that she knew nothing at all about newly married people or their wishes; and must leave Mr. Brooke to decide the matter for himself.

The next minute she was heartily regretting that she had not made a better use of her opportunities, for Nigel Brooke had hastily bidden her farewell, and left her, asserting that a forgotten engagement called him

at once in the opposite direction. Fanny Clewson would have given much to be admitted on visiting terms at the Chase (and once admitted, they would never, without a downright quarrel, have shaken themselves free of her again), and she had fully intended, before the conclusion of this interview, to secure Mr. Brooke's promise to spend an evening in the almshouses with herself and her mamma. However, he was gone, and this time there was no help for it. She could only look after him with wistful eyes, which, unfortunately, were lost upon him, as he never turned his head in her direction: and as soon as he was out of sight, she resumed her way with a sigh.

As for Nigel, he strode on without stopping until he reached the inn where he had put up his horse, when he mounted and rode straight home.

As he did so, he was angry with himself; he thought he had possessed more moral courage, more strength to encounter what was unavoidable. He had known, a month ago, that Nelly, as Dr. Monkton's wife, must come home to live at Hilstone. He had tried to realise what it would be for him to meet her under this new aspect; to see her and hear of her in the position which she had chosen for herself, and he had arrived at the conclusion, that since she had so chosen, it would be bearable. For in this fact, lay almost the bitterest portion of the cup he had to swallow. He silently argued, that if Nelly had voluntarily fallen in love with, and accepted a man like James Monkton, he must part with his own preconceptions of her purity, and candour, and simplicity. He had loved her so much for all this; he loved her still so much for all he had believed her to be; and yet he could not re-

concile the two ideas. He could not imagine her willingly becoming the wife of the man whose first looks upon Hilstone Downs had made her shudder; and yet remaining the lovable girl who had so charmed him with her winning, childish ways. He would have given his life to possess the one; he felt as though he could care nothing for the other.

Satisfied with regard to the latter contingency, he had believed that, however much he might suffer through resigning the visionary Nelly, he was sufficiently schooled to meet the real one (should chance throw him in her way) without any inconvenient amount of mental disturbance.

And it was aggravating to find, that at the first mention of such a probability, he had felt as decided a twinge of cowardice as it had ever been his lot to experience.

Through all the midday heat of the fierce August sun, he rode on, bending beneath this weight of thought, and having reached the Chase, he threw his reins to a groom, and entering the house by a side door, locked himself up in his bed-room.

He did not emerge thence the whole afternoon; even his mother knew nothing of his return. Thinking that he was detained in Hilstone, she had ordered her carriage after luncheon as usual, and proceeded with one of the Miss Johnstones to take a country drive, on returning from which, she was vastly surprised by the appearance of two portmanteaus which, strapped ready for travelling, stood in the hall.

"Has anyone arrived during my absence?" she demanded of the servant who let her in.

"No, madam, no one. These portmanteaus belong to Mr. Brooke."

"Mr. Brooke? impossible! he is going nowhere."

"These are my master's portmanteaus, madam," was the man's decisive rejoinder, and she flew past him to demand an explanation of her son.

"Nigel, are you going anywhere?"

He was in the library, listlessly examining the newspapers, and the eyes which he raised at his mother's breathless enquiry, were very languid ones.

"Yes, mother; I am — I intend to run up to town to-night for a few weeks."

"Have you business there?"

Nigel did not always approve of the sharp manner in which Mrs. Brooke would question him respecting his comings and goings; she was too apt to forget the age he had attained, and to speak to him as if he were still a boy. He was accustomed, on such occasions, slightly to put her down, although he never forgot the respect due to her as his mother.

"Well, none of which it would interest you to hear, or that concerns you either. It will not detain me long, I daresay, and I do not wish to be absent after the thirtieth."

He had no business, except to try and get rid of his aching heart, but he thirsted to get away from the place which perhaps, at that moment contained his cousin Nelly. He felt that he needed still further preparation before he could breathe the same air, with the indifference which he coveted. What was she after all, this little rustic beauty, that he should not find it possible to forget her amid the excitement provided by a town life. London need never be quite void to the

mere pleasure seeker, and Nigel Brooke had no higher motive in going there. He wanted to forget, and he could not forget while sitting still at Orpington. Although he so seldom left home for his own amusement, his mother seemed, in this instance, to suspect that his plea was a feigned one, for she answered sharply:

"Well, it seems strange to me that you should choose to spend half the season down at this place, and then go up to London when there is nothing to be done there. What am I to do if Captain Pooley and Mr. Maxwell, and any of the other gentlemen whom you have invited for the shooting season, arrive before you return?"

"They are not likely to be here before the thirtieth," he replied, quietly, "and I have told you that I will be home by that date. This is only the fifth of the month."

"It must be very important business to detain you for three weeks."

"It is important."

"And it seems to have come upon you very suddenly."

"Yes, mother, it has done so," he returned, with an inward sigh as he recalled how sudden the intelligence had appeared to him.

"Well, Nigel," resumed Mrs. Brooke, with an air of dissatisfaction, "I cannot make it out at all, I am sure you are hiding something from me, and all I can say is, that, if it is business connected with the house, I think you are very wrong. Your poor dear father would never have done so, not even when we were first married; and of late years he was wont to say, that he could not keep so much as a thought from me."

Nigel, having been much in his father's confidence before his death, fancied that he had heard him give vent to a very different opinion concerning the trust he reposed in his wife, and say, that if he wanted a thing proclaimed throughout Calcutta, he had but to give her a hint of it; but the remembrance had no power to provoke a smile from him now.

He merely answered:

"And he was quite right to do so; mother, and if the house is ever threatened with any crisis, in which your circumspection and advice can be of aid to us, you may rest assured, it shall not be kept from you. But in this instance, my business has nothing to do with our commercial affairs, nor could it be benefited by any counsel, even from so clear a head as your own; else I should be thankful indeed, to anyone who could help me to accomplish it."

The last words were uttered in so low a tone, that Mrs. Brooke did not catch their import, but her self-love had received sufficient gratification from her son's previous compliment to render her indifferent to anything further, and it was with a smile of intense satisfaction that she linked her arm in his, saying that, since he was probably in a hurry to start, she would dispense that day with dressing for dinner, and join him as soon as she had laid aside her bonnet and shawl.

Nigel thanked her for her complaisance; and longed then, and several times before he left Orpington, to tell her of her niece's expected arrival in Hilstone, and ask how, in the event of their meeting, she intended to act.

But he dared not.

Middle-aged man, as he styled himself, he was too shyly ashamed of this, sweet, secret love of his, to be able to mention its subject with any shew of interest, even before his mother. He was so terribly afraid that she would link his sudden departure with Nelly's sudden arrival; and guess how deeply he was wounded. So he left the Chase, without provoking further comment on the reason of his flight.

CHAPTER V.

Mrs. Prowse finds her Reign is over.

As soon as the figures of Fanny Clewson and Nigel Brooke had repassed the confectioner's shop, Mrs. Prowse thrust her head from the door to gaze after them.

"The forward thing," she inwardly ejaculated as she watched the twists and bends of the lady's body, and could imagine the smirks by which they were accompanied. "I do believe she considers herself a beauty. However, I'll take care that Mrs. Filmer hears of this; for if she only half knew the way in which Fanny Clewson goes on, I am sure she would never let her be so intimate with her dear Laura."

"A seed-cake or a plum-cake, did you say, ma'am?" enquired the mild voice of the confectioner's wife, recalling Mrs. Prowse to a sense of her position.

"Oh! a seed-cake, if you please, Mrs. Priddings, and a pound of mixed biscuits, and half-a-dozen Abernethys, for 15, St. Bartholomew's Street, you know," with a meaning smile, "and the Abernethys must be quite fresh, because the doctor won't touch them unless they are so."

"Oh, certainly, ma'am. I will send up some of to-

day's baking, and very glad to hear that they will be required," with a half curtsy, and a look intended to indicate that Mrs. Priddings knew all about it. "And I trust that I may be fortunate enough to keep the custom of No. 15, ma'am, now that you've left it; for we've always tried to give every satisfaction, and ——"

"There is little doubt of that, Mrs. Priddings," returned her patroness, "and considering that you serve the deanery, and every house of any consequence in the cloisters, I should be very much surprised if Dr. Monkton expressed any wish to change."

"Yes! that's true, ma'am," said the confectioner, doubtfully, "but still ladies have their fancies, you see; and Mr. Muffet has some very powerful friends on his side."

"I beg you will not name Muffet in connection with my brother's house, Mrs. Priddings," exclaimed Mrs. Prowse, decidedly. "Even if he did wish to make a change, it is not in the slightest degree likely that he would consent to deal with a man who exclusively supplies the barracks. Dr. Monkton belongs to the cathedral, Mrs. Priddings, and will only deal with the cathedral tradespeople."

"Of course, ma'am, and I'm sure it's very kind of you to say so, and very considerate of the doctor, too; but still as his lady may have her fancies, Priddings and me, we should feel much obliged if you'd be so good as to put in a word for us when there's an occasion. For the cook from No. 15, did send to fetch French rolls from Mr. Muffet's only this morning, for my little boy see the girl both going in and coming out, and not for the first time either."

"Emma dealing at Muffet's without my orders,"

exclaimed Mrs. Prowse with horror. "I shall inquire into this immediately, Mrs. Priddings, and you may depend it will never happen again. But are you sure it was not a mistake?"

"Dear me, ma'am — quite sure! Billy knows the girl Martha as well as he do his sister, and she nodded to him from across the way, too. I must say I felt it, and our own windows blocked up with French rolls the while."

"I am *astonished*; I can hardly *believe* it," said Mrs. Prowse indignantly. "Dealing at Muffet's, and directly my back is turned! However, she must give me very good reasons for doing so, or I'm afraid she will have cause to regret it. Good morning, Mrs. Priddings. You will send the cake and biscuits over in the course of an hour, please, as I can't be spared from the Deanery to-night, and I wish to see everything in readiness for Dr. and Mrs. Monkton before they arrive." And away bustled Mrs. Prowse to St. Bartholomew's Street, followed by the envy of such of Mrs. Priddings's customers as had heard her last words, which was only due to the fortunate woman who could not be "spared" from the sacred Deanery table.

Arrived at No. 15, Mrs. Prowse turned the door-handle with a decision that seemed to say, she still considered herself regnant there; and passing through the hall into the dining-room, enthroned herself in an arm-chair, and authoritatively rang the bell.

It was answered by a man in plain clothes, who was half a butler and half Dr. Monkton's confidential servant.

"Long!" said the canon's wife sharply, "desire Emma to come here at once."

The man bowed and disappeared, repeating Mrs. Prowse's order the next minute to the cook in these words: "Here, Emma! the cat's in the dining-room, and wants you immediately."

Emma was a smiling, round-faced woman by nature, but the expression with which she greeted her late mistress was gloom itself.

"What will you please to be wanting, ma'am?" she inquired with an air which seemed to add, "You've no business here now, and I have not the least intention of attending to anything you may say."

But the manner, if it attracted Mrs. Prowse's notice, only served to increase her determination.

"I wish to know, Emma," she commenced in the most dignified tone, "if it is true that since my departure from this house, you have been dealing with Muffet the baker. Now! don't tell me a falsehood, because I know all about it already."

"Well! if you know all about it, ma'am," replied Emma, doggedly, "it can't be any use my telling you."

"Don't dare be impertinent to me, Emma," cried Mrs. Prowse in her shrill voice, "or I shall complain to my brother about you. You have not answered my question. Have you sent for bread to Muffet's during Dr. Monkton's absence?"

"Yes, ma'am, I have," the servant said, firmly.

"And pray, why? Don't you know that I never permitted anything from that man's shop to enter this house whilst I was in it?"

"Yes, ma'am, I do," was the laconic reply.

"You *do*?" exclaimed Mrs. Prowse, in a tone of the utmost surprise. "You acknowledge that you re-

membered my orders, and yet you disobeyed them. What can you be thinking of?"

"When you was mistress in this house, ma'am," said Emma, who because she dared not show the rage she felt, had commenced to whimper, "I never disobeyed one of your orders, as I'm aware of; but I never understood, nor would anyone else, as they were to continue after you'd left the house. We've a new mistress now, ma'am, and we shall be laid under new orders; and till they're given I don't hold myself responsible to nobody. As for Mr. Muffet, he's quite as good a tradesman as Mr. Priddings, any day, and better; and the Doctor's written orders are, that we're to lay in everything of the very best; so, till he, or his lady, gives me directions to the contrary, I shall continue to deal with Mr. Muffet. And I'm quite ready to take the blame, ma'am, for anything I do." And here the cook paused to hear what her late mistress had to say in reply to her speech.

Mrs. Prowse had turned white with indignation, but she felt that her day in No. 15 was over, and that perhaps it would be better to compromise matters a little.

"But, Emma, Muffet is essentially a military baker. He serves no one of any consequence in the cloisters, and I think the cathedral gentry are bound to keep to their own tradesmen."

"That's for the new mistress to decide, I suppose, ma'am, and of course, as I said before, if she likes to deal with Priddings, I've nothing to say for or against it; but I know good bread when I see it, and Muffet's bread is by far the best, and always has been. And no wonder, too, for the military knows what they're

about, and always deals with the best shops in the town. And as for that there Priddings, they wouldn't take his bread from him, not as a gift."

This heterodox speech savoured so strongly of rebellion against the powers that were, that the canon's wife deemed it advisable to change the subject.

"Well! cook," she replied, rising from her throne and looking far more like the conquered than the conqueror, "I suppose we had better leave it for the present, and wait till we hear what your master has to say on the subject. Have you heard from him to-day?"

"Mr. Long have had a letter by the morning's post, I believe," replied Emma, not much more pleasantly than before, "which said as they'd be home this evening to a seven o'clock dinner precisely."

"And have you everything ready for them?"

"Everything, ma'am."

"Well, that is sufficient then. I shall go upstairs now, and see what Elizabeth is doing with the rest of the house." And the cook, only too glad to close the interview, let the lady pass her in order to gain the staircase, whilst she escaped to her own regions.

The large square upper landing peculiar to old-fashioned houses, upon which Mrs. Prowse emerged, was blocked up with bed-room-chairs and tables, and towel-horses, indicative of a general cleaning. Yet not so much so, but that her quick eyes at once discerned the form of a tabby cat, which was lazily sunning itself in the broad window-sill before which there usually stood a stand of flowers. Now, if Mrs. Prowse hated children, she hated animals still more. She was used to say that though the first were a necessary and

unavoidable evil, no one but a fool would needlessly endure the presence of the last, and during her residence in her brother's house not a cat or a dog had dared to show itself above the kitchen floor. She would even drive the sparrows from her window-sill, and go out of her way to crush with vicious pleasure the beetles or other insects which she encountered in her walks. • The sight of the rebellious tabby, thus calmly washing its face within forbidden precincts, roused Mrs. Prowse's ire. She had not dared resent the human opposition with which she had just met below; but she flew at the unconsciously offending animal, as if it had been Emma herself she was about to chastise, and brought down her closed parasol with such force upon its round soft head and shoulders that the handle snapped in two. The cat flew, with a squall such as cats alone can give, across the landing and down the stairs, and the upper housemaid, whose especial pet it was, rushing from the bed-room to the rescue of her favourite, encountered Mrs. Prowse, pale with passion and panting from exertion, with the broken parasol, telling its own tale, in her hand.

"Oh! I beg your pardon, ma'am," said Elizabeth, with scarlet cheeks; "but I thought I heard the cat cry out," and she looked about, as if for some traces of her tabby.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Mrs. Prowse as soon as she could speak, "what do you mean, Elizabeth, by allowing that brute up on this floor when you know, the only condition on which it was permitted to remain in the house, was, that it never left the kitchen?"

"It doesn't do any harm," replied the woman, her

face clouding over at once, just as the cook's had done, "there couldn't be a cleaner animal, and she's never jumped on a bed since she's been here."

"I don't care whether she jumps on the beds or not, Elizabeth! my orders are that she is kept in the kitchen, and I'll have no animals of any sort about the upper floors," and then, remembering that she had no longer the right to issue such commands, Mrs. Prowse judiciously added, "at least, it is nothing to me now, of course, whether it is so or not, but I am quite certain that your new mistress will wish to be as particular as I am."

"Well! ma'am, my mistress will be home to-night, and then I can ask her," returned the housemaid, with anything but a good grace, as she glanced at the broken parasol and remembered the treatment to which her cat had been subjected.

"What are you turning out both the bed-rooms for?" next enquired the irate lady; "there is no occasion for it whatever, the spare room was thoroughly cleaned not a month ago and no one has slept in it since."

The two principal bed-rooms in the house, with dressing-rooms adjoining, stood on opposite sides of that floor. One was destined as the apartment of Dr. and Mrs. Monkton: the other had always been reserved as a guest-chamber: Mr. and Mrs. Prowse, even whilst they lived in St. Bartholomew's Street, having occupied a room on the upper storey.

"We had orders to do so," returned the housemaid sullenly.

"Orders! from whom?"

"From the doctor, ma'am."

"And who is to sleep in it, pray?"

"Mr. Brooke, I believe, the new mistress's brother."

"Mr. Brooke? but he can't be coming here yet awhile."

"The young gentleman's coming to-night, ma'am," here put in Martha, the under housemaid, delighted with the prospect of seeing Mrs. Prowse's discomfiture at the news. She was not disappointed. The face of the canon's wife, which had at first only expressed incredulity, now turned grey with the knowledge that the servants of the house had been better informed with respect to her brother's intentions than herself.

"Who told you so?" she demanded sharply.

"'Twas writ in the letter that Mr. Long received," replied the girl.

"Go down at once and fetch it. I am surprised that they should have presumed to keep such intelligence from me."

The letter was produced, and Mrs. Prowse convinced herself that she had not been misinformed. The doctor desired that the guest chamber should be thoroughly prepared for the occupation of Mr. Brooke; and further intimated that Mrs. Monkton would be accompanied by an attendant who would require a bed-room to herself.

Mrs. Prowse was confounded. She knew that men were generally rather insane at such times, and disposed to do very foolish things; but she had given James credit for more sense than this. To bring home a brother-in-law the very day he returned himself — and to permit his wife to keep a maid who was too fine to sleep with the other servants, appeared in her

eyes the very height of folly; to say nothing of her never having been consulted in the matter.

She could have forgiven anything sooner than this; but she could not bear to feel that she was nobody in the establishment where she had reigned supreme. She was so indignant at the way in which everything had been arranged without the slightest reference to herself, that the daring insolence of cats and cooks alike faded from her mind, and nothing was worth mentioning in comparison with the best room (which had been considered too good for her and Mr. Prowse,) being set in order for a young bachelor's use. But her great desire was, that the servants should not guess she felt thus affronted.

"Take this back to Long," she said with a lofty air, extending the letter to Martha, "and tell him that I see there is nothing in it but what Dr. Monkton has already written to myself. As for Mr. Brooke, he may, or may not arrive with them to-night. The room is only to be prepared in case he does do so. And it is right it should be ready to receive guests at all times. And he can tell his master from me that I am sorry I shall not be able to look in upon them this evening, as they have a dinner party at the Deanery, and Mrs. Filmer cannot do without me; but that I shall be sure to step over the first thing to-morrow morning;" and so saying, Mrs. Prowse, securing the fragments of her parasol, left the house with what she intended to be a very dignified demeanour.

"And a good thing, too," said Mr. Long, when the housemaid flew down to the kitchen to deliver the message which ended with the intimation that the doctor's sister would be seen no more that day. "She's

no business to come here bothering and poking her nose into everything, and I hope the new mistress will put a stop to it."

"She's got her own servants to bully now," remarked the cook, "to say nothing of the poor dear canon to worry and hustle as she chooses. Why can't she leave us alone, we're none of hers, be thankful!"

"I'd half a mind to let her know *my* opinion of her," said the housemaid as she caressed the tabby cat, "a going and hitting a poor defenceless hanimal like this. She ought to have a stick over her own back. 'Twould do her a mint of good."

"I was so glad she broke her parasol," giggled the girl, Martha, "she's that stingy, that it 'll quite go to her heart to pay sixpence for its being mended."

"Yes! if she have a heart," interposed the footman, who had not, as yet, joined in the discussion, "but I don't think we saw much of it whilst she was here, nor yet no one else."

"But she's precious hartful, all the same," remarked the cook delighted at her own wit.

"Now, I'll tell you what it is, young women," said the butler, thinking the conversation had lasted long enough, "until the doctor comes home, I'm master here, and my orders are, that you all go about your business, or neither house nor dinner will be ready against they come. And if you consider, John, that reading that there newspaper will clean your plate, it's more than I do, so I'll be obliged if you'll go into your pantry and finish your morning's work."

Whereupon the group dispersed laughing, and telling Mr. Long that he was a regular "old woman," and "every inch as bad as the cat herself."

Meanwhile "the cat," blissfully ignorant of the comments so freely passed upon her behaviour, was returning to her own house, whence she issued in gorgeous raiment to adorn the Deanery dinner table just about the same time that Nelly Monkton crossed the threshold of her new home; and Nigel Brooke entered the railway carriage which was to put half a hundred miles between his cousin and himself.

CHAPTER VI.

The Meeting of the Sisters-in-Law.

THE principal reason for which the canon's wife was so frequently asked to the Deanery, was, that she might be seated for the greater part of the evening behind an urn, at a side-table, pouring out tea and coffee for the guests; from which position she was probably released only to take a hand at cribbage with the dean; or planted by his side, to amuse him by shouting a summary of the local news into his ear, whilst the rest of the visitors were at liberty to entertain themselves. All Hilstone knew the secret of her constant appearance there; even Mrs. Filmer did not hesitate to confess that the reason she found it so difficult to spare Mrs. Prowse from her dinner-parties, was the use the woman was to her: only Mrs. Prowse herself refused to see the indignity to which she was subjected; and firmly believed that she was not only the faithful coadjutor of the dean's daughter-in-law, but her most valued friend. On the present occasion she must have been blind indeed, and deaf into the bargain, not to see the shrugged shoulders with which Captain Herbert Filmer saluted her entrance to the

drawing-room, nor to hear the half tones, too loud to be called a whisper, in which he uttered the words —

“Good heavens! that detestable woman here again? When are we to be freed from her presence?”

“Hush! Herbert! pray!” his sister had replied; “if she were to overhear what you say, and take offence at it, I don’t know what mamma would do — she’s her right hand.”

“Her toady — flatterer — fawner — spaniel — you mean,” he answered; “why don’t you call things by their right names, Laura?”

“Any way mamma couldn’t get on without her,” said his sister, laughing; and there the dispute had ended.

But even had Mrs. Prowse overheard Captain Filmer’s uncomplimentary remarks, they would have been more than outbalanced the next moment by the familiar manner in which his mother called her “Matilda” before the assembled company, and enquired if her brother and his wife had yet arrived in Hilstone.

“You must tell the doctor to call round and see me in the morning,” said Mrs. Filmer, in her hard, unmodulated voice, “we can’t do without him any more than we can do without you; and I shall go and see his wife after a day or two. She’s fresh from the country — isn’t she? Well, don’t let her frighten herself about receiving me — tell her I sha’n’t eat her!” and the mistress of the Deanery finished up her speech with a coarse, grating laugh which was appreciated by no one but Mrs. Prowse.

“If my mother doesn’t eat the bride, she bids fair to break the drums of her ears, if she salutes her after that fashion,” remarked Captain Filmer, professing to

shudder beneath the infiction; "shall you call with her, Laura?"

"I suppose I shall be obliged to do so, whether I wish it or no."

"Oh! well! that's all right, then; because you can report on the lady's appearance, before I decide whether to follow suit; for if Monkton has chosen a wife anything like his sister, I know it will be a long while before he catches me within his doors."

But Mrs. Prowse was enchanted with the condescension of her dear Mrs. Filmer. She was certain that her sister-in-law would be fully alive to the honour of the intended visit; and if she were a little shy and overcome at first, she trusted that Mrs. Filmer would excuse it, on the score of her youth; and the great trial it must be to a young girl so quietly brought up, to find herself all at once transformed into the mistress of an establishment like her brother's, and called upon to receive such honoured and distinguished guests.

"Pooh!" was Captain Filmer's irreverent exclamation, upon the conclusion of the above speech; "Mrs. Monkton must have been reared deep in the country indeed if she has never seen an old woman before. Now! I'll wager a hundred to one, that I'd make her more shy and confused by looking at her for half an hour, than my mother would by jawing at her for six."

"Oh! Herbert! I wish you wouldn't talk such nonsense," rejoined his sister, with a warning pluck at his sleeve, as she observed more than one young lady giggling at his wit, who would be sure to repeat it directly she reached home.

But his remarks were not overheard by his mother,

or Mrs. Prowse; and the latter spent an evening of such unalloyed content that it totally erased the memory of the unpleasant scene which had preceded it.

She returned to her own house, full of stories of her friend's condescension and amiability, which she volubly repeated to Mr. Prowse, a mild, inoffensive looking man, who had not accompanied her to the Deanery. Indeed he never went into society unless he was absolutely obliged to do so, and was wont to say in private to his familiars, that where his wife was, she left no room for him, and therefore it was little use their going to the same house.

"And where do you think I have been, my dear?" he ventured to ask at the conclusion of one of her lengthy eulogiums.

"How should I guess?" she replied, sharply. She could not help speaking so, even when best pleased, for there was no softness in her nature. "Puzzling your head over your next sermon, I suppose, or moping about the garden. You had much better have come to the Deanery. I never spent a more delightful evening."

"But I fancy I have spent quite as delightful an evening, and perhaps even more so," returned canon Prowse, who could sometimes be bold, even in the presence of his wife. She looked up at him; her large black eyes dilated with surprise, and he continued —

"I have been over at your brother's, my dear, and introduced to his wife."

"Oh! is that all?" replied Mrs. Prowse, who was nevertheless not over pleased that her husband should have been the first to see the new-comer. "Well, what

is she like? I had no idea you thought of going there so soon."

"No more I did, my dear!" said the canon, almost apologetically, "but the doctor came over here, in hopes I suppose of seeing yourself, and finding I was alone, made me return with him. Oh! such a fresh, charming young creature, Matilda, she will be quite the glory of Hilstone."

"Are you speaking of James's wife?" demanded Mrs. Prowse, affecting to misunderstand his allusion.

"Of course I am, my dear. She has the sweetest face, I think, I have ever seen; and her poor brother, although otherwise much afflicted, is, in respect of feature, scarcely behind herself. They both appear to be most interesting young people—but I was not prepared, from your account, to find that your brother had married a beauty!"

Now Mrs. Prowse was not readily disposed (what woman would be?) to sympathise in such rhapsodies regarding the stranger from her usually sedate and apathetic husband.

"Well! I always knew that men are fools when they're in love," she retorted, "but I must say I thought James had more sense than to be led away by mere beauty. A girl who has a very pretty face is generally good for nothing but to be looked at, though it remains to be proved," she added, with a spiteful glance at the offending canon, "whether she *is* such a beauty, after all! *Some* men are fools, whether they're in love or out of love; and I prefer to decide the matter for myself to taking an opinion secondhand. So I shall go over the first thing to-morrow morning, and see this paragon, who is to set all Hilstone on fire by your ac-

count, when I shall be better able to judge of the truth of the assertion. Meanwhile, I hope I sha'n't sleep any the worse for the delay of a few hours in the introduction;" and seizing the bed-room candlestick, with a look of supreme contempt for the weakness of her husband's sentiments, Mrs. Prowse with a jerk, preceded him out of the apartment.

The unfortunate canon, condemning his folly in having betrayed his admiration for the doctor's bride, and fearful lest he should not yet have heard the last of it, followed her with downcast looks.

When his wife had reached the middle of the staircase, she turned and addressed him so suddenly, that in his fright and surprise he nearly fell down the remainder of the flight.

"Why has the brother come down with them?" she demanded with asperity.

"I'm sure I don't know, my dear," he falteringly replied; "how should I know? — it is no business of mine; I never even thought of asking."

"You never think of anything," was the uncomplimentary reply; "but I consider that it *is* my business, and I shall make a point of putting the question to James directly I see him. I never heard of such an arrangement in my life before, and the young man himself ought to have had too much good feeling to consent to it, whoever the proposal came from. However, it's quite plain to me that it's some of your 'paragon's' doings; men are not usually so attached to their brothers-in-law that they can't part with them for a day; but the manner in which James has behaved altogether concerning his marriage has been extraordi-

nary — most extraordinary, indeed! — and I think he must be going out of his mind.”

“I know nothing about it, my dear. I really know nothing but what I have told you — it is of no use your speaking to me like this,” repeated her husband plaintively, as they reached the top of the staircase.

“Bah! whoever said you did?” exclaimed the lady angrily, as she bounced into her dressing-room and slammed the door in his face.

The canon heaved a sigh, and sought the shelter of his room, wishing from the bottom of his heart meanwhile that French customs were English ones, and that he might have been permitted to remain there altogether. But he was destined to suffer no more martyrdom that night, for Mrs. Prowse's excitement, added to the exertions of the evening, fortunately for him, had tired her out; and when he rejoined her she was not only too sleepy to scold him any more, but rose so late the following morning, that it was nearly one o'clock before she found herself at the door of No. 15, St. Bartholmew's Street.

She entered the house, as usual, without knock or ring; and searched the library, (which was also her brother's consulting-room), the dining-room and the drawing-room, all three of which apartments were on the ground-floor, without success.

They were all empty, with the exception of the last, where she encountered the housemaid Elizabeth, carrying off an old-fashioned table from one of the recesses.

“Why are you moving that table?” demanded the visitor, forgetting her lesson of the day before.

“It is my mistress's orders,” replied Elizabeth with

a look of triumph as she left the room bearing the article in question.

Mrs. Prowse, too ruffled by the servant's manner to stoop to further parley, permitted her to go in peace, and rang the bell for Long instead.

"Where is your master?" she asked, as the man appeared.

"My master was obliged to go out this morning, ma'am, to take over his practice from the gentleman who has been acting for him; but he desired me, if anyone called, to say that he hoped to be back to luncheon."

"But Mrs. Monkton?" snapped the canon's wife.

"I believe my mistress is upstairs, ma'am: I will inform her that you are here."

"Tell her, if you please, that Mrs. Prowse, Dr. Monkton's sister, is waiting to see her," returned the lady, drawing up her small person on the sofa with all the dignity it could assume.

She did not half like being thus treated as an ordinary visitor at No. 15, but if it was to be so she would exact all the attention due to a stranger.

So Long departed, leaving her seated in solitary state in the large formal drawing-room, in which no sound was audible save the buzzing of a huge bumble-bee which had been attracted by the boxes of mignonne standing outside the windows.

All this appeared very unorthodox and irregular in the eyes of Mrs. Prowse.

Her notion of a bride was of a blushing, bashful young lady, robed in a silk, both bright and tight, with a gold watch chain tastefully disposed across her bosom, and sitting stiffly up to receive her visitors

from after breakfast until nightfall. She felt that if her brother James's wife had known the proper etiquette to be observed upon such an occasion, she would not have been left for so long a time to the resources of her own imagination; whilst all the pretty things she had intended to say upon first meeting, were evaporating one by one beneath her sense of neglect. But if to find the state-room empty shocked Mrs. Prowse, how much more were her ideas of propriety outraged when (the doors being left open on account of the heat,) she distinctly heard Long's arrival on the upper floor and announcement of her august presence followed by the words — rung out in a clear girlish voice —

“Mrs. Prowse? — Oh, please ask her to walk up here.”

Her flimsy dignity was so much wounded by this fancied affront, that she was very nearly leaving the house then and there, and refusing to return without an apology from her unknown sister-in-law. But she had hardly had time to settle the point, before Long re-appeared with a request that she would follow him upstairs, and she found herself on the upper landing before she well knew what she was about. Once there, all other feelings were banished by the astonishment which she felt at the scene which it presented. The corridor was even more blocked up by boxes and articles of furniture than it had been the day before, whilst servants were busily engaged in re-arranging the order of the apartments; and from the midst of the confusion came forward with shyly-extended hand a girl, simply attired in a brown muslin dress, with violet eyes set in a broad white forehead, and a profusion of sunny hair falling about her shoulders.

Mrs. Prowse, like most dark women, was extremely envious of a fair skin, and she took a jealous dislike at first sight to her brother's wife.

Nelly was, indeed, looking her best; for a month of sequestered life had removed much of the healthy but unbecoming tan from her face and hands, whilst her hair arranged in a more fashionable though not less graceful manner, and the extra attention which she had been compelled to pay to her dress, all tended to improve her personal appearance.

"I hope you will excuse my asking you up here," she said, with a courtesy rendered perfect from being genuine, and quite unconscious how nearly she had affronted her new connection by doing so; "but we are very busy arranging my brother's room, and as he likes to be much by himself, he will not feel quite at home until it is completed. Pray walk in." And shaking hands with the canon's wife, (Nelly was not a woman who could embrace a perfect stranger) she essayed to lead her into what had been the dressing-room of the guest-chamber. But directly Mrs. Prowse had crossed the threshold, she started back with an exclamation of almost childish terror, for close to the sofa occupied by Robert Brooke, with heaving flanks, red eyeballs, and tongue lolling out of his mouth from the heat, lay extended the huge mastiff, Thug. As Mrs. Prowse cried out, Nelly thought she must have hurt herself; and could not imagine why the two housemaids should smile and furtively nudge each other's elbows; but a solution of the mystery was soon afforded by the frightened visitor herself.

"Oh! I couldn't go in there," she exclaimed. "I really couldn't sit in the same room with that animal.

Do you mean to tell me, Mrs. James, that my brother permits such a creature to roam about the house?"

"What, Thug!" said Nelly, infinitely amused at the idea of anyone being alarmed at the appearance of a dog. "Oh, he is the most harmless fellow possible, Mrs. Prowse! I assure you there is nothing whatever to fear; I have had him from a little puppy; he wouldn't hurt a fly unless he were told:" and she knelt down by the mastiff's side as she spoke, and squeezed his broad head confidingly beneath her arm, a proceeding of which Thug appeared greatly to approve, if his loving, grateful glance might be accepted as a token of his pleasure. But Mrs. Prowse would not be reasoned out of her aversion to enter the room whilst the animal remained in it. She was not really afraid of Thug, but she disapproved of the presence of any of the brute creation about a dwelling-house; the principle was a bad one, and though her brother might be so foolish, in the first flush of his wedded happiness, as to allow such a thing without reproof, she considered it was her duty to put a stop to it for him, and to see that his wife was as particular about his comfort as she had been. So, notwithstanding Nelly's renewed persuasions, and Robert Brooke's look of amazement, and the housemaids' delighted titters, Mrs. Prowse obstinately remained in the doorway holding up her silken skirts, and maintaining that it was quite impossible she could sit down in the same apartment as a dog.

"If you are really afraid of him," said Nelly, after a while, "I will send him away," and then addressing her favourite, "Come, Thug, you must go for the pre-

sent; good dog, go and lie down," and shutting the mastiff into the bed-room, she redirected her attention to her visitor.

"Now that the enemy has been put to flight," she said smiling, "you must let me introduce my brother to you."

The young man returned Mrs. Prowse's stiff bow from his sofa; but the looks which the new acquaintances interchanged, were not very cordial ones; he despising the lady for her affected terror and snappish voice, and she hating him simply for being there.

"I am not fond of animals," she said as she seated herself, feeling her late conduct required a little explanation, "and I especially disapprove of them about a house; I never allowed them upstairs whilst I was my brother's housekeeper, and I hope, Mrs. James, that you will pursue a similar course of action, for I am sure, that in reality, he dislikes them as much as I do."

"Dr. Monkton dislike animals!" exclaimed Nelly, "oh! I am sure he does not. He is almost as fond of Thug as I am; and there was a beautiful tabby cat came up to breakfast with us this morning, and he nursed it on his knee nearly all the time. I love animals, Mrs. Prowse, I shouldn't mind if the house were full of them, both birds and beasts. I left three dear cats behind me at Bickton; but only because I knew they would be unhappy if I brought them away, so I mean to make a great pet of the tabby, and have been teaching Thug to be friends with her already."

Nelly's enthusiasm was so genuine; and the maids were looking so pleased at the open avowal of their

new mistress's tastes, that Mrs. Prowse deemed it advisable to change the subject.

"What are you doing to this room?" she enquired presently, "you seem to me to be pulling it all to pieces."

"And so I am," laughed Nelly, "I am turning it into a smoking and sitting-room for Bertie. We have given him the bed-room next to it, and as he does not need a dressing-room, this will be very convenient for him to sit in. He is not able to move about much, you know," she added, with a glance of fond compassion towards the recumbent figure on the sofa.

But at this first piece of news, Mrs. Prowse almost felt her breath taken away. Not only was her brother James reported to have sat down to breakfast with the kitchen cat upon his knee, but the guest chamber and its dressing-room, the apartments which were considered too good for the use of the canon and herself, were destined to be defiled by the tobacco smoke of a bachelor.

"But doesn't it seem a pity?" she almost gasped in her indignant surprise, "a great pity to you, Mrs. James, that all this nice furniture, and the curtains and carpet, should be spoilt by the fumes of tobacco. My brother never smokes, he considers it a very bad habit, very injurious to the health, and quite unfit for a domestic character."

"I wish he did smoke," returned Nelly, carelessly; "I think every doctor should do so, because it is said to prevent infection. Anyway, Bertie couldn't live without it. But he never smokes a cigar in the house; and pipes can't do any harm, you know."

Mrs. Prowse did not "know" anything about it, for though her poor, patient canon did occasionally indulge in a forbidden weed, it was without her cognisance, and always far enough removed from any chance of discovery. Yet, unwilling to dismiss the grievance without another attempt at its remedy, she continued:

"But surely it is taking a great deal of trouble to move the dressing-table and washing-stand, and all these other articles for so short a time. It would be different if it were for a permanency."

But Nelly was perfectly innocent of comprehending the conveyed insinuation.

"I should never think any trouble too great to take for Bertie," she answered simply, "and I have no doubt that this arrangement will be a permanent one, for I do not see where he could change to, or what other room in the house would suit him so well."

"But this is the guest room," returned Mrs. Prowse, almost panting with suppressed excitement.

"Oh, I hope we shall not have any guests for a long time," said Nelly, laughing, "and when they do come, they must go upstairs. I could not have put Bertie there, because moving up and down is such an exertion to him. Besides he would not have been near myself, and we have never been separated, even by a floor: and never shall be, as long as I can help it."

At this moment the sound of a gong reverberated through the house.

"That is the summons to luncheon, I suppose," cried Nelly, starting from her chair. "You can leave these things for the present, Elizabeth, and tell nurse to come and wait upon Mr. Brooke. You will stay and take luncheon with us, Mrs. Prowse, will you not?"

and then, I daresay, you will see James. As for you, darling," stooping to kiss her brother, "I will send yours up by Aggie, and you must be sure and eat it all. And I shall be ready to go out with you, either in the garden, or elsewhere, as soon as ever you wish it yourself."

"But, Mrs. James, shall you not wait luncheon until my brother returns?" enquired Mrs. Prowse, as Nelly stepped over the threshold and invited her by a sign to follow.

"What! wait until Dr. Monkton comes home?" exclaimed the girl, with elevated eye-brows; "but he may not be back for another hour, Mrs. Prowse, and I'm as hungry as I can be. And *pray* don't call me 'Mrs. James,'" she added, in a pleading tone as they descended the staircase together. "It is such a hideous name, and I do dislike it so."

CHAPTER VII.

The first bitter Drop in Nelly's Cup.

THE feelings experienced by Mrs. Prowse, as she followed Nelly into the luncheon-room, are better imagined than described. The coolness with which her new sister-in-law expressed her wishes and opinions, struck the canon's wife almost speechless with surprise. She had positively nothing to say in answer to such fearless frankness. She had understood from her brother, that his wife was a young girl who had been reared in the utmost seclusion; and had expected, in consequence, to meet a blushing, timid child, who would not dare to think for herself, but be entirely subservient, not only to her husband, but to her hus-

band's sister, looking up to them both, indeed, as to a superior order of beings.

Over such a subject, Mrs. Prowse would have completely tyrannised; but she would have liked her, after a fashion, all the same. She would have derived such keen satisfaction in arranging all her household affairs for her, from ordering the dinner and scolding the servants, to directing the choice of her acquaintance or her dress, that in sheer gratitude for so much pleasure, she could not but have set some value on the person from whose weakness she derived it.

Had she, on the contrary, discovered she had been deceived with respect to the appearance of her brother's bride, and instead of a mere girl, encountered a woman of her own age and experience, who was resolved to stand up for herself, and rule her house as she chose, Mrs. Prowse would have silently acknowledged her right to do so, and shrunk into her proper position of her own accord.

But to find that the mistress of No. 15, was really almost the child she had been described, and yet in full possession of a woman's knowledge of the privileges acquired by her marriage, was too much for the canon's wife. She looked at Nelly's sweet sunny face, (not without a malicious remembrance of her own husband's admiration of it the night before) with its innocent eyes, and artless expression; at the simplicity of her dress (so much too simple, according to Mrs. Prowse's idea, for her brother's wife), and the un-studied grace of her manner; and contrasting them with the decision of her words and the freedom with which she accepted all the good things bestowed on her with her new name, was fairly puzzled what to

think of her. Was this a child, or was it a woman? Certainly not a woman to increase the weight and respectability of her brother's establishment in Hilstone; still less a child who would consent to be tutored and trained, turned this way or that, according as the Monktons chose to guide her. And feeling this, Mrs. Prowse almost hated Nelly, as, without hesitation she took her seat at the head of the luncheon table, and motioned her visitor into a chair at the side. She was only doing what she had been accustomed to do, all her life at home, and that was to take the entire management of the establishment: to rule, came easily and naturally to her; but Mrs. Prowse, unaware of the circumstance, mistook the girl's simplicity for audacity, and chose to believe that she assumed the freedom, merely in the pride of her new possessions, and for the sake of "shewing off." Although it was the last thing she would have acknowledged, Matilda Prowse became jealous, even during that first interview, of Nelly's freshness and beauty; still more so of her apparent contentment and independence; and finding that, according to her own creed, she could neither hope to respect, nor influence her, she took to hating her instead; a feeling which is not uncommon between relatives thus violently brought together, and which was religiously fostered in the present instance till the end of the chapter.

Nelly, meanwhile, perfectly unconscious of the thoughts which were then passing through the mind of her sister-in-law, chatted away at the luncheon table as though they were destined to become the best friends in the world.

"Yes! we went to Paris," she said in answer to

some formal question from Mrs. Prowse relative to the wedding tour, "but only for a fortnight; and to tell you the truth, I grudged even that, for my brother is miserable without me, and so am I, without him. We had never been separated before — at least, only once," she added, correcting herself with a blush.

Mrs. Prowse noted the blush, and it awakened her curiosity.

"And when may that have been?" she asked.

"When I went to Orpington Chase: when I first met your brother," replied Nelly, still colouring; but, under the circumstances, the colouring was not out of place, and Mrs. Prowse thought no more of it.

"I liked Paris very much," continued Nelly, anxious to change the subject, "but I have been such a rustic all my life, that I have seen nothing, and any place is new to me. Little Bickton is such a tiny village that even Hilstone appears quite a grand town after it.

"*Even Hilstone!*" repeated the canon's wife, not over pleased with the depreciatory term. "Why, Mrs. James, Hilstone is considered one of the finest towns in England, as it is one of the most ancient. It has not its equal anywhere: and in point of advantages it is quite unrivalled."

"Is it?" said innocent Nelly.

"It shows in what a very secluded manner you must have lived to put the question," replied Mrs. Prowse with a thin smile. "Why our cathedral is perfect, but I suppose you have never even seen a cathedral, so that you will not be able to judge of its merits by comparison."

"Oh! yes, I have," said Nelly eagerly, "I saw

Notre Dame in Paris, besides several beautiful churches and abbeys. In fact, I think James took me to everything worth seeing; but I was very glad to get home again. It was all bustle and confusion, and I was longing for Bertie and Little Bickton, and so we spent the last week there. I cannot be happy away from him."

"Your brother appears to have been a great charge to you," observed Mrs. Prowse.

"A very welcome charge, excepting for his own sake, Mrs. Prowse. I could not let anyone look after him except myself. Our old nurse Aggie and I have waited on him ever since he was born."

"But surely that cannot last for ever," exclaimed the doctor's sister, determined to learn the truth respecting Robert Brooke. "It has been all very well hitherto, Mrs. James, I dare-say, but now that you are married, you will have other duties to fulfil besides waiting on an invalid."

"Never any that will prevent my looking after Bertie, Mrs. Prowse," was the energetic answer, "or I am afraid they will run a chance of being neglected. Why, he is my own twin brother, you know, there were only seven minutes between our births, and it is so sad to think that he should have been afflicted, and I escaped without anything," and Nelly's eyes moistened as they generally did when she mentioned her brother's deformity.

"But what will Mr. Brooke do, when he returns to the country, Mrs. James?" pertinaciously demanded her listener. "He will be forced to resign your attentions then; he cannot expect to keep you always by his side."

At this question Nelly was so astonished that she laid down her knife and fork.

"To the country, Mrs. Prowse, to what country?"

"To little Bibbling, or whatever you call the place you come from. Your brother has property there, has he not? a house and grounds, or something of the sort."

At this suggestion the bride, to the indignation of the canon's wife, burst into a most indecorous laugh.

"Oh! I beg your pardon, Mrs. Prowse," exclaimed the offender as soon as she could speak, "but I cannot help laughing at the idea of Bertie with a house and grounds. What would he do with it, poor darling, if I were not there to order it for him? It is quite a mistake, I assure you — we have nothing — and never had, except the lease of grandpapa's cottage, which we disposed of. And even were it the case, Bertie would never leave me for Little Bickton or any place. I would never have married, if our separation had been the consequence; we could not live without each other."

At this speech, which so evidently betokened what were at least the bride's intentions with respect to the length of her brother's visit, Mrs. Prowse waxed very wroth, and she was just about to say something cutting relative to the strangeness of such a proceeding, and the talk it would create in Hilstone, when her good intentions were frustrated by the appearance of Dr. Monkton.

He entered the room with a furtive glance, as though he almost hoped that his sister might either have not yet arrived, or taken her departure again; but on perceiving her stiffly sitting by his young wife's side, he very properly assumed a look of gratification,

and hastened to greet her. The Monktons were not a demonstrative couple, at all events towards each other, and Nelly, who so ardently loved her brother, was astonished to see the formal salute which, after more than a month's separation, passed between the doctor and Mrs. Prowse. She would have given Bertie double as much after the absence of an hour, or after no absence at all, but for the pleasure of expending some of the affection upon him with which her warm heart was overflowing.

Yet after Dr. Monkton had thus calmly greeted his sister, he passed on to his wife and kissed her warmly; and although Nelly did not know what it was to be placed in such a position, she instinctively felt that this was what she could never have done, and left the other undone.

She shrunk from the kiss so publicly given, and coloured as sensitively as though it were something wrong. Mrs. Prowse noticing both the action and its result, sneered at her brother's infatuation, whilst she gave Nelly credit for being "absurdly affected, considering the open way in which she had gone on with Mr. Brooke upstairs."

Dr. Monkton sat down to the luncheon table and commenced to talk volubly; but he did not appear at his ease, and every minute his dark eyes roved from his sister's face to that of his wife, as if he could discern what the women thought of one another.

Nelly was as calm and collected as usual, but there was a nervous manner about Mrs. Prowse, as if she burned to disclose some hidden wrong, which did not tend to re-assure her brother, and he spoke of anything and everything rather than give her an opportunity of

doing the same. But in the midst of one of his descriptions of Paris, there was heard a melancholy howl.

"Why, what's the matter with Thug, Helena?" he said, addressing his wife. He always called her by her full name, and she was glad (although she scarcely knew why) that he did so.

"He smells the luncheon, I suppose, and is impatient," she replied. "I shut him up in the bed-room, because Mrs. Prowse is afraid of him."

"Afraid!" echoed the doctor; "why how long is it since you have become afraid of dogs, Matilda?"

"I do not know that I am exactly *afraid* of him," replied that lady, "but I certainly object to sit in the same room with an animal who appears to me more fit for a stable than a house. You know, James, that I never liked to see dogs, even small ones, about the sitting-rooms, and consider that nobody with cleanly habits would approve of it; but I never saw such a huge brute as this admitted there before. I should as soon think of keeping a donkey in my drawing-room, myself."

"Thug is certainly a good size for a lady's lap dog," remarked the doctor, laughing, "and is fitter as you say for a kennel than a sofa, but he is a great pet of Helena's, so we mustn't say anything against him here."

Nelly's colour had been rapidly coming and going during this discussion, and she only waited till the last word was out of her husband's mouth, before she eagerly interposed her claim to a hearing.

"I know, properly speaking, that he is not a dog for the house, James, but he has always been in it, ever since I first had him; and he is as gentle with

those he knows as the tiniest spaniel could be. He sleeps on the mat outside my bed-room door," she continued, addressing herself to Mrs. Prowse, "and you would not know that there was anything there, he is so quiet. And he has never been tied up, ever since he was born; we tried it once and he fretted so dreadfully that he got quite thin. He howled the whole time, and refused to eat his food."

"He would soon get over that," said Dr. Monkton, as if it were a matter of little consequence whether he did or no.

"Oh! but I am sure he wouldn't," exclaimed Nelly with a look of distress, as a vague fear of some future opposition with respect to her favourite, flitted across her mind. "He is so very fond of Bertie and me. He would be miserable if you took him away from us. So it is no use talking of it, James, for I won't even hear of such a thing."

They had not been married more than a month then, and he smiled at her earnestness, and said she was a little goose and wanted to spoil the dog as much as she was spoilt herself; and so for the present her heart was reassured, notwithstanding that Mrs. Prowse turned down the corners of her mouth at the display of so much weak folly on the part of her brother.

As soon as the meal was concluded, Nelly jumped up and said she must go to Bertie, as she had promised to accompany him whether he sat in the garden or was wheeled out for a drive.

"Tell him the garden will be best," shouted the doctor as she left the room, "at all events till after dinner. It is too hot for you to be out, until the sun has gone down, Helena."

When she had disappeared he turned to his sister, and, as though making up his mind to something disagreeable, asked abruptly:

"Well, have I said too much or too little, Matilda? what do you think of her?"

"I've thought very little either one way or another," replied Mrs. Prowse in the most disheartening and unpleasant tone. "I have been too busy listening to all she has to say. She seems to be a great talker."

"It is the vivacity of youth," observed the doctor, "and the result perhaps to-day of having a little nervousness to conceal. I have not found Helena very talkative since our marriage."

"Oh! I shouldn't say she was *nervous*. That is the last thing I should ascribe to her," tittered Mrs. Prowse. "But with regard to this brother, James! how long do you expect him to stop with you?"

At this question Dr. Monkton positively coloured. It was the one which he had dreaded most; which he knew sooner or later he should have to answer; and for which he should incur most blame. He had not expected it to be put quite so early; but it would be all the same in the end. Yet, the answer to it was not one to be given in public, and the servants were already clearing the luncheon table.

"I should like to speak with you about that and several other matters, Matilda," he replied. "Suppose we go into the garden for a while. You have your parasol and we shall not find it too warm beneath the trees."

So they passed out of the French windows on to the terrace, which although not long, was broad and

well-sheltered, and paced up and down beneath its foliage, conversing together.

"The fact is," observed Dr. Monkton in reference to his sister's query, "it is quite impossible for me to say for how long Robert Brooke may or may not remain here. You see the case is rather a peculiar one. They are orphans without a home, and they are twins who have never been separated, and all this, added to the boys infirm condition, renders any proposal for their living apart rather difficult of suggestion. "In short," he continued, "it was an understood thing, that if Helena married me, her brother was to accompany us to Hilstone. They are very much attached to one another, as you can see, and I first won her regard by the attention I paid her brother, and so for the present the matter must rest there."

"But for a permanency," exclaimed Mrs. Prowse, "to have him here always; whether you have a family or whether you have not: to have that young man a fixture in your house, and occupying the best bed-room too, will be most inconvenient; and I must add, most unprecedented.

They were walking up and down, up and down, beneath the windows of the two dressing-rooms which stood on the first landing and overlooked the garden.

"I said, Matilda, that for the *present* the matter must rest there," repeated Dr. Monkton, with some emphasis on the words he wished to impress upon his sister, "but whether Robert Brooke remains with us or not, will entirely depend upon his future conduct — and my wishes."

Upon leaving the dining-room, Nelly had run up to Bertie, as she intended doing, but finding that he

was not quite ready to go out into the garden, had waited his royal pleasure. To beguile the time she leaned out of the dressing-room window, about which twined clusters of the noisette rose; and on seeing her husband approach, had plucked a blossom with the childish intention of throwing it on him as he passed. But as he came within reach, he spoke the words above recorded, and she guessed their import at once. Sick with the impression which they conveyed, Nelly leaned back against the window sill, whilst as their meaning fully sunk into her mind, large tears gathered in her eyes, and rolled slowly down her cheeks.

It was the first time she had ever had the slightest doubt — the faintest notion, that her brother's residence with her was not to be a permanent one; permanent — beyond the possibility of a change. She did not fear — she could not as yet entertain a fear that her husband's words meant more than that, if it was agreeable to all parties, they were not bound to keep by one another; but the possibility of such a contingency was sufficient to make her wretched.

It was the first note of distrust which she had heard sounded in her married life; the first taste of the bitter cup which she was afterwards called upon to swallow.

Bertie did not see her thus, but old Aggie did, and, as usual, was vehement in her anxiety to know what had happened to affect her young mistress. For the nurse had already heard sufficient at the kitchen table, about the doctor's sister, to make her suspect that her visit had had something to do with Nelly's tears.

"Now nurse, it is really nothing of any consequence," said Nelly, in answer to the old woman's

reiterated entreaties that she would confess, "it is all my own stupidity. I overheard something which worried me a little, and that is positively all. Remember, I have been married for a whole month last Saturday, and I have never cried once, from that day to this, so it was not to be expected that I could go on like that for ever. Fancy *me!* whom you have so often called your 'cry-baby' going for a whole month without one tear! Why, I wanted something by this time to freshen me up. — And it's all over now, Aggie, so do trot along, and get Bertie to come into the garden, or — or — perhaps I may begin again!"

CHAPTER VIII.

What the Twins thought of their new Home.

NELLY was perfectly correct in affirming that the first month of her wedded life had been spent without shedding a single tear. When she had once made up her mind that for Bertie's sake as well as for her own, she would be wrong to refuse Dr. Monkton's proposal; or rather, when she had once given him her hand in the parish church of Little Bickton, she had found the sacrifice not so great as she expected. For although there have certainly been cases in which wretched girls, frightened or persuaded into unions the mere thought of which they detested, have been dragged half fainting to the altar, they are the exceptions, not the rule; and their heroines have not been women of the same order of mind as Nelly Brooke. Far oftener, in this world (if not in that of romance) have marriages which ended in the depths of despair and shame, commenced with a very fair promise of domestic happiness. We have but

to search the records of the Divorce Court to prove this truth. There are few English maidens who will be forced into marriage against their will; few English men who would care to accept a hand thus reluctantly given. But there are hundreds, aye, thousands, of maidens, who listen to the voice of the first tempter who presents himself, and refuse to be undeceived as to his personal merits; and thousands of men who persist in marrying for the sake of a pretty face alone. And these are the unions which so often end in misery instead of happiness.

If Nelly Brooke had positively disliked Dr. Monkton, she would not have married him, even to save her brother's life. She was too pure and upright for that; she would rather have watched Bertie die, and died herself for grief afterwards. But she was dazzled by the many advantages which the marriage offered her; she was bewildered by the advice and persuasions of her friends — coming from such various quarters, and yet all tending to the same end — and she was puzzled with regard to her own feelings respecting her lover.

She could not help acknowledging that he was exceedingly kind and pleasant, and well-looking; and she kept on asking herself where she could find fault with him and what she required more; and because no settled answer came from her heart, and her objections seemed vague and undefined, she concluded that she must be too exacting, and that in her ignorance she required more than any woman had a right to expect or receive. She felt that something urged her against the marriage, but yet she could not give that something any name; it was a shadowy and intangible feeling which might simply be the result of contemplating so great a change

in her life, and shared in common with every girl under the same circumstances. And then had been thrown into the scale Mrs. Weston's arguments and Mr. Ray's advice; and, to crown all, that dreadful, never-to-be-forgotten fall of Bertie's, and thereupon the balance had turned; and Nelly yielded. But she yielded of her own free will — if a will that had been thus tampered with can be called "free" — at all events, she did not consent to marry Dr. Monkton until she believed that it was the right thing for her to do. She was not a lamb dragged to the sacrifice; she was a lamb who saw with the eyes of him whom she most loved; and thought that to view him happy and contented would be sufficient reward to her for any amount of self-denial.

This remembrance did not make her after-burthen any less weighty to bear; on the contrary, it increased the load. The wretchedness which others bring upon us, is at least entitled to the consolation of self-pity, but the trouble entailed by our own blindness or wilfulness has no right to such a plea; and all we can do is to curse our folly, and suffer in silence.

But Nelly had not yet arrived at cursing — she had not even had an idea of regretting the step she had taken: on the contrary, she had more than once congratulated herself that she had followed the advice of her friends. All had been so very bright and pleasant since her wedding day. Dr. Monkton has already been described as a passionate and pleasure-seeking man, who had fallen in love with Nelly Brooke for no better reason than the freshness of her face and manners. So long, therefore, as he remained unsatiated with these attractions, he would be sure to treat

her kindly, and during the month that they had been left to each other's society, and he had been subjected to no influence but hers, nothing had occurred to check their happiness, nor to rouse the temper of which she had not yet seen a specimen. His young wife had proved all that he could desire; she had soon lost her shy reserve, and the artless wonder she expressed at all she saw, and the frank comments she passed upon it, had served to amuse and interest him; whilst if she did not yet readily respond to his affection, she had at least learned to listen to its protestations without impatience, and to bear its signs without shrinking. And in return for her forbearance James Monkton had lavished such gifts upon his bride as Nelly had not only never received, but never dreamed of in her life before. Articles of dress, of jewellery, and such knick-knacks as girls delight in, were, during her sojourn in Paris, showered upon her daily; whilst every evening her husband would take her to some fresh place of entertainment where he would derive his whole pleasure from merely watching the varied expressions of childish delight and surprise which, one after another, flitted across her open face.

Nelly had lived a fairy life in Paris, until she had almost begun to believe that hers must be the acme of wedded happiness. She had been so little used, poor child, to receiving any attention, or exciting any admiration, that it is not to be wondered at if her husband's warm rhapsodies upon her beauty and his anxiety to give her pleasure, or to lavish gifts upon her, appeared, in her unsophisticated ignorance, to be the very height of devotion. She had yet to learn that men can love unto death, who have never dared so

much as to offer a flower to the object of their affection, nor to breathe a word into her ear which related to themselves.

But, after a while, notwithstanding her pleasures and her presents, Nelly began to pine for Bertie. She longed to tell him of her unexpected content, and to shew him her store of treasures, many of which had been selected for himself; above all to see his face again, to hear his voice, and hold his hand in hers. Her love for her twin was not only faithful, it was so sympathetic, that it was physically impossible that she should be long at rest without him. Dr. Monkton did not entirely believe in the strange sympathy said to exist between some twin-children; he only attributed his wife's anxiety to rejoin her brother, to the fact that they had been so accustomed to live together, that she missed him as she would have missed any other familiar thing, and as she would have done if there had been seven years between their births, instead of seven minutes.

But he was not in the mood to ridicule her attachment for Bertie, or even to dispute its source; and when Nelly began to lose her interest in the sights of Paris, and to sigh for the time when she should meet her brother again, he offered to take her home at once.

Robert Brooke, delighted at his sister's compliance and the marriage by which it had been so shortly followed, (for there had only been a month between the engagement and the wedding,) had consented to be left until their return under the charge of old Aggie and Mr. Ray, and had removed to the vicarage as soon as the bride and bridegroom had left Little Bickton.

Thence Nelly had almost daily received letters from him, which sometimes detailed the kindness he was experiencing at the hands of the vicar's family, but oftener enlarged on the pleasure which he felt in the prospect of seeing them again, and the day when he should for ever exchange Little Bickton for a residence in Hilstone. These letters had afforded Nelly intense gratification, and reconciled her to remaining in Paris as long as she had done; for, contrary to his usual moods, everything was rose-coloured now to Robert Brooke, and in his delight at her marriage, and the future before them, she received the first instalment of the payment of the debt he owed her. The original plan had been that Dr. and Mrs. Monkton should go straight from Paris to Hilstone, and that Robert Brooke, with old Aggie, and Thug, should join them there; but when her husband proposed to take her back to Little Bickton for a week before they entered their new home, Nelly gladly consented.

To see Mrs. Weston again, and little Tommy Dobbs, and the Rays, seemed almost as if she had never been married at all; and during the few days she remained in her old quarters, Nelly's spirits were so high, and her excitement so unbounded, that her friends congratulated themselves on the wisdom they had displayed in advising her to act as she had done; and her brother was more than ever convinced that both their fortunes were made. And next, they had all returned to Hilstone together; and this brings the narrative of their lives down to the moment when Nelly overheard the words which her husband used concerning Bertie, and suddenly woke up from her brief dream of contentment to remember that nothing

is certain in this world — nothing, indeed, except that once married we cannot with credit or ease unmarry ourselves again!

It was a shock, but only a passing one; for her husband's manner towards her was unaltered, and the young and flattered are too much engrossed in the present to permit a visionary future to disturb them overmuch. Besides, Nelly's fears, — if Dr. Monkton's remark had left any behind it, — were too vague not to be dispelled by the cordiality with which the brothers-in-law behaved to one another, and the good understanding which seemed to exist between them. With Robert Brooke, the doctor was infallible; he quoted him constantly, and referred to him on every occasion; seeming to think there could be no end to his generosity, or limit to their friendship. He called him by his Christian name whenever he wished to mention him, whilst he was "Bertie," and nothing else with Dr. Monkton; and Nelly was charmed to think how soon the two men had adopted one another as relations.

Mrs. Prowse took her departure before the dinner-hour, and (not over-pleased apparently with her first visit) did not reappear during the whole of the succeeding day; and the intervening time, which was passed by the brother and sister in examining the comforts and conveniences of their new abode, and summing up its luxuries, was one of unalloyed content.

Nelly flew from one chamber to another; now exclaiming with delight at the beauty of a picture, or calling to Bertie to come and try the ease of a spring-cushioned chair; anon, bending enchanted over the stands of hot-house flowers which adorned the sitting-rooms, or busily engaged in examining the books of

engravings which stood on the shelves of the doctor's library.

Every article of furniture in Dr. Monkton's house was of the best — every ornament in good taste, and it contained much to be admired even by those that were accustomed to such luxuries; but to these young people who had been used to the mere necessaries of life, and not always to them, it was like an enchanted palace of delight! There was a seat on poles, in which Bertie might be carried up and down stairs whenever he felt too lazy to walk; and there was a wheeled chair always awaiting his pleasure in the hall, in which he could either sit at the table or be taken out into the garden. And he had a spring mattress on his bed, which he declared had afforded him better nights than he had ever passed in his life before, and a soft couch with piles of cushions in his little sitting-room, and a bell close at hand, which rung right into old Aggie's ears and would summon her to his side in a moment.

Added to which, Dr. Monkton had informed him that the footman was always to be at his service, from luncheon till dinner-time, and after dinner for as long as he chose to employ him; so that, with his invalid chair he was to make himself quite independent of the other inmates of the house, and to go just where he listed. And Bertie was so pleased at this latter intimation, that Nelly had not the heart to put a check on his delight, even by expressing a hope that he would not often wish so to absent himself. It was happiness to her only to watch his face as he dilated on the kindness with which the doctor had made all these arrangements for his comfort, or to hear the tone of his

voice as he contrasted their present life with the one they had left in the dull past behind them.

"And he says, Nell," he remarked gaily in allusion to some conversation which had passed between himself and his brother-in-law, "that as soon as ever the people of the place have called upon you, which they are all sure to do before long — you will have more invitations to parties than you will care to accept. And then you will be obliged to give them some dinners in return, and you will sit at the head of your table looking so pretty and jolly, and with every one paying you compliments and saying what a darling you are — and, I shall be so proud of my sister. I shall never go down, you know, when you have company. I shouldn't care about it if I were well, and in my present state it would be out of the question. But I shall hear almost all about it from you, and fancy the rest for myself; and you must run up once in the evening, or so, just to take a peep at me, and let me see how handsome you can look in an evening dress. My dearest Nell! I am so glad to think that you are in your proper position at last."

But Nelly looked more perplexed than pleased at the prospect of giving dinner-parties.

"I daresay it will come naturally to me after a few times," she said, "but I hope it won't be necessary to give any for a long while, Bertie. You know I have never done anything of the kind before, and I am sure at first that I shan't know in the least, what to do or say."

"What nonsense," laughed Bertie. "All you'll have to do is to put on your most becoming dress, and look as pretty as you can. What a blessing it is that

you've married a rich man who can afford to pay servants to arrange all such things for you. Oh! Nelly, what a curse poverty is! I wonder we can have borne it so long, that it has not killed us both before now."

Nelly sighed and looked grave.

"There are worse curses than poverty, darling, though happily neither you nor I have known them. But if I could not appreciate the value of all this comfort for my own sake, Bertie, I should do so for yours. It is positive bliss to see you so happy. I hardly know you for the same brother that I had at Little Bickton. What a little time—" and she might have added, "what a little! *thing*" — "to work such great changes, but I am very thankful that it is so."

What Nelly said was true. A stranger who had only seen Robert Brooke in his discontent at Little Bickton, would scarcely have recognised him as he appeared in Hilstone. His face, which then had never changed its fretful and moody expression for anything brighter than the sickly look of gratitude with which he would occasionally reward his sister's efforts for his comfort, was now irradiated with smiles; and his voice, the weariful cadence of which used to go to her heart, had regained much of its boyish tone, and was becoming cheerful like her own. His sister's marriage and his change of residence seemed to have put new life into him; he appeared to have lost that painful sense of his deformity which erst-while had made him shrink from any encounter with his kind: and was eager to go out and see everything there was to be seen in Hilstone. He had ceased to grumble too at the hardness of his lot; but would speak with hope and cheerfulness of the

future, as though he believed there might be happiness contained in it for him as well as for other men.

Had her husband never shewn her any individual kindness or attention, Nelly must still have been grateful to him for the mighty change which he had worked in her brother's mind.

She lived in Bertie's life, and as James Monkton treated one, so would he save or destroy the other.

CHAPTER IX.

The Dean's Daughter-in-Law is highly offended.

"I have good news for you, Helena," said Dr. Monkton, about a week after their arrival in Hilstone, as they sat together at the breakfast table.

"What is that?"

"I am summoned to a consultation in London, which will certainly detain me till the evening; and perhaps over the night."

"And, why should that be good news, James?" she enquired.

"Because the carriage will be at your service for the whole of the day, and you can take Bertie over to Coombe Wood, or Stackley Abbey; or any of the places about here, which I have described to you."

"Oh! that will be charming," exclaimed Nelly, as the vision of a whole day spent in driving about the beautiful country with her brother, rose up before her, and then she added with a degree of compunction, "but I wish you could go also, James."

"You must learn to be thankful for small mercies, Helena! If I were here, and able to go with you, that would be the very reason that you could not go

yourself. You don't know yet what it is to be a doctor's wife. However, take my advice, and enjoy yourself when you can, for it is not often that you will get such an opportunity."

And shortly afterwards, he rose, and bidding her farewell, proceeded to the railway station, whilst she flew up to Bertie's room to consult him with respect to the intended expedition.

They had been so equally unused to anything like novelty or pleasure, that the anticipation excited him almost as much as herself, and after a brief colloquy, it was agreed that they should partake of an early dinner, "in the dear old way, you know, Bertie!" and drive out to Coombe Wood afterwards, where the coachman was to put up his horses, and allow them a couple of hours or so, for wandering about the beautiful place of which they had heard so much.

"And we will take my large plaid, and your air cushions, Bertie," exclaimed Nelly, her face rosy with excitement, "so that you can sit down if you feel in the least bit tired, and we will walk, very, very slowly, just loiter about, in fact, and look for all the wild flowers which James says, grow there; and if we stay late enough, perhaps we may hear the nightingales. There were no nightingales in dear old Bickton, were there, darling? at least I never heard any, but James says there are hundreds in Coombe Wood, and that they sing so beautifully directly the sun goes down. But now I must run down and speak to cook about the dinner, or we shall not have it in time."

The servants, who had already taken a great fancy to their girlish mistress, at once became eager to assist in her plan, and the cook proposed that she should

pack up a basket of good things to put in the carriage, that, if so inclined, the brother and sister might take their evening meal in the wood.

"Oh! yes! do, cook," replied Mrs. James Monkton, clapping her hands in the most undignified manner, "and now, if I could only manage to persuade my dear old Thug to go too, it would be a perfect party."

Here, the footman, who had been listening from his pantry, ventured to suggest that the mastiff and himself were already such good friends, that if he were on the box, he felt confident that the dog would follow the carriage.

"No doubt he would, John," replied his mistress, "with you on the box, and me inside. Oh! we certainly must try it. Thug should learn to follow the horses."

"I can keep on a whistling to him, ma'am; and if he shouldn't quite understand at first, 'twill be easy to jump down and coax him on a bit."

"To be sure," cried Nelly, to whom, in her present state of excitement, it would almost have appeared easy to drag the carriage to Coombe Wood herself, "and I can put my head out of the window too, and call him; and so between your whistling, John, and my calling, I think it will be very strange if he prefers to stay behind," and with a laugh still upon her tongue, Nelly ran up the kitchen-stairs into the hall, and almost into the arms of prim Mrs. Prowse, who, accompanied by a sly-looking lady with mock-modest eyes, had entered the house in her usual familiar manner. Nelly had been running and talking so fast that she was rather flushed and out of breath, and

struck her sister-in-law as looking more like a school-girl fresh from a game of romps, than the mistress of a household, from the important duty of giving directions to her servants.

"Oh! how do you do," exclaimed Nelly carelessly, with a broad smile upon her face, "I am *so* busy! we are going over to Coombe Wood directly after dinner," and then she had time to glance towards the stranger, as though demanding an introduction.

"I am quite well, I thank you, Mrs. James," returned Mrs. Prowse with a severe propriety, intended to discountenance the other's frivolity, "and have just stepped over with Fanny Clewson — this is she;" intimating her companion by a movement of her head, "everyone in Hilstone knows Fanny Clewson — to tell you that I have just heard that Mrs. Filmer intends calling upon you this afternoon, so I thought it best that you should be prepared."

Nelly thought the mere statement that everyone in Hilstone knew Miss Clewson was a strange mode of introducing her to one who did not; but as the lady herself appeared to take it as a matter of course, and not to be in the least offended, she only bowed in return for her deep curtsey; and then answered Mrs. Prowse's announcement with the irreverent enquiry,

"Mrs. Filmer! — who *is* Mrs. Filmer?"

Miss Clewson looked at Mrs. Prowse, and Mrs. Prowse looked at Miss Clewson, and for a moment neither of them seemed able to speak for surprise.

"My *dear* Mrs. Monkton!" at last drawled the unmarried lady in a voice of incredulity.

"Your ignorance must be affected," now put in the canon's wife. "Surely my brother James has told you

of Mrs. Filmer; the *daughter-in-law* of the Dean of Hilstone! *mistress* of the deanery at the present moment! and *mother* of Capt. Herbert and Miss Laura Filmer!"

"No, indeed he has not!" replied Nelly, laughing at the comical look of consternation which her sister-in-law's face had assumed, "or if he has I have forgotten all about her, which comes to the same thing. But pray don't stand here; let us go into the drawing-room, and then you can enlighten my darkness," and she led the way as she proposed. But Mrs. Prowse was not to be appeased by Nelly's cheery tone. Levity on such a subject became sacrilege, which, as a staunch upholder of the ecclesiastical party and all its members, it was her faithful duty to put down.

"I have nothing more to say upon the matter, Mrs. James," she gravely remarked as they seated themselves, "and am only surprised to find that you need any information on what so greatly concerns us all. Mrs. Filmer is *the* lady of Hilstone; she 'leads' the town; and all those whom she has hitherto honoured with her acquaintance have been only too grateful for her notice. She has a great regard for myself, and also for my brother James, in consequence of which, and with the evident desire to shew *us* attention, she has been good enough, thus early, to signify that she will call upon you. She will be here this afternoon. Having no wish to ruffle or discompose you, she has been so kind as to prepare you for her visit, by sending an intimation of it through myself. I am not sure at what hour she will be here, but of course you will hold yourself in readiness to receive her directly she arrives. And I wish, Mrs. James," continued Mrs. Prowse, becoming more confidential, "I hope that you

will put on a silk dress for the occasion. These muslins and prints are all very well for the morning, but they are not suitable to a visit of ceremony — and I observed the other day that you wore one all the afternoon — Mrs. Filmer knows that you come from the country, and will be ready, I am sure, to make every allowance; but still, I think it right to tell you these things, else people may suspect that you have not been used to any society, and in a place like Hilstone, we cannot be too particular.”

Nelly's disposition was naturally forbearing, but her spirit rebelled at the tone of dictation and patronage which Mrs. Prowse had taken up, and which was doubly irritating before a third party. She thought of the proposed scheme of pleasure being abandoned, and could not see the necessity of disappointing both Bertie and herself for the convenience of a stranger. So that her answer had more decision in it, than in her new position she had yet dared to express.

“I do not think that it will signify much to Mrs. Filmer, whether I put on a silk dress or a muslin one, to-day; for as I told you at first, Bertie and I are going to Coombe Wood this afternoon; and shall most likely have started before Mrs. Filmer arrives.”

“But you must put off going; you must defer your expedition, Mrs. James!” exclaimed Mrs. Prowse, horrified at the light manner in which the bride spoke of missing the promised visit. “Mrs. Filmer sent over Fanny Clewson to inform me of her intention, simply that I might prepare you for receiving her, and you talk of going out for a drive instead. I never heard of such a thing! Mrs. Filmer would be deeply offended at

such an unwarrantable slight — she might never call on you again.”

“But surely,” argued Nelly, “Mrs. Filmer can never have expected that I should put off all other engagements only just to see her. Bertie and I have made all our arrangements for passing the afternoon in Coombe Wood, and I can’t put it off for anyone, because he would be very much disappointed and so should I; we are going to dine early on purpose. If Mrs. Filmer comes before we start I shall be very pleased to see her — if she’s nice — else, any other day will do as well, I suppose.”

“Where is my brother James?” exclaimed the canon’s spouse, looking about the room in a vague manner, as if she was faint and wanted more air. “I *must* speak to him. He will never allow this.”

“He is gone to London for the day,” returned Nelly, quietly, “and may not be back until to-morrow morning. It was he who proposed our going to Coombe Wood; and told us to be sure and make the best use of our time, for we might not have such another opportunity.”

“But he did not know that *Mrs. Filmer* was coming to call upon you,” panted Mrs. Prowse, “he would be the first to desire you to make *any* engagement succumb to this.”

“Would he really, do you think?” asked Nelly, reflectively; and then she turned suddenly to Mrs. Prowse and said: “Well, look here then. I will put off starting for an hour later — that will not be until four — and if you see Mrs. Filmer, you can just ask her to come before then.”

Ask Mrs. Filmer — who, in her coarse patronage,

was accustomed to outrage all etiquette with regard to visiting her humbler neighbours — to pay her respects to the doctor's little bride before a certain hour, or not at all. The mere idea of taking such a liberty was enough to petrify Mrs. Prowse. She rose from the sofa whereon she had been seated, and followed by Fanny Clewson, prepared to quit the room.

"Very well, Mrs. James, I have warned you, remember," she said indignantly, "and now I must beg to wash my hands of the whole affair. *Mrs. Filmer is coming to call on you this afternoon.* I have delivered the message with which I was entrusted to you, and I have pointed out the necessity of your attending to it. My brother James being unfortunately absent, I can do no more, but must leave you to act as you think proper," and she swept out of the door as she spoke.

"Oh! I am *sure* Mrs. Monkton will do just as you wish, dear Mrs. Prowse," murmured, more than said, Miss Fanny Clewson, looking at Nelly from beneath her drooping eye-lashes, as she wriggled after her friend. This species of address was still more impertinent in Nelly's ideas, than the former had been; she dropped the hand she was about to offer Miss Clewson at parting, and merely bowed to her instead.

"I understand perfectly, Mrs. Prowse," she said, as she stood on the doorstep and witnessed the departure of her visitors, "Mrs. Filmer is coming here this afternoon, and if I should be at home at the time, I shall be very happy to receive her. I have put off my engagement for an hour, solely on her account, and I think she could hardly expect me to do more."

Mrs. Prowse and Miss Clewson left her without further parley, and Nelly returned into the hall. As

she did so, she felt very discomposed at what had just passed. She knew that she was young, and ignorant of the ways of society, and had only been used to country life; but that was no reason, she silently argued, that Mrs. Prowse should treat her as if she were a child, to be ordered about and dictated to. She had already seen enough of her sister-in-law to make her sincerely regret there was any connection between them, but since that misfortune could not now be remedied, she had no inclination to be made to submit to an authority so unlawfully exercised. Nelly had always been mistress in her grandfather's house, and interference from strangers was a thing she had not been used to, and could not brook. She was a lamb, it is true, but only according to whose hand pulled the reins that checked her. She could be a very spirited lamb when occasion demanded, and this was an occasion which seemed to call up her most rebellious feelings. She did not tell Bertie of the interview she had had with Mrs. Prowse. She feared it might vex him, and she was accustomed to shield him from little annoyances by keeping them to herself. So she made no alteration in their plans, except that when four o'clock struck without any sign of Mrs. Filmer's approach, her natural goodnature and wish to oblige, caused her to loiter about for half-an-hour longer in hopes of seeing her expected guests before she started.

But at the end of that period Bertie grew impatient, declaring the best part of the day was already gone, and they should have no time at all in the wood at that rate.

"What on earth are you waiting for, Nelly?" he

asked rather fretfully, "the carriage must have been at the door for an hour."

"Not quite so long as that, Bertie, but we will keep the horses standing no longer. I expected some ladies to call here this afternoon, but perhaps they have changed their minds about coming, so let us start."

She slipped her brother's arm through her own as she spoke, and led him into the hall, but just as Long had thrown open the front door, and signified to the coachman that they were ready, their own carriage was forced to move on to make way for that of the dean; from which with a vast amount of pomp and banging of steps, alighted the high and mighty Mrs. Filmer. She was followed by her daughter and Mrs. Prowse (whom she had ordered to accompany her) and was just in time to meet the brother and sister on the threshold of the doctor's house.

It was an unfortunate encounter, and all the more so because Nelly, with Bertie hanging on her arm, was powerless to do more than smile and half bow in acknowledgment of the presence of her visitors.

Mrs. Filmer, rustling in a plum-coloured brocade, just glanced at the girl in her simple robe and bonnet, and then without the least suspicion that this was the bride she had come in state to visit, was about to pass on without further notice, when Mrs. Prowse ventured to touch her elbow:

"Mrs. James Monkton," she said, as she indicated Nelly with her eyes, and gave a frown of displeasure at her homely appearance.

"Who? — what *that?*" rudely exclaimed the lady of the Deanery, as she turned completely round to

stare at poor Nelly. "Didn't you tell her I was coming?"

Mrs. Prowse was about to make some abject apology, when her sister-in-law, perceiving the awkwardness of the situation, came to the rescue. Addressing herself to Mrs. Filmer, she said:

"I have much pleasure in seeing you. If you will kindly allow me to put my brother in the carriage I will return to you at once. Mrs. Prowse! will you take these ladies into the drawing-room?" And she passed on with Bertie, whilst Mrs. and Miss Filmer, followed by their jackal, were compelled to do as she desired them.

"Well! this is most extraordinary behaviour," said the female dignitary, as she ensconced herself upon the sofa. "Can you tell me the reason of this, Matilda? Did you inform the young woman that I was going to call on her this afternoon?"

"I did, indeed, Mrs. Filmer," replied the hapless jackal, who, pert and snappish with everyone else, was always abjectly humble before the dean's daughter-in-law; "I did indeed, most particularly, and quite fancied that she understood my wishes; but——"

"I said, mamma, that you had better wait till to-morrow," exclaimed Miss Laura Filmer, who was arranging her bonnet-strings at the glass over the mantel-piece; "but you would come to-day. Mrs. Prowse said Mrs. Monkton had some previous engagement."

"But she should have put it off," interposed the canon's wife; "I fully thought she had put it off—everything should have deferred to your mamma's goodness!"

"Of course she should have put it off!" echoed the

dean's daughter-in-law. At this moment the subject of their argument entered the room.

"I am afraid we are detaining you, Mrs. Monkton," continued Mrs. Filmer with frigid politeness — "you were going out."

The girl was too truthful to deny the fact.

"I can easily wait a few minutes," she said, with a quiet smile; "the days are so long now, that time is not of so much consequence."

"It's a pity such a mistake was not prevented, though," returned her visitor. "I told Matilda Prowse, here, to let you know in good time, that I was coming this afternoon; but I suppose she delayed till 'twas too late to alter your plans."

To this accusation Mrs. Prowse attempted a piteous denial; but though Nelly had little sympathy with either her feelings or herself, she could not hear her wronged without refuting it, and her eager reply came first.

"Oh! no! indeed, Mrs. Filmer — you are quite mistaken. Mrs. Prowse was over here directly after breakfast, to tell me of your intention, and had it not been for her doing so, we should have started more than an hour ago. But the fact is, Dr. Monkton has gone to London for the day, and left us the carriage, and we are anxious to make the best use of such an opportunity by exploring Coombe Wood, of which we have heard a great deal. If it had been only for myself, I should not have minded so much, perhaps, giving it up, but my brother had set his heart upon going, and I could not have him disappointed."

At this avowal, Laura Filmer looked round, interested, but her mother, unaccustomed to such candour,

tossed her head with indignation at the "young woman's" presumption.

"A most unusual attention to a brother," she said, as though doubting the truth of Nelly's statement. "There are few young women, Mrs. Monkton, who are so ready to sacrifice their own interests for their relatives."

"But I assure you I am sacrificing nothing," replied Nelly, laughing, and thinking that Mrs. Filmer alluded to some self-denial on her part. "I love driving about quite as much as Bertie does; and I'd rather be with him than with any one in the world."

At this additional piece of boldness, the august mistress of the Deanery was too affronted to make any reply; Mrs. Prowse looked at the offender, as if she wondered that the earth did not open and swallow her where she sat; and even Laura Filmer, who could not help feeling interested in the sweet, girlish face and figure before them, seemed to think it would be advisable to create a diversion by starting another subject of conversation.

"I suppose you will join the Choral Society, Mrs. Monkton. Every lady of any standing in Hilstone belongs to it."

"I have not heard of it," said Nelly; "what is it like?"

"It is a society of ladies and gentlemen for practising concerted music — chiefly sacred. We meet once a week, in the Mechanics' Institute, and have concerts every quarter. You must take a ticket, Mrs. Monkton, for even if you do not care to sing, it will admit you to the concerts, and we shall want your subscription."

Miss Laura Filmer was one of the most active members of the Choral Society, which was as much in want of funds as it was of voices.

"Oh! I know what you are alluding to, now!" exclaimed Nelly, "only I had not heard it called by that name. A gentleman, who was here, the other day, was trying to persuade me to belong to it — a Mr. Rumbell, I think — a white, fat man —"

"A white — fat — man!" slowly repeated Mrs. Filmer, "is your sister-in-law alluding to the *Reverend Mr. Rumbell*, Matilda?"

"I should scarcely think so — I can hardly believe so!" gasped Mrs. Prowse, in her horror and agitation lest the repeated delinquencies of her brother's wife should by any means return on her own head.

"Yes! that is he!" replied Nelly, nodding her head to Mrs. Filmer, "one of the cathedral canons, I think Dr. Monkton said — a very ugly, pale man. He sat here a long time, one afternoon, and did all he could to make me take a ticket for this society; but I had just promised Dr. Nesbitt that I would not. I told Mr. Rumbell that I should be no loss, for I know scarcely anything of music — but I shall be very happy to subscribe all the same, if that will do any good."

"Do you mean to tell me, Mrs. Monkton, that Dr. Nesbitt, our cathedral organist, has already called upon you?" now solemnly enquired Mrs. Filmer.

Now Dr. Nesbitt was a man who never called on any one, especially a stranger, and even those ladies with whom he was most familiar (including Mrs. Filmer herself) had the greatest difficulty in luring him to their houses, for, added to his eccentric and reserved habits, he was exceedingly shy.

“Oh! yes!” replied Nelly, laughing, “twice, I think — or three times, and what a funny old man he is! He came in first one evening, when I was sitting alone at the piano, and trying to sing, and he made me go on, although I was horribly frightened. He says I shall be able to sing and play both, if I practise, and he is going to teach me. He has spoken to Dr. Monkton about it, and he is to come here three times a week, to give me a lesson. And how beautifully he plays, himself! he sat here for nearly two hours, yesterday evening, playing to us until I could hardly bear to listen to it. It made me feel so glad, and yet so miserable!”

Mrs. Filmer could hardly believe her ears.

Dr. Nesbitt — who, although in the pay and employment of the church, had actually refused to give lessons on the piano to her own daughter, on the plea that he had given up teaching — to offer to instruct this stranger in the elements of music! Dr. Nesbitt, who could hardly be persuaded to touch the instrument for the amusement of herself or her friends, to sit for a couple of hours playing to a raw girl, who acknowledged that she knew nothing about the science! It was impossible — Mrs. Monkton must be either mistaken or wilfully deceiving them. Dr. Nesbitt would never so risk his interests in Hilstone.

“If this be true,” she said, with the utmost rudeness, turning to Mrs. Prowse, “I don’t think, from what *we* know of Dr. Nesbitt, that it is very likely to continue — it must be a mere freak on his part; but I shall mention it to him all the same. However,” rising from her seat, “we have, doubtless, detained Mrs. Monkton quite long enough from her anticipated plea-

sure. For all the good it has done, my dear, I might have saved you the trouble of giving her any intimation of my intended visit. But the doctor will be sorry when he comes to hear of it. Good morning to you, Mrs. Monkton!" and with merely a bow, Mrs. Filmer swept grandly out of the drawing-room, closely and obsequiously followed by the canon's wife.

Laura Filmer was more polite than her mother; she stayed behind to bid farewell to her new acquaintance, and to repeat her request that she would join the Choral Society. "If Dr. Nesbitt says you have a voice, you may be sure you have, and we want good voices very much. My brother says there are several ladies in his regiment, who can sing, but mamma is so bigoted against the military. Do join us, if you can."

"But I promised Dr. Nesbitt I would not," replied Nelly. "He declared the choruses would pull my voice all to pieces, and he wouldn't teach me if I did. Besides, he said they all quarrelled so — there was hardly any time for practice."

"And so they do — he is right there," returned Miss Filmer, "but mamma is waiting, and I must go;" and then she added, hurriedly, "I wish you hadn't said quite so much, just now, and affronted her; I should have liked you for a companion, I am sure I should. Good-bye!" and with a friendly shake of the hand, she ran after the other ladies. The comments almost immediately passed in each carriage upon the occupants of the other, were not dissimilar in character.

"What is your friend like, Nelly?" enquired her brother, as she took her seat beside him.

"Perfectly insufferable, Bertie! both in speech and

manner. Pray don't mention her again, or you will completely spoil the pleasure of my drive."

And in the dean's carriage it was —

"Well, Matilda! all I can say is — I am sorry for your brother — extremely sorry. I had thought better of him, and of his wish to advance instead of lowering the interests of Hilstone! A more forward young woman, both in manner and speech, I think I have seldom met."

And the jackal could only bemoan the family misfortune, and trust that her dearest Mrs. Filmer would visit the offences of the new comer on neither her brother nor herself.

CHAPTER X.

Nelly is taken to Task.

DR. MONKTON returned from London on the following morning, in anything but a desirable temper. He had been summoned there, to a consultation concerning some surgical operation, by men who had full faith in his judgment; but on their meeting to discuss the case, it happened that he totally differed in opinion from them, respecting the treatment to be pursued. The other doctors were all agreed; Dr. Monkton alone was obstinately assured that they were mistaken. However, as he was in a minority of one to three, and the danger was imminent, his advice was put on one side. The operation was performed, and being successful, he was proved to have been altogether in the wrong.

This was what had galled him: he would rather

the patient had died twenty times over, so that he might have triumphed above his colleagues. As it was, the self-gratulations of the other men sent him back to Hilstone in the worst of tempers.

He would have liked to have poisoned them all three, but as that was impracticable, he parted with them as politely as ever, and returned home to vent his ill-humour on the first person who should be so unfortunate as to offend him.

When James Monkton has been elsewhere described as a passionate man, the term bore allusion to his temperament, and not to his temper. A warm temper usually accompanies a warm heart: quick words and quick repentance go together; and a cold-blooded person who is slow to wrath is generally slow to forgiveness also. It was thus, unhappily, with Nelly's husband.

He was not hasty to take umbrage because so few things had the power to touch his feelings. At the same time, where he had once been offended, he never forgot the injury. He was so narrow-minded that he could make no allowance for actions engendered by a difference of disposition, and he had so little generosity that he had never been known to confess that he was in the wrong.

It was his nature to cherish resentment even to malice, but he shewed his policy in this particular by only oppressing such as were weaker than himself.

Like his sister, he was no real friend to animals, or children, or even women, except where his own advancement or gratification was concerned.

He could be bland and gentle in the extreme, with

a Mrs. Filmer, or a Mrs. Brooke, however annoyed he might feel at being called up in the middle of the night because either of them fancied she had a pain in her little finger; but he could speak harshly to a dying woman or child, for whose sake he had been troubled in like manner to inhale the unpleasant fumes of an ill-ventilated cottage.

He prided himself on the care which he took of his well-bred and well-fed horses, and his leash of valuable greyhounds, whilst he could kick a poor half-starved mongrel over the threshold of the cottage above alluded to, or strike a costermonger's unoffending donkey athwart the nose, and smile to hear the howl of the one animal, or to see the shudder with which the other would silently remonstrate against such needless cruelty.

He forgot, or rather he had never possessed a heart large enough to comprehend the truth that if our love for animals springs from a generous wish to protect the weak and defenceless, it will be extended to the whole brute creation, and be more largely drawn upon in behalf of the unfortunate than the prosperous. But to revert to his behaviour on the morning he returned to Hilstone.

He had met his wife with less warmth than usual, although he had been unable to find fault with the beaming, cheerful face, which had welcomed him home. He had only cut her rather short when she was volubly describing their pleasure of the evening before, and Nelly had thought that he looked tired and worried, and laid it to the fatigue and anxiety which he had probably gone through. She was perfectly aware that one half of the life of a professional

man must be a sealed book to his wife; and was too sensible to make any enquiries that might annoy her husband. But she had not the least idea that his silence proceeded from ill-temper; and after he had finished breakfast, saw him enter his consulting-room, with full belief that his cheerfulness would be restored by luncheon-time.

There were several poor patients waiting to consult him about such trifling ailments as their babies' blotches, or their own small pains and aches; but he found so much fault with the first two or three for troubling him with such nonsense that the remainder shrunk together, and looked almost afraid to speak.

Long, who, in his capacity of confidential servant, usually attended in the room on these occasions, and who had seen too much of his master's moods not to know what was the matter with him, went from one group to the other, entreating the people, if their business was urgent, to speak up at once, and if not, to leave it until another day.

"The doctor's been up the whole night," he said to one woman who seemed to require a reason for the demand, "and is very tired, as well as in a great hurry. I daresay your baby's eyes won't be any the worse for waiting till to-morrow morning, Mrs. Brown."

"Well! they may, or they may not," grumbled the mother as she prepared to move off again, "but if so be they are, I can but take him up to Dr. Nash, who wouldn't refuse to see a suffering child at any hour. He never neglects the poor for his own convenience, bless 'im," but before the concluding words had escaped her lips, the door was luckily closed upon her and several of her companions; and the rest of the gratis

patients having been summarily disposed of, Long and his master found themselves alone.

"Don't let anybody else in," said Dr. Monkton quickly, as footsteps were again heard in the hall, "I can see no more to-day."

"But you *must* see *me*, James," exclaimed the shrill voice of Mrs. Prowse as that lady appeared upon the threshold, "it is absolutely necessary that I should speak to you, and at once. Long! leave the room!"

Under the eye of his master, Long dared not even hesitate to obey the imperative command, and in another moment he was gone.

"What do you want with me, Matilda?" demanded the doctor, without looking up from the papers with which he was occupied, "I am very hurried, and must tell you I have no time to waste upon nonsense."

He would gladly have dismissed her as peremptorily as she had done his servant, for he was too sullen to desire converse with anyone, but firmly as he could hold his own with most people, Dr. Monkton stood rather in awe of his sister.

That man must have assurance indeed, who can afford not to feel somewhat afraid of such a woman's tongue.

"*Nonsense!*" echoed Mrs. Prowse, "I wish you may find it nonsense! If Mrs. Filmer once takes it into her head to call in Dr. Nash, you may pack up your things and be gone, for there'll be an end to all your practice here."

At these words, her brother almost forgot his sulks in his amazement.

"What *are* you talking about?" he enquired.

"I'm talking about what all Hilstone is talking

about at this present moment, James; and about what would never have happened if you had thought fit to consult me before taking a step, as you used to do. But everything is changed now; and I trust you may find it changed for the better! You rush off to town higgledy-piggledy, without saying a word to anyone, or leaving a single order or direction behind you — and this is the consequence.”

“Am I to understand,” demanded the doctor, interrupting her, “that you expect me to ask your opinion before I make a professional engagement; or your leave before I start to fulfil it?”

“No! of course not,” replied Mrs. Prowse with unabated warmth, and not in the least checked by the severity of her brother's tone, “but before you trusted the maintenance of your name and respectability to the hands of a child, you might, and you ought to have ascertained that she was equal to the charge.”

“I suppose you are alluding to my wife,” he remarked indifferently.

“Yes, I *am* alluding to your wife,” was the caustic reply, “and it would be a good thing for you, James, if I were the only person who had occasion this morning to allude to her.”

“Why, what has she done?”

“What has she *not* done?” cried Mrs. Prowse. “Shewn the utmost rudeness and incivility to Mrs. Filmer and her daughter, and offended them so highly that I doubt if they will ever be persuaded to enter your doors again.”

At this news Dr. Monkton's countenance visibly lowered. His sister could have told him nothing regarding his wife to cause him greater annoyance. He

prided himself on the exclusiveness with which he usurped the best practice of Hilstone, and was well aware that all his good fortune in this respect arose from his connection with the deanery. If Mrs. Filmer chose to take offence at any behaviour on the part of himself or his wife, he knew that he might as well (as Mrs. Prowse had said) pack up his things at once, and be gone. All his indifference fled at once. He laid down his papers and advanced to where his informant was seated, fanning herself, from heat and agitation.

"You cannot be in earnest, Matilda," he said quickly. "Helena is too sweet-tempered to shew rudeness to anyone. What did she do, or say? and when did it all happen?"

"It happened during your absence of yesterday," replied the canon's wife, delighted to see how keenly his interest was aroused; "and I can vouch for the truth of it, for I was present myself. Mrs. Filmer took the trouble to send over in the morning and tell your wife that she intended calling on her in the afternoon, but Mrs. Monkton, it seems, preferred taking a drive instead, and it was therefore merely by chance that she had a couple of minutes to bestow upon her visitors when they made their appearance. Such behaviour, at all events, as dear Mrs. Filmer remarked to me afterwards, possessed the charm of novelty, for it is the first time that she has ever been treated in that way in Hilstone before."

"Perhaps Helena did not receive the message," remarked the doctor with knitted brows.

"I carried it to her myself, James."

"But since she was at home surely Mrs. Filmer

might have staid more than a couple of minutes if she had wished it."

"*If she had wished it?*" Do you think it likely that *Mrs. Filmer*, the leading lady of Hilstone, would condescend to *wish* to prolong a visit, which if considered as an honour, was decidedly not treated as such. Why, the first words your wife uttered were to complain that she had been kept from her drive by the delay in their appearance; and then she went on to speak to *Mrs. Filmer* in the most extraordinary manner; just as if she were anybody! openly refused to join the choral society, and mentioned *Mr. Rumbell* and *Dr. Nesbitt* in such familiar terms, that I cannot recall them without indignation. All I know is, that *Mrs. Filmer* remarked to me afterwards, that she had never met with a more forward and unpleasant young person. And that is a nice thing to be said of one's brother's wife by the daughter-in-law of the dean. I'm sure I cried with shame when I heard it."

Dr. Monkton's thin lips were compressed firmly, and his face was growing darker every moment.

"I must speak to *Helena* about this," he said with ominous brevity.

"Speak to her! well, I should rather hope you would, *James*, and if you wish to retain your friends, you must do something more than speak to her. You have chosen, without consulting anyone, to marry a mere girl from the country, who appears to be perfectly ignorant of what as your wife is required from her; but that is no reason why you should let your reputation go to rack and ruin in her hands. She has been here a week, and she has done you enough mischief to last a year. But I knew how it would be,

directly I heard that you had saddled yourself with that cripple."

"Why, what of him?" asked her brother in surprise. "What can he have had to do with the present business?"

"Everything," returned Mrs. Prowse with emphasis, "you must be blind if you cannot see that the wishes and opinions of that young man rule your wife. I suppose you think you're her master, but you'll never be that so long as her brother is in the house. Why, a child might see how she is guided by him. It was nothing yesterday but 'my *brother* wished it,' — 'my *brother* would have been disappointed,' — 'my *brother* is waiting,' and so it is in all things. That boy is everything and you are nothing, and I believe she married you more for his sake than for her own."

This shaft, though fired at random, was so unfortunately true, that it made Dr. Monkton furious. He had known from the commencement that he influenced Nelly only through his conduct to her brother, but it was a hard truth to hear from the lips of another.

"Take care what you are about!" he exclaimed, sharply turning to his sister. Her sallow face turned whiter at his address, and her hard black eyes gleamed sternly at him, but she only tossed her head, and replied:

"Well, if it isn't true, anyone would think so."

"That is my business, and not yours," he said severely.

"And that brute of a dog, too," ran on Mrs. Prowse, attempting to change the current of his thoughts, "no one who had any regard for you or for your property,

would keep an animal like that about the house. Mrs. Filmer was astonished — perfectly astonished — at seeing it in the hall yesterday, and said she wondered at anyone expecting a lady to enter the same place with it. However," continued the canon's wife as she rose and shook out her skirts, preparatory to leaving, "I considered it my duty to inform you of the circumstance, and you must do as you please regarding it. All I can say is, that I sincerely hope your wife's extraordinary behaviour may not be permitted to influence the cordiality with which the canon and myself have always been received at the deanery. If I perceive any alteration in dear Mrs. Filmer's manners towards us, however, I shall know who to thank for the change. One cannot touch pitch without being defiled." And without waiting to explain whether her quotation bore allusion to Mrs. Filmer, Nelly, or herself, Mrs. Prowse jerked out of her brother's room.

As soon as she was gone, Dr. Monkton sat down to collect his thoughts, and resolve upon his actions. As he did so, his anger grew deeper and deeper against the cause of his annoyance. As long as his sister had been in the room, irritating him by her observations, it had been chiefly directed towards herself; now that she had disappeared, it reverted to his wife. He had never felt disposed to be harsh with Nelly yet, there had been so little time and so little reason for anything but caressing her; but now, his dread of decreasing popularity, and the sting which some of Mrs. Prowse's words had left behind them, added to his previous ill-humour, combined to raise a mood which was destined to surprise her.

After the reflection of a few moments he rose sud-

denly and rung the bell for Long, and the request "Ask your mistress to step here for a minute," was soon followed by the appearance of Nelly herself. She had been just going out with her brother, and was arrayed in her walking things. She came in with a smile on her lips, half curious and half expectant, for she could not conceive why her husband should send for her during his business hours, and just behind her, treading on and rending with his weight her muslin dress, appeared her constant attendant, Thug.

"Do you want me, James?" she naturally, though perhaps unnecessarily, asked.

"Yes; or I should not have sent for you," was the discouraging reply, and then as she closed the door, and he perceived the mastiff by her side, he added, "I wish to heavens, Helena, that you would not take that animal with you wherever you go. *You* may like your rooms to smell like a stable, but it is more than I do."

The look — the manner — the tone of voice, were what she had never experienced from him before. Nelly started, and changed colour — but the next moment she had re-opened the door, and ordered the dog into the passage.

"I am sorry," she said gently, "I am very sorry, James, that he annoys you, I had no idea of it."

"It would annoy anyone," he answered, "to have a brute like that always at his heels. The wonder is, that you can like it yourself."

"But how can I prevent it?" she said with a look of perplexity. "He has never been used to be alone, you know, and he *will* follow me everywhere. But I

will take care he does not come in your room again. He must learn to stay entirely in Bertie's or mine."

"He ought not to be in any room at all," grumbled the doctor, "his proper place is the stable. However, I have something of much greater importance to speak to you of now, Helena. What on earth can you have meant by your treatment of Mrs. Filmer, yesterday?"

"My treatment of Mrs. Filmer?" said the girl, advancing close to her husband's side. "How did I treat her, James?"

"Infamously, if what I hear is true. You refused to remain at home to receive her after she had sent you an intimation of her coming, and when by chance, you met her, you behaved so rudely, that both she and her daughter have declared that they will never enter the house again."

"But who says that I was rude?" demanded Nelly, with wide open eyes.

"My sister," replied Dr. Monkton.

"Then it is a shame of her! it is a great shame," exclaimed his young wife, indignant at the exaggeration which had been used respecting her conduct of the day before. "I was not rude at all, James! I am sure I was not. I waited at home an hour and a half on purpose to see Mrs. Filmer, and when she came I talked to her as I would have done to any other lady. She was very disagreeable in her manner towards me though, and I was sorry afterwards that I had put off our drive for her sake. I am sure it was no pleasure to see her; and I won't do it another time."

Now, although Dr. Monkton had sent for Nelly with the intention of being very angry with her, her sweet aspect and gentleness of manner had at first al-

most disarmed him. But this last bit of rebellion recalled him to a sense of his duty.

"But you *must* do it another time, Helena! you must behave far better another time than you have done this. I have sent for you now expressly to re-monstrate on such conduct. What arrangement can you possibly have made that you could not have put off until to-day, or to-morrow?"

"Why, didn't you say yourself, before you went to London," replied Nelly with the most charming pout, "that we might have the carriage and go to Coombe Wood?"

"Pooh! Coombe Wood!" retorted the doctor, "any day would have done for Coombe Wood. You must understand at once, Helena, that Mrs. Filmer is a very important person in Hilstone; and that it is absolutely necessary that you keep on friendly terms with her. She has it in her power to make or break anybody here."

"But we had made all our arrangements before I even heard she was coming," urged Nelly. "We had set our hearts upon going to Coombe Wood, and it would have been such a terrible disappointment to us, to give it up altogether."

The plural pronoun, in his present state of mind, jarred upon James Monkton's ear.

"*We*," he repeated, "who are *we*?"

Of course he knew as well as she did, but he made the demand with the sole view of bringing the cause of complaint prominently forward.

"Why, Bertie and me, of course, James," replied Nelly, staring at such a question.

"That's just it!" he said, eagerly seizing the op-

portunity which her answer afforded him. "We should have been disappointed, and therefore the expedition could not be deferred until another day; if it had only been *your* convenience which had been called in question, you would have been ready enough to comply with my sister's advice. Now, I'll tell you what it is, Helena, your attention to your brother is all well enough in its way, but I'll not have it interfere with your attention to my friends, nor your obligations as the mistress of this house. From this time society will make certain calls upon you to which you must respond irrespective of any self-imposed duty to Robert; he has already monopolised the best part of your life, the rest belongs to me."

"But, James," she began falteringly.

"I wish to hear nothing more upon the subject," he answered decisively, as he prepared to leave the room. "As long as Robert remains with us I am willing to give him every luxury which my means can afford, but that does not include your company whenever he chooses to command it. If you had not, by your devotion, rendered him utterly selfish, he would be the first to see the necessity of a change. He has the old woman to attend to his wants, and the man to take him out for his airings; what more can he desire? Any way, except when entirely at liberty to dispose of your own time, he cannot have my wife. So do not let me have to speak to you again on this subject." And passing through the open door, Dr. Monkton left Nelly to her own reflections.

CHAPTER XI.

And resolves to do her Duty.

At first they were very bitter ones. It was not her husband's angry looks or words that she so much resented (though she had little expected, and thought she little deserved them) as the knowledge that they had been induced by his sister's unjust representations. She believed, that, had it not been for them, the doctor would never have thought of objecting to her care of Bertie, or of imagining that it interfered with her courtesy to his friends. For the moment she hated Mrs. Prowse, hated Mrs. Filmer, hated Hilstone, and almost everybody in it. But Nelly was too sweet tempered to cherish such vindictive feelings long. It was but a little while before better thoughts arose, but a few minutes spent on the sofa, where her husband had left her, before she was ready silently to acknowledge that she might not have been sufficiently conciliating in her manner towards her new acquaintances; that she ought, perhaps, to have appeared to value their attentions more, and her own and Bertie's pleasures less; that she was, after all, but a very unimportant personage in comparison with Mrs. Filmer, who was a married woman of so many years' standing; and had been mistress of the Deanery nearly as long. Nelly felt all this, and resolved, in consequence, that she would do her duty better for the time to come, but how far her ready compliance was attributable to her new-born fear, perhaps even she was incompetent to decide. Yet, she knew that she was afraid, she could hardly tell of what. The terms in which Dr.

Monkton had spoken of her brother rankled in her heart. She could not forget them; she could not shake off the distrust which they had engendered, nor lose the remembrance of who had prompted him so to speak.

She felt that it was necessary for both their sakes, that she should yield implicitly to her husband's wishes — even though dictated by his sister; but she yielded under protest.

It was the obedience of fear, not that of love! When Nelly left her husband's consulting room, on that morning, to join her brother, she had conceived a dread from which she was never after wholly free; a dread, which though almost undefined, had still the power grievously to oppress her.

She told herself again and again, that her fears were futile, that her husband's words had meant nothing — that no one had the desire or the capability to part her from her brother, so long as Bertie expressed a wish to remain at her side.

Yet the trouble was unallayed, and from that day she began to watch him with more than her former solicitude.

She told him but little of what Dr. Monkton had said to her; she would have been afraid to repeat that part which related to himself. When he rallied her upon the length of her absence, and asked whether a doctor's consulting room was a proper place to make love in, and what the patients had thought of her intrusion; she gently silenced him with the remark that the interview had not been such as to render it a fit subject for jesting.

"James is vexed, I am sorry to say, at my not

having made a more formal business of receiving Mrs. Filmer and her daughter, yesterday. It seems that she is a very important lady in Hilstone, and more so than I had any idea of, and if I offend her, I may do him harm."

"And pray, who took the trouble to tell him about it?" demanded Bertie.

She was walking by the side of his wheeled chair at the time, and they had ordered the man who conducted it, to turn into one of the pretty quiet lanes, by which Hilstone was surrounded.

"Mrs. Prowse, I believe," replied Nelly, in a low voice.

"The interfering old cat!" exclaimed her brother, between whom and the canon's wife there already existed a mutual antipathy; "what business is it of hers, I should like to know? why doesn't she keep to her own house, and leave you to receive your visitors as you choose. I thought she had come for no good when I saw her smirking behind the other old woman, yesterday."

"Oh, hush, Bertie!" said Nelly, in a warning whisper; "pray don't speak so loud — the man will hear you."

"And what if he does?"

"He must think it so strange, darling, considering the connection between us; besides, these things get repeated, and if it should come back to James's ears, or her own, that you had mentioned her in those terms — only fancy!"

"Only fancy — what, Nelly? What harm could Mrs. Prowse do me that I did not choose to accept at her hands? She must even keep a civil tongue in her

head, if it comes to that, for it's your house, and not hers; and you could order her out of it, any day, if she made herself disagreeable."

Nelly sighed, and knew not what to answer. How could she tell him what she feared herself — that Mrs. Prowse had so much influence over her brother, and so few scruples as to the method of using it, that she was far more likely to prove the means of turning Bertie out of the house, than to be turned out herself.

Bertie's temper was so uncertain; and his false pride was so little under control, that he would at once insist upon testing the truth of her supposition, and probably bring about the very disagreement between her husband and himself, which, from the manner in which the doctor had spoken of him that morning, she had reason to apprehend would not be difficult.

Whilst she was debating how she should caution him not to offend the canon's wife, Thug, who always walked so close by her side as almost to impede her footsteps, thrust his nose into her hand, and then jerked it upwards, as much as to say, "notice me."

"She objects to Thug," said Nelly, dejectedly.

"What, Monkton's sister? Well, let her object, then, Nell! The dog is yours, not hers; and for my part, I shall in future order him to lie down right under her nose, whenever I have an opportunity."

"Oh, no! dear Bertie! pray don't," exclaimed his sister, fearful of the mischief her remark might create. "She may not be so accustomed to animals as we are, you know; and though Thug is a darling, it is not everybody that would like him in the house. And I don't know why I should say that it is Mrs. Prowse

who particularly objects to him. It was James himself, who said he made the room smell like a stable, this morning — but I fancied that his sister —”

“Of course she is at the bottom of it,” interrupted Bertie, “when did Monkton ever object to Thug before? why, he used to say, at Little Bickton, that the dog would be an ornament to any house, and that it was a pleasure merely to look at such a noble animal.”

“And so it is,” exclaimed Nelly, as she stooped to caress her favourite, “but still he *is* large, Bertie; no one can deny that; and if Mrs. Prowse makes a fuss about him now, what will she say when the wet weather comes, and he gets his feet muddy!”

“I shouldn’t care what she said; tell her, if she doesn’t like to sit in your rooms, that she can keep in her own. You think too much of that woman, Nelly — you seem to forget that you are the mistress of Monkton’s house, and not her.”

Nelly could have answered, “Yes, but he is the master,” had she not been afraid of raising her brother’s suspicions, so she turned it off, by saying that she should be the first to think it a shame if Thug were permitted to spoil such carpets as theirs with the marks of his great clumsy feet, and before winter set in, she should teach him to wipe them on the mat every time he entered the house. She did not meet her husband again until dinner-time, and then, although Bertie was as cheerful as usual, and she herself quite ready to appear to have forgotten that anything unpleasant had passed between them, she saw at a glance that Dr. Monkton had not yet succeeded in shaking off his ill-humour. Before she had known her husband

much longer, she was aware, that, if left to himself, he took days and sometimes even weeks to recover from such an attack.

She had been accustomed to witness very similar displays of temper from Bertie, for in the duration of their evil moods Robert Brooke and his brother-in-law were much alike.

But Nelly could better understand the feeling in one case than in the other, or her love for her brother made her fancy that she did so. She had always attributed Bertie's fits of sullenness to the depression of spirits induced by the discomfort and lack of excitement which surrounded his needy home.

But why a man, prosperous and happy, like Dr. Monkton, should find such difficulty in casting out the evil spirit, she could not comprehend; for that he was still angry with herself she would not believe. Her own nature was too forgiving to think so much wrong of another.

Yet, when she found that her remarks remained unanswered, that her smiles were unreturned, and that all her little arts to attract her husband's attention, or to excite his admiration, were unavailing, Nelly really became nervous. She began to think that he must have heard something worse concerning her, — that Mrs. Prowse had been trying to make more mischief between them. She caught herself starting whenever the doctor condescended to open his mouth, lest it should be to blame her again; yet she was still more alarmed when a slight difference of opinion arose between him and his brother-in-law. She was so eager, on that occasion, to interpose her own ideas on the subject under discussion, with the generous view of

turning the argument against herself, that Bertie took her sharply to task for unwarrantable interference in what was no concern of hers.

She could not help fancying that there was a still greater alteration in her husband's manner towards her brother than towards herself, for in nothing that Bertie advanced did Dr. Monkton seem to agree; and she was thankful when the meal was concluded to hear the former say that he intended to make the most of such an evening by going out again in his chair.

He rose and left the room, and they were alone. Her husband had also risen from table, and thrown himself upon the sofa.

Nelly had no pride — none of that odious feeling at least which is too often quoted as a virtue, and which prompts an offended woman to act contrary to her own inclination in order that she may enjoy the paltry triumph of forcing the man to assume the position which should be hers, and be the first to sue for pardon.

She did not love her husband; if she had, such a state of things would never have arisen between them; but she was anxious to be friends with him, and she felt no shame in confessing it. So she followed him from the dinner-table, and knelt down by his side, and taking his unwilling hand in hers she looked full in his face with her sweet serious eyes, and said frankly:

“James! I am so sorry I offended Mrs. Filmer yesterday.”

“It is not much use being sorry,” he replied, as he resolutely turned away from her pleading face.

"Yes, it is," she answered cheerfully; "it is better than not caring at all, isn't it? Because, perhaps I can remedy it, James. You know that I was not rude on purpose; and if you will tell Mrs. Filmer that it was thoughtlessness, I daresay she will overlook it this once, and I will promise you it shall not happen again."

He was a man after all; he could not resist such sweetness, nor rudely draw away the hand against which she had laid her cheek.

"I am very young, you see," continued Nelly, "and what your sister says is true — I am very ignorant of the ways of society. We had no grand parties nor fashionable ladies at Little Bickton, and I daresay that what would seem natural to me in the country would appear rude to people in a town. So if you will only take the trouble to tell me what to do, James, I will do it with all my heart."

He could not be generous enough to tell her all he thought of her compliance; but he stooped and kissed her broad forehead, and Nelly accepted the silent caress as a token of his forgiveness.

"Since you wish me to direct your actions, Helena," he commenced, with some pomposity, "(and it is certainly my place to do so), there are several things my sister mentioned, in which you appear to her to have shown a want of judgment."

At this allusion to his adviser, Nelly winced.

"Can't you decide for me, James, without consulting Mrs. Prowse?" she asked hastily.

He looked at her with astonishment.

"And what is your objection to Matilda, Helena? She is only too anxious to see you on good terms with

Mrs. Filmer, and all the other ladies of Hilstone, and conducting this establishment in the same style in which she did it herself. She has nothing so much at heart as my popularity, in which of course your own is concerned. You could not have a better counsellor with regard to the behaviour calculated to render you a favourite in Hilstone."

"Oh! very well, then. Go on!" said the girl, impatiently. She did not dare disturb their newborn peace by remarking that the last thing she cared about was to become the pet of Hilstone.

"Matilda considers that it was ill-advised of you to refuse to join the choral society, of which all the principal ladies here are members, including Miss Filmer herself, and as my wife you are of course bound to encourage everything which advances the interests of the town."

"I told Miss Filmer I would subscribe to it," cried Nelly.

"But I should wish you to become a member, Helena."

"It will take up so much time," she argued. "Your sister says they meet for private, as well as public practice."

"If it monopolised twice as much it would be time well spent," replied her husband; "you have not much to keep you at home, Helena."

Nelly thought of two or three evenings each week spent away from Bertie, and made a final struggle for liberty.

"But, James, I promised Dr. Nesbitt that I would not join it."

"Ah! that is another thing that I must mention to

you," he said quickly. "I hear that you spoke far too freely of Dr. Nesbitt and Mr. Rumbell, before Mrs. Filmer. Those gentlemen are both, as it were, in the retinue of the dean, and his daughter-in-law does not like to hear that any such are more intimate at other houses than they are at the Deanery. If they come here often, or mix with us on more than friendly terms, (such as in the case of Dr. Nesbitt giving you singing lessons), you must learn not to speak of it, or you will cause jealousy amongst your neighbours, and perhaps do harm to your friends themselves, by exciting Mrs. Filmer's anger against them."

This was presenting an entirely new phase of social life for the contemplation of his unsophisticated listener, and when Nelly opened her eyes wide at the receipt of her husband's communication, it was with unaffected surprise.

"Are you really in earnest, James?" she said, "or are you laughing at me? What possible concern can it be of Mrs. Filmer's, if Dr. Nesbitt comes oftener to this house than he does to the Deanery? Why! he doesn't belong to her, does he?"

At this ingenuous question, Dr. Monkton so far forgot his ill-humour as to laugh.

"She would like him to do so, my dear, body and soul, and those who desire to remain in her good graces, had best pretend to think that he does. And, since, as regards ourselves, a great deal depends upon her not being offended with us, you will see the necessity of regulating your behaviour towards her and everyone connected with the Deanery, not so much by what *you* think correct, as by what you see that *she* does."

For a few minutes Nelly remained silent, then she gave a deep sigh.

"What is the matter now?" said her husband, not unkindly.

"It will be so dreadfully difficult," she replied. "I am afraid I shall never be able to do it properly."

"To do what?" he enquired. "If you allude to the Choral Society, Helena, so long as you attend the practices, it little matters if you sing or not."

"Oh! no, not that," she said, shaking her head, "I meant with regard to Mrs. Filmer, James. You know I am so foolish; I have been accustomed to say just what I think, to laugh when I feel inclined, and to remain silent when I don't wish to talk; that I am afraid I shall always be making mistakes. If a thing is not wrong or unkind, it seems so natural to me to say it, and as for keeping a secret, or pretending what I do not feel, I never could do it, and I never shall."

But to this strain of frivolity Dr. Monkton saw fit to put a summary conclusion.

"You *must* help such things, Helena, and you must do them, into the bargain, when the contrary mode of action will affect our welfare. And if I find that your own sense is not sufficient to point out to you the advisability of altering your behaviour in these respects, I shall be compelled, for my own sake, to remove all such obstacles from your path, as might tempt you to act otherwise."

At these words Nelly suddenly left her kneeling position beside her husband, and walked towards the window. She could not pretend to misunderstand his threat, nor to be blind to the implied truth that if she did not submit of herself, he would rule her through

her love for Bertie. Nothing that he had ever done or said before had sunk him, like this, in her opinion. She despised him for the means he had so unnecessarily adopted to control her, although she dared not but submit to his guidance.

"Only tell me what you wish me to do, James!" she replied, in an altered voice from the window, "and I have said before that I am ready to do it. I dare say even telling stories will come easy to me after a time, for there is no saying what we can do till we try."

Dr. Monkton did not consider this tone of jesting to be any change for the better, for he was a man who could never take a joke when directed against himself.

"I see nothing whatever to laugh at," he said, "in my desire that you should learn to behave like other people. A minute ago, Helena, I thought you were in earnest in wishing to please me; now I suppose I may conclude that you have no intention to try!"

One thought of Bertie, and her spirit of sarcasm fled before it.

"No! indeed, James! pray don't say that. I have every wish and every intention. I will call on Mrs. Filmer whenever you think proper; and you shall go with me to see how well I can behave, and I will try — indeed I will — to make the people in Hilstone like me as much as possible."

She held out her hand, and he drew her towards him, and ratified a fresh forgiveness. But this caress was still less palatable to Nelly than the last. Let a man once utter a word, or perform an action, which shall make a woman really *despise* him; which shall

cause her to rank him lower in the scale of creation than herself, and compassion may remain, but love is gone for ever. In this case there was no love to take its flight; but the hope of its arising even had been quenched by Dr. Monkton's threat.

CHAPTER XII.

The Amateur Choral Society of Hilstone.

NELLY was as good as her word. She not only strove to conciliate Mrs. Prowse by asking her advice with respect to the time, manner, and style in which she should return Mrs. Filmer's call, but actually requested her sister-in-law to accompany her to the Deanery, and promised to put on her best dress and bonnet for the occasion.

Dr. Monkton had been careful to secure the ear of his patroness before his young wife crossed her threshold, during which interview he begged her to ascribe Nelly's apparent neglect to her ignorance of the laws of etiquette, and as the handsome persuasive doctor was a great favourite with the Dean's daughter-in-law, his petition was granted, and Mrs. Filmer expressed herself graciously prepared to overlook Mrs. Monkton's first offence.

And when this favourable opening was followed by a state visit from Nelly and Mrs. Prowse, during which the bride sat bolt upright on the Deanery sofa, looking as shy and saying as little as even the heart of the canon's wife could desire, the promise of pardon was confirmed, and a bond of peace, if not of cordiality, was tacitly signed between them.

Miss Laura Filmer, who, without so much dignity

to maintain, had never regarded the conduct of Mrs. Monkton in the same light as her mother, appeared charmed with her new acquaintance, and readily extracted the promise, which poor Nelly had bound herself to give, that she would at once become a member of the Hilstone Choral Society. Captain Herbert Filmer also, who was at the Deanery at the time, was vastly taken with the sweet blushing face of their visitor, and lauded it so much, both in town and barracks, that the sycophantic herd by which he and his sister were surrounded, could but commence to sing to the same strain, and under such patronage Nelly was soon in danger of becoming what she had so little wished to be — a Hilstone favourite.

Her successful visit to the deanery was shortly followed by an invitation to dinner there, which in due time her husband informed her they must return. This was an event which Nelly had greatly dreaded; but when it came to pass, she was surprised to find how little it affected her. Dr. Monkton had excellent taste, and he took care that all trouble concerning the entertainment should be taken off his wife's hands. She had nothing to do but to adorn herself, and receive her guests; and when eventually she took her seat at the head of the table, and surveyed the exquisite manner in which everything was arranged, it seemed to her ignorance as though the feast had sprung up by magic for her convenience. She was rather quiet during the whole evening, for she felt the importance of the position to which she was so unaccustomed; but she comported herself with much grace, and the general opinion, led by the outspoken compliments of Laura and Herbert Filmer, was, that Dr. Monkton's bride was a "very

sweet young creature." Mrs. Filmer, who could not quite forget her first reception at No. 15, was not so ready to subscribe to the last sentiment, but as she nodded her august head when some one ventured to repeat it to her, and said "very well in her way, but wants manner; if Matilda Prowse will take her in hand, I daresay she'll do," it was generally believed that she did not disapprove of the doctor's choice, and the verdict was pronounced in Hilstone accordingly.

Whilst all this gaiety was going on down-stairs, Robert Brooke remained in his own room. He had said that he should do so; and dearly as Nelly loved him, and little as she enjoyed any pleasure without him, she felt that his decision was best, particularly as her husband had said upon hearing it that he should have thought it very strange, if he had had any other intention.

She had visited her brother, however, more than once during the evening, and he had admired her blue dress and the forget-me-nots she wore in her hair, as much as she could possibly desire. But after each brief interview she seemed to return to her guests with less cheerfulness. Bertie had said that he should never feel his exclusion from such scenes; that he had not the slightest wish to mix in them: yet on this first occasion of his being left alone, he did seem to feel it.

She even thought by the dulness of his eyes and the brevity of his answers, that some of his old sullen spirit was getting the mastery over him again. For since Nelly had promised her husband that she would do all in her power to make the people of Hilstone like her, her greastest trouble had been through her

brother, for whom alone she had conceded to what was so much against her inclination.

It had been very hard to hear Bertie's sarcasms on her rapid change of opinion: to hear him laugh at her meek surrender of her rights: at her forbearance with Mrs. Prowse; her deference to Mrs. Filmer, and not to tell him for whose sake she so humbled herself. He had sneered at her for want of spirit; had prophesied that she would never be fit to take her place in society, and averred that if the management of her house and herself was to be thus put into alien hands, they had better have remained at Little Bickton, where at least they were masters of their own.

He had done worse than this; for, convinced that it was the fault of Mrs. Prowse that his sister was not left more at liberty, he had tried to resent the fancied tyranny by seizing every possible opportunity to annoy the canon's wife, which ill-advised proceeding had provoked a feeling of enmity between them which increased each time they met.

It was in vain that Nelly, dreading the consequence of such a feud, entreated him to be more forbearing with her sister-in-law; he was determined as he said, that Mrs. Prowse should see that one of the family, at least, had a little spirit, and finding that the more she remonstrated, the more mischievous he became, she directed her whole attention to preventing any needless encounter taking place between the belligerents.

The printed ticket, by the purchase of which she was enrolled a member of the Amateur Choral Society of Hilstone, was duly sent to her, and Nelly prepared to accompany her sister-in-law to the place of practice on the first Wednesday evening after its reception.

It was a wet, unpleasant night, for September had now arrived, and the month had set in with rain.

"I think we had almost better have stayed at home this week," remarked Nelly laughing, as she picked her way along the streaming flagstones.

"What! missed *the practice* for a little rain?" returned Mrs. Prowse, "I hope you will not ever think of doing such a thing, Mrs. James. Nothing short of illness should be suffered to keep you away."

"But a damp air like this must be very bad for the voice," said Nelly, "not that I care about mine, for I know I shall not be able to sing a note. I cannot read music at first sight."

"Then our meetings will be of the greatest advantage to you," replied Mrs. Prowse, "for it was for the purpose of teaching the members to read concerted music fluently, that the society was instituted. I don't think it will rain again before we reach the Institute, and should it do so on our coming out, I have ordered Crummy's Double to fetch us home."

"What!" exclaimed Nelly in amazement.

"*Crummy's Double*," repeated the canon's wife with the utmost gravity, "it is a most convenient little conveyance, peculiar to Hilstone; however, you will doubtless see it as we return to-night."

At this juncture they reached the door of the Mechanics' Institute, and Nelly had no further opportunity for enquiring why the "convenient little conveyance" bore such an extraordinary name, for in another minute they had entered the lobby, which was also the ladies' retiring-room, and were being elbowed and hustled about amidst a crowd of female members, who each with a roll of music beneath her arm was trying to se-

cure a safe corner in which to deposit her bundle of wraps and umbrellas.

Nelly's first idea was that they were all dress-makers; the next, they were all old women. When she had leisure, however, to discriminate amidst the motley group, she perceived that there were a few gentlewomen amongst it, and perhaps a dozen under twenty years of age; otherwise she found no reason to alter her original opinion. The lobby was a mass of dust and confusion, and filled with an endless war of tongues. Here was Mrs. Roe with spectacles perched across her Roman nose; and Miss Hammond, the curls of whose grey wig kept up a constant bobbing with her recognitions; and Miss Laura Filmer, for whom the whole society obsequiously made way; and the Misses Harley, who followed and toadied her wherever she went. Nelly, who had laid aside her walking things as soon as she entered the room, was staring about her in utter amazement, to think that women could talk so much about so little when she was perceived by Miss Filmer, and immediately taken possession of.

"Ah! Mrs. Monkton — so here you are! Take my arm — do — and let us get out of this mob."

The words were not uttered very politely, but the "mob" smiled and fell back, leaving a narrow passage through which Nelly felt herself dragged into the outer hall again.

"The worst of a society of this kind," said Miss Filmer, quite audibly, as they ascended the staircase together, "is that it is impossible to exclude the tradespeople. It is a local institution you see — the only requisite for admission to which is a good voice, and we should offend half the town by being particular.

Even if it were possible to be so in a place like this, when half the so-called gentry are retired tradesmen. Now, the Harleys, for instance —— Oh! here they are,” continued the young lady without the least discomposure, as she was overtaken by the subjects of her remark. “Well! Miss Harley, I suppose you won’t try the solos again to-night, as I understand Mrs. Clarence is to be here.”

“I don’t know, I’m sure,” replied the Miss Harley she addressed, who was pinched and elderly, and had a decidedly red nose. “Mrs. Clarence is here, I believe, and I know she has a very loud voice — *coarse* I should call it; but whether she understands music remains to be proved.”

“She is a pupil of Garcia’s anyhow,” replied Miss Filmer, who seemed to hate the Hilstonians as much as her mother adored them, and had a decided taste for anything military, although she was not permitted to indulge it by associating with the officers’ wives.

“Do you not take some of the solos yourself?” inquired Nelly, thinking that, as one of the most important members of the society, Miss Filmer would be entitled to choose in such matters.

“Oh, dear no! I am a very insignificant personage as far as the singing is concerned,” laughed her companion, “I have scarcely any voice, and should not come here at all if it were not for the fun of the thing. I’m only a second — what are you?”

“Contralto — I believe,” said Nelly, guessing she alluded to the quality of her voice; “at least Dr. Nesbitt says so.”

“I’m glad of that — then we will sit together and amuse ourselves by quizzing the old women. It will

kill you to hear Mrs. Roe sing, and Mrs. Prowse. Oh! I forgot though — she's a relation of yours, isn't she? I'm sure I beg your pardon; but she *will* try the solos, and does make such a dreadful hash of them. I hope Mr. Rumbell will offer them to Mrs. Clarence. It will drive all the others mad."

The room in which the meeting was held — except for a few benches placed at one end for the accommodation of the singers — was bare of furniture. Round the space left vacant were ranged the members of the orchestra, and in the midst of them, batôn in hand, was standing the fat canon Mr. Rumbell, bowing and smiling to each lady as she entered.

When Miss Filmer appeared with Nelly by her side, he left his position and advanced into the centre of the room to shake hands with them and politely express his pleasure at the latter having joined his staff.

"I expect we shall have a treat to-night, Miss Filmer, a regular treat — Mrs. Clarence is here; and I am thinking of offering her the solos. What do you say?"

"Offer them, by all means, Mr. Rumbell, and make her take them. It will be delicious! Have you a book to lend Mrs. Monkton?"

He produced a copy of Haydn's Seasons — armed with which Nelly followed her new friend to the seats appointed for them. Mrs. Prowse, who flattered herself that her shrill pipe was a soprano, was already ensconced upon the other side of the room; but she bustled across it before the practice commenced, in order to air her intimacy with the dean's granddaughter before the less fortunate members of the society.

"My dear Laura," she said, in a tone which was at all events audible to all who were near, "do you see how unfortunately I am placed, close by the side of *that* Mrs. Clarence? — actually next to her — so very awkward. And she is looking as composed the while as if she had attended here every night of her life. What assurance, is it not? Ah! Mrs. Roe, I see you are listening to what I say. You and I agree upon this point, I know. But did you ever see such coolness? I really believe she thinks Mr. Rumbell will offer her the solos. He! he! he!"

"She can hardly expect that, I should say," remarked Miss Filmer, with the most deceptive gravity; "not at least while *you* are in the room, Mrs. Prowse; and if I were you I wouldn't allow her to accept them if he did."

"Oh! but he *won't*, my dear," was the unaffected reply; "he *couldn't* — it would never be allowed; but I must run back again. The naughty man is getting impatient — he will break his baton if he raps us to order in that fashion. Good-bye." And the canon's wife skipped playfully back to her seat on the other side of the room. As she quitted them Nelly glanced towards the spot where the much-abused Mrs. Clarence was quietly sitting, but could only discern the profile of a fresh frank face, the owner of which appeared to be attentively studying the music she held in her hand. She was wondering why such an inoffensive-looking woman should be the cause of so much spite, when her attention was redirected to the proceedings of the evening by the president (after having made a short speech expressive of his satisfaction at welcoming two new and valuable additions to the society) giving out that the

practice for that night was to consist of the first book of Haydn's Seasons.

Following this announcement there came an universal buzz, during which Nelly easily perceived that instead of reading their parts at first sight, most of the members had been studying them beforehand.

"We miss the third page, dear."

"No, not if there is anyone to take the recitative."

"Mind you give us that first B well."

"Yes, and don't forget that the time changes after the opening movement." All this and much more being said as fast as possible, and at the same moment, whilst the speakers' heads were nodding significantly at one another.

"Ladies! ladies!" at last exclaimed the president in despair, finding that rapping with his baton to attract their attention only served to increase the din, "it is impossible that any business can be done whilst you refuse to give me a hearing."

"Now he's getting angry, the naughty fellow," tittered Miss Harley.

"We shall really have to scold you," said the youthful Sophy Hammond in an undertone, as she shook her finger at the supposed delinquent.

"I wish to goodness you'd hold your tongues," said Miss Filmer abruptly, turning to her loquacious neighbours. "One would think you were a pack of children behind there."

This reproof had the desired effect; the giddy creatures' voices sunk into whispers. Order was restored, and the baited president, who had actually left his *daïs* and walked twice across the room in his irritation, returned to his place again.

"I was going to observe," he recommenced, "that it is very desirable we should get up Haydn's Seasons for our next concert, but there is a difficulty about the solos, which are by no means easy."

"We can have a professional to take them, when the time comes," snapped Mrs. Prowse.

"Very true!" replied Mr. Rumbell, "but they are so intermixed with the choruses that it is impossible to practise one without the other."

"We had better not attempt it then," said Mrs. Roe.

"Happily for the society," continued the president smiling, "I have been fortunate enough to find a way out of the dilemma. This lady," waving his hand towards Mrs. Clarence, "is kind enough to say that she will sing the solos for us, and I am certain that she will do them every justice."

At this undisguised announcement of their president's base intentions, Mrs. Clarence smiled and bowed; whilst the other members of the Choral Society glanced at her and one another, speechless with vexation.

"I thought, I thought, Mr. Rumbell," panted Mrs. Prowse, "that to avoid invidious comparisons, it was a rule of the society, that no resident in Hilstone should be allowed to take a solo."

"Mrs. Clarence is not a resident," replied the canon, waiving the objection. "We consider the regimental ladies as only temporary visitors, more 's the pity! But we are wasting time, and will proceed at once, if you please." And at a wave of his hand, the orchestra struck up the opening symphony.

There was nothing then for the ladies to do, but

to swallow their indignation as best they might, or reserve it for a more convenient opportunity.

To Nelly, to whom Haydn's Seasons was as a volume of Greek, and who had consequently nothing to do but to watch the proceedings of those around her, all this was as good as a play. She was so infinitely amused at what she saw and heard; she laughed so immoderately and so long, and Laura Filmer took such delight in making her laugh more, by her whispering observations, that at last she grew seriously afraid that her merriment would be noticed by Mrs. Prowse, and that she should get into fresh trouble with her husband.

"Pray don't, Miss Filmer," she repeatedly entreated, "pray don't set me off again, for my sister-in-law is watching us, and she will be so angry."

"And won't they let you laugh, poor child?" said Miss Filmer compassionately.

"Oh! yes, indeed!" was Nelly's quick reply, "but not here you know; not in so public a place. It is not proper; and I might give offence to several people."

"Well, you can do as you like," said Miss Filmer, "but you can't object to my pointing out a few objects of curiosity to your notice," and in consequence, the 'objects of curiosity' continued to defeat all poor Nelly's efforts to behave as became the wife of Dr. Monkton, and the sister-in-law of Mrs. Prowse. The symphony was over and the singers rose for the opening chorus. It was scrambled through in a very tame manner, and should have been followed by a tenor solo, taken by Mr. Rumbell's fellow canon, Mr. Pratt, but which on the score of unproficiency, that gentleman begged to be excused until the succeeding week. It was now

Mrs. Clarence's turn for display; and amid a battery of ill-natured glances she rose to read a very difficult recitative.

She accomplished the first few lines very well, considering the many obstacles they presented to an amateur; and her clear, powerful voice, fully equal to the occasion, rang through the empty room.

But after a while, she slightly hesitated, and then with a quick glance at the leader, gave forth a wrong note. It was both in tune and time, but it was not the note written down by Haydn. Mrs. Clarence being a real musician perceived her error at once, which few of her fellow students did, and stopped with an apology. The president was about to say it was of no consequence, and desire the orchestra to re-strike the chord, when a titter ran audibly through the room: a piece of discourtesy intended to confuse the singer, which had been put in motion by Mrs. Prowse, and eagerly seconded by all who were envious of the new member.

Mrs. Clarence, unaccustomed to being laughed at, looked round, colouring deeply.

Laura Filmer asked aloud, "Who was that?" and even Nelly in her surprise could not help exclaiming:—

"How very rude!"

The tittering ceased, but most of the ladies continued to smile furtively behind their music-books, and Mr. Rumbell was just going to apologise for such a lapse of good breeding, on the part of his pupils, when Mrs. Clarence's voice was heard distinctly to ask:—

"Did I not understand you to say, Mr. Rumbell, that this society was expressly for the practice of reading music at first sight, and that the members were

bound not to learn their parts at home? Else I would have looked over these solos before I came here, and not have ventured to expose myself, as it seems to me, by the merriment of these ladies, I must have done."

Before the president could answer, and assure her she was right in her conjecture, Miss Filmer said across the room:—

"Yes, Mrs. Clarence, you are perfectly correct in thinking so, albeit there is scarcely a member who does not study the choruses in private, before attempting to sing them here. Perhaps, however, considering what a jumble we make of them, it is just as well that it is so. But there is no one who is competent to do what you have done to-night, and we ought all to be greatly obliged to you for accepting the thankless office."

Such a speech from the dean's granddaughter to a perfect stranger could not fail to stem, if not to turn, the tide of public opinion. Mrs. Prowse bit her lip, and looked sadly conscious, as did several of her colleagues, whilst Mrs. Clarence, reassured by the timely compliment which was echoed by the president, proceeded with her recitative and finished triumphantly.

Nelly admired Miss Filmer for the boldness with which she had spoken—she saw that her sarcasm was only elicited for the benefit of such as deserved it, and from that evening she took a great fancy for the seemingly discourteous girl.

The practice concluded without further disturbance, and as soon as it was broken up, a crowd of agitated females, Mrs. Prowse amongst the number, surrounded Mr. Rumbell's dais, threatening to overwhelm him, with their questions, arguments, and disputes.

"Just look at them!" exclaimed Miss Filmer, aloud, pointing out the excited group to Nelly's notice; "they'll kill that poor man some night, between them. I often wonder to meet him, walking about alive and unharmed on Thursday mornings. But come, Mrs. Monkton, let us leave them to consume him by themselves."

"It would take a long time to do that," laughed Nelly, as she followed her down the stairs. "There is plenty of him, I am sure."

"Yes, I know you think so," responded her new friend, "and mamma has not forgotten that you called him a white — fat — man. He is an especial pet of hers, and the terms offended her greatly."

"But it is true," remonstrated Nelly, "he is white and fat."

"Perfectly true, Mrs. Monkton; I am not the one to dispute it, only the truth must not always be spoken, and especially in Hilstone — as you will find out for yourself before long. But it is pouring with rain: is your carriage coming for you?" and on being answered in the negative, Miss Filmer continued, "Let me take you home, then — it is all in the way." But, just then, Nelly remembered "Crummy's double," and declined the offered civility.

"No, thank you, Miss Filmer! I believe I had better not. I must wait for my sister-in-law, and she said, that, in case of rain, she had engaged Crummy's — Crummy's — something or other, to come for us."

"Oh! 'Crummy's double,'" said Laura Filmer, with a laugh, "then there's a treat in store for you, and for me, too, for I shall wait to see you get in, and hear how you like it. Where is Mrs. Prowse? Miss Hill

will you please run up-stairs, and tell Mrs. Prowse that Mrs. Monkton and Crummy's double are alike waiting for her."

In another minute the canon's wife had joined them, and the ladies, having procured their wraps, proceeded to the door together.

"Now, pray don't stand in the draught, my dear Laura," pleaded Mrs. Prowse, "your carriage will be up, directly, and your dear mamma will be so vexed if you take a cold."

"It's not my carriage I want, but yours," replied Miss Filmer; "I am anxious to witness the success of Mrs. Monkton's first attempt to enter 'Crummy's double.'"

"I am sure there is nothing to see!" said the canon's wife, in a tone of dissatisfaction.

"That is my concern," replied Miss Filmer; "I have the happy facility of taking pleasure in small things."

At the door of the Institute stood a tall, narrow conveyance, more like a double sedan chair, on wheels, than anything else, and which was drawn by a couple of donkeys. Nelly was just going to exclaim at the singularity of its appearance, when Laura Filmer continued, in a gleeful voice —

"Here it is! here's 'Crummy's double;' now ring the bell, and draw up the curtain, for the play is just going to begin."

A lad came forward and opened the door of the vehicle, into which Mrs. Prowse, too offended even to bid Miss Filmer good-night, stepped in silent dignity.

Nelly, after the exchange of a laughing farewell,

essayed to follow her sister-in-law, but stood balancing herself on the step instead.

"Where am I to sit?" she asked, with surprise, for the interior seemed filled even with the sparse figure of Mrs. Prowse.

"Ah! where indeed?" echoed Miss Filmer, from the doorstep; "this is just what I came to ascertain, for I feel quite curious on the subject."

"I wish to goodness you would enter the 'double,' Mrs. James," said Mrs. Prowse, testily, "and not stand there, making us the laughing-stocks of the whole society. There is plenty of room here for two; and always has been."

Thus adjured, Nelly made a bold plunge into the carriage, and alighting on the back seat, felt as though she were sitting in an infant's high chair, whilst her knees grated against those of her sister-in-law, and her head just cleared the roof above it. Mrs. Prowse next gave the order to start; and "Crummy's double," lurching violently to one side, and then to the other, set off, shaking and jolting over the stony street, followed by a most irreverent peal of laughter from the grand-daughter of the dean.

"I cannot imagine what has come to Laura Filmer, to-night," said Mrs. Prowse, as soon as the rattling of the donkey-chair would permit her remarks to be heard; "she is not at all like herself—but indeed the practice altogether has been a most unsatisfactory one. How did you get on, Mrs. James?"

"Not very well; but it is all new to me, you know. I had enough to do to look about me."

"I observed that you laughed a great deal," said her sister-in-law.

"I really could not help it!" replied Nelly, apologetically.

"I saw nothing to laugh at, myself," was the unsympathetic response.

And indeed poor Nelly had gone down several degrees in the estimation of the canon's wife, for her levity during the evening.

Mrs. Prowse was almost ready to return to her first opinion that she was both "forward and presuming," almost sorry for what she had said to Dr. Monkton, concerning her, only the day before, namely, "that if Mrs. James could be but separated from that very unpleasant and exacting young man, her brother, whose influence over her was all for harm; and given over to the guidance of herself and dear Mrs. Filmer, she really thought that, with patience, they might in time make something of her."

CHAPTER XIII.

Bertie shews the Extent of his Gratitude.

"WHERE are you going, Nelly?" said Bertie, fretfully, one afternoon, a few weeks afterwards, as his sister, attired in her walking things, thrust her head into his room, to nod him a cheerful farewell.

Touched by the sound of his voice, Nelly crossed the threshold to bend over his sofa.

"Only to give Thug half an hour's run in the meadows, darling!" she said, affectionately. "But do you want me?"

"No, not at this moment," he answered, in the

same discontented tone, "but you won't be long, will you? and you'll stay with me, this evening?"

Nelly's face fell.

"I *can't*, this evening, Bertie! It's Wednesday, remember; the night of the choral practice."

"You are not obliged to attend it."

"Not exactly *obliged*, perhaps; but if I do not, Mrs. Prowse makes an unnecessary fuss about it, and speaks to James, and then he is angry with me; I had a lecture, last week, because I remained at home with you."

"What a wretch that woman is!" exclaimed Bertie, angrily, "she is always interfering between us, now. I declare not a day passes but there is something unpleasant. But I'll pay her out for it, as sure as my name's Brooke."

He was for ever making impotent threats of the kind, which only resolved themselves into his being impertinent to the canon's wife, and her complaining to her brother on the subject, until Nelly had begun to dread a collision between them.

"You must not speak like that, dear Bertie," she said, on the present occasion. "You aggravate Mrs. Prowse to such an extent already, that you have to thank yourself for half the annoyance she causes you. Why, the reason I want now to give Thug a run is, that the poor brute has been shut up for half the day on your account."

"And by whose orders?"

"By those of James; but he gave them in consequence of his sister telling him that you had urged the dog to put his dirty feet upon her lap yesterday. You know she hates the animal, and has not much love for

you, and yet you cannot leave us in peace when we are so."

"That's right, take their parts!" exclaimed Bertie, "I believe you like them both a great deal better than you do me. You are altogether changed since you came to Hilstone, Nelly. You used never to think it any trouble to sit by me for a few hours when I was sick or sorry at Little Bickton, but now your head is so full of your choral practices and your dinner parties, and your fine new acquaintances, that I suppose you would consider it a loss of time to look after an useless cripple like myself."

The utter injustice of this accusation did not lessen its power to sting poor Nelly. That Bertie, her brother, for whom she had done all this, for whom she daily endured the uncongenial society of Mrs. Prowse, and meekly submitted to her husband's wishes; that *he* should think she was enjoying herself without him, and preferring scenes of pleasures, to lightening the burthen of his weary hours, was too much. She had not cried violently for a long time; she was too much afraid of the remarks which the traces of her emotion might provoke; but in the present instance, Bertie's unkind words broke down all her self-control, and she threw herself sobbing beside his couch.

It was so hard—so very, very hard—that *he* should be the one to censure her!

"Oh! Bertie—darling—Bertie, my dearest brother—you know—you must know it is not the case. I would like to be with you always, dear, I have more pleasure in sitting by your sofa, than mixing in any company; but how can I help it? James says, that as his wife, it is absolutely necessary that I should

visit and be friendly with the people of Hilstone; he insists upon my accepting the invitations which we receive, and giving parties in return, and I have no choice. If I were to refuse to go out, or receive his friends here, on the plea that I did not like to leave you alone, he might say ——”

“What *could* he say?” demanded Bertie, who was not yet convinced but that his sister might do as she chose.

Nelly remembered herself in time.

“He might think it was a frivolous excuse, darling, and say that I owe as much attention to him as to you.”

“At all events, you might try the experiment,” persisted her brother.

“I have tried,” she answered, in a low voice.

“And with what success?”

“James said I must do as he bid me.”

She dared not tell him further.

“But now, Bertie, since I cannot stay with you to-night,” she continued, trying to speak more cheerfully, “cannot we think of some amusement for you in my absence? What will you do with yourself?”

“There is nothing to be done in this beastly place,” he said despondingly.

“Nelly started. Hilstone a “beastly place,” merely to live at which appeared, at one time, to be the summit of his desire. She almost thought that she must have been mistaken in his words.

“Nothing to be done here,” she echoed. “Why, Bertie dear, what is it that you want? You have everything you need to make you comfortable at home, and

every convenience for going about. What more could you have anywhere?"

"What's the use of having a thing to go about in," he answered rudely, "when there's no where to go to?"

"No where to go to?" repeated Nelly.

"Yes, no where to go to. I wish you wouldn't keep repeating my words like a parrot, Nell. I made sure, of course, that a large town like Hilstone would possess a theatre and music hall, and have something going on occasionally which should amuse a man; but I declare the place is perfectly stagnant. There's not a young fellow to be seen in it, out of the barracks, nor a respectable billiard-table either. It's sickening."

"But, Bertie," said Nelly, to whom this plaint for music halls and billiard-tables was something entirely new. "You never had any of these things at Little Bickton."

But this crowning proof of his sister's want of sense, irritated Robert Brooke beyond bearing.

"At *Little Bickton*," he said, sneeringly, "of course I didn't have them at Little Bickton, and you may remember how happy I was there into the bargain. Why, what on earth do you imagine I wanted to leave the place for, if it were not to procure those pleasures with which it was unprovided? And now, this hole is nearly as bad as the other, in fact, I'm not sure that it isn't worse. In the country, I could at all events, have *you* to sit with me whenever I felt lonely; but here, you are away three nights in the week, and Monkton is always with you the other three. It's wretched work for me; and if I go out, it's not much better. I used to say there was nothing to be seen at Little Bickton but grass and cabbages, but here there's

nothing to be seen but hedges and dust; unless I go through the town, which never varies either, and jolts me to death. And as for all your old women acquaintances, who come jabbering round my chair, I hate them like poison, and would go five miles the other way to avoid meeting them."

Nelly rose from her position with a sigh. What could she say which should make a spirit like this contented? And she had hoped, ah! how she had hoped, that this change of life would bring her brother all the happiness he coveted.

"I will stay with you, dear," she said gently, laying aside her gloves and parasol. "This next hour, at all events, is my own."

"But I don't want you," he replied gloomily, "I would much rather be alone, and you have made your eyes so red, that you had better go out and get rid of them, or your dear sister-in-law will demand the reason of your tears. And then, when she hears it is my fault, there will be another row."

So Nelly gathered up her things again, and kissing Bertie as warmly as though his words to her had been all affection, called her mastiff and took her way to the meadows.

The animal was at first exuberant in his delight at being once more free; he had sadly felt being shut up in disgrace in a small room on the kitchen floor, and his mistress had felt it almost as much as himself; but now she seemed to have no heart to rejoice with him on his liberty. His pleasure was chiefly shewn in tearing about a quarter of a mile in advance, and returning as swiftly, with his nose to the ground, until he reached Nelly's side, when he would give a bark

of joy, and a bound which nearly sent her on her back. It was in vain she cautioned him not to upset her; Thug's gratitude and ecstasy were too great; and it was not until the intelligent brute had leisure to perceive there was something wrong with his young mistress, that he could be persuaded to walk as steadily as usual. When he did observe that she greeted his gambols without a smile, he needed no further warning to be sober.

Which amongst us does not know what it is to have a dog sympathise with our trouble?

Poor Nelly's tears had too much cause to flow, and when she found herself traversing the quiet meadows where she could be secure from observation, they ran down with restraint. She could not but keenly feel the confession of her brother's disappointment.

If this was the case, if Bertie's lot was really no better for the change her marriage had effected in it, what was there further to hope, or look for? She could not marry over again; there was no chance of her being able to offer him the choice of another home! She had done what she had done of her own free will, certainly; but at his most earnest solicitation and desire, and now that things had not turned out as he had anticipated, there was no retreating, no going back to the dear old stupid life they had passed at Little Bickton, because the new life at Hilstone had been tried and proved a failure. Her brother was free, it was true (if so helpless and dependent a creature could ever be free of those who loved him), but she was tied — that was the galling thought — whatever happened to him, or between him and her husband, she had delivered herself over to another rule and juris-

diction, and must abide by the consequences. For Bertie's sake, to enliven his sad existence, to prolong, as she had fondly hoped, his precious life, she had yielded up her freedom, and now that she was captive at his own request, he blamed her for not resisting the will of her lawful master.

But if she did resist, she knew what the consequence would be. She had observed for weeks past, ever since, indeed, the first conversation they had held upon the subject, that Dr. Monkton's manner towards Bertie was changing, that he not only appeared ready to quarrel with him, but anxious to find a pretext for doing so; and more than once he had made her heart stand still by saying, with reference to some of her brother's words or actions, that he would not bear them much longer. Every fresh order he gave her, also, seemed issued with the intention of separating her as much as possible from Bertie, and forcing her to break through all the dear old customs which had been hers from infancy.

The doctor's hours for retiring to rest (like those of most men of his profession) were compelled to be very irregular, but he seldom left the house of an evening without reminding his wife to go to bed early; for he admired her country roses too much not to desire their preservation.

Whenever Bertie came home in good time, Nelly had observed this request, but latterly he had been almost as irregular as his brother-in-law. Sometimes it had been eleven, or even twelve o'clock, before he returned to St. Bartholomew's Street, and his sister had seen him into his room, trembling the while lest her husband should come back before she could slip into her own. Her pale face and heavy eyes, however, one

morning at the breakfast table, elicited such a string of searching enquiries from Dr. Monkton, that she found it impossible, without deception, to conceal the truth from him.

He did not blame her on that occasion, although he was angry at the cause of her appearance, but he strictly forbade her ever again to sit up for her brother.

"But it does me no harm, indeed, James," she had earnestly pleaded, "I have always been used to sit up for Bertie, and am none the worse for it."

"I am the best judge of that," he answered, decidedly, "at all events, my desire is that it does not occur again."

"But he *wants* me," she went on, with a view to gaining her point. "Bertie is not comfortable unless I read and say 'good-night' to him, and see that he has all he requires."

"The old nurse can attend to that, I presume," replied her husband, "else, what is she here for? And whilst we are on the subject, let me tell you, Helena, that I do not approve of your attending your brother in his bed-room. It is not the usual custom, and it excites remark. My sister has already mentioned to me how very strange it appears in her eyes, and consequently will in those of others. Robert has all the help he needs, and if not, he can have more. Any way, there is no necessity for your being one of his servants, and therefore, whether he is home early or late, I desire that in future you allow him to find his way into his bed alone."

At this command, which appeared to her so needlessly unkind, Nelly at first felt angry. From her

childhood, ever since they had ceased to occupy the same bed, she had been accustomed, in the true motherly fashion, to creep into her twin-brother's room the last thing at night to read the Bible, and see that he was comfortable, and whisper to him to be *sure* and not forget to say his prayers. And Bertie had always declared that he could not go to sleep unless Nelly's hand tucked in the bed-clothes, and even at Little Bickton had kept her up until the most unreasonable hours in order that she might perform this last ceremony for him. At the thought that all this was to be omitted for the time to come, that the only moment in the day which she had for private converse with him must be given up; that from morning to night they would never now be sure of meeting without witnesses, Nelly even felt bold enough for remonstrance.

"Oh! I *can't* do that, James!" she had heedlessly exclaimed. "I must kiss Bertie the last thing at night, and tuck him up, or I shall not be able to sleep myself."

But the next moment she had repented her temerity. Her husband's brow grew suddenly dark, and his eyes looked like his sister's, as he said, not warmly, but with clenched teeth:

"*You can't?* but you *must*, Helena, and there's an end of the matter. Remember! you are no longer at Little Bickton. Your brother may have seen fit to make a slave of you while there, but I will not have your health and nerves destroyed, and your necessary rest curtailed by dancing attendance on him, here; and if you cannot manage to make him understand this of yourself, refer him to me, and he shall soon know my mind on the subject."

What could the girl do after this? She might have defied her husband to his face, as netted fishes flap against the meshes, but everyone knows how long that is likely to last, and that the more they flap the sooner they are exhausted; or she might, had she not been herself, have disobeyed him secretly, but that was not Nelly's nature, and in either case, detection and correction must have followed, and her correction would have been through Bertie. So that the poor little girl, in a very unheroine-like fashion, had betaken herself humbly to bed at ten o'clock every night since, to creep out of it again when she heard her brother's slow and shambling step upon the stairs, and stand with barefeet to watch him cautiously through an unclosed chink of the door, whilst she whispered, "Good-night, my darling, and God bless you!" before he disappeared. And in excuse for such unusual conduct on her part, she had only been able to tell him that her husband did not think it good for her to sit up later, and been doomed in return to hear herself called "selfish," and "lazy," and to be told that if she had not suggested the necessity of such a change, he was sure that Monkton never would have pressed it. For his sake she was submitting to everything that she liked least, and Bertie could neither comprehend her devotion nor her fear. And now, added to it all, he was not even going to be happy himself.

As Nelly — walking alone through the quiet meadows — reflected on these things, she cried bitterly.

CHAPTER XIV.

Nelly and Nigel Brooke meet again.

THE meadows through which she rambled lay at the back of Hilstone, were three or four in number; had a trout stream running through them from end to end; and were connected with each other by ordinary turnstiles. They were a chosen resort of Nelly's, not only because their appearance transported her thoughts from the bricks and mortar of Hilstone back to the buttercups, and daisies of her dear old home, but because her favourite Thug enjoyed nothing so much as scampering backwards and forwards along their broad expanse, or rolling his huge carcase over and over, like some donkey at play, amongst the thick rank grass with which the trout stream was fringed; and on the present occasion, although not quite so boisterous as usual, he was sufficiently content to make her entertain no thoughts of turning back until he had had his full allowance of holiday.

The meadows were quite empty, and Nelly mechanically passed through the first turnstile and the second without raising her eyes from the ground. The third led into a lane, after crossing which, a fourth field would take her almost back to her home. But as she was nearing this third stile, Thug first hung back with a low growl, and then with a sudden bound cleared the gate into the road beyond. Nelly thought nothing of the dog's action — he had scented another dog perhaps, or seen a plough-boy — it only roused her sufficiently to make her raise her hand to her eyes and dash away the tears which still hung upon their lashes. But as

she passed through the turnstile, some one drew back to make way for her, and she looked up to see the last person on earth whom she expected — her cousin Nigel!

In a moment her face had crimsoned over, and her breathing become hurried, whilst he appeared equally moved by the surprise of their encounter.

But Nelly was a creature of impulse; her first feeling was joy at meeting him again, and she obeyed it, with an outstretched hand, and the genuine exclamation:

“Oh! Cousin Nigel! I am so glad to see you.”

But before he had had time to return her friendly greeting, recollection came pouring back upon the poor child's heart; his quarrel with her brother and her husband flashed across her mind, and with a vague and sickly sense of having done something wrong, she turned away again towards the meadow, saying rapidly:

“But I had better go home — perhaps I had better go home.”

“Have they forbidden you even to speak to me then, Nelly?”

It was his own kind voice, and she paused to listen to it and to consider. After all she had not been so forbidden. Bertie had often spoken to her in his bragging manner since their arrival in Hilstone, of what he should say and do, in the event of coming in contact with his cousin; but he had not seemed to calculate on her meeting with Nigel Brooke when alone. As for her husband, she had never heard him mention the name of the master of Orpington Chase, since they had been married. So she felt at least that she would be

committing no actual disobedience by exchanging a few words with him, and after a moment's thought she said:

"Oh, no! — they have not indeed!" but so faintly, that he had to stoop in order to catch her words.

"Is it your own inclination then which prompts you to avoid me, Nelly? Do you believe all that Robert says of me?"

She shook her head.

"Well! then you will surely not refuse to give me a few kind words. It is a long time since we met — nearly a twelvemonth. I suppose that you have almost forgotten me?"

"I shall never forget," she said sadly. "I was so happy at the Chase, and I have so regretted all that has passed between us since. How is Aunt Eliza, Cousin Nigel, and what — what does she think of me?"

In her anxiety for an answer to her question she for the first time raised her eyes to his, and enabled him to gain a full view of her face. He started backwards.

"Good Heavens!" he exclaimed; "what's the matter with you, Nelly. What have you been doing to yourself?"

"Where? — how do you mean — in what manner?" she said, almost as surprised as her companion, and not in the least knowing to what he alluded.

"Your face — your eyes — your mouth!" he replied slowly, as he scanned her features. "Oh! my dear girl — how you are altered!"

His meaning flashed upon her now, and remembering, if it were the case, whence the alteration came,

the burthen of her care seemed suddenly to press upon her too heavily. The wonder expressed in her cousin's voice, the compassion of his gaze, no less than the affection with which he spoke, struck some chord in Nelly's overcharged heart, and she answered his question with a burst of tears.

"Oh! am I altered?" she said, as well as he could distinguish through her sobs. "Am I so altered in so short a time? I ought to be — I know I ought to be!" And she laid her head down on the wooden stile, and cried like a child.

When Nigel Brooke saw what effect his words had had, he grew quite nervous. Men generally are so when they have made a woman cry; they cannot understand that such a sudden and violent emotion may be not only harmless but a relief. He stood by alternately urging Nelly to be calm, and looking up and down the lane in dread lest some one should approach. But fortune favoured him, and when his cousin was once more composed, her tears had been without other witness than himself. And her whole anxiety then was to know what he could possibly have thought of her folly.

"Whatever can you think of me, Cousin Nigel, breaking down in this absurd manner," she said, trying to smile, "but somehow it has been all so sudden — and speaking of the Chase and Aunt Eliza — and you were very good to me, and to both of us — and ——"

"Don't talk of it any more, Nelly," he answered in a voice scarcely less faltering than her own. "If you have felt the cause which separated us, I have felt it no less, God knows! And I knew all along

that it was no fault of yours, and that you could not act otherwise than as your brother dictated to you. And now, all things are changed, you see, and there is no need for us to make ourselves miserable by raking up the past. I am glad to think that you are well married, and that in one respect at least you will never have reason to regret that Robert's decision was a hasty one. And now let me hear something about him and yourself! You are happy, of course! as you ought to be — and how is he? Is his back any stronger than 'it used to be?"

"No! — not the least, Cousin Nigel, nor ever will be, I am afraid! — and he has a dreadful cough. Sometimes I lie awake half the night to hear him coughing, but he says he does it in his sleep, and scarcely remembers it in the morning. Dr. Monkton used to say — he used to think, I believe, — that there were several remedies that might benefit the weakness of his spine, but we have never tried them."

"But how is that?" asked Nigel, who had not failed to notice the formal name by which Nelly mentioned her husband.

"I scarcely know — but I suppose Dr. Monkton has altered his opinion about him. I spoke to him about it once, and he said it would be a sheer waste of time and money, and that Bertie will never be other than he is. But — oh! I do wish," with a deep-drawn sigh, "that he could cure his cough."

"Robert takes medicine for his cough, I presume."

"Yes! — at least he ought to do so — but he is very troublesome about his medicine. Half the times he declares it will do him no good, and refuses to take it altogether, and when I do manage to force it down

his throat, he makes as much fuss over it as if he were a baby!" And Nelly laughed a little low sad laugh, which wonderfully contrasted with her cousin's remembrance of her ringing notes of old.

"Perhaps Bertie is not careful enough of himself?" argued Nigel. (How nice it sounded in her ears, to hear him speak the familiar name again). "Keeps too late hours, and goes about too much — I suppose he is very gay and happy now — gay at least compared to the life he led in Bickton."

"I know he keeps late hours," said Nelly, sadly; "but he is not gay, Cousin Nigel, and I fear he is not happy, and that is just what was worrying me to-day before I met you. He seems to be so greatly disappointed in Hilstone — to have expected so much amusement and found so little, that he quite disheartened me."

"Were his anticipations very high then, Nelly?"

"Oh! so high! there seemed no limit to them before I was — I was married," she said with a slight hesitation, for though she felt the comfort of some one to confide in, who notwithstanding their estrangement would take Bertie's part, she feared by being outspoken, to reveal too much. "He thought that living in a town was to procure him everything — health, and pleasure, and society — and he never could talk sufficiently of all he should gain by the exchange. And I told him otherwise, I told him what I knew was true, that it was impossible with the affliction God had seen fit to put upon him, he could ever run about and enjoy himself like other men, and that if his life were easy and comfortable, he should learn to be content. But he would not believe me, he would not see things

in the same light as I did, and this is the end of it!" she concluded mournfully, little guessing how much she had told of her own history in this statement of her brother's disappointment. But Nigel Brooke understood it all, and even whilst thinking how mistaken was her devotion, he could feel thankful that she was the same Nelly whom he had fallen in love with, and that if she had been sacrificed in marriage, it was for the sake of others, and not for herself! Yet how his heart bled for her, as they paced side by side, up and down the silent meadows.

"My poor child!" he murmured softly, "*I* could have done better for you than this!"

As soon as he had said the words, he regretted them. He knew that they bore a double meaning, and that Nelly might understand by them that her brother would have been the happier for not allowing his pride to prevent his accepting his cousin's assistance; at the same time if she had any suspicion of his feelings for her; if the same thoughts were in her mind that moment as were coursing through his own, she might interpret what he had said in its real sense; that whether she loved him or not, he could have made her happier in marriage than he believed her then to be. Curious to ascertain the truth, if possible, from the expression of her face, Nigel Brooke glanced down at the figure by his side and started to find a pair of soft earnest eyes raised in wonderment, to meet his own. For a few seconds the cousins gazed at one another, gazed whilst reality revealed itself to each, and Nigel learned that he was loved; and Nelly, that she might have been his wife. Then the hot blood rushed in a torrent to the girl's face, and her eyes were quickly turned

upon the ground, and she felt nothing, and knew nothing, excepting that she trembled, and was ashamed of herself, and sick of life! So they walked together in silence, occupied with their own thoughts.

Nigel had intended next to ask her for some details of her amusements and employments; but after this episode, everything on earth seemed too frivolous to speak of, and he rejected one topic after another as it rose into his mind.

But before they had proceeded much further, he began to feel that silence is sometimes more dangerous than speech, and with an effort, broke it.

"You have still got Thug, I see!"

With what relief did Nelly hear him speak again in his ordinary voice; and with how much eagerness did she embrace the opportunity to make him believe that she was very cheerful indeed.

"Oh! yes! You didn't think I should part with him, did you, cousin Nigel? My dear old 'baby,' what should I do without him? But he has been in sad disgrace to-day."

"How is that, I thought he was perfection."

"So he is in my eyes; but you see everyone is not of the same opinion. And Bertie spoils the dog to an unpardonable degree. So I am sorry to say that yesterday, Master Thug forgot his manners, and put his dirty feet upon a lady's dress. Yes! Thug, you did," she continued, as the animal hearing himself named came up to her side, "and to a lady, who hates all dogs into the bargain, both great and small, so of course she didn't like it."

"And what heavy penalty did you award him?"

"He was shut up for some hours in a room by him-

self, which he cannot bear; but as he had no idea what the punishment was for, I am afraid it will not do him much good. The only effect it has had as yet, is, that directly I let him out, he knocked me right down for joy."

"I hope you have given up that dangerous habit of allowing him to spring at your throat and face, Nelly. It is really not safe, particularly with an animal of so treacherous a nature as a mastiff. I can assure you I have often shuddered to think of the first time I saw him do so. Do you remember it? It was when you were making pastry in the kitchen at Little Bickton."

At the mention of Little Bickton, Nelly's face, which had been doing its best to smile before, again clouded over.

"Ah! I never make cakes or pastry now," she said regretfully, "and I used to like it so much, and how fond Thug was of the raw dough. I used to roll it into pills and make him catch them. But Mrs. Prowse would think it dreadful, I suppose, if I were even to hint at doing such a thing."

"You have pleasanter employments now, I hope," said her cousin, with an attempt at cheerfulness, "or at all events, more suitable ones to your station in life. It is all very well for a woman to know how to make such things as pastry and beds; but when she has a head as well as fingers, she need never be at a loss for occupation. Do you sing, Nelly?"

"A little. I am learning to do so with Dr. Nesbitt."

"And I suppose you are a member of the Hilstone Choral Society."

"Yes! but I hate it, and that reminds me that I

must not be late for dinner to-day, as it is practice night. Perhaps I had better go at once."

They had walked back to the end of the first field by this time, and she prepared to return home the same way she had come. She held out her hand at parting, and he took it, and did not seem inclined to let it go again.

"Is there no chance of your brother ever liking me again, Nelly?" he said, looking almost wistfully into her face, "no hope of our ever meeting and mixing as cousins should?"

"I am afraid not," she faltered, "I have said all I dared, and more, but it has been useless. He seems determined, and he says that it cannot be — that it would not be right."

"But *you* are not afraid to hold my hand, dear; *you* do not regard me only as the son of your father's murderer, do you?"

Not afraid perhaps, but the clasped hands trembled strangely, and Nelly was so nervous that she could not speak. Presently he seemed to guess that he was torturing her, for with a sudden wrench he tore his own hand away.

"You would not, Nelly, believe me that you would not, if you knew all the circumstances of the case. But, of what am I talking? It would be as useless now (as perhaps it would be difficult) to convince you that your brother is in error. Well!" with a sigh, "good-bye, then! but remember, if you are ever in difficulty or distress, that everything I have is at your disposal."

Then he drew a card from his pocket-book —

"This is my town address; a letter sent there will

always reach me, and receive immediate attention. Nelly, don't quite forget me; don't cease to care for me, whatever they may try to make you believe or do. We may meet again, who knows what is in the future? and under happier circumstances than these. Till then, God bless you always!"

He turned hastily, as if to go, but a low sound from her detained him. She had tried to answer him and failed.

"Did you speak, Nelly?" he asked.

"Not now?" she whispered, alluding to his mention of a meeting in the future. "Shall I not see you sometimes as to-day?"

The thought that it might not occur again, revealed to her how dear the present interview had been. She had heard all that her brother had to say against the father of the man before her (and in part she had believed the story and shuddered at it), but she had never been able to connect the disgrace of that circumstance with Nigel Brooke, or permit it to have any effect upon the gratitude she felt she owed him. And she had too recently arrived at the knowledge of her own heart to be able to do more than feel the sweetness of her new sensations; she had had no time to realise their danger, or to calculate their wrong.

To Nigel Brooke, who thought he had never known how much he loved her till he gazed upon her fair young face again, her question was a strong temptation. But he grappled with and laid it. His was no weak heart to sport with open eyes upon the brink of a precipice, until he became so dazzled that he had no alternative but to cast himself over, or to be dragged away at the risk of life and reason.

He had known his own feelings for some months past, and now to his sorrow, he knew Nelly's; and the fiat had already gone forth — they must part.

"There is little chance of it," he answered, with as much calmness as he could assume, "because I have long made up my mind to let the Chase, and believe, at last, that I have a reasonable offer. So, it is likely that before many weeks, my mother and I shall have left Orpington to take up our residence in London."

Then, his heart torn by the downcast expression of her face, he hurriedly added:

"And if it were not so, Nelly, still we could not — we ought not — to meet. Dear child," looking her steadfastly in the face, "you *know* it will be best for both of us."

It was strange, that in a moment of such misery, that one fond expression should have sunk into the bottom of her heart, and had the power to keep a warm spot there for evermore. Even as she raised her weary eyes to answer his remark, something of their despondent look had fled before it.

"Yes, you are right," she said, in a low voice, "it *will* be best, for our happiness and for ourselves."

Their eyes and hands met once more, and then Nigel Brooke, sternly denying himself even a backward glance, strode steadily on in the direction of the Chase; whilst Nelly, her brain, heart, and soul, alike in turmoil — Nelly, who had left St. Bartholomew's Street a child — returned to it — a woman!

CHAPTER XV.

Mrs. Clarence resigns her Office.

FOR several hours after she had reached her home, Nelly had no time for further thought.

To her dismay she found, upon arrival, that she was later than she had anticipated; the first dinner bell had sounded; Dr. Monkton was already in his dressing-room, and she had to hasten her own preparation as much as possible, lest she should offend him by a want of punctuality.

When they met in the dining-room, things did not appear much more propitious. Her husband was thoughtful and pre-occupied, Bertie evidently sullen, and in her nervous and discomposed state, Nelly yet maintained most of the desultory conversation which ensued.

The labour was so hard, and her efforts to amuse them so ungraciously received by both her companions, that it was quite a relief when, before the meal was concluded, Mrs. Prowse arrived to bear her off to the Choral Society, even though that lady did not appear to be in her most amiable mood on the occasion.

Nelly was playing with her dessert when her sister-in-law entered the room, and did not stir, until roused by the tart observation:

"If you intend to dawdle about much longer, Mrs. James, I must go without you. It is most important that I should not be late at the meeting this evening, for Laura Filmer has so bad a cold, that she will be unable to attend, and it won't do for us both to be absent. So if you mean to accompany me, I shall be obliged by your getting ready at once."

"I beg your pardon," said Nelly, mechanically, as she rose from the table. "I had no idea you were in a hurry."

But Robert Brooke resented the dictatorial style of Mrs. Prowse's address, and to his sister's annoyance, came to the rescue.

"Is Nell *obliged* to go to this choral humbug, Monkton, whether she be ill or well?" he asked, in the tone of contempt which he knew best calculated to excite the ire of the canon's wife.

"Are you not well, Helena?" said Dr. Monkton.

Thus directly appealed to, she was compelled to announce that she was.

"What made you imagine she was not?" her husband next enquired of his brother-in-law.

"Mr. Brooke is too apt to consider his sister unequal to any duties which are not undertaken for himself," remarked Mrs. Prowse spitefully.

"And Mrs. Prowse to urge her to take a part in anything in which it is impossible her brother can share," he retorted, with less politeness than was due to the sex of his opponent.

Nelly, distressed beyond measure at this budding altercation, stood with the handle of the door in her grasp, uncertain whether to stay or to retreat; whilst Dr. Monkton listened to the audacity of Robert Brooke with evident surprise.

"And what the devil is it to you whether she does or not?" he said, angrily addressing his brother-in-law. "Helena has a tongue, and can speak for herself, I suppose; we want none of your interference," and waving his hand, he signed to Nelly to go upstairs; whither she soon heard herself followed by Bertie, who

went into his own room, and after violently slamming, locked the door behind him.

She would gladly have excused herself then from accompanying Mrs. Prowse to the choral meeting, for she feared the consequence of leaving the two angry men in the house together, but she dared not make the breach wider than it was. So in a few minutes the sisters-in-law commenced their walk to the Mechanics' Institute, which they accomplished without having exchanged more than half-a-dozen words.

There had been a sad amount of bickering going on amongst the members of the choral society during the last few weeks. The dignity of those ladies who belonged to the ecclesiastical party had been quite unable to stand against the affront offered to it in the shape of a Mrs. Clarence from "the barracks," being invited to stand up and lead their choruses; and poor Mr. Rumbell had wondered ever since how he could have been so rash as to propose it.

He had been besieged, both in public and private, attacked alike in his sacred bachelor dwelling and in the High Street, by bevys of excited females, bearing copies of the printed rules of the society, which were known to have been drawn up by his own hand.

They thrust them under his nose, they forced him to read over Rule VI., by which it was set forth that:

"In order to preserve the general harmony so essential to the well-doing of the Society, no member, resident in Hilstone, shall be selected for the purpose of singing the solos of the various works performed, but that if no non-resident member can be found fit to undertake such solos, the Society shall provide a professional person at the quarterly concerts for that

especial purpose;" and refuted all his arguments in favour of Mrs. Clarence *not* being a resident but a visitor, by asserting that, in that case, he had no right to have admitted her at all, as the Society had been formed for the benefit of the towns-people; in fact, Mr. Rumbell found that he had got himself into a regular scrape, and he almost wished Mrs. Clarence had been dumb, before he had been struck by the beauty of her soprano voice.

"But who else is there to take the solos?" he exclaimed at last, despairingly, as grey curls and spectacles closed in around him, and shrill remonstrances vibrated on his ear; "only tell me that, ladies! Who is there, in Hilstone or out of Hilstone, who is competent to sing for you as Mrs. Clarence does? If you can find me a non-resident member to take her place, the exchange shall be made, but till then, you must permit me a little license in this matter."

Their president had said the words, and for a while they left him in peace, though they were anything but at rest themselves. From that hour, the object of Mrs. Prowse and Mrs. Roe, and Miss Hammond and others of the same clique, was to search the neighbouring towns and villages for a non-resident member, with a soprano voice — for there were many people living out of Hilstone, who belonged to the Society, but only attended the practices during the summer evenings.

At last they were successful; Mrs. Roe was the fortunate woman who hit upon a young girl, the daughter of the clergyman of the hamlet of Wickley, who certainly possessed all the elements of a fine voice, but who was so young and shy, and ignorant, that she had not the least idea of using it. However there were

the notes; Miss Grey (as she was called) was proved capable of taking the upper C with almost as much force as Mrs. Clarence herself ("and certainly with far more delicacy," as Mrs. Roe observed), so after having been invited for several consecutive evenings to that lady's house, to be instructed by herself and her intimates in the parts required of her, she was dragged before the president of the choral society, and produced as a substitute for the obnoxious officer's wife.

Poor Mr. Rumbell was fairly trapped; he had passed his word, and he could not depart from it. He had drawn up Rule VI. himself, and dared not deny the work of his own hands. Here was the non-resident member; blushing, indeed, and ready to sink into the earth with confusion when called upon to exhibit her talents; but with the requisite register to render her a fit candidate for the honour of taking the solos of the Society. Yet when he thought of her as an exchange for Mrs. Clarence, the pupil of Garcia, he seemed for the first time to realise the extent of feminine jealousy.

"She'll never do!" he said, trembling himself at the idea of having to tell the other lady that she must resign the ungracious task she had undertaken. "Her voice is very fair, but she knows too little of singing, Mrs. Roe. She will break down at the first obstacle."

"She will do no such thing, Mr. Rumbell!" rejoined Mrs. Roe, with asperity; "she only wants practice to enable her to sing quite as well, if not better, than *that* Mrs. Clarence! Besides, you passed your word, remember; to say nothing of the rules. If the printed rules of the Society are to be put aside for every stranger who happens to have a tolerable voice, they had better never have been made. Let us keep

to them, and then we shall know what to expect. Otherwise, in saying that I should no longer take any pride in belonging to the Society, I know that I speak, not only my own opinion, but that of Mrs. Prowse, Mrs. Allondale, and all the other members of any influence — not excepting Mrs. Filmer herself.”

Mr. Rumbell grew alarmed. If these women — old women, as they were — chose to join in opposition to himself, and the dean's daughter-in-law seconded the movement; either the choral society or his presidentship must go to the wall. And in either case he would incur considerable odium at the hands of the cathedral party.

So, without being the first of his sex who has been over-ruled by circumstances and petticoats, he gave his consent that Miss Grey should be presented to the members as their future soloist; and the evening of which this chapter treats was the one appointed for her introduction. Nelly had heard nothing of all this; she took too little interest in the meetings; and was altogether too insignificant for Mrs. Prowse to have considered it worth her while to enlighten her. Besides, she and her party were anticipating with keen delight, the surprise and discomfiture of Mrs. Clarence's admirers, when the announcement should be made.

As for Miss Filmer, she had no cold at all, but she was so disgusted with the whole proceeding, that she had vowed she would not be present on the occasion; and that if it really took place she should strike her name off the subscribers' list the following morning. But her opinion was as nothing compared to her mother's, to which it was generally opposed. Confused as Nelly's thoughts were, and wandering from the

scene before her, she could not help, as soon as she had taken her seat, remarking the various glances of importance, mystery, and congratulation, which were being exchanged between Mrs. Roe and her friends, now speculating on the possible identity of the extremely bashful looking young lady, who, with downcast eyes and burning cheeks, was placed in a prominent position on the sopranos' bench, supported, on either side, by Mrs. Prowse and Miss Fanny Clewson.

They were shortly followed by the entrance of Mrs. Clarence, who, with her books in her hand, sat quietly down in her accustomed seat. Nelly thought that the president was more fidgety than usual; but as he was always pale and nervous-looking, his discomposure did not make much difference in his appearance.

The practice commenced: as the orchestra played the last bars of the overture, and the singers rose to be ready for the opening chorus, Mrs. Clarence standing a little to the front, as was her wont, the atmosphere seemed to have become suddenly closer to Mr. Rumbell, for he drew forth his handkerchief, and wiped his face repeatedly. The final chord came: Mrs. Clarence, her eye fixed on his batôn, was about to commence her part, when the wand of the leader fell, and he gave a couple of nervous taps with it, to command attention.

"I have a few words to say," he stammered, "before commencing this evening's practice. I am quite sure that we have all been most sensible of the great kindness shown by this lady" (waving his batôn towards Mrs. Clarence) "in taking our solos, and singing them so ably for us; still I find—" here Mr. Rumbell was again obliged to have recourse to his pocket-hand-

kerchief — “that in accepting her valuable services, we have been breaking one of the most stringent rules of our little Society; and broken rules, you know, ladies, sometimes lead to broken heads.” Here the president tried to smile with a feeble merriment on the many faces turned towards him, of which he could distinguish but the face of Mrs. Clarence, filled with calm surprise.

“It is one of the rules of Hilstone Choral Society that no resident member shall sing a solo, and we were obliged to make this rule because ladies are known to be so sadly jealous of one another. If the Society had been composed of gentlemen only, I don't think we should have needed such a restriction at all.”

This witticism was received with great giggling by most of the female members, and Nelly observed that the older the ladies were the more they seemed to giggle. Only Mrs. Clarence remained perfectly still, and apparently unmoved.

“We have been obliged to forget all about this rule for the last few weeks, because we were so very anxious to practise ‘Haydn's Seasons,’ for our next concert, but as we have now been sufficiently fortunate as to find a young lady who is a member of our Society, and yet non-resident in Hilstone, but who promises to be good enough to come over from Wickley every Wednesday evening, to take our solos for us, why, all I can say is —” here Mr. Rumbell's breath seemed to be drawn with considerable difficulty — “all I need say on the part of myself as president, and yourselves as members, of this society, is, that our united and most grateful thanks are due to Mrs. Clarence for all the trouble she has taken to oblige us, and —” struggling back to the

jocose strain — “we feel very glad to think that we have now an opportunity of lightening her labours, and giving her a holiday in fact.” Then with a little stiff cock-sparrow bow, which was intended to be the personification of ease, Mr. Rumbell, as it were, dismissed Mrs. Clarence, and continued —

“Miss Grey, who will in future undertake our solos, is kind enough to say that she will commence doing so from to-night.”

Mrs. Clarence bowed to the president in return for his salutation, but showed no sign of resentment. She did not even resume her seat, but drawing back to a level with the other singers, joined in the chorus as heartily as usual.

Poor Miss Grey, on the contrary, who was now thrust forward by her officious friends, coloured violently, and exhibited all the symptoms of conscious guilt, whilst the music which was being sung in her ears, sounded like an indistinct clang, and her vision became so blurred and dim that she could not distinguish a note in the book she held before her.

The chorus ceased; the assembly waited for her recitative. The girl looked up, and looked down; the tears rushed to her eyes and over her burning cheeks, and she dared not trust her voice alone in the silence which succeeded.

“Now, Miss Grey,” said the president waving his batôn, as a signal for her note — but no note came.

“Here, dear, perhaps you’ve lost your place,” exclaimed Mrs. Prowse, whose patronage was generally accompanied by familiarity. Mrs. Roe’s hawk-like eye glanced fearfully at her from the other side of the room, whilst her minor upholders smiled compassion-

ately, and murmured "Poor dear, she feels a little timid at first. I daresay she'll soon get over it, and it's much better than being too bold, in my opinion."

"Try, Miss Grey," urged the president, "it's only fancy, you know; you sing it in a first rate style when at home, and we are all friends here, remember; make a commencement and it will be easy enough."

But though his encouragement was backed by all her patronesses, the new candidate for solo honours continued to shake her head mournfully in reply, whilst the tears rolled steadily down her cheeks. She had contracted a nervous mood and it seemed impossible to her to shake it off.

"What's to be done now?" exclaimed Mr. Rumbell, puffing in the style which had so much amused poor Nelly on her first acquaintance with him.

"Give her a glass of port wine," suggested Mr. Pratt, the tenor canon.

"And where are we to get port wine from?" was the perturbed answer.

"From my house," said Mrs. Roe. "Do run for it, Mr. Pratt, it won't take you five minutes. She ought to have had a glass before she came, poor child, but she would not be persuaded, though I pressed her to take it."

So after sundry directions, Mr. Pratt set off running to fetch the port wine, and the practice was postponed until his return. Mr. Rumbell spent the interval in pacing up and down the room, with vexation portrayed on every feature of his face; whilst the ladies crowded about Miss Grey, who had become slightly hysterical, and was beginning to feel terribly ashamed of herself.

At any other time, the whole of this scene would have proved irresistibly comic to the senses of Nelly Monkton, for there was a great deal of fun to be extracted from the faces of Mrs. Prowse and Mrs. Roe at this dead failure to their enterprise. But the emotion she had herself passed through that afternoon, had left her in the mood to be sympathetic with trouble only, and she thought more of the slight which had been shewn to Mrs. Clarence, and the misery experienced by Miss Grey, than of the others' discomfiture. As soon as the well-shaken port wine had arrived, a couple of glasses were administered almost by force, to the unfortunate soloist; and being again supported to her feet, she managed with the energy of despair to falter the notes required of her. But she merely scrambled through her task; her voice was raw and unsympathetic, though not more so than her execution; in fine, she had the sound without the soul, and Nelly thought she had never listened to singing which was more distasteful to her.

The practice was concluded, and the singers began to leave; Miss Grey's admirers again crowded about her, laden with congratulation and encouragement, whilst the poor girl herself seemed only anxious to be permitted to take her departure as quickly as possible, that she might hide her diminished head at Wickley.

Mrs. Clarence, having gathered up her music-books, was also crossing the room, when her steps were arrested by the approach of Mr. Rumbell.

"I am so sorry — so very sorry — my dear Mrs. Clarence, that this should have happened; but I hope you will believe that it is not my fault. I had no alternative. The members have compelled me to keep

to the printed rules, in which unfortunately no provision was made for a contingency like the present. But I trust you will not wholly desert us. I trust that we shall still see you here occasionally, and have the aid of your powerful voice and judgment in leading our choruses."

The whole of this address had been delivered in a low tone, for the room was still full of women, eager to gather round and hear what their president had to say to Mrs. Clarence. But that lady's answer was intentionally given in a key which rendered it patent to all.

"I am much obliged to you, Mr. Rumbell, for your good opinion, but I could not possibly think of infringing the rights of your chosen soloist by interfering with any part of her work. You are aware that I undertook this office entirely at your request, that I told you at the time it was rather against my own wishes than otherwise. No copy of the rules was shewn to me; I never heard that there were any until to-night. Had I known of the one you allude to, I should have been the first to advise you to respect it. And had I been aware that the society was governed not by yourself and your vice-president, but by the ladies of Hilstone, I should have been the last to join it. As it is, you must permit me to withdraw my name from the members' list, and to express my regret that its having been placed there, should have been the innocent cause of so much unpleasantness to yourself." And with a general bow to the lingering members, Mrs. Clarence shook hands with Mr. Rumbell, and left the room.

"And there goes the best voice and the most

valuable member that our society has ever been able to boast of," exclaimed the president wrathfully as the door closed behind her. "Ladies, I wish you all a very good evening, and I hope you are satisfied with your work. It's more than I am." And with a fearful scowl upon his usually benign countenance, Mr. Rumbell also took his departure.

Matters looked almost too serious then for public discussion, and the group dispersing without further gossip, Nelly shortly afterwards found herself on the steps of her own house, shaking hands with, and saying good-night to Mrs. Prowse; and totally oblivious of the comments on the evening's proceedings, with which that worthy had favoured her all the way home.

As the hall door opened to admit her, and she heard that neither her husband nor her brother had yet returned, she had but one idea in her mind, that the time had come when she might rest and think.

So she crept upstairs and into bed; and laying her throbbing head upon the pillow, closed her eyes, and in imagination reviewed each event of that most eventful day.

CHAPTER XVI.

Dr. Monkton's Sentiments appear to have undergone a Change.

BUT even in that hour of acute pain, Nelly was true to herself. She saw everything plainly now; nothing was undefinable, nothing was hid.

It was as though a curtain had been suddenly withdrawn from before her heart, and all that had appeared foggy and misty in her past life, was rendered

clear by its removal. That apparently unreasonable shrinking from marriage for which she had been unable to account, that invisible cord which had seemed to draw her backwards whenever she contemplated such a change, was no longer a mystery to her. Her cousin Nigel loved her, and had circumstances not intervened to prevent his telling her so, she would have been able to recognise her feelings for him under their true name.

But her own blindness, and their subsequent separation, had rendered this impossible; and now — it was no use thinking any more about it. She had done that which made any explanation between them futile, and though she had acted, as she imagined, for the best, she felt she had no one but herself to blame for the mistake.

Yet, though her poor little, fevered heart was bent to the earth, beneath its load of disappointment and useless regret, she did not once declare, as a more romantic heroine might have done, that the burthen was too heavy, and she should sink under it.

She did not even toss and tumble on her bed, and moan that life was over for her; and thenceforth all she had to look for, was release from it. Nor did she curse the hour when she had met her husband, or her own folly in having married him.

Nelly's chief thought through life had been her brother, and whilst Bertie remained, she would never acknowledge that it, or its duties, could be over. And she keenly felt, even during this first trial of standing face to face with what she had lost, that though an earlier knowledge of her own heart would have prevented her becoming the wife of Dr. Monkton, it could

not, whilst Bertie cherished his present resentment, have forwarded a marriage with her cousin. So that her chief sorrow was resolved into a generous pity, for what Nigel himself might suffer. At this thought the poor girl's courage for a moment did seem to fail; and a little prayer went up to heaven that she might be allowed to bear twice — three times the pain, if their mutual Guardian would but lift the burthen off his shoulders.

Her memory flew back to Orpington Chase, and all his kindness to her there, and she wondered she could have been so foolish as not to guess at once how much she loved him. Could she have helped loving him? Did she not remember their interview in the corridor when he kissed her, and how she had wondered afterwards what he could possibly have meant by it? She knew now — she had found it all out when it was too late — and yet she could not feel entirely sorry that it had happened.

Nothing that Bertie had said could influence her thoughts concerning him, however much it might her actions. Even had she not heard Mr. Ray's opinion about her brother's prejudice and obstinacy, she knew enough herself to feel that both were exaggerated. And were it not so, the kindness of the son had already wiped from off her loving mind the injury of the father.

Nigel had kissed her, he had called her by terms of endearment. She supposed it would never be so again; but it made her heart less heavy to think of, and her hot hands clasped themselves together as she thanked God for the memory. But then the thought that a memory — an empty, shadowy, unsatisfying

memory — was to be her only portion of love in this world, overcame the poor child's heroic gratitude, and she turned her face upon the pillows, and cried quietly to herself.

This patient submission to the inevitable, was entirely in keeping with the conduct of Nelly's whole life. To feel an angry resentment against the will of heaven, would have been as unnatural to her, as to blaspheme her Maker. And yet she suffered none the less because she suffered silently, and would have thought it wrong to refuse any ordinary means by which she might obtain alleviation.

She would gladly have gone to sleep and forgotten her trouble for a while, on the present occasion, but her eyes felt as though they would never close. Soon after midnight she heard her brother return, and listened to his progress up the stairs, which was accompanied by such an unnecessary amount of noisy talk, that she felt thankful her husband was not at home to find fault with him.

But not until the dawn had broken, was the familiar sound of the doctor's latchkey heard in the door, followed by his entrance to the room which he usually occupied when business had detained him during the greater part of the night. Then, for the first time, the question occurred to Nelly, what should she say to him concerning her interview with Nigel Brooke? She was sadly afraid of the spirit in which both her husband and her brother might receive the news; and her consciousness made her fearful lest, during the recital, she should betray more than she intended of her own feelings regarding it; yet the idea of concealing that she had met her cousin, never struck her mind. She knew

that she had done no actual wrong in speaking to him, but had she omitted to mention the fact, the burthen of deception would have laid heavily upon her conscience.

So she resolved that she would relate the circumstance upon the first favourable opportunity; and the only stipulation she made with herself, was, that the confession should take place when both Dr. Monkton and Bertie were present. She felt sure that they would both gladly unite in seizing the opportunity to censure the actions of her cousin and his father and mother; but then she would not have to go through such a scene twice. One good hearty tirade of mutual abuse against the whole family, might surely serve for both of them; and having arrived at this conclusion, Nelly, more wearied by her varied emotions than she had given herself credit for, fell asleep at last and slumbered heavily till long after her usual hour of rising. Late as it was, however, when she entered the breakfast-room, she found that she was destined to take her meal alone. The doctor was so thoroughly tired from his night's vigil, that he slept till the last moment, and went straight from his bed to his consulting room; and Bertie, whose small stock of strength was visibly giving way beneath the late hours he insisted upon keeping, was too languid to rise before noon. So that it was not until they met at the luncheon-table, that Nelly had an opportunity of speaking to them both together.

She tried then by several means, to bring the conversation round to the subject of her walk of the previous day, without success, for Dr. Monkton was ruminating on a case which just then occupied much

of his attention, and Bertie, she perceived to her sorrow, appeared no better pleased with her than he had done when they parted. So at last, she was obliged to have recourse to plain speaking.

"I took Thug out for a run in the meadows yesterday evening, James," she commenced.

"Did you? it was more than the brute deserved after his behaviour."

"But who do you think I met there?"

"What a stupid question," observed her brother, "when you know every old maid in Hilstone."

"But this wasn't an old maid," she persisted; and then finding that neither of them would try to guess, she added very quickly, "I met Nigel Brooke," and immediately cast her eyes upon her plate, not daring to observe the effect of her intelligence upon her listeners. But it was not so great as she had anticipated.

"What, your cousin from the Chase?" asked her husband.

"That scoundrel!" exclaimed Bertie, reddening at the mere mention of his name, "does he walk in the meadows? You mustn't go there again then, Nelly. I won't have you subjected to meeting him, I only wish I had been with you. I would have shewn him what I think of him and his doings. Of course you didn't notice him as you passed."

"Of course she did," interposed the doctor, "or I shall be very much displeased with her. Helena knows that I expect my wife to behave like a lady with whomever she is thrown in contact."

"Do you mean to tell me then," said Robert Brooke, "that you expect my sister to be on terms of

courtesy with her cousin, after his infamous behaviour to us?"

"Most certainly I do, not only expect, but desire it."

"Then it must be done without my knowledge," retorted the other fiercely, "for if I saw him presume to bow to her, I'd knock him down for it."

Nelly was so anxious to divert her husband's attention from her brother's unpleasant manner, that she had not even leisure to smile at the absurd threat contained in his words.

"But I had no alternative yesterday, Bertie," she exclaimed. "I came upon him quite unexpectedly in the lane at the end of the fields, and had no real excuse to make for refusing to exchange a few words with him. You had never forbidden me, James," she added more timidly to Dr. Monkton, "or I would not have done so."

"I know I have not," he answered, "nor have I any intention of forbidding you. You have my permission, Helena, to speak to your cousin as often as you may meet him."

At this reception — so widely different from what she had anticipated for her news — Nelly looked up in amazement.

But Dr. Monkton knew what he was about. The constant visits which his professional rival was called upon to make on Mrs. Brooke's behalf, to Orpington Chase, had caused him, of late, to think more than ever that he had been very foolish to quarrel with so profitable a patient. It had been all very well, perhaps, at the time, when his wife had yet to be won, and he was enthusiastic in the prosecution of his love-

suit; but since he had fairly settled down as a married man, his disagreement with the Brookes of Orpington had assumed a different aspect, and he would have been very pleased to be asked to make it up again. They were the only respectable relations that his wife possessed, and he saw no reason why she should be longer deprived of the benefit of their notice and society. As for the absurd chimeras which her brother had got into his head, concerning the injury they were supposed to have done him, why he must either get rid of them again, or — (and the probability of this alternative had made itself very patent to Dr. Monkton during the last few weeks) — he must look out for another home in which to indulge his morbid fancies.

But if Nelly was only astonished at this change in her husband's sentiments, her brother entertained very different feelings concerning it. His face from having been crimson with excitement, grew pale with passion, and the lips of his delicate, fractious mouth were firmly compressed.

"You give my sister permission to be on friendly terms with Nigel Brooke, Monkton? You who know all the circumstances of the cause which parted us — who are aware that the hands of his father were stained with the blood of ours, and that I would not allow Nelly even to answer his letters, far less to visit at his house, or hold any communication with him?"

"I am aware that you talk a great deal of nonsense," replied the doctor angrily, "and that I can manage the affairs of my wife without any help from you. You may choose to quarrel with the only relations of any influence which you possess; but that is

no reason that Helena should be forced to follow your example."

"But you quarrelled with them yourself on our account," persisted Robert Brooke, excitedly.

"Pardon me! I did nothing of the sort," interposed his brother-in-law, totally forgetting how he had once averred to the contrary. "My misunderstanding with Mrs. Brooke was purely personal, and one that may be set right any day. I never heard a word of your absurd notions respecting your cousin, until you told me of them yourself. Politeness may at the time have forbidden me to say what I thought of them. But as to carrying them into execution here, it is simply impossible, and whenever I see the opening for a reconciliation between Helena and her aunt, it will assuredly be made."

"But she shall *not* visit at the Chase," exclaimed Robert Brooke, trembling with rage. "As long as I live, my sister shall never clasp hands with the Nigel Brookes, nor acknowledge them as relations. I will not allow it — I will never speak to her again if she does — I will see her *dead* first."

He had risen from his seat during the doctor's speech, and stood supporting himself by the table, and now as he concluded his own, he brought down his fragile hand upon the mahogany with a force which made the purple veins start from beneath the delicate skin.

"Pooh — pooh — pooh!" said Dr. Monkton, carelessly. "Sit down again, Robert. You don't know what you're talking about."

At these words, so coolly and contemptuously delivered, the young man became nearly beside himself.

Nelly, who had been watching his irritability and her husband's gathering gloom with the greatest anxiety, (although from fear of aggravating the quarrel she had abstained from interference), pushed her chair close to Bertie, and laid her hand upon his arm as though she would entreat him to be patient. But he shook it off without paying the least regard to her silent plea.

"Monkton!" he exclaimed, "do you intend to insult me?"

"I intend you to fully understand that I alone am master in this house," was the rejoinder. "You talk very glibly, young man, of what you will allow '*your sister*' to do, but you seem to forget that your sister is *my wife*."

"I am her nearest relative," said Robert, hotly.

"The accident of birth which makes you so gives you no power whatever over her, under present circumstances. Helena's obedience is due to me alone, and to me alone it will be paid. You have yet to learn that you can have no authority in this house."

At this plain and irrefutable truth, Robert Brooke was visibly discomposed. He also, of late, had become but too well aware that good feeling alone gave him a claim upon the home which contained his sister. Yet, even this knowledge could not teach him to be prudent, although it made his voice tremble, as he replied:

"That may, or may not be; but so long as I can prevent it, Nelly shall never be friends with Nigel Brooke. You should be the first yourself, Monkton, to forbid it. If you knew all——"

Dr. Monkton turned round and deliberately fixed his sinister eyes upon the face of Robert Brooke.

"And suppose I do know *all!*" he said, speaking rather slowly. "Suppose I know a great deal more than you had the honour or the honesty to tell me! Suppose I have no higher opinion of you because you tried to keep back half the truth from me!"

At this address, which was incomprehensible to Nelly, she was astonished to see all the excitement fade out of her brother's face, and leave nothing but a weary languor behind. Robert's lips had been parted, and his eyes raised ready to answer any accusation from his brother-in-law; but when Dr. Monkton's words were concluded, he appeared to have nothing to say in reply to them, but sank down upon his seat as though exhausted by the effort he had made. His sister passed her arm round him in token of her ready help and sympathy, whilst her husband, rising to leave the room, passed before he did so, to deliver a parting caution.

"Robert Brooke! Let us understand each other. I have said very little as yet about your behaviour since you have been under my roof, although it has in many respects been by no means satisfactory to me. But whilst I rule this establishment, and you remain a member of it, I must beg that you conform in all things to its requirements. We must have no more exhibitions such as that of to-day. If my friends — or my wife's friends — are so objectionable to you, that you cannot meet them with the courtesy of a gentleman, you have the alternative; to go where you will run no risk of offending either them or myself," — and Dr. Monkton passed out of the room.

This then was the upshot of all Robert's day dreams! — this the realization of that vision in which Nelly and himself drove proudly by Mrs. Brooke of

Orpington Chase, without deigning the faintest recognition; this the manner by which they were to prove to their cousin Nigel that they disdained to accept not only his assistance but his acquaintance! Nelly was desired to notice him whenever they met; and her husband's positive intention was to bring about a reconciliation between the families as soon as possible. The idea was so mortifying; it so fully proved his own impotency to convince his hearers of what he believed himself, that Robert Brooke in mourning his defeat and disappointment had scarcely any time to wonder at the marvellous change which his brother-in-law's sentiments appeared to have undergone. He realised the first misfortune, indeed, so vividly, that Nelly was shocked to see that tears trickled through the thin fingers with which, as soon as they were alone, he had covered his face.

"Bertie! Bertie, my darling!" she exclaimed, "pray don't let it worry you like this. There is no need indeed; James is angry at your setting up your opinion against his, and has said more than he intends to do. He would never dream of bringing Nigel Brooke here, and I do not even think he will have the opportunity, for I heard yesterday that he and Aunt Eliza are going to live in London." And in her alarm and solicitude for her brother, Nelly seemed to have forgotten all that made her own misery in the case. But Bertie refused to be comforted. He had weakened himself so much lately by dissipation, of which his sister, from her enforced separation from him, had little idea, that he had lost even the small amount of command, which he had been used to hold over himself, and at this total upset of his unworthy ambition he had completely broken down.

"Promise me, Nell!" he said, whilst she was clinging about his neck and kissing away the tears which she blushed to see upon his face. "*Swear* to me, that you will never speak to Nigel Brooke or to his mother unless you are compelled to do so, and that if Monkton forces you into their company, you will refuse to say or do more than the most formal civility obliges."

But this promise Nelly hesitated to give.

She loved Bertie as herself; but the experience of the day before had forced her to acknowledge that her affection for him had at last a rival, which claimed at all events to have the power to make her quite as miserable as its predecessor had sometimes done.

So, without loosing her hold of her brother, she only whispered —

"I can't promise that, darling, it would be foolish and useless for me to do so; for if James desires a thing, you know that I must obey him, or it would be the worse for both of us."

She had never hinted so much to Bertie before, of the power her husband held over her, through him. But he was in no mood to be reasonable, or reasoned with.

As his sister's refusal left her lips, her pushed her roughly away from him.

"So you are against me also," he bitterly complained. "I might have guessed as much. You have always had a lurking fondness for Nigel Brooke and his mother, Nelly, and have never fully agreed with me as to the indelible injury for which we are indebted to them. So I have no doubt this determination of Monkton's meets with your entire approval, and that you will do all in your power to make him keep to it,

and that another month will see you as thick as ever at the Chase."

Conscious that much of what her brother said was true, Nelly blushed deeply at his accusation; but she was perfectly sincere when she replied: —

"I promise you to do nothing, Bertie, to further a meeting between myself and the Nigel Brookes. I may not have thought entirely as you have in the matter, but you will acknowledge that I have never acted against your wishes in any particular, and, if I had no inclination to do so before, I have still less now. Indeed! I am in earnest," she continued sadly, as her brother turned round to gather from her open face if she were speaking her real mind, "I have no wish to see an intimacy formed again between us: I should try to prevent it if it were likely, for I think it would be the worst thing that could happen for us all."

"I suppose you're telling the truth," said Bertie incredulously; "but after what Monkton said to-day, I feel as if I should never trust anyone again."

"Not *me*, darling, oh! don't say that of me," she exclaimed in a burst of distress at the mere supposition, "I have always been true to you, Bertie, you know I have, and shall remain so till I die." And in her endeavours to soothe her brother's fears and restore his good opinion of herself, Nelly quite forgot to ask him to what her husband could have possibly alluded, when he hinted that he knew more about the wretched business which had been the cause of so much trouble to them all than Bertie had had the honesty to tell him.

CHAPTER XVII.

Old Aggie becomes communicative.

It was on a chilly afternoon in the commencement of November, some little time after the occurrence related in the preceding chapter, that Nelly was alone in her dressing-room. She was idle — a fact of no mean significance — that is, her fingers were unemployed, although her brain was busy enough, as having drawn her low chair close to the fire, she sat with her head on her hand, staring into its glowing embers. Many things had occurred during the last few weeks to vex and alarm her. Since the quarrel which they had had regarding Nigel Brooke, words had more than once arisen between Bertie and his brother-in-law, until Dr. Monkton's customary behaviour had grown to be curt and authoritative, and the younger man's either sullen or defiant. And added to this, her outward existence had become more spiritless and dull. Hilstone was not a lively place at the best of times: and autumn was its most stagnant season. There was positively no out-door distraction for Nelly except the Choral Society practices, and since Laura Filmer had withdrawn her name from the subscribers' list, they were less interesting than they had ever been.

It was a great, and most unfortunate change for a country bred girl, who had been used to run about as she liked, and to have her own way in everything. All the freedom of the dear old life at Bickton was gone for ever, for Mrs. Prowse had even managed of late to discover that walking by herself was a most improper practice for her sister-in-law to indulge in,

and brought so many rumours to St. Bartholomew's Street of ladies having been insulted, robbed and frightened when met in the fields alone, that Nelly was strictly forbidden to go there without the protection of a companion. She had heard, and almost with relief, that the tenants of Orpington Chase had taken their departure for London, since it allayed the fear of her husband striving to regain an entrance for her there, and she had hoped also that the chance of meeting her cousin in her daily walks once removed, she should have less difficulty in erasing his image from her memory.

But this hope Nelly had already proved to be a false one. It seemed harder to forget him now that a distance of so many miles was between them: and she found that, added to her former regret, there had sprung up a lively fear, lest amid the attractions and distractions of a town life, her cousin should learn to forget *her*. Though to what end he should remember her, she could not satisfy herself. But her chief cause of anxiety still continued to be her brother. *She* had fallen very submissively into the dull routine of life in a country town; but Bertie was as discontented as ever, and never putting any restraint on his tongue for prudence sake, openly abused Hilstone and its inhabitants both before the doctor and his sister. And the prospect was growing darker every day, and Nelly felt that all her spirit was fading out of her with the sunshine of the year.

As she was thus sadly ruminating, a knock sounded on her door, and old Aggie's head was thrust into her dressing-room.

"Do Thug happen to be with you, Miss Nelly, my

dear?" she enquired, "for Master Robert's been asking after him for the last hour, and I can't see him nowhere."

The old nurse had never been able to tune her tongue to address her nurseling by any other than her maiden name, and Nelly would not have had her alter it for all the world.

"No! he is not, nurse!" she exclaimed, starting from her reverie, "and now I come to think of it, I have not seen the dear old dog since luncheon time. I wonder where he can be. Perhaps I shut him in the dining-room, do go down and see."

Aggie hobbled away, and Nelly waited anxiously for the sound of her favourite's bark, the token of his release. For times were altering for poor Thug almost as much as for herself. The doctor seldom greeted him now except with a complaint or a kick: and two days before, he had, for some fancied offence, subjected him to a regular thrashing, the first indignity of the sort the mastiff had ever received, but which to Nelly's extreme surprise, Thug hardly resented, as she had imagined that he would; although from his unusually craven bearing since he did not seem to have forgotten it. Since which, she had been more than usually careful lest the dog should be any cause of annoyance, and had almost made up her mind that for his own sake, his liberty must be curtailed, and she must try and reconcile him to the occupation of a kennel. Yet, former experience made her very loath to adopt this measure until there was no alternative.

She heard old Aggie limp downstairs, and open the dining-room door, but no Thug bounded to answer her summons; upon which she descended to the kitchen

regions, where she remained longer than suited her mistress's impatience, and when she again made her appearance, Nelly met her at the head of the stairs.

"Well! where is he, Aggie?"

"He ain't nowhere about, my dear, not as I can see."

"But don't the servants know where he is?" demanded Nelly, in surprise. "Perhaps he went out with the carriage!"

The nurse had reached the landing by this time, and she put her hard, wrinkled hand on the girl's rounded shoulder, and pressed her to re-enter the dressing-room.

"He's all safe, Miss Nelly; don't you be afraid for him: but I've had it in my mind to speak to you for several days past, and there's no time like the present. So if you be at leisure, my dear, I'll come in and sit a bit with you, now."

"Come in, Nursey, by all means!" said Nelly, though half afraid of what she might have to listen to; "it wants an hour to the dressing-bell yet, and it's a long time since you and I have had a talk together."

Old Aggie, who had always been a privileged nuisance with her young mistress, was, as may readily be imagined, still more so now. She had given up a great deal in leaving her quiet little village, and following the fortunes of the brother and sister, and she would have done so for no one less dear to her than Nelly was. She was a most faithful attendant on Bertie, notwithstanding her increasing age and infirmities; and Nelly would have suffered twice as much in being separated from her brother, if she had not felt

that he had his nurse with him to supply her place. Poor old Aggie had felt very strange and uncomfortable when she first found herself placed in the midst of half a dozen modern servants, who ridiculed her for the punctilious manner in which she discharged all her duties, and spoke of her employers behind their backs. But her real worth had caused all such little unpleasantnesses, after a while, to melt away, and give place to the respect which she deserved. Still she always averred that she only stayed in Hilstone for the sake of "her child," and that if anything happened to Miss Nelly, she should be the first to go back to Little Bickton, and leave Master Robert to shift for himself. "As he deserved," she would add, indignantly. But Aggie never ventured to hint at such a contingency to Master Robert's sister, for her nurse was the last remnant of Bickton life which remained to Nelly, and she would have been miserable if she had thought it possible that they could ever be separated again.

When they had entered the dressing-room on the present occasion, and Aggie, (after having carefully ascertained that no listener lurked in the adjoining apartment) had closed both the doors leading to that and to the passage, she took a chair close to her mistress, and bent her face down to hers.

"Miss Nelly, my dear!" she commenced in the husky whisper of old age, "what I want to speak to you about, is Master Robert — he's laying very heavy on my mind, my dear; and I can't feel it right to keep it to myself no longer."

Nelly had little idea but that the woman was going to tell her, what, to her grief, she knew already — that her brother kept hours most unfitted both to his health

and respectability; but as she had no hope that discussing the fact would remedy it, she tried to evade the subject by saying lightly, though with a heightened colour:

"Why, Nursey, I thought your communication was to concern Thug — at all events, tell me where the dear old dog is."

"I don't think Thug is of much consequence compared to the other," replied old Aggie, "but it's part of my story, anyhow. The dog's been took behind the stables, Miss Nelly, by the doctor's orders, and tied up along with them nasty, hungry-looking greyhounds, and it's all Master Robert's doing — every bit of it!"

Nelly turned quite pale.

"But how is that?" she exclaimed.

"Why! it seems when Master Robert came in last night, he caught sight of Mrs. Prowse's cloak, which she had left behind her in the afternoon, a-hanging up in the hall, and what should he go for to do, but to tie it round that dog's neck, and send him to sleep on the landing here, with the hood right over his head!"

"Oh! how inconsiderate! how thoughtless!" cried Nelly, "and when I am always begging Bertie to be more careful about offending Mrs. Prowse! But why didn't you take it off again, Nurse?"

"My dear!" said the old woman, solemnly, "do you think, if I had gone for to see it, that I wouldn't have took it off again? But I was in the bed-room, and never heard nothing of it till this moment. And when the doctor come in, which he didn't do till quite early this morning, and see the dog lying there, with

the cloak wrapped under and over him, Mr. Long says his oaths was something awful; and he ordered him to chain him up behind the stable as soon as ever a place could be made ready for him. And the carpenter's been a knocking up a kennel all the morning."

"And he never told *me*," said Nelly, almost forgetting, in her distress, to whom she was speaking; "how unkind! He might have known it was not *my* fault."

"My dear! the doctor's not a gentleman to speak all that's on his mind, remember! Most like he forgot the order as soon as he had given it!"

"But what can Bertie have been thinking of?" exclaimed Nelly, eager to change the subject from her husband's indifference to her feelings; "What on earth could make him play so silly a trick, and one which he must have known would get the poor dog into a scrape. He pretends to be so fond of Thug, and yet he does all he can to render him a cause of annoyance!"

"Ah! Miss Nelly! that just brings me to what I feel I must speak to you about. Neither Master Robert's ways, my dear, nor his doings, are such as they ought to be, and if he don't stop them, they'll bring him to great trouble before long."

"Are you alluding to his health, Nurse? I know his cough is very troublesome, poor darling! But this weather is so much against him."

"His cough is bad, Miss Nelly, sure enough, but he makes it a deal worse than he need — not a drop of the mixture can I persuade him to take, either by day or by night. He won't do nothing without you, my dear; and now that you ain't about him so much

as you used to be, I might as well speak to that there table, I'm sure it's little rest I get at night, now-a-days, and it's little rest he can get himself, either, poor lad — for if I'm wore out with the constant noise of his coughing, what must he be with the exertion!"

Nelly's answering sigh came from the bottom of her heart. She had known all this before, and had pondered and wept over it, without finding any possible remedy. Bertie was obstinate, so was her husband; and between the two she could do nothing!

"But that ain't the worst of it, Miss Nelly, by a long deal," continued old Aggie.

"What *can* be worse," said Nelly. "He'll kill himself if he will not listen to reason."

"He's going a much shorter way to do that, my dear, than by refusing all the medicine in the world."

"What do you mean, Nurse?" exclaimed the girl, suddenly turning to the old woman, and seizing her arm. "Oh! what *do* you mean? tell me quickly."

"Miss Nelly, my bird! do you remember the night at Bickton Farm, before you writ to tell the doctor as you'd take him?" said Aggie, gazing steadily at the eager face upturned to hers, whilst she fondly stroked the hand which had grasped her own. The bright flush of excitement which had mounted to Nelly's cheeks receded from them little by little, leaving a deadly pallor behind it. Remember it! ah! did she not? the unsteady gait, the horrid sickly leer, the unintelligible babble, which had so shocked and frightened her! She read the truth at once in Aggie's compassionate glance, and closing her eyes as though she would shut out sense and feeling, Nelly leaned back in silence on her chair. The old woman, alarmed at

her appearance, scrambled up from her seat, and procuring a bottle of eau-de-cologne from the dressing-table, poured it plentifully over her mistress's face and hands.

"That will do, Nurse," said Nelly quietly, as the fragrant scent ran down her neck and bosom, "don't be frightened; I never faint, you know, and I feel all right again now, and able to listen to what you have to say. But," — with an effort to restrain her emotion — "pray be quick about it."

"There ain't much more to tell, my dearie," resumed the nurse. "I wish I had been dead before I had to tell it, but I feel you ought to know. As it was then, Miss Nelly, so it is now; and not once, but almost every night in the week. You don't see it, my dear, because he lies late of a morning, and you're in bed before he returns of a night; but all the servants know it for a truth. Why, he's just as often carried up them stairs as he walks them, Miss Nelly. And that will account to you for all his tricks, for half the times he knows no more what he's doing than the babe unborn."

Nelly recalled with a shudder the various noises to which she had so often listened on Bertie's return, without guessing the cause; and from shame and vexation combined, she began to cry.

"Now, don't you do that, Miss Nelly!" urged the old nurse, "it can't do him no manner of good, you know, and it may do yourself some harm. But, as you must perceive, such habits is quite sufficient to ruin anyone's health, let alone a sickly creature like Master Robert. Why at this rate his life won't be worth a day's purchase soon."

"But where does he get it, Nurse? where does he get the stuff which makes him in that horrid state?" asked Nelly with averted eyes and burning cheeks.

"Lor', my dear, in a town like this he can get it in a dozen places. He didn't find no difficulty remember, even at Bickton; and when a man's once set upon that course he'd find a tap in the sandy desert. It isn't my usual way you know, Miss Nelly — to speak of the concerns of my betters — I've been reared very different from that: but I thought it was my duty when I see how Master Robert was going on, just to ask John where he mostly wheels him to of an evening. And it seems that his favourite place is the 'Feathers,' where they keep a billiard-table unbeknown; and where, if he's ever likely to fall in company with a gentleman, 'tain't with such a one as you would like to see your brother making friends with, nor as the doctor would be pleased to hear that he even knew. And John says that he's there regular, for two or three hours almost every night, and that when he ain't fit to walk, they sends him home in a fly or a chair. And a pretty lot of his money, I'll lay, they've took from him before now."

"Aggie," exclaimed Nelly, horror struck at the woman's recital, "what can I do? what can I say to convince Bertie that he is ruining himself?"

"I don't see that it will be any manner of use your speaking to him, Miss Nelly. Most likely it will only aggravate him to do worse. He ain't a pliable nature, Master Robert, nor never were. From a baby the only way to get him to do anything, was to beg of him not."

"But it *must* be put a stop to," said Nelly; "I

should never forgive myself if I did not try, Aggie! I will speak to him at once," and she rose as if for the purpose. But the nurse detained her.

"Speak to the doctor, my dear, that's your only plan. Nothing else won't do no good."

"To Dr. Monkton," exclaimed the girl in alarm, "oh! no, Aggie, he would be so angry, he would never forgive him; and then Bertie and he might come to words about it, and there is no saying how it would end."

"Angry about it, Miss Nelly? In course he would; 'twould be a marvel indeed, otherwise. But that's just what may be the saving of Master Robert. Your speaking won't do no good. You'll kiss him and cry over him, and beg him for his own sake and your'n to be more steady, and he'll swear to all you ask him, and be just the same two days afterwards. But let the doctor, as has the real authority in this house, tell him as he won't stand it no longer from him, and it'll make all the difference in the world. Now, do try it, my dear. Go to your husband on the first opportunity, and tell him how Master Robert's going on, and beg of him to save his health and his life for you. The doctor won't refuse you nothing, my bird. He loves you too much surely, to wish to see you unhappy. Lor', lor'! what a deal you've gone through in your short life," continued the old woman as Nelly's face was hidden in her lap, "he's amost wore you out, my blessing, with his whims and his ways, but there's a reward for you up above, never fear. And there'll be a reward for you here below too, if I don't mistake; for 'tis morally impossible that anyone with a human heart, could stand out for ever against such patient love as your'n."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Thug sleeps on the Landing for the last Time.

BUT notwithstanding all her nurse's persuasions to the contrary, Nelly could not make up her mind to ask the advice of her husband on the subject of Bertie's delinquencies. She knew at once too little of him — and too much! Too little, when that sweet familiarity and perfect confidence which ought to exist between persons connected by so close a tie are taken into consideration, and too much as regarded his undisguised antipathy towards her brother.

But, to put in a word of entreaty for poor Thug was an easier task. In her horror and shame at the distressing news which Aggie had told her about Bertie, Nelly had almost lost sight of the annoyance which she would otherwise have felt at her favourite being put in durance for his sake. But in reality, it was no small trouble to her. She was fresh and childlike in most of her feelings, and she loved the dog, as only girls before the cares of maternity come upon them, can love the animals which they have reared for themselves. From the hour when he had been first presented to her, a little blind puppy with a very wide mouth, the mastiff had been her constant companion and friend. To him she had confided, very foolishly no doubt, everything which either gave her pain or pleasure, but as amongst his other virtues, Thug did not possess the faculty of repetition, his mistress might perhaps have chosen her confidant less wisely. Throughout his existence of seven years' duration, a short space enough to the man of middle-age, but a considerable

item when deducted from Nelly's nineteen summers, her dog and she had never been separated, except on that memorable occasion when she left her home for Orpington Chase. From his whining puppyhood, when she would proudly take him out for a run upon the common, and losing the scent and sound of her advancing footsteps, he would throw his little head into the air and turn round and round in yapping helplessness until she ran back to pick him up again; throughout his romping, rollicking youth, and the sedate though not less rough attentions of his maturity, Thug and his mistress had been the most inseparable of allies. He had always accompanied her in her walks; sat beside her at her meals, and lain snoring outside her bed-room door at night. He had been reared so tenderly, and treated so well, that he hardly knew the meaning of correction, and a chain and collar were immediate signals for his rebellion. Nelly knew this perfectly, and the idea of what the animal must be suffering tied up amongst strangers, and in a strange place, worried her greatly; and, added to which, Thug had not been well during the previous week. He had never thrown out the distemper so decidedly as to be unmistakably such; and she had more than once remarked lately from his heavy drooping look and loss of appetite, that she feared he was going to take to baby-disorders in his old age. Every now and then, during the pauses in the meal which was just past, a long mournful howl, too far off to be distinctly heard, but quite near enough to catch her listening ear, had nearly driven the tears into her eyes; and when, after dinner, she found herself alone with her husband, her anxiety for Thug's restoration to his good graces over-

came the natural timidity which she felt on approaching so dangerous a subject.

Bertie — with whom the dog was almost as great a favourite as with his sister — had evidently learned the reason of his disappearance, for he had scarcely opened his lips all dinner-time; but Dr. Monkton, who had, as old Aggie surmised, “most-like forgot the order” as soon as he had given it, was much the same in manner as usual. But evidently some very unpleasant recollection attached to the circumstance, for as soon as Nelly mentioned the dog’s name, his brow clouded over, and his face assumed a look of the greatest determination.

“James!” she commenced hurriedly, “I have missed poor old Thug so this afternoon.”

She was sitting under the lamp-light, engaged in needlework. She did not go and throw herself down by the side of her husband, as on a former occasion, for since she had arrived at a more perfect knowledge of her heart, Nelly had felt a shrinking from him which she had tried in vain to overcome. Any chance of her loving him had been nipped in the bud long before; but now, even her unreserve shrunk abashed into a corner, as though merely to show itself mere deception. When she had ventured to make her remark she glanced up fearfully, to see how it had been taken.

Dr. Monkton was standing by the mantelpiece, and frowning terribly.

“You must learn to do without him, anyhow, Helena, for I have no intention of setting him at liberty again.”

The work dropped from her hands upon the table.

"Oh! not really, James? You are not in earnest? If he is not let loose to sleep in the house as usual he will howl so dreadfully all night, and I shall lie awake and listen to him."

"If that is the case," replied the doctor coolly, "he must be muzzled."

"But he will be frantic, James! He will go mad. Thug has never been used to any restraint in his life."

"Then it is high time he became used to it," replied Dr. Monkton. "A mastiff is not a proper dog for the house; he is not even a safe dog to keep loose about the promises."

"He has never hurt anyone since he was born," said Nelly mournfully, "and he will fret so dreadfully, away from Bertie and me. Just hear how he is howling at this moment! Oh! James — *do* let him loose. He shall never come into the sitting-rooms nor annoy you in any way, if you will but let him stay here as he used to do. He will die if he is always kept chained up to a kennel."

At the idea of a powerful brute like Thug dying of a chain and collar, Dr. Monkton laughed immoderately.

"You don't know what nonsense you are talking, Helena! However, if being kept in his proper place is to prove the death of Thug, I am afraid he must be sacrificed — for he will never take up his abode in this house again. I am tired of having my property and that of my friends, destroyed by an animal."

"But that wasn't Thug's fault," exclaimed Nelly, almost forgetting whose it was in her anxiety to defend her favourite.

"Perhaps so," returned her husband; "but it is not the first time that he has been made the means of annoyance to my friends, and a direct defiance of my own orders. Your brother has done all he can to upset the peace and regularity of this household, Helena; but I have at all events removed one temptation out of his reach. He will no longer have Thug to practise any of his drunken tricks upon. We shall see what method he next adopts of exhibiting his gentlemanly behaviour and feelings."

At this avowal that her husband was aware of what she had trusted he was in ignorance, Nelly grew so alarmed that she had no further anxiety to waste upon poor Thug. She clasped her hands together and looked up into his face imploringly as she exclaimed:

"Oh! James—I never heard of it until to-day—I had no idea of such a thing until old Aggie told me. And she says that poor Bertie coughs so dreadfully all night that she can get no rest for listening to him."

"I know he does," replied the doctor, totally unmoved, as he drew a toothpick from its case, and commenced to use it.

"And it is worse—so much worse than it used to be."

"I know it is," he repeated, as indifferently as before.

"But, James! he will *kill* himself if he goes on like this."

"Of course he will," replied Dr. Monkton, still busily employed upon his teeth.

Nelly gazed at him for a moment, as if it were impossible that he could be in earnest, and then, as she marked the cold, sarcastic, unchanged expression of his

face, she sprang at him, as though she had gone wild, and shook him by the arm.

"James! James! for God's sake don't look at me like that! Say that you will save him! tell me that you will do all in your power to restore him to health, and break him of these dreadful habits! You *can* do it! You know you can do it if you try! It is but such a little while that he has taken to them; surely it will not be so difficult to win him back again! My speaking is of no avail, but he will listen to you if you reason with him kindly. Oh! James, say that you will talk to him, for my sake!"

But Dr. Monkton, once bent upon a thing, was not the man to be moved by a woman's tearful entreaties. He quietly disengaged himself from the excited grasp of his wife's hand, and resumed the operation with which she had interfered.

"I intend to speak to him," he replied, "and very decidedly, but I have no such hopes of the result as you appear to entertain! and as to his cough, it has gone too far. Medicine may alleviate it, perhaps, but nothing will stop it until his breath is stopped altogether."

She had relinquished her hold of him, and sunk down into her former place, and when his cruel words were ended, nothing was to be heard in the room but the sound of her quiet sobbing.

Sympathising so little with the cause, the sight of Nelly's grief had no power to move Dr. Monkton, and after the silence of a few minutes, he deliberately wiped his toothpick, replaced it in its case, and left the room, and when he had adjusted his great coat in the hall, she heard him quit the house. For a long

time she remained there, with her face buried in her hands, considering what was best to be done. One thing was evident, she must act alone; it was useless, at all events in his present mood, to look for aid or advice to her husband.

And the danger was imminent; there was no time to be lost; she must see, and speak with Bertie before he had an interview with Dr. Monkton, that she might implore him for both their sakes, to be patient and forbearing, and not bring his disagreement with his brother-in-law to an open rupture.

As the thought struck her, she rose to seek him, lest by any chance he might be in his own room; but, as usual, he was absent. Then Nelly's mind, distracted for the moment from the work she had in hand, reverted to her dog, and wrapping a warm cloak about her shoulders, with the hood over her head, she ventured out upon a visit to the stables. The grooms and coachman, who were snugly enjoying their pipes and newspapers by a fire in the harness-room, were quite startled by the sudden appearance of their young mistress, until they heard the errand on which she had come. But they all knew how she loved her dog, and had been proportionately indignant at receiving orders to tie him up. The coachman himself volunteered to guide her to the mastiff's kennel, and through the damp and dirt of the outbuildings Nelly followed him gladly, in hopes of carrying some comfort to her disconsolate Thug.

"He ain't 'owled 'alf so much, ma'am, the last hour or so," remarked the coachman, who instinctively felt that his lady required a little cheering on the subject. "It don't come natural to him to be tied up just at

first, I dare say, but he'll get used to it by-and-bye, ma'am, as you'll see, and enjoy his runs all the more for not having been loose all day. There's the kennel, ma'am, I had it placed very snug and dry, knowing he'd been so pampered, so he won't come to no harm of wet or cold. Here! Thug, Thug! old fellow!" and the coachman whistled, and Nelly called, and then the stable lantern, which the former carried, was turned upon the kennel, and to their surprise it was empty!

"Well, now, that's strange!" said the man. "He can't have broke away, for here's the chain and collar, and yet I never hear no one about the place this evening. But master, he come to the stables before he went out, ma'am, to give his orders concerning the horses, and I shouldn't at all wonder if he took it in his mind to give the dog a run. Any way, he can't be lost."

Nelly was not at all afraid of this herself, she even thought it might be as the coachman had suggested, and, hoping that if her husband proved better than his word in one instance, he might do so in the other, she hurried back to the house. Contrary to her customary obedience, and notwithstanding Aggie's evident desire to get her into bed, she sat up till twelve o'clock that night, in hopes of seeing and speaking with her brother; but when the hour struck without having brought him home, fear, lest her husband should be the first to return, made her comply with the nurse's entreaties, that she would at least disencumber herself of her apparel. But two minutes afterwards she repented her tardy acquiescence, for hardly was she robed in her dressing-gown, before the stoppage of a fly at the front

door, and the subsequent sound of Bertie's voice in the hall, told her that what she had waited for was at hand.

Old Aggie left her to receive her master, and Nelly stood with the door of her dressing-room just unclosed, ready to call to her brother, as soon as he should have reached the landing; but what was her chagrin and disappointment when his slow progress upstairs was accomplished, to see that he was accompanied by both Long and the footman, and that it evidently was as much as they could do to persuade him to go quietly to his bed; and following close upon his footsteps, not with his usual impetuous rush, but inertly and heavily, she saw to her amazement — Thug!

Bertie appeared in the highest spirits. By the lamp on the landing, and the candle carried by the nurse, Nelly could perceive that the flush on his delicate face, the false brilliance in his eyes, and the careless manner in which his hair was tossed back from his forehead, gave him a debonnair air, which, whilst it struck a chill to her heart, was infinitely becoming to himself. He looked so handsome, as he stood at the head of the stairs, alternately joking with the men-servants, and abusing the poor old nurse for begging him to come into his bed-room, and she felt him to be so very dear, that it was as much as she could do to refrain from leaving her room, and joining her entreaties to those of his attendants; but she trusted every moment that Aggie's persuasion might prove successful, and that the men might go away, and leave her at liberty to do as she chose.

But the next minute she perceived that the difficulty lay in the fact that Bertie would not permit Long to take the mastiff back again to the stables.

"The dog sleeps *here*," he said authoritatively. "He has always done so, and I will not permit him to be removed. Here Thug! my good fellow! there's your bed!" and he pulled a fluffy sheepskin mat from before the door of Dr. Monkton's dressing-room, and threw it down in the centre of the landing; and upon which, Thug, in the same heavy, drooping manner, immediately ensconced himself.

But the servants evidently foresaw, what Nelly had at once realised, that this fresh act of rebellion would be the cause of an aggravated quarrel between the doctor and his brother-in-law, and endeavoured all they dared to dissuade the young man from persisting in his determination.

"Now, Mr. Brooke," said Long, speaking as though he addressed an obstinate child, "do let me take the animal down again. He'll lie just as comfortable in his kennel as here, you know; and the doctor will blame me perhaps, if he finds him on the landing again."

"Blame you?" loudly exclaimed Bertie, "and what if he does? If he blames you, give him warning, that's my advice. Don't stand his nonsense any more than I do. As to that dog, he belongs to me, and not to the doctor. He may tie up his own mangy hounds as much as he likes; and himself too, into the bargain; but he sha'n't tie up my mastiff, and if he's bent upon it, let him do it himself, ha! ha! Let him come up here with a chain and a collar, and lay a finger upon Thug when I've once told him to lie still, ha! ha! He'll see what he'll get for his pains. Your doctor won't cure himself in a hurry after that, ha! ha!"

At this most thoughtless speech, the men grinned

as servants will when their superiors lower themselves for their amusement. The old nurse in vain put in her feeble warnings, and Nelly shrunk behind the door deeply ashamed for her brother, and fearful lest she should be known to have overheard him.

"But, we could bring him up the first thing in the morning, sir," urged the footman, anxious only to get the dog away until his owner should have recovered his senses. "They'll be wondering what's become of him down at the stables, and coming up here, may be, to enquire. Better let him go back for to-night, sir."

But Robert Brooke was not to be persuaded; he swore with an oath, such as his sister had never heard proceed from his mouth before, that the mastiff should pass the night on that rug, and nowhere else; and that if the doctor saw him there, all the better, it was just what he wished and intended him to do.

"Bertie, Bertie dearest, let him go," exclaimed Nelly, at this juncture, forgetting everything but the dread of her husband's anger.

"Holloa, my darling, are you there?" replied Bertie, all his real feeling for her bubbling to the surface in the unguarded state into which he had thrown himself. "You won't have old Thug kicked out on a night like this, Nelly dear, will you?"

"Let him go, dear Bertie, pray let him go, I implore you," she said, retreating behind the door as her brother staggered up against it.

"You faithless vixen!" he exclaimed, "have *you* gone over to the Philistines? Old Thug won't thank you for your advice, Nell. Why, where are you hiding yourself? Come out of that!" and with a rude effort, he pushed the door wide open.

By that time Nelly was in the centre of the room, but the men-servants thinking that the scene was best without a witness, after one or two ineffectual attempts to coax Thug to follow them, went down stairs again, leaving Robert Brooke alone with the women.

Nelly saw, of course, that it would be useless attempting to speak to her brother that night upon the subject which occupied her mind. All she could do, was by coaxing, entreaty, and numberless caresses, to induce him, as soon as might be, to retire to his bed. But the task was by no means an easy, or a speedy one. Poor Bertie happened to be in a very loving mood, and Nelly had missed his old tenderness so grievously of late, that she had not the heart to cut his little grateful and repentant speeches short. But as soon as she had persuaded him (by many a promise not to quit his side until he should be fast asleep) to lie down; and having watched him fall off into a heavy slumber, had gently disengaged her hand from his clasp, she hurried again upon the landing. All her thought now was, how to get rid of Thug, before her husband returned. The dog was sleeping as she imagined, upon the rug which Bertie had thrown to him; but when, with the candle in her hand, she stooped to pat his head, she saw that his eyes were open.

"I am sure that Thug is not well," she remarked to Aggie, who was close behind her, "just see how dull his eyes are, Nurse, and his nose is as hot as fire. Poor old dear, it's a shame to turn you out again when you have made yourself so comfortable, but I dare not let you stay. Come, Thug, old man, get up, don't be so lazy. Come, get up, old fellow," and she pushed the animal's sides with the intention of urging him to

rise. But Thug, usually so lively, seemed this night to be either very indolent or very sulky. His heavy eyes followed the light of the candle which she carried, in a remarkable manner; but he showed no other sign of recognition, although Nelly laid her soft cheek against his forehead in her distress at his obstinacy and apparent illness.

"Aggie!" she exclaimed, "this must not be. Dr. Monkton will return home soon, and must not find Thug here. It will make him so angry. Do go down stairs and beg either Long or John to bring up a chain and collar."

"Lor, my deary, do you know what time it is. It's past two, and they must have been abed long ago. And who will be up to receive the dog in the stables either, at this time in the morning? No one; and it would be unreasonable to expect it. No, Miss Nelly, it's unfortunate as the animal's here again, but it's just part and parcel of Master Robert's tricks, and as it is so, best let him bide till daylight: very like the doctor won't be home at all till morning, for Mr. Long says as he's gone right into the country, and I'll be stirring the first thing, my dear, and engage to take Thug back to the kennel myself. So the best thing you can do is, to get a wink of sleep, for you must be rarely tired."

And so Nelly — having no better suggestion to make herself — yielded to old Aggie's persuasion; and after a vain endeavour to withdraw the fluffy mat from beneath Thug's carcass, for which he saluted her, to her amazement, with a low growl, she submitted to being tucked up in her own bed, where, after a while, fatigue overcoming her grief and anxiety, she fell asleep.

CHAPTER XIX.

Dr. Monkton's Revenge.

WHEN Dr. Monkton left the house that evening it was with no thought of enmity against his wife. That she should plead for the restoration of her favourite's liberty, and try to find excuses for her brother's misconduct, was but natural; and however little sympathy her husband felt in her distress, he could not, in common justice, be angry with her for it. But with regard to Robert Brooke, he entertained very different feelings, and, as he told Nelly, had fully made up his mind to speak to him with decision. The fact being that he had never really contemplated his brother-in-law taking up a permanent residence in his house. It had been very convenient to tell his wife so in the days of his courtship, when any idea to the contrary would have frightened her away from him; but he had known from the commencement that it was a plan which could never be either lasting or successful, and he felt that the time had already come when it should be changed. One of his own proposals at the period of his marriage, (and which, although he but desired it in furtherance of the event now contemplated, had made poor Nelly consider him the most generous of men) had been, that the two thousand pounds left to the twins by their grandfather should be settled upon the brother alone, so that he might feel himself to be independent of his sister. And as Dr. Monkton had agreed to settle double that sum upon his intended wife, Mr. Ray had eagerly assented to the proposition, and thought with Nelly that it was a most satisfactory

proof of the doctor's honourable intentions towards them both.

But this very act of generosity now rendered the way clear for the ejection of his brother-in-law.

Robert Brooke could not complain that he was thrust forth helpless and penniless upon the world: he had an income of his own to spend as he thought fit, and the sooner he killed himself with it the better, so Dr. Monkton inwardly decided. He was weary of the continued opposition shewn to his wishes by his wife's brother; weary of hearing the tales repeated against him by Mrs. Prowse, and of the discredit he was bringing upon his name and establishment by repeated acts of folly and drunkenness.

He felt no disposition to remonstrate and argue with him as Nelly had entreated him to do: had he done so, and thereby worked a change, he would have regretted his forbearance; for he was sick of Robert Brooke, and only wanted to get rid of him altogether. He thought that his wife would be more his own when her brother was out of the way; that she would be more interested in his affairs, more affectionate towards himself; more submissive, even he acknowledged, she could not be.

What Nelly would feel at the proposed change had no share in his consideration: James Monkton had determined that his house should be freed from the obnoxious presence of his brother-in-law, and had that end been obtainable only by stepping over the dead body of his wife, it would not have caused him to swerve from his purpose.

He had been opposed, and openly rebelled against, and he was set upon having his revenge.

Such were his thoughts as he took his way into the country, by the time he returned more important matters had driven them from his mind. Dr. Monkton never used his own horses at night, and he almost regretted it on this occasion, as he was jolted homewards for about twelve miles in a hack conveyance, and on a cold, dark, November morning.

Though he had plenty to occupy his mind, for the case to which he had been summoned was an intricate one, and he was very desirous to pull the patient through it, because the family doctor had pronounced such to be hopeless. So there he sat, knitting his dark eye-brows, and ransacking his clever brain for a new expedient, and hardly noticed that it was six o'clock, and the dawn was breaking, until he paid the fare at his own portals.

Early as it was, however, the attentive Long heard his master's latchkey in the door, and was up at once, eager to ascertain whether he would take a cup of coffee, or wait until he had obtained an hour's rest. But the doctor had already been drenched with hot coffee at the house from which he had come, and declined to take any refreshment except sleep, with which intention he set his foot upon the staircase, closely followed by his attendant.

But as he reached the landing, he started back with an abruptness which nearly sent Long down the stairs again. The lamp which usually burned all night upon the corridor was out, but the grey morning light streaming through the unshuttered window, and the candle carried by the servant, were quite sufficient to reveal the burly carcass of the mastiff, Thug, stretched

out upon the fluffy sheepskin mat, passive, though awake.

"Whose work is this?" said Dr. Monkton, turning to the man behind him.

He did not speak loudly, nor (apparently) angrily; but with a look in his eyes, and an expression about his mouth, which Long had seen before and learned to dread. For his own part, the servant had till then, totally forgotten the occurrence of the past night, and although, being a good-natured fellow, he was usually ready to hide the foibles of Robert Brooke as much as possible from his master's notice, he was too much afraid of the consequences on the present occasion not to lay the blame where it was due.

"Whose work is this?" repeated Dr. Monkton; "by whose order was that dog brought back into the house?"

"By no one's, sir, that I am aware of," replied Long, "he followed Mr. Brooke when he returned home last night, and though John and me tried all we could to persuade him to let us take the animal back to the stables, the young gentleman didn't seem inclined to it, and so the dog stayed here. I did all I could, I assure you, sir," he repeated, observing the ominous look which was creeping over his master's face, "I told Mr. Brooke that I knew 'twould be against your wishes, and my mistress, she told him the same, sir, but it was all of no use."

"At what time did this occur?"

"At twelve, sir, or thereabouts."

"And your mistress was up at that hour?"

At this question, poor Long, who fancied he was

about to drag Nelly into the scrape as well, stammered more than was needful.

"I don't know as she was rightly 'up,' sir; I didn't see my mistress, but she spoke to Mr. Brooke from her dressing-room."

"Go down to the stables, and fetch me a chain and collar."

At this order, portentous from its very brevity, Long disappeared as quickly as he could, and after the necessary delay returned with the articles requested, accompanied by his fellow-labourer, John.

Dr. Monkton, instead of being in his room, was still standing on the landing, gazing moodily upon the mastiff, who appeared to return the gaze with interest from his red, sleepless eyes.

"Put it on," he said, referring to the chain and collar, as the men reached his side. Neither of them seemed to relish the command, but the footman, being most accustomed to the dog, was brave enough to attempt its fulfilment. But as he stooped towards the animal's throat, Thug quietly raised his head, and displayed all his fangs, at which John started up rather more quickly than he had knelt down.

"Stand back!" said Long, "and let me try — you don't go the right way about it, John," and taking the collar from the other's hand, he approached the mastiff with a word of encouragement. "Come now, old fellow! there — there — gently — that's right!" but just as he had said "that's right," and laid his hand upon him, Thug gave a growl, which might have warned a braver man to be more prudent, and sent Mr. Long against the opposite wall with as much, if not greater agility, than had been previously exhibited by John.

"Why don't you collar the brute?" demanded the doctor, getting impatient at the delay.

"Well, sir, 't isn't such an easy matter," replied Long ruefully; "he's been told to lie there, you see, and I expect no one will be able to move him, except 'tis his master or mistress. He's a rare 'un to obey, *I* know! And I shouldn't like to get a bite from him no more than any other would."

"*Bite!*" exclaimed the doctor, contemptuously, "why, he's as gentle as a lamb! However, if you're afraid of that, I'll muzzle him," and walking into his dressing-room, he presently returned with a strap muzzle.

Apparently anxious to show his men what he thought of their pusillanimous fears, Dr. Monkton disdained to make use of any coaxing or persuasion towards the mastiff, but silently approaching him with the muzzle in his hand, deliberately knelt down in order to apply it. But Thug was not the inoffensive lamb-like creature he had described him to be. He had not forgotten the thrashing so lately received from the same hand which now attempted to strap together his powerful jaws, and before the doctor had had time to perceive his danger or to regard the warning cry with which the servants saluted him, the dog, half rising from his recumbent position, had seized and bitten him through the fingers, and but for a timely retreat, had next attacked his throat. For even as Long and the footman, alarmed for their master's safety, forcibly dragged him beyond the animal's immediate reach, Thug, with a low, strange sound, which was neither a bark, a growl, nor a moan, darted forwards, and with the evident intention of springing, fixed his glaring,

angry eyes upon the doctor's form. But, before the men were able to do more than contemplate the threatened horror, the dog had sunk back again upon the sheepskin mat, as though exhausted by the effort he had made.

But neither the suddenness of the animal's attack, the danger, nor the alarm of his companions, had any power to divert Dr. Monkton's attention from a resolution instantaneously but irrevocably formed.

He turned away from all the eager enquiries and persuasions of his servants, to issue one command —

“Bring me my gun!”

But even Long's fears for his own safety gave way before the strangeness of such a request.

“Here, sir? what in the house?” he exclaimed.

“Bring me my gun!” was the only answer he received, given in a tone of determination, which could neither be mistaken nor disobeyed.

Meanwhile Thug's strange, low cry, which had not had the power to stir Bertie from his torpid slumbers, had fully roused his poor little mistress.

Nelly had gone to sleep, dreading each moment to hear her husband's step upon the stairs; and as is usual in such cases, her rest had been so broken and disturbed that as soon as the dog's howl sounded in her ear, she started up, fully awake, believing he had come. And there she lay, listening to the subdued voices on the landing, wondering whose they were, and what they could portend, and yet not daring at first to do more than listen to them.

Long, keeping a good watch upon the dreaded animal the while, found his way into the dressing-room, and procuring the gun, delivered it into his master's

hand. It was always kept loaded—in another moment it was on full cock, and with his finger on the trigger, and a look of malicious pleasure on his face, Dr. Monkton cautiously advanced towards the prostrate mastiff.

Poor Thug seemed to know what was in store for him. He made no further effort in his own defence, but merely shut his eyes, and shivered, as the barrel of the gun touched his ear, and the contents were discharged into his brain.

Such a report was sufficient to arouse and alarm every inmate of the house, however soundly they may have been sleeping.

A scream from one side of the corridor, and a shout followed by an oath from the other, announced that the two persons most interested in the mastiff's fate, would soon appear to learn it for themselves; but that fact did not seem to affect the perpetrator of the deed further than by apprising him that it would be as well if the two men-servants were first removed from the scene of action.

"Take this down with you," he said, carelessly, as he delivered his gun to Long, "and draw the other charge. It has been loaded for such a time that it is quite a chance it did not miss fire;" and then as the men retreated, leaving the dead body of the mastiff upon the landing, and the door of his wife's dressing-room was flung open, he turned quite as coolly to confront the scared face, and trembling figure of poor Nelly.

"Oh! James!" she exclaimed, "what has happened, what have you done?" and then her quick eyes roving to where the form of Thug lay outstretched upon the

sheepskin mat stained with his blood, she flew across the corridor and flung herself down by his side.

"Oh! have you killed my dog? How cruel! how unjust! My poor dog — whom I loved so much, and who never did you any harm. Oh! how could you be so cruel — so very *very* cruel? Oh! Thug — my poor Thug — how I used to love you!" and in a burst of grief she hid her face on the dead creature's body, and wept passionately.

"Yes! I have killed him, Helena!" interposed the cold, modulated tones of her husband's voice, "as I should kill any animal who is turned into a nuisance for my annoyance. But you need not look so indignantly at me about it. If you have any one to thank for this occurrence it is your brother. He is the murderer of your dog — not myself."

"*I am?*" exclaimed a voice on the other side of them, where Bertie, sobered by his night's rest, appeared, at the door of his own room. "What do you mean by saying so? — What have *I* had to do with it?"

"Everything!" returned the doctor, "but your day is over, Robert Brooke. Your follies, as far as they concern our peace, die with your sister's dog."

CHAPTER XX.

Nelly and Bertie are parted.

"By what right," exclaimed Bertie, in tones the haughtiness of which, had her attention not been absorbed by grief for her slaughtered favourite, would not have failed to excite the alarm of his sister, "By what right," he repeated, advancing to the centre of the landing, and confronting his brother-in-law, "do

you first destroy property which does not belong to you, and then tax me with being the cause of your violence. I shall be obliged if you will explain yourself."

"I fully intend to do so," replied Dr. Monkton as he slowly and methodically wound a handkerchief about the fingers which bore traces of poor Thug's farewell. "In the first place, the animal was mine to do as I chose with. He belonged to my wife, and our possessions are in common — he proved himself dangerous, and I am perfectly justified in putting him out of the way. In the second, had you left him in the kennel, where I had given orders he should abide, he would probably have been alive at this moment. By bringing him here, your sister has, as I told her before, only yourself to thank for his death."

"That is a paltry excuse," said Robert Brooke in return, "the dog was ours, and you knew and acknowledged it."

"Paltry or not, it must stand," replied the doctor, "as I intend to make no other. But it is time that this sort of thing was put a stop to. You have now been a guest in my house for many months, and the long and the short of it is, Robert Brooke, that you have outstayed your welcome. If we are not to quarrel irrevocably, we must part."

At these words Nelly started from her kneeling position and leant against the balustrades, gazing from one man to the other with wide staring eyes.

"A guest?" said Robert Brooke with heightened colour, and in a tone of interrogation.

"Yes, a guest, most certainly," repeated the doctor with the utmost nonchalance. "You did not suppose I

intended to charge you for your board and lodging, did you? That is not my way of treating the friends who honour me by staying beneath my roof."

"It was not as a *guest* that you spoke of my living with you when we were at Little Bickton," said the other in a trembling voice.

"Did I not?" was the careless reply. "If so, the reason was, perhaps, because I hoped at that time that your visits here would be so frequent and prolonged, that you would come at last to look upon Hilstone almost in the light of a home. But such an idea, as you must perceive, would be preposterous now. You dislike the place, you refuse to conform to the rules of this establishment, or to recognise the master of it, in myself; added to which your habits are such as to render you quite unfit to be the associate of your sister. There are several other reasons, unnecessary for me to particularise, which render it desirable that your visit to us should, at all events, for the present, be — what shall I call it?" he continued, smiling, — "I can hardly say — curtailed, considering the time it has already lasted; — well, terminated then, or let us say, postponed until a more favourable opportunity. You have your own money, you know; a sufficiency for your maintenance has been settled on you, therefore you can have no excuse to make, or, as far as I can see, complaint."

"I have no wish or intention of making either," replied Robert Brooke, who had nevertheless turned very pale at the prospect of parting with his sister, "but if I leave your house, I leave it for ever. Do you imagine I would stay to be a pensioner on your bounty; or to run the risk of being again insulted as you have in-

sulted me this morning? No! you may force me to go, if you choose, but you will never see me again if you do."

"Bertie! Bertie! for Heaven's sake think what you are saying," cried Nelly as she darted across the landing, and seized her brother's hand. He turned, and with quivering lips and a face which was ashen-grey regarded her fondly.

"I know what I am saying, Nell, well enough; and I have one regret in saying it—yourself!"

"In that respect you must, of course, act as you see fit," replied Dr. Monkton. "It makes no alteration in what I said to you, or think concerning you. You appear to me to have made a slight mistake respecting the intentions I entertained on your behalf, previous to my marriage, but if so, it is rectified now, and not likely to occur again."

"A slight mistake!" shouted Robert Brooke, without heeding the warning pressure of his sister's hand. "You know, Monkton, that it was not a mistake. You know that before my sister consented to marry you, you not only told her that your house should be my home, but held out hopes of my restoration to health, which you have not even attempted to fulfil. Nell thought, I know she did—as I was fool enough to think too—that you were almost as interested in myself as she is; and that her marriage was to secure me every comfort for life; else, why is she here, poor child? why is she here?"

"You are not paying a high compliment to my powers of pleasing," remarked Dr. Monkton in reply. "I trust that Helena had other inducements to become my wife beside the very futile hope of seeing a miracle

performed in your behalf. If I slightly flattered her desires with respect to yourself at that period, it was only what any other man in the same situation would have done; and you, at any rate, might have been considered sober enough to calculate the chances of your cure. But you have been blinded by selfishness to everything but what should further your own good."

"How can you stand there and disclaim your own words? Did you not propose trying all kinds of devices for the strengthening of my spine? Chemical baths, and galvanism, and shampooing, and mechanical supports? Where are all the fine remedies which were to afford me relief? Which of them has been tried? which, even procured? No! you cannot deny that you lured us here under false pretences; and that you have not fulfilled one of the promises you made!"

Dr. Monkton smiled at the infuriated youth with contemptuous pity.

"I believe I have heard you use exactly the same expression, Robert, with regard to your cousin Nigel Brooke. He lured your sister to the Chase, did he not? under false pretences; and offered you his assistance doubtless, with a similar design. All the world is against you, except yourself. That fact is evident."

"Do you wish to madden me?" exclaimed Bertie as he shook off Nelly's clinging grasp and advanced to his brother-in-law, "your pretence with respect to your feeling for Nigel Brooke, is another of the vile deceptions for which, were I not cursed with this impotency, I would strike you to the ground."

"Softly, softly!" sarcastically urged Dr. Monkton, holding up a hand as though to defend himself, "you frighten me, Robert, with your threats. But, whilst

we are on the subject of deception, I have a word to say to yourself. I think we may cry quits there. What about the deception that, had it lain with yourself, would have been practised upon me with regard to my wife?"

At this question, Nelly (who, though too terrified to interfere, was watching the progress of the quarrel in the most agonising suspense) saw the same strange, grey shade steal over her brother's face, which had so much startled her once before, when her husband made a similar accusation against him at the luncheon-table.

"Deception!" he stammered, but with the desperation of one who feels that the betrayal of an important secret is close at hand, "what deception?"

"You know as well as I do," replied Dr. Monkton, sternly, "but since you force an explanation from me, be it so. That, by which you would have concealed from me the truth concerning your parentage, and led me to believe that I was about to take a wife of honourable birth."

"And can you prove otherwise," said Robert Brooke, with a final endeavour at concealment.

"Of course I can. Your guardian, being a gentleman, revealed every particular to me, as you, had you been a man, might have guessed he would do."

"And pray what had he to reveal?" persevered his opponent, although the question was but a gasping whisper.

"That you are — bastards!"

"*Coward!*" exclaimed Robert Brooke, as he staggered back against the opposite wall.

"Bertie! Bertie! it is not true," screamed Nelly, as

she again flew to her brother's side, "say it is not true. Tell him it is a lie, it is a mistake. Mr. Ray must have been mistaken; we were poor, darling, and uneducated, and very humble in our way of living, but we are not that — oh! say we are not that!" and she sunk down sobbing, with her arms clasped about his knees.

Old Aggie, who was the only one of the servants who had dared to appear upon the scene (although the others had taken care to station themselves within a convenient distance for hearing) now came forward and tried to disengage Nelly from her brother, for the latter, leaning back against the door-post, seemed almost as if he were about to faint.

"Come, Miss Nelly; come, my darling," said the old nurse, coaxingly. "Let Master Robert bide a bit, for all this will be too much for him. Don't you take on so, dearie, for let people say what they will, your own lives have been honourable, and no one can't deny it."

"No! no! Nurse," exclaimed the girl, resisting all Aggie's efforts to raise her, "let me alone, don't touch me, until Bertie has given me an answer. Brother! darling! my own brother! tell me, for God's sake, that it isn't true! that we are not what — what *he* — called us; and I will go away at once, and try to be contented."

"I *can't*, Nelly," said Bertie, panting with excitement. "I *can't*, darling, or I would, but it is true — true as *he* is false! I have kept it from you, dear, I thought it best, but I have had my reward, in hearing you first learn it from *his* lips. We are all that he

has said, nameless, forsaken, and obscure, and I wish to God I had been content that we should remain so."

"But we are still the same," cried Nelly, rising to her feet and folding her brother in her arms, "we are still own brother and sister, Bertie, no shame can unmake us that. Let us go away together, darling, let us go where no one will care to throw our misfortune in our face; or where, happy in each other's love, we can afford to laugh at them, even though they should. We want no grand houses nor fine clothes, nor carriages, to make us happy, Bertie, we only want each other; and what should separate us, born in the same hour, and to the same heritage of shame. Come, darling, let us go; in a few days, or weeks, or months, we shall have forgotten all this misery, and you shall never want whilst I can work for you." And in the energy of her devoted love, Nelly was really urging her brother towards the head of the staircase, as though they could leave the house then and there, and never re-enter it. But she was soon recalled to a sense of her position.

"Pardon me, Helena," said the calm voice of her husband, "but you seem to have forgotten that you are no longer a free agent. That your brother, after his violent language and expressed determination, quits our roof, is unavoidable; but I must beg you to remember that you are my wife, and that your place is *here*, where your duty lies, and your implicit obedience is due."

At this reminder, Nelly's arms relaxed their grasp of her brother, and she sunk down wearily by his side.

"Oh, let me go!" she said, looking up at her hus-

band with a white, worn face, "let me go with him, James; I shall die if you keep me here. We are both the same, you know, if he is a disgrace to you, so am I; let me go away with him, and we will never trouble you by word or look again."

"Go away with him," replied James Monkton, angrily, "what folly are you talking? *How* could you go away with him, even if I wished it, without creating a scandal which should raise the town? Your brother leaving us, after so long a visit, is only natural, and easily accounted for; but do you imagine that I intend our private affairs to become the comment of Hilstone? You are a perfect child, Helena. Get up from that absurd position; and if you cannot better control your feelings and your words, go into your bed-room until you are more calm. You will let every servant in the house know the reason of our disagreement. It is most unreasonable of you, most ill-judged."

She rose as passively as she had sunk down, and stood by the side of her brother, trembling.

"Poor child," said Bertie, as he touched her cold lips with his own. "I have sold you for very little, indeed. I made a bad bargain of you, Nell; and if you ever forgive me, it is more than I shall do myself."

"Mr. Brooke," interposed Dr. Monkton, "if you intend to stand there much longer, insulting me by your reminiscences and your regrets, you will reduce me to the unpleasant necessity of sending for a fly to remove yourself and your possessions from my house. The matter is settled, that we part, and the sooner it takes place the better."

"I am entirely of your opinion," returned the other, "Aggie, pack up my things and tell one of the servants to fetch a cab."

The "things," consisting only of his clothes, did not take long to pack, and by the time he had exchanged his dressing-gown for his ordinary attire, they were strapped down and ready for travelling. Meanwhile Dr. Monkton had retired to his own room, and Nelly, passive from sheer despair, sat beside old Aggie, with folded hands, gazing dreamily at each article as she placed it in the portmanteau; but when the arrangements were complete, and the rattling wheels of a hack conveyance had stopped before the door, and Bertie, tearless, and as despairing as herself, came towards her with the intention of saying farewell, all Nelly's passiveness passed away, and she gave a shriek which resounded throughout the house, and brought Dr. Monkton from his dressing-room again, upon the landing.

"Good-bye!" she screamed. "Oh! no, Bertie! not good-bye! I can't say it! I couldn't say it! I should die. Let me go with you, brother! Let me go with him, James! Don't keep me here to die all by myself. Oh! Bertie, oh! my darling, kill me before you go away and leave me all alone."

She clung to him, she grasped him with a force and energy which rendered it difficult even for Dr. Monkton to disengage her, and utterly impossible for Bertie to free himself.

"It *must* be, Nelly, there is no hope, no chance of an alternative. Be brave, darling, be good; think how often you have been so before for my sake, and try it once again, if you don't wish this parting to prove my

death. It is like death already! It is worse than death."

And then, as he tore himself from her, and gained the head of the staircase, he turned and said:

"Nelly, for the first time I seem to see all your unselfishness and your love. This is my own fault, I might have prevented it had I chosen; but what has your life been, but one long thought of me? God bless you for it!"

But she could not let him go. She shook off her husband's hold, as though she had equalled him in strength, and flew after her brother.

"Bertie! only one word! I *am* good you see, I *am* brave! I will not distress you more than I can help; but where are you going, darling? where am I to find you when I come?"

The possibility of not following him was incredible to her.

"I can't say, Nelly, but I think to London. Anyway, you shall hear, of course you shall hear from me every day and every hour. I shall have no pleasure except in writing to you."

"But Aggie must go with you," she replied. "Oh, where is Aggie; she must make herself ready at once," and flying after the old woman, who had retreated weeping to her room, Nelly came upon her with the startling announcement:

"Nurse! what are you about? Bertie is going directly, and of course you must go with him. How could he get on without either of us?"

"Lor! my deary," exclaimed old Aggie, terribly fluttered by the sudden command, "however can I get ready to go along of Master Robert now? I haven't

a rag put up, Miss Nelly, and ever so many trifles owing in the town. 'Tis morally impossible, my dear, as I can accompany your brother to-day; to-morrow or next day I could follow him, perhaps, if yourself and the doctor see fit, but to go along of him now —”

“It must be *now*, Aggie! you must go with him directly,” replied her mistress, decidedly, “or I will never speak or look at you again. Oh!” altering her tone to one of supplication, “think what I am suffering, and put on your things at once. On my knees, dear old nurse, I beg and pray of you to do as I ask. Never mind your boxes or your bills, they shall be sent after you, and paid; I will see to all that, only get ready, that Bertie may not go alone.”

And then, as the poor old woman, scarcely knowing, between her love for Nelly and her grief at the turn things had taken, what she was about, began to array herself in her bonnet and shawl, the girl drew a purse from her bosom, and thrust it into her hand.

“See here, Aggie! I snatched this from my dressing-table as I passed. I don't know how much there is in it, but it is all mine; keep it, and use it for Bertie and yourself, and in the pocket,” she added, blushing, “there is a card, a card which Cousin Nigel gave me, with his address in town. If Bertie should go to London, Nurse, promise me that you will find out Mr. Brooke, and let him know that he is there, and that I am miserable: that is all.”

She seized the old woman's withered face between her hands, and kissed it affectionately.

“God bless you, dear old Nurse! Take care of him, be gentle with him, love him for my sake; you are all the hope I have in parting with him.”

Then she returned to the landing, and spoke almost as rapidly to Bertie.

"She is coming, dearest, she will not be a minute. Say you will wait for her, or you will break my heart."

"Well! I will wait a minute!" he replied, "but it must not be more, for each extra minute in this house is an hour of my life," and then perceiving a furtive smile upon the face of his brother-in-law, Robert Brooke turned to him and said:

"Aye! you may laugh, Monkton, but that does not alter either the truth or the meaning of my words. You have insulted me to-day as you would never have dared to do had I been able to resent it like another man. You think, I daresay, with the body of that poor mastiff lying dead at your feet, and the carriage waiting at the door to convey me from this house, that you have gained the victory, and as far as I am concerned, perhaps you have; but there is a God in Heaven, Monkton, and as you treat that girl, whom you bought with promises which you have never fulfilled, so will I pray that He may remember you. You have acted the part of a coward towards me this day, but beware how you act in the same manner towards my sister, for she has an Advocate and Protector of whom I am not worthy to boast."

"All very fine talking," sneered Dr. Monkton, who had nevertheless considerably changed countenance at this address, "but I think we have had almost enough of it for once, Mr. Brooke, and I am afraid you will find that it will not advance your own interests, for with my consent, your sister holds no further communication with you from to-day."

At the announcement of this fresh trouble, Nelly, who had been leaning over the balustrades, eagerly drinking in the last sounds of her brother's voice, and gazing at his retreating figure with sad, wild eyes, turned and stared into her husband's face as if she were bewildered.

"It is true, Helena!" he said, in answer to her imploring gaze, "if your own feelings do not prompt you to abstain from associating with one who has so grossly insulted myself, I shall be compelled to adopt means by which you will be effectually prevented doing so."

Then, as Bertie, without further remonstrance, descended the remainder of the flight of stairs, and she heard the vehicle which was conveying Aggie and himself to the station, drive rapidly away, Nelly fell down, like a stone, where her husband's cruel words had smitten her, across the lifeless body of her favourite Thug.

CHAPTER XXI.

The Prophecies of Mrs. Prowse are not verified.

LOVE that is reared upon no better foundation than passion can never last. It is like making a bonfire of paper or shavings, without more solid fuel, which, however much they may crackle and splutter on being lighted, will eventually die out, and leave nothing but blackness behind. And how can it be otherwise whilst we are creatures of change? A few days or weeks, at the most a few months, are sufficient to render us familiar with each line in a picture, each word in a poem, each note in a melody, and then,

however they enchanted us at first, we tire of them, regard them no more than if we had never seen or heard them, and begin to look around us for something new; and, were it possible to treat the man or woman of whom we have become weary, like a painting or a book, to let them hang on our walls without further notice, or lie, covered with dust, upon our bookshelves, whilst we run about in search of novelties, marriage for the sake of a pleasing face or an engaging manner might not be attended with the heavy risk which it is now.

But we know that it is otherwise. We know that when we have become so accustomed to the perfect features, or the graceful figure, that they attract us no more than the homeliest would do, if there is no fresh ever-varying mind, welling over with new thoughts, new ideas, new feelings, to engage our attention and fall back upon, we get as sick of the enforced companionship as if we were compelled to read the same vapid composition over and over again, from beginning to end.

Dr. Monkton need not have proved this to be the case with his wife had he so chosen.

With all her ignorance and simplicity, Nelly had a fund of original matter on which he might have drawn, and found his trouble well repaid him. She had plenty of common sense and a hardy vigorous mind, which would have delighted in being taught and thought no trouble too great which should advance that end. And she possessed what was still better, a quick comprehension to fasten eagerly on any subject to which his superior intellect had guided it, combined with a humble opinion of herself, and an earnest desire

to learn. But of what value or interest were these mental qualities to James Monkton? He had married the girl for her pretty face and naïve manner, and he had not even stopped to inquire if she possessed any other qualifications for becoming his life-companion.

Since their marriage he had seen her at breakfast, and luncheon, and dinner, and now and then he had spent an evening in her company. If Nelly were becomingly dressed on those occasions, appeared cheerful and good-tempered, and not averse to receiving his carresses, her husband was perfectly satisfied, for his life was lived apart from hers or any woman's.

He was absorbed in his professional pursuits, and had his wife gone on smiling and contented, and otherwise conducting herself unobnoxiously, he would probably have remained as satisfied with her until the end.

But as soon as any occasion for annoyance arose between them; as soon as the poor girl either directly or indirectly became a cause of offence to him, the worth of his professed attachment became apparent.

As he raised her senseless body from the spot where it had fallen, and thought that this separation from her brother might prove but the commencement of a train of evils with herself, Dr. Monkton was almost sorry he had married her. The long dark lashes which lay upon her cheeks had no attractions for him at that moment. The white teeth gleaming through her parted lips, the curved mouth, the broad fair forehead, what were they to him then? Only part and parcel of a woman who had not sufficient strength of mind to control her feelings, and evidently intended to make a nuisance of herself. As he carried her

across the landing to her own room, he did not notice one of the beauties over which a few months before he had fallen into raptures. As he laid her on her bed and stood by until she had regained her consciousness, he did not even kiss the face which he had considered, so short a time ago, to be the most engaging in the world. Yet Dr. Monkton's feelings were not singular. In this respect he was like most of his fellow creatures to whom possession means satiety. But had he loved Nelly as he should have loved his wife; had her physical attractions been a secondary consideration to him, compared to her heart and soul, he would have felt her to be dearer in an hour of such helplessness than she had ever appeared in the flush and pride of beauty. As it was, however, as soon as he perceived that she had recovered from her swoon, he rang the bell for the housemaid, and delivering her mistress to her charge, retired to his own room.

When he emerged thence an hour afterwards the house seemed quite changed. It really looked cheerful again. The morning sun, bright for the time of year, was streaming over the corridor from which the dead body of the mastiff, together with the mat he died on, had been carefully removed; and in the rooms which had been occupied by Robert Brooke, women were laughing and chatting with each other as they shook up the bolsters and mattresses, and piled all the furniture together, preparatory to a thorough clearing. The doctor attired with his usual care; his glossy hair and whiskers scrupulously attended to, and holding a scented cambric handkerchief in his hand, stepped lightly across the landing to the apartment of his wife.

"I am going down to breakfast, Helena!" he said,

with affected animation. "Shall I send yours up here?"

She was lying just as he had left her, passively stretched upon the bed with her languid eyes fixed upon the patch of sky which she could distinguish through the window-pane.

"You will take something to eat, will you not?" he repeated, thinking she had not heard his words.

But she never answered him, and only shuddered when he laid his hand upon her shoulder. So he turned away, resolving in his mind that she was sulky, and bid the woman in attendance follow him, to carry up the breakfast tray.

He did not suffer the incidents of the morning to destroy his own appetite, however; on the contrary, it was, if anything, better than usual. The house was clear of two of its greatest nuisances: Robert Brooke was gone, and the mastiff was dead; even the atmosphere seemed brighter and lighter in consequence; and Dr. Monkton felt as though he were going to begin life anew. So he attacked the various dishes before him with considerable relish, and was detected humming to himself as he entered his consulting-room; an occurrence so unprecedented, that Long remarked in confidence to John, that he shouldn't wonder now if he heard that the world itself was coming to an end. But though Dr. Monkton was so light-hearted and content, he did not feel easy when, two hours afterwards, Elizabeth the housemaid asked to see him before he left home, to communicate the fact that her mistress had neither moved nor spoke since he had seen her last. He was not sure what termination this unusual calmness might not have, and did not like to leave

Nelly alone with the servants. So he despatched a message to request the presence of his sister, and in a few minutes more, Mrs. Prowse bustled into his apartments.

"My dear James!" she commenced, "is not this news too good to be true? Are they really both of them gone — that most unpleasant young man, and that odious dog? I could scarcely believe my ears when Long told me of it! What a deliverance! I declare the place looks quite different without them already. But how did it all come about? I am dying to hear."

"Very naturally!" replied her brother. "The mastiff showed himself to be dangerously inclined, and so I shot him, as I should have done either of my own animals under the same circumstances; however, Brooke chose to resent the act as a butchery, and we came to words about it, which ended in his leaving for London; which after all, you know, is not to be wondered at, for his visit here has extended over four months already, and I rather think he wanted an excuse for a change himself. Hilstone is not a lively place for a young man."

Dr. Monkton mentioned the occurrence in this off-hand manner because his sister was a great gossip, and he had no desire for his family quarrels to become patent to the town; but even whilst he spoke he felt she was aware that his words were not the expression of his real feelings.

"Well! perhaps not," returned Mrs. Prowse, willing to humour him, although she knew that this event was what he had been trying to bring about for weeks past, "but it is just as well it has happened so. Guests

should not outstay their welcome, and this is not the best time of the year in which to visit Hilstone. But what have you done to your hand?"

"Oh! that was a last piece of attention on Thug's part," replied the doctor smiling, as he regarded the long white fingers which he had daintily patched with court plaister; "he seized and bit me here as I was about to muzzle him."

"The nasty dangerous brute!" exclaimed his sister, "how thankful I am that you destroyed him. But I hope the wounds won't be troublesome — are they deep?"

"Oh, dear no!" replied the doctor, indifferently; "they are nothing — mere scratches — only they look unsightly. But why I sent for you, Matilda, was to ask if you would be troubled to sit by Helena during my absence. I shall not be gone long."

"To be sure, if you wish it, James; though I can't say that she usually appears to desire my company. But what's the matter with her — is she ill?"

"Not ill, perhaps — but considerably upset by all this annoyance. She is on her bed, at present, but I think it would be a kindness if you could persuade her to dress and come downstairs. She evidently feels the separation from her brother!"

"*Feels* it! my dear James! Of course she *feels* it! but that is not the slightest excuse for neglecting her household duties. I should like to know when you have known *me* to lie in bed on account of my feelings, or any such rubbish."

"There is no doubt that they are attached to one another!" remarked Dr. Monkton, as he put his papers together, preparatory for a start.

“And so are we, I trust; and so are most brothers and sisters: but that is no reason that they should never be separated. And how your wife could ever have expected anything else is my wonder. There are few people who would have kept that young man here as long as you have with his nasty dissipated habits, and his impertinent manner. I am sure if she thinks rightly, she should consider it quite a blessing that he has left the house. I should if he in any way belonged to me.”

“Well! don’t say anything to Helena, about his not coming back again; at all events, to-day: because I fancy it is that idea which is worrying her most. And of course he *will* come back, sooner or later — there is little doubt about that!”

This speech of the doctor’s, again intended to mislead his sister, did its work as effectually as its predecessor.

“To be sure not!” she replied, “only I *do* hope that you will not be so foolish as to give him up the guest-chamber again. It has gone to my heart to see how all that beautiful furniture has been tossed and tumbled about for his convenience; and I am sure it will take months to sweeten those rooms sufficiently for the use of any decent person. Bachelors have always been put upon the upper story before, and I can’t see why Mr. Brooke is to be treated differently to everybody else.”

“Well, well,” interrupted the doctor, who considered the discussion a sad waste of time, “it will be soon enough to talk about that when Robert Brooke returns to Hilstone. Meanwhile my patients are wait-

ing for me, and I want you to go and look after my wife."

"Oh! of course, my dear James, I will run up at once, and you will see Helena at the luncheon table — you may depend upon that! Indeed I shall *insist* upon her rising; and if I find she is at all low, I will take her round to the Deanery with me, to-night. Mrs. Filmer begged me to step in after dinner; and, in fact, James," lowering her voice, "I prophesy that you will find Helena altogether a different creature now her brother is gone. His influence was the very worst to which she could be subjected, and now that it is removed, if you will leave her to dear Mrs. Filmer and myself for a few weeks, we shall shew you quite another young lady at the close of them."

This notion, which coincided with his own ideas of the change which separation from her brother might effect in Nelly, pleased Dr. Monkton, and he left Mrs. Prowse to pursue her system of education, as cheerfully as though no blight had fallen on the life of his young wife.

The first thing which his sister did upon his departure, was to whisk upstairs, and knock sharply at the door of Nelly's room, which, after a short delay, was opened by Elizabeth.

"Dear me! Elizabeth!" exclaimed the canon's wife; "why didn't you open the door before? What are you all about up here? why, Mrs. James!" going up to the silent figure on the bed; "you don't mean to tell me you have not yet risen — do you know what time it is? — past twelve o'clock, and such a genial morning. I've been all round the town before this, about some commissions, for dear Mrs. Filmer. — Why, what's the

matter with you — are you ill? are you in any pain — or are you only lazy?”

At this tirade which was jerked out in Mrs. Prowse's shrillest voice and quickest manner, Nelly just raised her languid eyes for a moment, and then, the heavy lids drooped again, and she turned away from the speaker.

“If you please, ma'am, I don't think my mistress *is* well,” interposed the housemaid; “for I can't get her to drink her tea, nor eat any breakfast; and she's been lying just that way, without stirring or speaking, ever since I was called to her by the Doctor.”

“But surely she can speak to *me*, if she can do nothing else. So, I hear your brother's gone to London, Mrs. James — he has a nice day for travelling, has he not — and he'll find town much gayer than Hilstone. I'm afraid our style of life was rather too quiet to suit his tastes. Eh, Mrs. James?”

At this allusion to Bertie, Nelly gave a deep sigh, and half raising her head from her pillow, stared about her as though just aroused from sleep.

“And the dog, too!” continued Mrs. Prowse, following up her advantage, “so he's gone into the bargain. Quite a clearance, isn't it? Well! I never was partial to the animal, as you know, and always considered him most unfit for a lady's pet, but still I am sorry it was necessary to destroy the poor creature, because he would have made a fine watch-dog, which was his proper vocation, and yet after all, perhaps it is as well, for of course my brother is the best judge of what was necessary to be done?”

“Oh! it was *not* necessary — it was not at *all* necessary;” cried Nelly, in a voice of pain, as the rattling

talk of her sister-in-law recalled her trouble vividly to her mind: "my poor dog! my dear old dog! pray don't speak of it—don't mention it again—I cannot bear it!" and she turned her face upon her pillow, and commenced to weep.

"Oh! well!" exclaimed Mrs. Prowse, testily, "if the mere mention of the animal is to give offence, of course we had better avoid it. But surely the death of a dog, Mrs. James—of a dangerous, vicious dog, which was ready to attack everybody who approached him, is not to be permitted to keep you in this state of inaction, whilst your duties as the mistress of my brother's establishment are being neglected. It would be far more becoming, I think, considering what is required, were you to rise and look after your household matters instead of lying here, crying for what cannot be helped. One would think, to see you, that it was a Christian you were lamenting, instead of a brute."

Nelly rose from her position at once; it was better to constrain herself to action than to stop quietly there, whilst she was being "talked at," by Mrs. Prowse; and her sister-in-law, seeing the good effect already produced by her words, began to credit herself with more discernment than she had dared to hope that she possessed.

"Come, that's right, Mrs. James!" she said with an air of patronage, "you must dress and come down stairs, and make a good luncheon, and then you will feel yourself again. Your brother's gone to have *his* holiday, you know, and so you must make the best use of yours, and enjoy yourself during his absence. Everyone has to part with their friends at times, and of course they feel the change at first; but no woman

of good sense would permit her feelings to interfere with the routine of her husband's establishment."

To this speech as before Nelly made no reply, but slowly going through the business of her toilet, permitted the housemaid to robe her first in one garment and then another whilst she sat like a statue to be dressed. When the business was concluded, Mrs. Prowse would have tucked the girl's arm under her own, in a jaunty and affable manner, as if she had determined on the thing and accomplished it, but Nelly drew back from the proffered assistance, and walked by herself, slowly but steadily. When she came out upon the landing, and her eye fell on the open door of what had been Bertie's room, and the spot where she had last seen the wretched carcass of Thug, she shuddered, but no more, and proceeded down the stairs without glancing at them again. But once in the dining-room, Mrs. Prowse found that her power over her sister-in-law had departed. Nelly seated herself in an arm chair, and with her clasped hands upon her lap, gazed idly out of the window or on the ground. Not all the efforts of the canon's wife could induce her to talk, nor to smile, and when Dr. Monkton joined them at the luncheon-table he found it as impossible to persuade her to eat, indeed more so, for she visibly shrunk from him whenever he addressed or approached her. At dinner it was just the same. Nelly was dressed as carefully as usual, and was as punctual in her attendance at the table; but though she took the different eatables upon her plate, she sent them away untasted; and her answers, if any, were given in monosyllables. So her husband lost his temper in consequence, and relinquished even the attempt to rouse her, and as the

only thing she had done with energy since the morning, was to refuse to be taken to the deanery, she was left in peace by both brother and sister, and permitted to go early to her bed. But the next day it was the same, and the day after that, and for many days in succession. There was no visible alteration in Nelly's manner. She dressed and came down stairs, and presided at meals; gave her orders, and spoke when she was spoken to, but nothing more. Not a smile, not a voluntary communication passed her lips; but she spent all her leisure time with her folded hands before her, gazing out upon the wintry sky, or on the ground, as if she were striving to solve some mystery beyond her comprehension. She did not weep, or if so, no one saw her tears, but every now and then a sigh which seemed to labour up from the deepest recesses of her heart would issue from her lips, and be scarcely lost upon the air before it was followed by another.

And neither did she rest by night, for whenever her husband had the opportunity for observation, he invariably found her lying on her pillows with wide-open sleepless eyes, which only closed with involuntary shrinking as she noticed his approach.

This sort of conduct nettled Dr. Monkton; he would not believe but that it was assumed for his annoyance, and he began to feel as revengeful towards Nelly as he had done towards her brother. He had not forgotten nor permitted to pass unobserved the allusion which Robert Brooke had made to his sister's object in accepting his proposals; and it was brought back vividly to his recollection by her present behaviour. But he resolved that it should not continue. Over the boy he had possessed no control except by banishing him from

his presence, but his wife was his own to do as he chose with, and his firm determination was to break the obstinacy of her spirit by preventing her having any communication with her absent brother until she displayed more cordial feelings towards himself.

Still Mrs. Prowse was more hopeful than was to be expected of her, and continued to affirm that if Nelly were only given over to the tender mercies of Mrs. Filmer and herself, a few weeks' discipline would make a different creature of her.

But after some five or six days of almost lifeless languor, the poor girl seemed suddenly to undergo a change. From being passive she became restless and excited. She began to watch for the arrival of the daily post, the hours for which might almost have been traced by the feverish flush which gathered on her cheek, as they approached; and the livid pallor which they left as they departed without bringing her a letter from her brother. At this juncture she abandoned that inert position of despair, and took to wandering about the house in an aimless, unsatisfied manner instead, roaming from room to room as though in quest of something which she never found.

And once at night as Dr. Monkton was returning from his business, he was struck by seeing the door of the empty guest-chamber left wide open, and entering to ascertain the cause was startled to see an apparition clothed in white with flowing hair, who swaying backwards and forwards over the forsaken bed, and moaning to herself in sleep, kept praying Bertie to come back again, or she should die. And at that time, too, he heard her couple another name with that of Bertie, and

call loudly upon Nigel Brooke to fulfil his oft-repeated promise, and to save her brother.

Yet Nelly never spoke to her husband on the subject. She never mentioned Robert's name, nor communicated her anxiety at receiving no letter from him, either to the doctor or his sister. She mourned in secret, and suffered by herself until a whole fortnight had gone by since the morning that poor Thug met his death, and yet no news of the traveller had arrived; and no change for the better appeared in Nelly's conduct. Mrs. Prowse's confident prophecies in the benefit which must accrue from a separation between the twins, did not seem in a fair way of being realised.

When, one day, all the girl's apathetic patience at once deserted her. A light seemed suddenly to break upon her mind, and suggesting what so strange a silence might portend, overcame her invincible repugnance to entering upon the subject with her husband. It was as though nature had succumbed, and could bear the strain laid upon it no longer, for with a rapidly-formed resolution she burst one morning into the doctor's own room, and addressed him vehemently in these words:

"James! where is Bertie? where is my brother? why is it that I have never heard from him?"

CHAPTER XXII.

The Brother and Sister meet again.

THE "gratis" patients had dispersed, and the doctor happened to be alone, jotting down his day's work in his memorandum-book. At the excited questions which burst from his wife, he merely looked up from his occupation and answered coolly:

"How should I know. Am I your brother's keeper?"

He could have satisfied her at that very moment. He could have told her where Bertie was, and what he was about; but had he done so, he would have been robbed of his revenge. Even whilst he marked her dilated eye, round which anxiety and sleeplessness had set dark rings; and watched the heaving of her breast, he smiled to think that silence and neglect had already driven her so far to his feet.

"But where can he be, what can he be doing?" she continued wildly. "It is now two whole weeks since he went from here, and I have not had a line to tell me where he may be found. Oh! James! I have been patient, I have been submissive; have I not? If you know where Bertie is, pray tell me, don't keep me longer in suspense!"

But it was Dr. Monkton's turn to triumph now, and he was not slow to avail himself of the opportunity.

"So you have at last thought fit to consult me on the subject," he quietly observed, as he continued pencilling down the various engagements he had made. "Perhaps it would have been better had you decided on doing so before. However, I really don't see of what assistance I can be to you in the matter. Your brother can write, I believe. If he had wished to communicate with you, I suppose he would have done so?"

"Oh, no! that cannot be the reason," she replied, forgetting in her anxiety to resent the coldness of his demeanour. "I am sure he would have written if he could: his last promise to me was to do so. But can-

not I find out, is there no means by which I can ascertain where he is living at this moment?"

"What, in London?" returned her husband, laughing at the idea which so distressed her, "oh, easily I should imagine. You would only have to walk about the streets, asking everyone you met if they had seen an old woman and a cripple going about together, and could direct you to their abode. You would be sure to find them; old women and cripples are such very unusual sights in the metropolis."

She covered her face with her hands, she could not bear that he should witness the agony he jeered at.

Then she asked outright, as if in desperation:

"James, have *you* had any news of Bertie since he went, has any letter come for me from him? If so, in God's name, I entreat of you to give it me!"

She evidently could not part with the preconceived notion that her husband knew more of the matter than she did. But he also had formed his ideas upon the subject, and was as loath to relinquish them as she was. Yet, how could he have resisted that voice of passionate entreaty, those mournful pleading eyes?

"I believe you have asked me that question once before," he said, "or something very similar to it. If you think I have your brother anywhere concealed about my person, Helena, you had better come and search me, but I am afraid you will find it lost trouble. The fact is, you have had too much faith in a promise made on the spur of the moment. He said he would write to you, probably after a time he may do so; but considering his habits are not of the most quiet and respectable order, it would be strange if a first introduction to the dissipations of London left him much

leisure for writing letters, even supposing he has been sober enough since his departure to enable him to hold a pen."

Nelly only waited to hear the sarcasm conveyed in his last words before she left the room. She felt that it was useless to appeal further to the feelings of a man who had none. She had arrived at last at the true knowledge of her husband's character. His malice and resentment once thoroughly roused, the sight of misery made as much impression on him as water does upon a stone. But, from that day, her strength rapidly declined. She swallowed the medicine which Dr. Monkton thought fit to prescribe for her, but it made no alteration in her health; her appetite and spirits became capricious, and she would as often eat voraciously as she would go fasting, or laugh with excitement, as she would sit passive in despair.

But whether one mood was upon her or the other, Nelly was in a constant state of fever.

Her hands and face were always burning, and the plumpness of her cheeks fell in and left her large, blue eyes, surrounded by broad circles of dark violet colour, standing prominently forward and glowing like a fire without flame.

Of course, so evident an alteration could not take place in the doctor's young wife without exciting the comments of all Hilstone; indeed, the town would not have considered it was doing its duty, and certainly would not have been acting up to its long sustained character, if it had left so strictly private and personal a matter alone.

It talked incessantly, its aristocracy talked, and its mobocracy talked, and its hedges and ditches, and

bricks and mortar, would all have talked likewise, had they but possessed the gift of language.¹

The particulars of the "extraordinary change," the why and the wherefore of the "extraordinary change," and the probable duration of the "extraordinary change," in Mrs. Monkton, were fully discussed, not only by Nelly's equals, but by her inferiors.

Mrs. Filmer would loudly call out to Mrs. Prowse across a drawing-room full of company, to enquire whether her poor sister-in-law appeared in any better spirits than she had done the day before, or whether any news had been heard of that unprincipled young man, her brother; and Mrs. Pridding, the confectioner's wife, would wag her sage head across the counter at Mrs. Biffins, the grocer's mother, whilst she communicated the news that there was not the least improvement in the state of the doctor's wife, and her own opinion was, that "the poor young creature was took for death."

Hilstone did more than talk, it called to enquire. Day after day, shoals of visitors looked in just to see how "dear Mrs. Monkton" was going on, and to ask if she had received news of Mr. Brooke.

And sometimes Nelly would see her tormenters, and laugh as she parried their curiosity concerning Bertie's silence and her own failing health; and at others, she would shut herself up in her room and refuse admittance even to the august Mrs. Filmer, or the pertinacious Mrs. Prowse. The latter lady had given her up long ago, and informed her brother of the fact, adding, that what she had mistaken for submission in Helena, had proved to be only obstinacy; and that now she came to look more closely into her character,

she was of opinion that the young man's disposition was the best of the two, "which isn't saying much for your wife," she would spitefully remark in conclusion.

There was only one person in all Hilstone who was any comfort to the unhappy girl at this time, and that was poor, meek, inoffensive Canon Prowse, who (after having listened patiently, perhaps, to a lengthy stricture from his wife, upon the catalogue of Nelly's sins,) would steal away from the shrill sound of her vixenish voice, and (first well assured that he was not watched) quietly enter the portals of No. 15.

There he would probably find the subject of the late discussion sitting all alone in the dusk, with dry eyes and burning hands and a countenance so woe-begone that it touched his very heart, and taking a seat beside her, the good man would spend an hour in quiet talk, which though chiefly maintained by himself, was often remembered by his listener during the sleepless night that followed. And once, when some word or look of Nelly's having appealed more powerfully than usual to his sympathy, he stooped to impress a fatherly kiss upon her forehead, the poor child's unnatural calmness gave way beneath the unexpected caress, and she found temporary relief in a prolonged fit of weeping.

But this kind of thing could not go on for ever. Christmas-day had come and passed, and been held as drearily as it is possible to hold that festival when unaccompanied by either peace or goodwill, when one bitter morning in January, Dr. Monkton awoke at early dawn to see his wife standing in her night-dress at his bedside, whilst he could just distinguish in the

grey light that her lips were moving. At first he imagined she was walking in her sleep, and addressing her in a low voice, desired her to go to bed again; but the next moment he saw she was awake.

"It is of no use my going to bed!" she answered in a low hollow tone, "I cannot sleep — I cannot rest — James! I have come to tell you I must go!"

"Go — go where?" he exclaimed, angry now that he found his disturbance had not been unintentional; "what the deuce are you talking about?"

"I must go to Bertie," she said, still speaking as though she were asleep. "Something has happened to him, and I cannot find out what it is. It cannot be death, because I am still alive; but he is in some distress or danger. He wants me — he is calling for me — and I must go at once."

"Pooh! you've been dreaming," replied her husband. "Get into bed, Helena, and let's have no more of this nonsense. You'll catch cold standing about in your night-dress," and then perceiving that she made no effort to follow his advice, he started up from his pillow and repeated angrily: "Do you hear what I say to you? Get into bed at once — and hold your tongue. As if it wasn't enough that a man should spend half his nights abroad in weather like this, but he must be waked up at six o'clock in the morning to listen to such folly."

But Nelly had lost all fear of her husband's anger. Instead of doing as he bid her, she moved slowly away to another part of the room, and commenced in a mechanical manner to put a few articles of dress together.

"What are you doing there?" exclaimed Dr. Monkton presently.

"I am going to Bertie!" she answered in a dreamy voice.

He started from his bed, and coming beside her, seized her wrist.

"It is no use doing that, James," she said quietly; "it is of no use trying to keep me here by force. My heart tells me that Bertie is calling for me, and I shall only die by inches if you will not let me go. You cannot separate us — we are one."

"And so are we," he answered, "in the sight of law, if not of Heaven. As you shall find, Helena, if you attempt to disobey me, to your cost. On the day your brother left us, I told you that with my consent you should never hold any communication with him again. What I said then I meant. You have not done it, and you shall not do it whilst I live to prevent you."

She looked into his face, and reading there the truth she had suspected, tore her wrist from his grasp with the strength engendered of a sense of wrong, and turned upon him like a fury.

"You have heard from him!" she loudly exclaimed. "You know where he is and what he is doing. I read it in your eyes — and you have kept the news from me! Oh! shame upon your cruel heart!"

He leant against the bed-post, and smiled sneeringly at her despair.

"Your abuse has not the least power to affect me," he replied, "nor do I wish to deny the truth of what you say. I *do* know your brother's present address — have known it all along, and have no intention of

revealing it to you. He had the politeness to tell me on the day we parted, that you would never have been my wife except from hope of the advantages which a residence here held out to himself. I know it to be the truth. I suspected it at the time I married you; I have been sure of it since you have been separated from him. However, it would not be reasonable of you to expect to have it all your own way. You have had your share of benefit from the arrangement; now comes my turn. You enjoyed your brother's company for five months; you must see how long you can make yourself contented with only mine. For, what I said before, Helena, I emphatically repeat: you shall never see, nor speak with him again!"

"You cannot separate us," she rejoined; her expression relapsing into one of weariness. "If you lock me in a room, James, I shall die at the same time as Bertie. There is but one life between us!"

"Fiddlesticks!" he said contemptuously — "I leave the belief of such stories to old women and fools — I shall not be in the least afraid of your dying when your brother does, for from all I have heard he is most probably dead at the present moment."

He expected to hear her scream, or see her faint at this announcement, but she did neither. She did not even seem to be moved by it, but remained unshaken in her own belief.

"No! he is not," was all she said. "Bertie is not dead, but he is longing for me — every day and every hour."

"Oh! I am glad you know so much about it," said Dr. Monkton, sarcastically, "as of course you can need no further information from me. And as you

seem so clever at divining, you will the more readily understand that I am in earnest when I say, that whether he is alive or dead you must give up all idea of seeing your brother again."

"I can't do that," she said, shaking her head; "I don't care what becomes of me, but I must go to him."

"But you *shall not* go to him," repeated her husband furiously. "He has insulted me as no man ever dared to do before; and if you presume to disobey my orders by attempting to hold any communication with him, I will never own or shelter you again. Thwart me in this — run counter to my express command, and you leave this house, as he did — never to return!"

The threat appeared to have no power to alarm her; not a muscle of her face moved as it struck upon her ear. She only looked wearily at the breaking dawn.

"Do you hear me, Helena?" demanded Dr. Monkton; "do you understand what I say?"

"Yes! I both hear and understand you," she answered in a low voice.

"Well! mind you obey me then, in this, as in all things, and as a preliminary, go back into your bed and remain there until the proper hour for rising."

To his surprise, she walked across the room, and did as he desired her; but though he followed, neither of them spoke another word, and at his usual time Dr. Monkton rose and went into his dressing-room. His wife did not meet him at the breakfast-table, but he thought it best to make no comment on the omission. She had heard his fixed determination, and knew he

meant to act upon it; for one day it would be best perhaps to leave her to digest it at her leisure. But, when his hours for home consultation were over, and he had driven away in his smartly-appointed brougham, Nelly came down stairs, attired for a walk, which quite charmed the heart of Elizabeth the housemaid, who had been trying in vain for many days past to persuade her to take some exercise.

"You look sadly pale, ma'am," she said, as Nelly passed her in the hall, "but I do hope as the fresh air will put a little life in you — for it's a beautiful morning;" and her mistress thanked her for that, and all her previous kindness, with a fervour that surprised her. It was a beautiful morning, as the servant had remarked, but Nelly kept her veil down closely as she hurried as fast as her failing strength permitted her, through the High Street of Hilstone, and turned into the less frequented road which led to the railway station. There was one thing in which Dr. Monkton had never stinted her, and that was money; and her purse held more than sufficient to enable her to carry out the one purpose which she entertained; to go to London in search of Bertie.

No thought of the difficulties she should encounter on the way had power to deter her. Although she had parted with his card to old Aggie, she had the name of Nigel Brooke's club graven on her mind, and her object was to seek her cousin's aid, and hand in hand with him to ransack the town, until they lighted on the house which held her brother.

When she arrived at the railway station, a bell was ringing furiously.

"Now then, Miss!" exclaimed a frantic porter, as

she entered the station room; "train's just a going, have you got your ticket?"

"No!" she replied, quietly.

The porter was disgusted at her indifference. "Just like them women!" he inwardly ejaculated, "thinks the world's made for 'em, and that everything must bide their convenience. — Well, then, you'll lose your train," he said, aloud, "for she's just off;" and, as he spoke, with a scream and a whistle the line of carriages moved slowly away.

"There ain't another to Stokely for the next four hours," said the porter, with malicious satisfaction, as her eyes followed the departing conveyance.

"I'm going to London," she replied, with a heavy sigh.

"Why didn't you say that before, Miss?" said the official, aggrieved to think his sarcasm should have been so wasted; "the next up train's due in fifteen minutes, but you can't take your ticket till the Headley train's passed. So the best thing you can do is to rest yourself in the waiting-room till that's come in."

She looked so young and so sadly tired, that for all her fancied stupidity, the porter's eyes followed her with compassion as she wearily dragged herself to the place indicated.

When she procured her ticket, and found her way again upon the platform, the train for London had arrived, and she had no further difficulty in proceeding.

Two hours of weary travelling, during which she scarcely dared raise her eyes, lest some fellow-passenger should speak to or recognise her, and she was landed

at one of the large London terminuses, amidst an army of porters, omnibuses, and cabs.

Nelly had heard much of London; of its great extent, continuous traffic, and overflowing population, but she had had no idea that one of its stations alone could be so busy a scene as now presented itself to her. Numbers of people bustled past her, too hurried even to look up as they collected their luggage, fought for the cabs, or vehemently disputed their fares. She alone seemed to have no aim or object, as she wandered listlessly up and down the platform, too nervous to speak to any of the officials, and yet quite ignorant of how to procure what she wanted, without their aid.

"Any luggage, Miss?" demanded a porter, as he noted her bewildered look.

She shook her head, and passed him, only wishing she had had courage to speak.

"Cab, Miss?" shouted a hansom, hailing her with his whip; but she thought he might be addressing some one else, and did not like to answer him.

At last the platform was, comparatively speaking, empty; another train was due upon the next line of rail, and most of the porters had crossed to receive it. The cabstand also was nearly deserted, and when Nelly was next asked if she did not need a conveyance she mustered courage to walk up to the vehicle, and address the driver —

"Cabman! can you take me *anywhere?*"

The sad eyes and the wistful face, no less than the apparent absurdity of the question, made the man think for a moment that the lady who spoke to him was not quite right in her mind, but if so, he considered, there

was sure to be a reward offered for her recovery in a day or two, and he might as well earn it as any one else.

"To be sure, Miss," he replied, "jumping off his box; "anywheres you like to name; all round the world, if so be it's your pleasure."

"I want to go to the——" she said, naming one of the large West End Clubs: "do you know where that is?"

"To be sure, Miss—all right—jump in!" replied cabby, to whom this request seemed but a confirmation of his previous surmise. He put her into his vehicle, and rattled her off to the place indicated. When he stopped, it was in a large square, and he came round to the cab-window, and pointed out a tall melancholy-looking building, at the opposite side of the road, to Nelly's notice.

"That there's the Club, Miss! now who may you want to see there?—no ladies admitted, you know."

"Oh! are they not, really?" she enquired; "may I not just go up the steps to ask a question?"

"Better not, Miss!" replied the cabman, shaking his head, "I can give a message for you as well as you could say it yourself."

"Then will you please enquire if Mr. Brooke is there—Mr. Nigel Brooke, of Orpington."

"Ain't in the Club, at present;" was the reply delivered a minute afterwards.

"Then ask them for his other address—for his private address," said Nelly, confidently; they must know where I can find him."

"They don't know nothing of his private address,

Miss," was the disheartening answer, "and he ain't been there for days."

"Then I must wait till he comes," she passively replied, as she leant back in the cab, and folded her hands, "I must wait here till I see him — it can't be long."

"But it may be ever so long," argued the driver, who did not relish the idea of standing about in the cold; "you'd best let me drive you somewheres, Miss, and leave your address for the gentleman."

"I have nowhere to go to," said the girl, sadly. "I have no other friend in London but himself. I must wait here till he comes;" and she seemed quite resigned to an indefinite delay.

"Knew she was cracked!" soliloquised the cabman, as he walked to and fro, and embraced himself with a view to promoting his circulation; "was sure of it, the first moment I clapped eyes on her," and then he ran away to get a glass of beer — and then he trotted to and fro again — and then he consulted his silver watch, and found that his horse had already been standing for an hour in the cold. "Look here, Miss!" he said, leaning confidentially upon the window sill; "I should be very sorry for to put you to any inconvenience, but my hoss has been standing here for better than an hour, and we shall both be frozen if we keep still much longer. 'Tain't a day for this sort of work, to say nothing of my being able to make double the money by moving about; so, if you're bent upon stopping here, which is quite contrary to the advice I'd give you, you must let me put you into another cab, for I've had enough of this job, and that's the truth!"

But as he was speaking to her, a light flashed into the patient eyes of his fare, such as he had not seen there before, and her little hands tried hard to push his burly figure on one side.

"Oh! stand away, please, do stand away!" she said, with excited utterance. "Don't you see, there he is, coming along the pavement? Nigel! Cousin Nigel, don't pass me, I am here!"

The last words were spoken loudly, and in another moment, one of two gentlemen who had been walking arm-in-arm as she had indicated, rushed across the road and opened the cab-door.

"Nelly!" he exclaimed. "Good God! is it possible that I see you? Have they permitted you to come at last; but what are you doing *here*, and by yourself?"

"Oh! Nigel!" she said, clinging to him, "no one has given me leave, no one knows that I have come, I ran away alone. Bertie wants me, I am sure he does, but I don't know where he is, and I came here to see you, that you might find him for me."

She spoke and looked so wildly, that the cabman was more than ever convinced that she was not in her right mind, and even Nigel Brooke had a passing fear, lest distress and grief should have unsettled her.

"You will come with me, will you not?" she said, imploringly, as she marked the expression in his eye. "You will come and help me look for Bertie?"

"Of course," he answered; "give me one moment to speak to the friend whom I have left, and I will go with you, Nelly, to the world's end," and after he had

done as he desired, he directed the cabman where to drive, and entering the vehicle, sat down by her side. She lay back in her corner of it, gazing at him as though he had been her guardian angel.

"We will find him together, Cousin Nigel, will we not?" she said, after a pause. "Oh! they have been cruel — so cruel — to me since he left. They have kept back all his letters, and never given me one scrap of news about him. They have nearly killed me, Nigel! and if it had not been for the hope of meeting him again, I *should* have died."

"Poor child!" he said, as he observed her wasted looks, and held her burning hand in his. "If I can call him to account for this, I will!"

"Do you think we are *sure* to find him?" she said, alluding to her brother. "He is very ill, and wants me, I have known that for weeks past, but they would not tell me so, nor give me his address."

"Then how can you possibly have known it, Nelly?" asked her cousin, in surprise.

"By what I have felt here," she answered, pressing her hand upon her heart. "Something here has been dying in me slowly for weeks past."

"Then you are quite prepared to find your brother ill?"

"Quite," she replied, sadly, "for I know he is."

"You have guessed the truth, unfortunately," said her cousin.

"Then have you seen him, Nigel, have you seen and spoken to Bertie? Ah! I knew, I felt you would if ever you received that card."

"I have been in close communication with him, dear Nelly, for a month past. I am taking you straight

to the house where he now lies. He is very ill, but I have nursed him through his illness, and we are reconciled to one another. He has wanted nothing — rest assured of that — except the sister I am taking to him now.”

He uttered these sentences slowly, but with the tenderest feeling, and Nelly, upon hearing them, had no power to ask the questions which she longed to put, but could only ejaculate “Thank God,” and express her gratitude through tears.

In a few minutes more the cab had stopped before a handsome house in Curzon Street, which Nigel Brooke had hired for his mother and himself. The cabman threw open the door of his vehicle noisily, as cabmen will, and as Nelly followed her cousin into the hall, a gentleman (in whom, to her amazement, she recognised their guardian, Mr. Ray) issued from a room on the ground floor, with his finger on his lip, to deprecate so unusual a disturbance; but when he saw by whom Nigel Brooke was accompanied, he dropped his hand again from sheer surprise, and would have detained and spoken to her, had not Nelly hurried past him. She felt that where he had come from, Bertie lay, and she had no time, no thought, for any other recognition. Closely followed by her cousin, she pressed into the room, in which, though several people were assembled, she saw but one object, the form of her twin brother, wasted, ah! how wasted! yet alive, and from his glad, expectant look, already waiting her.

With a cry, which was born half of sorrow and half of joy, Nelly sprang forward, and clasped him in her arms; and then there followed a deep silence, which everybody present felt too sacred to be broken.

Bertie himself was the first to speak.

"I have — waited — for this — darling!" he faintly whispered. "I only — waited — till you — came!"

Then, placing one wasted hand in the clasp of Nigel Brooke, who stood beside his bed, he put the other fondly round his sister's neck, and drawing her head downwards till their faces met, placed his cold lips against her own, and so died!

CHAPTER XXIII.

In which Nelly learns the History of her Birth.

THE disinclination which he naturally felt to meet his cousin Nelly after her marriage, was not the sole reason that had induced Nigel Brooke to leave the Chase. It was the most powerful, perhaps, but not the most urgent. *That* was connected with his mother.

Mrs. Brooke has already been represented as a weak-minded and frivolous woman, partial to the society of people much younger than herself, and very open to flattery.

Deprived of the companionship of Nelly Brooke, and having quarrelled with her "charming" doctor, she was not long in finding candidates for her favour, to supply their places, amongst whom was a certain Major Hazell, a man of about the age of her own son, who, from being at first simply intimate at the Chase, became by degrees so particular in his attentions to the old lady, that it was evident he intended to make her a proposal of marriage. At this prospect, which was

patent to all, Mrs. Brooke simpered like a girl of seventeen, whilst Nigel felt nothing but annoyance.

— Although his father had seen fit to bequeath the bulk of his large fortune to himself, he had left his widow sufficiently independent to render her money an object of attraction to a penniless man like Major Hazell, who would not, so Nigel guessed, be particular to a shade about the age of the woman he married, so long as her income was enough to keep him in comfort. And although she was silly and vain, and often the cause of vexation to himself, it distressed Nigel Brooke to think that his mother should become, at her time of life, the prey of an adventurer, for with his present intentions towards her, he could think of Major Hazell in no other light.

To reason with Mrs. Brooke, however, was all that he could do, and reasoning was of no avail; she either could not, or she would not, see that the idea of anything like love passing between herself and a man of Major Hazell's age was absurd, and the slightest allusion to his probable object in courting her, was sufficient to bring down such a storm of tearful reproaches, that her son was not tempted to try the effect too often. Then he had hoped that a removal from Orpington might turn her thoughts into another direction, or divert those of her professed admirer, and it was partly for that reason, and wholly with that wish, that he had taken the house in Curzon Street, which they then occupied; not that their departure from the Chase had had the effect which he desired, for Major Hazell had followed them to London a few weeks afterwards, and made a formal proposal of marriage to Mrs. Brooke, which she, as formally, had accepted, so that, added to her former

airs and graces, Nigel had now the further mortification of seeing his mother ape all the blushing modesty of a young fiancée, and engaged day after day in amassing a magnificent wardrobe in which to appear under her new condition.

He had tried all he could to dissuade her from taking such a step, and he had failed; there was nothing left to be done but to put as good a face upon the matter as he could.

He had been in the thick of the annoyance caused by this occurrence, when one day, on calling at his club, an ill-spelt and almost illegible note, which old Aggie had got some one to trace for her on a dirty piece of paper, was put into his hand; with the intimation that a very old woman had called four or five times at the club in order to see him, and on the occasion of her last visit, had left that behind her, to be given to him as soon as possible.

Having heard nothing of his cousin's arrival in London, or of his quarrel with Dr. Monkton, Nigel Brooke was at first totally at a loss to understand *who* it was that presented her "humbel respecks" to him, or so earnestly entreated him to visit her young master, at his lodgings in one of the dirty little thoroughfares that intersect the Strand: and had it not been that the last sentence informed him it was by "mis nely's" desire that the request was made, he would probably have considered the communication as some hoax, not worthy his attention. But those magic letters (when he had guessed the name they were intended to represent) were all-sufficient to command his immediate services.

Within an hour of receiving the unsightly scrawl, he was at the given address, hearing a roundabout

statement of the whole proceeding from the quivering lips of poor old Aggie, who felt certain that Miss Nelly must either be dead or dying, at Hilstone, because she had never forwarded the box of clothes, as she had promised to do, nor even answered the letters which Master Robert had sent her.

The accounts of "Master Robert" himself were very unsatisfactory. His summary dismissal from the doctor's house, and the subsequent silence of his sister, appeared to have had a most unfavourable effect upon his mind and behaviour. From the nurse's story, he seemed to be spending more money in a night than ought to suffice him for a month; and to be living in a round of low dissipation which must, eventually, prove as fatal to his health, as it already had, to his respectability. To hear all this grieved Nigel Brooke exceedingly; for Nelly's sake, far more than for his own; for he knew how keen a grief the knowledge of such conduct on her brother's part would be to her.

That she should not have written, or in any way noticed Bertie's letters, was at that time as incomprehensible to him as to old Aggie. But before the nurse had finished her narration, her listener had formed two resolutions. One was, to rescue Robert Brooke from his present life of folly, the other to communicate the sad effects which the estrangement had had upon him to Dr. Monkton.

And the latter task, although, to Nigel Brooke, by far the most unpleasant of the two, was as faithfully performed as was the former. He wrote to Dr. Monkton, not once, but a dozen times; not only when he first found out that Robert Brooke was on the road to ruin, but when, after the wretched boy, borne down

by disappointment and a reckless disregard of health, was stretched upon his dying bed, and in a condition to excite the sympathy of the coldest heart on earth.

By that time, Nigel Brooke, by dint of perseverance in his charitable undertaking, by dint of gentle reasoning, of appeals to his love for his twin-sister, and by repeated acts of kindness from himself — had succeeded in touching some hidden spring in Robert's nature, and effecting a complete reconciliation between them. How it came about the lad himself could never say; but he knew that he had been very obstinate, and very broken down by sickness and despondency, before he could accept the hand so cordially extended by his cousin, or consent to be made comfortable at his expense.

But when that day arrived — a happy day for Nigel, and he bore poor dying Bertie and his faithful nurse to Curzon Street, the breach was healed, and perfect confidence restored; and from that time until his death Robert Brooke could never sufficiently reproach himself for the estrangement which he had caused between them.

Meanwhile no letter came from Dr. Monkton, until his correspondent (unable to account for so ungentlemanly a disregard of his repeated communications) expressed in writing his intention of going down to Hilstone to learn the reason.

Then he received an answer, but couched in such terms as he had thought no man who deserved the name would have written of another. In it Dr. Monkton detailed the affronts he had received from Robert Brooke, and the effect which separation from her brother had had upon his wife, and without noticing the fact of the young man's approaching death, which Nigel

had strongly urged upon his consideration, emphatically refused to allow Nelly to go to London to see her brother, or to hold any communication with him whatever.

It was a case in which a cousin's authority was useless.

Nelly belonged to her husband, and was under his control, and the only way in which Nigel could assist her was to entreat Dr. Monkton by every persuasion in his power, to alter his determination, which he continued to do, until he received a final refusal conveyed in so curt and peremptory a manner as to forbid his making another attempt. Meanwhile every excuse that could be thought of was made to poor Bertie for the prolonged delay in his sister's appearance, until at last he had grown too weak to be able to think or feel very strongly upon any subject, although he never relinquished the fixed idea that he should see her again before he died. When it was evident that his cousin's end was drawing near, Nigel Brooke had written to his guardian, Mr. Ray, to come and say farewell to him, and things had arrived at this pass when he so unexpectedly encountered Nelly in the cab outside the club, and conveyed her also to her dying brother's side.

It was a long time before the girl was in a proper state to hear all this, herself.

For many days after Bertie's death she was unfit to be spoken to; for weeks she could not listen calmly to any particulars concerning his illness; and months had passed before she was fully persuaded that she also was not going to die and be laid by his side in the quiet grave in Little Bickton churchyard, where, at her

express desire, Nigel Brooke and Mr. Ray had conveyed her brother's body.

But when she was able to converse with old Aggie on the subject, and to listen to the nurse's details of her cousin's generosity and kindness, she felt as though she could never love him sufficiently in return for what he had done.

At the same time she asked to hear the history of her own and brother's birth.

"Tell me all about it, Aggie!" she had said on that occasion, "and don't be in the least afraid of wounding my sensibility; whilst my darling was here I felt the shame of it for his sake, but now that he is gone, nothing can ever give me pain or pleasure, and I should like to know the whole truth before I meet him again."

"Well then, my deary!" replied the old woman: "You've heard me say, a many times, how that I nursed your poor mamma before ever you and Master Robert was born. Your grandpapa didn't live at Little Bickton then, Miss Nelly, but at a village not any bigger, in the lower parts of Devon, of which he were the rector. He were married twice, you know, and when he took his second wife his son by his first lady (which was Mr. Nigel's father) was fast growing up into a young man. Well! after a year or so your poor mamma was born, and lor' what a fuss they did make over her: I don't believe never a baby was made such a fuss about before, and as she grew older, she was that spoilt there was no holding her.

"I wouldn't wish to say a word against her, Miss Nelly, and she dead and buried now, poor young thing, nigh upon twenty years; but still you wishes to hear

the whole truth, and her wilfulness was much at the bottom of it all.

"She wouldn't mind your grandpapa nor your grandmamma, no more than if they'd never spoke to her; and so you may believe that she didn't mind anything what *I* might say. Indeed, she were mostly as contrary as she could stand, and I believe the only body that could in the least control her, was her big brother, Mr. Nigel's father.

"He had married a few years after your grandpapa took his second wife, and there warn't so much difference between the ages of their children, not more than a matter of four or five years perhaps, and so, in course, he looked upon Miss Helen quite as a child, and never failed to speak to her when he see fit, which used to bring words sometimes between his father and himself.

"Well, she grew up, Miss Nelly, until she was close upon seventeen, tall and straight as a poplar, but as unlearned as any cotter's girl, for she never would apply herself to her books, and her papa let her do just as she chose.

"She was very pretty, prettier than yourself, which is saying a great deal, to my mind, though I never liked her face as well as I do your'n, my deary; you've more the look of your poor papa, to say the truth, for though strangers took you to be so similar, Master Robert was the most like his mamma, and I always thought so.

"Miss Helen, she seemed never at home, but was always tearing about the lanes on her pony, or wandering in the woods, as wild as the pony itself when it was turned out to grass.

“It was just at this time that she made the acquaintance of a young gentleman, very little older than herself, who was living in a neighbouring town. He wasn't in the army exactly, but he was studying for it under a master, and expected to join a regiment very shortly.

“How your poor mamma come to know him first, I can't tell you, but he called at the rectory one afternoon, and then it seemed that they had met each other before, and was well acquainted. Your grandmamma made the young gentleman as welcome as she did everybody, so did your grandpapa; so from that day he was for ever riding over to see them; and he and Miss Helen, they used to go away together into the woods and fields and read poetry and such like rubbish, and sometimes not come back for hours together.

“When Mr. Nigel's father, who was a merchant and living up in London, come to hear of all the nonsense that was going on between his sister and this young gentleman, he was very angry, and he come straight down into Devon and spoke to your grandpapa about it. But lor, Miss Nelly, what manner of use was that? You know what your grandpa was of late years, my dear, and though I don't mean to say he was quite so bad in the days I speak of, yet he never took much notice of anything which lay out of his parish business; he did go so far, I believe, as to tell your grandmamma that he thought Miss Helen was getting a little too much liberty in the matter, but she only smiled at his fears, and said they was just a boy and girl together, and no possible harm could come of it. And so things went on in the same way till the young gentleman's time was up, and he had to go to some foreign place,

Malta I think they called it, for to join the army, and when your grandpapa and grandmamma see how Miss Helen took on at his departure, I think they was a little pleased to think as he was really a going.

“For you must remember, Miss Nelly, that in consequence of his being such a lad and almost from school like, there hadn’t been no talk of marriage between them, nor any thought of such a thing, so far as your grandpapa wished, or we could tell. But the young gentleman hadn’t been gone more than a few months before we servants began to see as there was something very wrong in the house. Your grandpapa, who wasn’t a young man by that time, Miss Nelly, he seemed to break down all of a sudden, and your grandmamma went about as if she was going mad with grief, and Miss Helen, she warn’t much better, poor thing, as she had little need to be; for after a bit it all come out, though I can hardly tell you how, that she had got into trouble and shame, such as had never been heard on in that house before.

“The news of his sister’s disgrace was sent, I suppose, to Mr. Nigel’s father, for what did he do but go straight off from London to Malta in a ship, and without consulting your grandpapa on the subject, invited the young gentleman (which was your poor papa, you know, my dear) to fight him with pistols, as was then the fashion.

“And now, Miss Nelly, this is the part of the story for which your uncle has always had so much blame thrown at him, but I can’t see it in so bad a light myself. Your poor papa was doubtless very young and thoughtless (I believe he was about come of age at the time) and the difference of years between them went a

great deal towards making up the noise there was about it; but still the truth remained, that he had brought his sister into trouble, and no gentleman, I am sure, ever dreamt of blaming Mr. Nigel's father for doing as he had done. Poor Master Robert used to say (as I've often heard him) that his uncle had *murdered* his father; but 'twasn't the case, Miss Nelly, and poor dear, he came to acknowledge that he had deceived himself, before he died. They met, and fought a duel, it is true, and the young gentleman, (who was an honourable good lad, I dare to say, or he wouldn't have left such a child as you behind him,) was so overcome by the shame of what he had done, that he fired his pistol in the air, but Mr. Nigel's father, having no knowledge that such was his intentions, took a straight aim, and shot him right through the heart.

“But what made the worst quarrel between your grandpapa and your uncle, Miss Nelly, was the fact that after the poor young gentleman's death, a sealed letter was found in his portmanteau, directed to your mamma, in which he said he never should forgive himself for the injury he had done her, and that he was going to get leave to England, as soon as might be, and marry her straight off.

“And I believe he come of a very high family, and would have been a lord some day, if he had only lived long enough, and had a power of money into the bargain. And that's what Master Robert used to be a-thinking of, when he said, that had it not been for his uncle's violence, you and he would have been as well off, or better, maybe, than his cousin were. So your grandpapa had two disappointments to contend against;

the loss of such a grand marriage for his daughter, and the loss of her good name into the bargain.

“Well, my deary, it was but three or four months after, that you and your poor brother came struggling into this world of misery, but sad changes had took place, even before then. Your grandpapa and uncle had come to such shameful words that they had parted with many a wicked oath, never to speak to one another again; and it wasn't long before we heard that Mr. Nigel's father had gone off to the Indies with his wife and son, with the intention of setting up in business there.

“Then came your grandmamma's death, which was terrible sudden, owing to her having the heart disease, and being unable to contend with so much trouble; and your poor mamma, who had never rightly held up her head since the news of her misfortune got abroad, and who felt her own mother's death sadly, she just waited to give birth to you two poor helpless babies before she flickered out of life herself. That was the last stroke to your grandpapa. I think if Miss Helen had been spared, however much ashamed he may have been of her, he would have tried to rub on somehow; but it didn't seem at first as if he could ever believe that she was gone.

“But directly the mould was filled in over her coffin, he left being a clergyman, and gave up his house and his living, and moved off to Little Bickton with Master Robert and yourself. You always went by the name of Brooke, my dear, having no claim to any other, and so he used to give out as you were the orphans of a younger son who had come by a sudden death, and no one but myself and Mr. Ray (who was

an old college friend of his) ever guessed to the contrary. So that's how I came to be your nurse, Miss Nelly, my dear, for of all his servants, your grandpapa only took me to look after you both."

"And he couldn't have chosen a better friend for us, or a more faithful nurse, Aggie," said Nelly, as the story was concluded.

"Haven't you no curiosity to learn your father's name, my bird?" enquired the old woman, after a pause.

She shook her head.

"No! I have no wish to hear it, or to think of it! I cannot feel as though I ever had a father. Thank you, Aggie, for what you have told me, but please never speak of it again. Perhaps I am hard-hearted; but when I think of all the bitter misery which the knowledge of our birth afforded Bertie, I lose all sense of pity or compassion, and can only feel the shame of the recital."

CHAPTER XXIV.

Take me back to Little Bickton.

ALTHOUGH sorely disinclined to hold any further correspondence with Dr. Monkton, Nigel Brooke considered it his duty to inform him without delay, of his wife's unexpected arrival in Curzon Street, and the subsequent death of her brother. The semi-conscious state in which Nelly then lay, utterly forbid all idea of her immediate return to Hilstone, but her cousin expressed his willingness to take her there as soon as ever she was fit to be removed, unless her husband

should prefer coming to London, to escort her home himself.

Sufficient had dropt from Nelly's lips, even in her half-wandering and disconnected sentences, to render him aware that a very serious estrangement had taken place between them, but he trusted that the girl's devotion to her brother, added to the real cause which she had had for fear, would, now that the bone of contention was removed, combine to soften her husband's heart towards her.

After a few days of uncertainty, however, he received an answer to his letter, written in the third person, in which Dr. Monkton begged to inform Mr. Brooke, that as Mrs. Monkton was fully aware, before she left her home, of the conditions attached to her taking such a step, he concluded that she did so without any desire of returning thither, whilst, for his own part, he had no intention of receiving her again.

This was discouraging, certainly, but at the time that he received it, the house (what with Nelly's illness, and Bertie's impending funeral) was in such a state of confusion, that Nigel had not leisure to feel the indignation at the doctor's letter, with which subsequent perusals inspired him.

For several weeks he let the matter rest, and then, for Nelly's sake, he felt that he must make another effort. For his own, he would but too gladly have kept her always under the same roof with his mother and himself, but however innocent, she could not live apart from her husband without incurring blame, which, as her nearest relative, it became his duty, if possible, to prevent; so that, when she was once more able to

sit up and be reasoned with, he spoke to her upon the subject.

Her wasted figure and her drawn white face, looked so much the more white and wasted for her deep mourning robes, that Nigel's heart failed him as he thought of delivering her once again to the tender mercies of her husband, but he knew it was the right thing to be done, and he trusted to Providence to bless the right.

He had expected to hear her remonstrate against such a proceeding, or even utterly refuse to play her part in it, but on the contrary, it almost seemed a matter of indifference to her. She recoiled a little at the thought of encountering Dr. Monkton, but was at that period so fully impressed with the idea that a few weeks, or at the most, months, would see her re-united to her brother, that it was of slight consequence where or with whom she spent the intervening time.

"Only it will be lost trouble, Cousin Nigel, I am afraid," she said, "for he told me if I went, it should be never to return, and — you don't know him as I do."

"Circumstances have altered since then, Nelly!" was Nigel's answer, "and whether we succeed or not, you will have the satisfaction of feeling that you have done your duty."

Accordingly, he took her down to Hilstone on the following day, and leaving her at the "Sovereign," which was the principal hotel in the place, proceeded by himself to call on Dr. Monkton.

They had travelled by an early train, and he was fortunate enough to find the doctor at home, busily engaged upon his luncheon. The meeting between the

two men was necessarily formal, but for his cousin's sake, Nigel Brooke made it as civil as was in his power.

"You will doubtless guess my errand, Dr. Monkton," he commenced. "Your wife is at this moment in the town, and willing to return to your protection, and I have come beforehand to ask if you are ready to receive her."

The doctor, who, at his visitor's request, had recommenced his meal, merely elevated his eyebrows, as he replied:

"Indeed? but I thought I had made my intentions on this subject fully known to you, Mr. Brooke."

"I received a letter from you, certainly," said Nigel, "written under the smart of first hearing that your wife had disobeyed your orders, but I can hardly believe that you will keep to the determination which you then expressed. Nelly did wrong in leaving Hilstone, Dr. Monkton, there is no doubt of that, but you will confess that you had given her provocation, in refusing to furnish her with any news concerning her brother's welfare."

"I do not suppose, Mr. Brooke, that you are here to discuss so purely personal a matter as the cause of quarrel between Mrs. Monkton and myself. It is sufficient for your satisfaction that you should know that she left my house on the clear understanding that she was not to return to it, and that I did not make such an agreement with the design of breaking it upon the first opportunity."

"But think of her youth, Dr. Monkton! Compared with men of our age, Nelly is almost a child! From

her birth she has been devoted to her brother, as no one should know better than yourself."

"Pray, by that sentence do you intend to make any allusion to the reason for which your cousin did me the honour of accepting my proposals of marriage?"

At this question, Nigel looked astonished.

"By no means," he replied. "Whatever my suspicions may have been, I have never heard aught from either Nelly or her brother to make me think she had any motive for marrying you except the right one."

"Oh! indeed! They have been more reticent with you, then, than they saw fit to be with me. Neither Mrs. Monkton nor her brother had any hesitation in averring that she took my name in order to minister to his dissipated tastes."

"Knowing her as I do, I can scarcely believe that to be the case," said Nigel, "but were it so, he is dead, and can never irritate nor disgrace you again. Can that fact have no power to alter your feelings with respect to your wife? She has felt the blow acutely, so much so, that you would be astonished to see the alteration grief has made in her. She holds the firm conviction (a fallacious one, I trust, but still true to her) that it will not be long before she follows him to the grave, and I think that in her present state of mind, a few kind words respecting her dead brother, and a little sympathy with her own trouble, would be enough to bind her once more to yourself. Surely it is worth the trial. Nelly has all the qualities requisite to make as devoted a wife as she has been a sister, and although she cannot live apart from you without having some slur cast on her good name, I do not urge these points on your consideration for my own sake as

being connected with herself. My mother's house is open to her, and as long as I live, I should for many reasons consider it a privilege to be permitted to assist her, so that when I say that it is my earnest wish to see you reconciled, I hope you will believe that I say it for your good, more than for my own."

"I have not the slightest desire to deprive you of one of your advantages, Mr. Brooke," exclaimed the doctor, as he rose from the luncheon table, "and since you appear to reckon assisting your cousin, even to affording her a home, not the least of them, I beg to intimate that you will not find me put any obstacle in your way. Mrs. Monkton is at liberty for the future to live where and with whom she chooses, so long as it is not with me."

Although Nigel Brooke had been speaking so calmly, and apparently with so little resentment, it had been a difficult matter from the commencement of the interview, for him to keep his temper, and Dr. Monkton's last speech thoroughly upset him. It was not so much the words used by Nelly's husband, as the sardonic expression of his face, and the slighting, sneering air in which he alluded to her, that so much nettled her cousin.

He saw the man now as she had seen him; worse than even *his* jealousy had ever pictured him to be; and felt what the poor child in whose behalf he stood there must have undergone, when left entirely in the power of one who could look and speak of her like this.

"It is all very well, Dr. Monkton," he said, rising also to his feet; "it is all very well of you to affect to cast off so entirely the woman whom you have sworn

to protect and cherish. But the law does not permit you to do so. You cannot—for one act of rebellion, however aggravated, disown a wife who expresses herself willing to return to her allegiance. Since I have heard the terms in which you can bring yourself to speak of her, I should be as loath to place my cousin in your hands as you could to be forced to take her back again; but if she consents to resign that, of which you have no right under present circumstances to deprive her, I, as her nearest relative, shall expect you to make a suitable provision for her wants. Consent to do that (as you must consent), and I will prove myself as ready to convey her from Hilstone as I can answer she will be to go.”

“Mrs. Monkton had four thousand pounds settled on her at her marriage, by myself,” replied the doctor, “and I presume she will now inherit anything that her brother may have left behind him. Of so much I have neither the power nor the wish to deprive her; but she will get nothing more from me.”

“And you can really resign her with so little feeling,” exclaimed Nigel Brooke, — “a woman with such a capability for loving—with so large and true and innocent a heart?”

The doctor smiled sarcastically.

“You seem so well read in the catalogue of her virtues, Mr. Brooke, that I think you had better appropriate them: I will make over my interest in them to you on the spot.”

“I did not come here to be insulted, Dr. Monkton, nor would I have borne as much as I already have from you, except for Nelly’s sake—I wish you a very good morning. I see that by stopping here longer I

shall only waste my time. What further needs to be settled between us, can be best arranged through writing." And with a stiff inclination of the head Nigel Brooke quitted the room.

As he walked back to the hotel where he had left his cousin, his indignation burned fiercely within him. This was the man, then, to whom Nelly had chained herself for life, and to secure health and affluence for the poor body now rotting in the grave to which it had descended all the quicker for its brief course of dissipation. Yet, much as he disliked and despised Dr. Monkton, he would not quite believe but that his indifference must be partly affected.

He was very obstinate, perhaps, or very much wounded at his wife's want of affection for him, and he had assumed that tone before a stranger of his own sex, in order to hide how deeply he was hurt. It could not be—it was impossible that any man could cherish so bitter and rancorous a hatred against a young affectionate girl, only because in the desperation of suspense she had dared to violate his will, and seek a dying brother.

It was not in Nigel Brooke's power to realise such a feeling, and by the time he had again reached Nelly's presence he had almost persuaded himself that could she be brought face to face with Dr. Monkton, all would yet be well between them.

She was seated in her old attitude, gazing fixedly upon the floor; but as her cousin entered the room she slowly raised her eyes to his.

"I have not been successful, Nelly, I regret to say," he said, answering the look which met his own. "Monkton seems very obstinate and unforgiving; but,

perhaps, considering what has gone before, I am not the best mediator that could have been chosen between you."

"I told you so," she said quietly. "I knew that he would not forgive me. He never forgives anyone. Let us go back to London, Cousin Nigel — it is of no use staying here, and the very air of Hilstone seems to stifle me."

"But I am so unwilling to give up the chance, dear Nelly," he replied. "You are so young — you seem entirely to forget how great a disadvantage in the world's eyes it will be to you to be known to be living apart from your husband."

"Not so great as it would be in my own to be living with him under present circumstances," she said, in a low voice.

"But you would return to him if he consented to receive you, Nelly; would you not?"

"Yes! if you think it best, Nigel! I will do whatever you think right. It will be but a little while anyway, and I should wish to die at peace with him and all the world."

"Were you to ask Mrs. Prowse to plead with him for you, might not that have a better effect than any words of mine? She is a woman and a sister, and must feel for the suspense and anxiety which you passed through with regard to poor dear Bertie."

"Must I go to see her, then?" asked Nelly, passively rising.

"I think it will be best, dear; but you shall not go alone. I will order a fly, and take you there myself." And consequently, in another half-hour the cousins found themselves in the drawing-room of Mrs. Prowse.

They had been told that she was in, but she kept them waiting a considerable time; and when she did appear, indignation was superadded to her usual snappishness. Following close upon her heels, but meekly, and as though he knew that he was disobeying orders, there came good Canon Prowse. As they entered, Nelly rose and advanced to meet them.

"Well! Mrs. James!" exclaimed her sister-in-law, "*you* in Hilstone! I could hardly believe but that the servant had misinformed me. And pray to what may I owe the honour of this visit?"

Nelly did not appear in the least intimidated by this address. She began to speak at once, not rapidly, but slowly and distinctly, and with a pathos in her tone which went to the heart of both her male listeners.

"I have come, Mrs. Prowse, because my Cousin Nigel thought it best I should do so," — (here Nigel Brooke and the canon's wife exchanged a formal salutation,) — "to ask you if you will speak to James for me. He is very angry with me, as I daresay that you know, and does not wish that I should return to live at Hilstone; but Bertie — my brother — is dead — and it will not be long before I follow him, and till that time comes, I should wish to do my duty, if I can. And perhaps James would believe this from you sooner than he would from me, or from my cousin."

These words were delivered so simply, that it was impossible for Mrs. Prowse to affect to misunderstand them.

"You should wish to do your duty, Mrs. James?" she echoed. "Well, that seems rather an extraordinary avowal, after your late behaviour. Running away from

Hilstone in broad daylight, and creating such a scandal as I believe was never heard of here before."

"My *dear*," put in the canon, feebly expostulating.

"Well, Canon, and I repeat it, such a scandal as Hilstone had never witnessed before."

"But I went to Bertie," said Nelly, as calmly as at first. "I went to see my brother, Mrs. Prowse, and he was dying; I told James so before I started. I told him I must go, or I should die myself."

"Who you went to makes no difference whatever," snapped Mrs. Prowse, "the infamy of the transaction lay in your presuming to go! And after *my brother* had commanded you not to stir from the house!"

"Pardon me, madam," interposed Nigel Brooke, "but I think the fact that my cousin went to her aunt's house, and to see a brother whom she rightly believed to be dying, *is* some palliation of the case."

"Of course it is," said Canon Prowse, decidedly.

"It's none at all," shrilly exclaimed his wife, "and I'll thank you, Canon, to hold your tongue upon the matter. It's no business of yours, anyway. I say again, that Mrs. James leaving her home in the manner she did, was an infamous proceeding, and I certainly shall not be the one to try and persuade my brother to receive her back after it.

"If we begin to talk of infamy, madam," said Nigel Brooke, hotly, "what do you think of Dr. Monkton keeping back all news of her brother's condition from his wife?"

"I think he was perfectly justified in doing so," she tartly replied, "the young man was a most dissipated young man, he was a disgrace to the establishment, and not a fit associate for any respectable per-

son——” but here she was stopped by Nelly, who with burning cheeks, exclaimed:

“He is *dead*, Mrs. Prowse, my dearest brother is dead and gone to heaven, and I will not hear the slightest odium cast upon his memory!”

Mrs. Prowse tittered.

“I know he is *dead*, Mrs. James, I have heard so far, but as to having gone to heaven——”

“Oh! shame! for shame!” cried Nigel Brooke.

“Be quiet!” shouted her husband, roused from his usual forbearance.

She turned round upon them both like a spit-fire.

“How *dare* you speak to me in that way, young man? And as for *you*, Canon, if you presume to use such a tone towards me again, we will soon see which is master in this house.”

“Come away, Nelly, come away,” said Nigel, drawing his cousin’s arm within his own. “I was wrong to subject you to such a scene as this!”

“Oh, indeed,” sneered Mrs. Prowse, “not good enough for her, I suppose. Not good enough company perhaps. We are not the tenants of Orpington Chase, Mr. Brooke, I know, but at all events, our fathers and mothers were married to each other, and we had a name, however humble, which we could call our own.”

“Cousin Nigel, let us go!” said Nelly, for the first time, shewing something that was not indifference.

“Woman! will you be silent?” said the Canon angrily, as he pushed his wife to one side. “Nelly, my dear girl, we part friends, do we not?”

She dropped her cousin’s arm, and ran back to his side.

"You were always good to me, Canon Prowse," she said, "and so you were to my poor dead Bertie. God bless you for it!"

She put her hand in his, and pressed it firmly; and he stooped down as he had done once before, and kissed her on the forehead.

"Oh, indeed," tittered Mrs. Prowse from the background. "I had no idea this kind of thing went on, or I should have been quite jealous. Kissing! well to be sure, it is just as well, I think, that my brother is so resolved to keep his word, or we should have Mrs. James running off *in company* next time, instead of alone!"

But she had scarcely concluded her speech before the hall door had slammed upon her visitors; and the Canon, the meek and long-suffering Canon, who scarcely dared in usual say that his soul was his own, turned upon her, and with a suddenness which took her completely by surprise — boxed her ears!

Mrs. Prowse could not believe her senses; no, she could *not* believe her senses, and particularly that sense which caused her sacred ears to ring.

The smartness of the attack had sent her spinning back into the drawing-room; and as she heard the door of her husband's study close and lock behind him, and felt that for the time being, he had escaped her clutches, she had no resource but to sink down on the sofa, and find relief in a burst of angry tears.

"And now, Nelly, what are we to do next?" enquired Nigel Brooke, as having conducted her back to Curzon Street, they entered once more upon the discussion of her prospects.

"Oh take me back to Little Bickton, Cousin Nigel,

let me go back to Little Bickton to Mrs. Weston, and the dear old farm, and live close to the spot where my poor darling lies."

Mrs. Brooke tried hard to reason her niece out of this plan. About to be married herself, and knowing that Nelly, as a married woman, could have no designs upon Nigel, nor Nigel upon her, she had been graciously pleased to resign her jealousy, and to return to her former opinion, that the girl would be a very pleasant and useful companion for herself. Indeed, she had gone so far as to tell her son that his cousin Helena was certainly very much improved by her marriage, and that if dear Hazell had no objection, she thought she should often like to have her to stay with them after they had become one.

But Nigel did not second her design, he was determined not to sanction it; he even suggested that Nelly was too young and too pretty to be a safe visitor in the house of so susceptible a man as his intended step-father; an idea which naturally gave his mother so much offence that she declined to enter upon the subject with him again. But his real reason was scarcely a less important one. He was not afraid for Major Hazell's peace of mind, but sorely for his own.

He would have given worlds to have kept that dear companion, with her sweet, sad face, for ever by his side, but he dared not do it. He knew that his mother's house would always be open to him, and he must be banished from it, if Nelly were admitted there. Even the short time he had lately spent in her society had greatly disturbed the tranquillity which he had hoped he was learning to attain, and he could not risk it further, lest the future might hold something darker

for them than he dared to contemplate. She was his cousin, it was true, and he her nearest relation; but he could not forget that she was dearer to him than she should be, and the wife of another man! And Nelly seemed instinctively to share his thoughts, and steadfastly resisting her aunt's entreaties and solicitations, turned from them all to prefer the old petition.

"Take me back to Bickton! for the little time before I join him, (oh, I hope and trust in heaven's mercy, that it will be but a very little time,) let me live close to Bertie's grave, for I feel as though he missed me even there."

So she did as she desired. She went back to live in the old rooms at Bickton Farm, which Nigel would have beautified for her with modern furniture, had she allowed him (but she said, "for such a little while, what did it signify?"); and beneath the roof where Bertie had lived, surrounded by the friends whom Bertie had known, cheered by Mrs. Weston and the Rays, and cared for by old Aggie, Nelly's bruised heart, after a while, began slowly, but certainly, to heal again.

CHAPTER XXV.

The Spirit of Thug is avenged.

THE early spring had now arrived; Nelly's flying visit to Hilstone, and her rejected offers of reconciliation were things of the past, for though but a few weeks had elapsed since the occurrence, Time had already closed over it like waters above a falling body, and every one who knew them, was aware that a breach had taken place between the doctor and his

young wife, so serious as to render it improbable that this world would see it healed again.

Of course there were various opinions on the subject. Some people were not slow to affirm that Mrs. Prowse's temper must be at the bottom of the disagreement, for Nelly had been a favourite with most in Hilstone; whilst others, who judged by hints thrown out by the Canon's wife herself, accredited the poor girl with sins such as her innocence had never dreamed of; and there were those who even went so far as to suggest that her character had not been all that Dr. Monkton thought when he married her.

This circumstance, however, had scarcely furnished more than a nine days' wonder for the town of Hilstone, before it found something else, scarcely less remarkable, to feed its curiosity upon. Dr. Monkton himself fell ill. It was the beginning of the month of February, when Mrs. Prowse first observed an alteration in her brother's spirits, which all at once became visibly depressed — an unusual, almost unprecedented case with him. The possessor of feelings singularly blunt, James Monkton was not the man to undergo many changes of temperament. He was never known to be either very jocular or very melancholy; he had been often heard to say that the extremes of happiness or misery were as inexplicable to him as they were unknown. Therefore, when he fell into low spirits, the effect was as remarkable as it was unexpected. Not that he courted observation in the matter; on the contrary, he religiously shunned every allusion to the state of his private feelings, and showed considerable temper when his sister ventured to touch upon the subject.

But, more than once she had suddenly come upon

him sitting alone, with his face buried in his hands, and an inexplicable gloom upon his brow, and although each time he had immediately roused himself, he had not been able to prevent her detecting that it was by force alone that he thus dismissed some unusually painful recollection from his mind.

Mrs. Prowse thought over this matter again and again, but by no possible means could she account for it: to her it was as mysterious as it was strange.

"I cannot imagine what is the matter with James!" she remarked one day, in a burst of unusual confidence to the Canon, "he is more melancholy and self-absorbed than I have ever seen him in his life before — one would really think he had something on his mind."

"Fretting about the quarrel with his wife, most likely," replied the Canon, "at least I am sure *I* should do so, were I in his place."

"Absurd!" said Mrs. Prowse, tossing her head, "*my brother*, I would have you know, Canon, is not a man to do one thing and mean another; and what you would feel under the circumstances is no criterion whatever for James. If he had had (or was ever likely to have had) the least desire to be reconciled to Mrs. James, he would not have stood so firmly in the matter as he did."

"Well! perhaps it's his conscience, then, which is pricking him," suggested her husband, "it ought to, if he possesses one at all."

"Canon!" exclaimed Mrs. Prowse, indignantly, "do you know what you are talking about? I should think *my brother's* conscience was as clear as any man's. He has nothing to reproach himself with, I am quite sure."

“No?” said the Canon, incredulously, “well, I’m glad to hear you say so, my dear, and I hope that the doctor may be able to give his conscience as clean a bill of health as you seem ready to do. Meanwhile, if his mind is so perfectly at ease, it seems strange to me that he should go sitting about in the way you describe with his head buried in his hands. It rather conveys an idea of self-reproach or misery to my mind; but perhaps I am mistaken, and it may only be the attitude of rejoicing innocence.”

Mrs. Prowse, with all her claws out, turned round upon her husband, ready to spring, but a look in his eye recalled her to herself, and she was fain to be content with flouncing out of his presence.

She had not forgotten the day on which she had insulted Nelly, and the remembrance of the indignity she had then received at the Canon’s hands, had still the power to make her ears tingle. It had been the commencement of a new era in both their lives. He had shown far less meekness and forbearance since that day, and she had been proportionately more humble. Her brother had proposed that they should again live together, as they had done before his marriage, and she had been anxious to do as he desired, and take up her residence in St. Bartholomew’s Street.

But on this plan the Canon had laid a most decided veto.

He had gone further; he had not hesitated to tell the doctor what he thought of his late conduct and unforgiving spirit; and although he would not prevent his wife from visiting her brother’s house, he absolutely refused to frequent it himself, or to accept any of the hospitalities tendered him from there. So that Mrs.

Prowse's sole satisfaction with regard to No. 15, now consisted in bursting in upon the servants at untoward times, in order to detect their petty sins of negligence or disobedience; or appearing in the kitchen, during meals, to the unmitigated disgust of the whole quintet, in hopes of finding that they were feasting on forbidden viands. Whenever she was fortunate enough to have some misdemeanour on their parts to relate, she carried the tale with alacrity to her brother; but as she had informed her husband, he had seemed lately to take no interest in anything, and she could not imagine what was the matter with him.

A few mornings after the conversation related, whilst Canon and Mrs. Prowse were seated at their breakfast, a servant entered, to inform them that "Mr. Long, from the doctor's, would be glad if he could speak with them for a minute."

Such a request on the part of "Mr. Long," who generally avoided the house of Mrs. Prowse as though it had been infected, was so unusual, that it provoked immediate curiosity, and the servant was desired to show him into the breakfast-room at once.

"Well! Long?" said Mrs. Prowse, interrogatively, as the man appeared.

Long waited a moment to make sure the other servant had had time to retreat; then opening the door again to glance into the passage, closed it securely, and advanced into the centre of the room.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," he said, in so low a voice that it might almost have been designated a whisper, "for the liberty that I take in interrupting you at your breakfast hour, but I am not quite easy, I regret to say, about my master."

"Your master!" exclaimed Mrs. Prowse; "why what of him, Long? Isn't he well?"

"I fear not, ma'am; but I dare not approach the subject with the doctor himself, on account of irritating him. I ventured to do so once, and he was annoyed with me, I may say violent. But I am sure that he is ill, ma'am. He has neither eaten nor drunk now, for two days past, and his dreams at night seem fearful. Since my mistress's departure I have slept, by my master's orders, in the further dressing-room, so as to be handy, and I hear him calling out sometimes, to that degree that I can't close my eyes. My master complained also of great pain in his shoulder and the back of his neck this morning, indeed he had to stop two or three times during dressing, on that account; but he won't let me take any notice of it, and has gone his rounds just the same as usual, though I'm sure he's more fit for his bed than to be out of doors."

"But what do you think is the matter with him, Long?" demanded the Canon.

"I can't say, I'm sure, sir, but the doctor has been very low in his spirits, for some weeks past, as perhaps you may have observed, and I shouldn't wonder myself if a fever or something of that sort was coming on him."

"Well! the doctor ought to know his own symptoms best," observed Canon Prowse, "and if he refuses to take any notice of them, I can't see what is to be done about it."

"I thought, perhaps, sir," said Long, twisting his hat round and round in his hands, "that if Mrs. Prowse would be good enough to speak to Dr. Nash on the subject he might be able to persuade my master to take more care of himself."

"Oh! I'm sure that wouldn't be of any use," replied Mrs. Prowse in her imperative manner. "Your master knows twice as much as Dr. Nash, and is not likely to take *his* advice. But I'll step round at dinner-time this evening, Long, and see what's the matter with him myself."

Long bowed and withdrew, though he had little hope that a woman's advice would have much influence with his master.

When Mrs. Prowse entered the dining-room of No. 15, at the time appointed, she found her brother looking much worse than she had anticipated. But to her repeated inquiries as to what ailed him, he pettishly replied that it was nothing, that he had only a pain in his shoulder and back, which as likely as not proceeded from rheumatism.

"Oh! I hope you are not going to have rheumatic fever, James!" she exclaimed; "you seem so restless and uncomfortable to me, and your face is so flushed that I shouldn't at all wonder if it were the case."

"I wish you'd stop your confounded croaking!" he said angrily; "it's enough to make a man ill to hear the way in which you go on."

The wine and dessert were on the table, but she observed that he sat with his back towards them, and was not drinking or eating as usual.

"Are you not going to take any wine, James?"

He rose then, but as though with an effort, and pouring out some sherry, attempted to raise it to his lips. But the next moment he dashed the wine-glass to the ground, and flew to the opposite side of the room, panting for breath and in a state apparently of the greatest terror.

Mrs. Prowse perceiving this action with much alarm, followed and attempted to soothe him, but he beat her off with his hands, and sank down on a sofa, gasping with agitation.

"James! what *is* the matter with you?" she exclaimed; "you must be very ill to go on like this. Let me send for Dr. Nash, or Mr. Young. You may do yourself serious harm by delaying to take advice."

"Leave me alone!" he answered in a harsh, thick voice, which was utterly unlike his own. "I want no doctors, or advice. There is nothing the matter with me, I tell you, and all I wish for is to be left to myself."

"Oh! if that is the case, of course I will go," said Mrs. Prowse, always but too ready to take offence; "but if you suffer for your negligence don't blame *me*, that's all. Good-night to you!" And quitting the room, she returned to her own house. Meanwhile the wretched man whom she had left grew so much worse, that before she had retired to rest, she received a second visit from Long, who with an expression of fear entreated her to summon Dr. Nash to his master's aid, or to authorise him to do so.

"I am sure he ought to see somebody, ma'am, and that at once, for he's been rolling his head about in the curiousest manner all the evening, and stammering as though he couldn't find his tongue."

"Well, you must send for Dr. Nash, then, and on your own responsibility, Long," snapped the affectionate sister, "for *I* don't intend to interfere again until I'm asked. I offered to do what I could for your master this afternoon, and he refused my services altogether. You must act as you think best, for I will not venture to give you any authority in the matter."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Long, respectfully,

though inappropriately; "then I *will* send for the other gentlemen, for I can't feel easy until I hear what their opinion of the case may be."

Accordingly, on pretence of transacting business of his own, Long crept out that evening to Dr. Nash's house, and furnished him with such an account of Dr. Monkton's symptoms as brought him at once to St. Bartholomew's Street.

But Mrs. Prowse did not go near her brother during the whole of the following day. He had offended her, and she desired he should learn that to do so was no slight thing.

On the morning of the day after, however, as she was passing the door of her husband's study, her curiosity was excited by hearing the sound of more than one strange voice within it; and she immediately stooped down to the keyhole to hear what they were talking about. Mrs. Prowse was not particular about using such simple expedients to gain her ends.

"I think that Mrs. Prowse should be informed of her brother's danger," said a voice, which she recognised as that of Dr. Nash.

"You think then, gentlemen, that the case is urgent," remarked her husband.

"Most decidedly so," was the reply from some stranger, "more than urgent, imminent, next to hopeless."

Then she was about to bustle in, eager for further intelligence, when, before she could resume an upright position, the door was suddenly thrown open. What the men thought of her, caught in the very act of listening to their conference, matters little; their minds were occupied at the moment with a subject of so much greater importance, that perhaps they never thought of her at all.

"My dear!" exclaimed the Canon, "these gentlemen were just enquiring for you. They have brought sad news with them, Matilda."

"Relating to my brother?" she asked, quickly.

"I regret to answer yes," replied Dr. Nash.

"What is the matter with him, doctor? Is it rheumatic fever, or scarlet fever, or what? I saw him the day before yesterday, and then he behaved in the most extraordinary manner to me."

"I am afraid you would think his actions still more extraordinary now," said her informant. "He is very ill, very ill indeed. Can you throw your thoughts back, Mrs. Prowse, to a night in last November, when, as I understand, Mr. Robert Brooke, the young gentleman lately dead, left your brother's house?"

"To be sure I can; but what of that?"

"On that night or morning," continued Dr. Nash, "Monkton shot a dog, I believe — a mastiff which lay upon the landing."

"Yes! a nasty, dangerous brute, which young Brooke had brought in on purpose to annoy him. But what possible connection can that circumstance have with his present illness?"

"We fear it has too much. Did Dr. Monkton ever tell you that the animal had bitten him?"

"Yes! now you mention it, he did. The dog seized his fingers as he was about to muzzle him, but the bites were scarcely to be called such. They were mere scratches, and healed directly."

Dr. Nash turned to the stranger, an eminent physician, whom he had summoned from London to his assistance.

"This account coincides with that of the servant," he remarked. "I greatly fear that your suspicions are correct."

"They are no longer suspicions with me," replied the other, "they are certainties."

"But what are you alluding to?" asked Mrs. Prowse, whose curiosity was all alive. "You cannot mean to tell me that those little wounds can have any effect upon my brother's health at this distance of time. Why, it happened nearly three months ago."

"That makes no difference," said the stranger, "the question is, in what state was the dog when shot?"

"Oh! I know nothing about the dog," replied Mrs. Prowse, hastily.

"We do, unfortunately, madam," he rejoined, "we have enquired, and have every reason to dread that rabies, though perhaps undeveloped, was in its system at the time."

At this surmise, which could not but convey a fearful meaning, even to a disinterested listener, the heart of the Canon's wife seemed suddenly to stand still, and her face grew pale as ashes.

"And in that case?" she gasped.

"In that case, we fear that there can be no mistake about Dr. Monkton's symptoms, which all tend to suggest the idea that he is suffering from ——"

"Not from — hydrophobia!" shrieked Mrs. Prowse. The stranger bowed his head.

She fell back on the sofa, unable to articulate, and white with terror.

"But please to understand, my dear lady," said Dr. Nash, "that you must not give a hint of our suspicions to your brother. Soothe him by every means in your power, and try to allay the fear which is evidently creeping on him, that we are enemies instead of friends, but ——"

"Oh! I couldn't go to him. I couldn't see him for anything," exclaimed Mrs. Prowse, "it would be the death of me, I know."

"What, not when he so much requires you?" said Dr. Nash. "If any malady needs gentle, soothing care, it must be a fearful one like this."

"But won't he be dangerous?" she urged, "and are you certain it is not catching?"

At this question the doctors could scarcely refrain from smiling, as they assured her to the contrary.

"And he will have his servants with him, and we shall also be in the house," said Dr. Nash; "but if you are really so timid, perhaps you will be of less use than harm."

But reassured as to the danger of her brother biting her, Mrs. Prowse was curious to be upon the scene of action, and almost immediately departed with her husband for St. Bartholomew's Street. On arrival, they were met by Long with a woeful account of the treatment he had undergone at his master's hands.

"He's as untractable to-day, ma'am, as a madman. He took a stick just now and threatened to hit me and John with it, and he won't take a drop of medicine, nor yet go into his bed-room for fear we mean to imprison him. I got him to lie down on the bed just now, for he's had no sleep all night, but he hadn't been here above a minute or two, before he jumped off and ran into the passage, roaring out that he was suffocated, and calling for water in the most violent manner. And when I was bringing the jug along to him, he rushed at it and tried to dip his whole head in, and when he found he couldn't drink it, he smashed the jug to pieces, and flew at me like a wild thing. I hope the doctors are coming back soon, sir, for I don't half

like being left alone with master, and no more will you, I think, when you see him."

"Where is he now, Long?"

"He's sitting on the landing, sir; I can't get him to move from the spot, and he's talking in a way to make one's flesh creep."

Canon Prowse had not seen his brother-in-law then for many days, and he was greatly shocked at his altered appearance. They found him as the man had indicated, sitting on the landing, talking to himself, with damp, matted hair, drawn face, wild, glassy eyes wide open, and dry, parched lips.

"Who is that pouring cold water on my head?" he called out, in accents of pain, as his sister and her husband ascended the stairs, "take these snakes from off me, Long. Clear away those large black things, why do you let them crawl over me in this manner?" and then, as no one appeared to obey his orders, he continued plaintively, "do as I tell you, don't stand there and let me be eaten up alive: whoever saw such animals on English ground?"

"He is raving," whispered Mrs. Prowse to her husband, "he must be delirious."

Yet the next moment he had recognised them both, and his memory did not seem the least impaired, though he talked very slowly, and with the rotatory motion of his head which the servant had before described to them.

"It's a long time since you've been here, Canon. I began to think we should never meet again. We quarrelled on that subject of Robert Brooke and his sister, didn't we? but it's just as well you've come to see me now, for I begin to think that I shan't get over this attack."

But then, as the Canon was about to approach and speak some words of comfort to him, he threw out his arms in the greatest agitation, exclaiming:—

“Don’t touch me! don’t come near me, for Heaven’s sake! If you attempt to touch me I will murder you.”

His eyes rolled round again in the wildest manner, and he commenced to mutter and talk incoherently to himself, crying out at intervals: “Don’t touch me! In God’s name, don’t lay a finger on me!”

Mr. and Mrs. Prowse, the one no less frightened than the other, beat a hasty retreat to the lower rooms, whence, in fear and trembling, they listened to the sick man’s broken dialogue with his attendants, until the doctors again made their appearance.

But when they ascended the staircase in their company, they found the scene had changed. The unhappy patient had now conceived the idea that his brother professionals were about to poison him, and had locked himself into his bed-room, and all entreaty on their parts that he should open to them, was only met by the coarsest and most virulent abuse.

The elegant and suave Dr. Monkton, who had never been known in his most impatient moments to say anything ungentlemanly, now levelled a tissue of the vilest language at the heads of his friends, and defied them to enter the room without his consent.

“We can do no earthly good,” said the London physician to Dr. Nash, “therefore what is the use of irritating him? Let his servants and his friends pass through if he so wishes it, and we can watch him if we choose through the crack of the door.”

Mrs. Prowse could not be persuaded to re-enter her brother’s presence, she was too great a coward, and had too little affection for him; but her husband accom-

panied Long into his master's bed-room, and was with the miserable man until the end.

He lay on his bed, his eyes and head constantly on the move, whilst he was so irritable that he could not bear to be touched, or even looked at. The idea that he had been poisoned evidently possessed his mind, and he would not attempt to swallow either food or medicine, and often cried out that could he catch a sight of those two doctors, he would murder them.

For the first time now he spoke of the mastiff, and connected his illness with the fact of having been bitten by him.

"The brute!" he exclaimed, "the nasty cowardly brute, to give me my death because I wished to muzzle him; but he had his deserts. I shot him. I shot him dead! But it would have been better, perhaps, if I had waited till Helena coaxed him off the landing. Where is Helena?" suddenly starting up. "Ah! I forgot! she's left me! They've all left me — or — did I make them go? It little matters now, but I am alone, all alone! Keep those two poisoners out of the room!" he shouted, with an oath which rang through the house, "if I catch sight of either of them again, I'll murder them as I did the mastiff."

Another night passed: a long weary night, during which he grew suddenly tractable, and talked sensibly for some time, but still complained of intense thirst (as he had done all along) and of great pain in his shoulder. His brother-in-law tried, more than once, to lead his thoughts to something higher than the things of earth, but his efforts were of no avail. Each time the subject was alluded to, Dr. Monkton's face put on a sardonic smile, which seemed to say the time was past

for his conversion, until the good Canon gave up the attempt in despair.

As night approached, his sister had gone home to her bed. She could be of no earthly use to him, she had argued, and she saw no reason in giving up her rest for nothing. So she slept soundly, doubtless, whilst James Monkton's life was ebbing painfully away, with no one at his side who loved him, or would mourn his dreadful death.

Canon Prowse was home himself before his wife had risen from her bed, and waked her with the news that her brother had departed.

"He became weaker every minute of the night," he said, in relating the occurrence, "and we hardly thought he could have lasted till the morning. At six o'clock he asked Long for some tea, but when it was brought to him, he only shuddered at the sight, and turned away. Soon afterwards, he raised himself in bed; I thought he was about to speak to me, and think so still, but before he could articulate a word, he fell back on his pillow and expired."

"Oh! my dear brother!" shrieked Mrs. Prowse, in her most effective treble. "Oh! my dear, dear brother, this is a judgment on those wicked Brookes, for if it hadn't been for them and for their horrid dog, he might have been alive and well this day. Oh! my dear brother, James! my only brother, James! what shall I do without him?" but finding that her lamentations increased in vehemence, until they were becoming patent to the entire household, Canon Prowse abruptly but judiciously closed the door upon them, and left his partner to weep and bewail her brother by herself.

There remains little more of this homely story to relate.

The reason of Dr. Monkton's death, although hushed up as much as possible by his relatives, could not but get wind in such a place as Hilstone, and Mrs. Prowse soon found, to her horror, that her brother's mantle was supposed in some mysterious manner to have fallen upon her, and that she was shunned by several of the residents, under the supposition that she was hydrophobic; but a greater misfortune befel her before long. Miss Laura Filmer, who had always entertained a predilection for the red-coats, took it into her head to run away with a subaltern of the 40th Bays, and as she had kept all her appointments with the gentleman under the pretence of visiting Mrs. Prowse, her mother chose to believe that the Canon's wife had really had something to do with the elopement, and cut her accordingly, upon which Hilstone, no longer dazzled by the glamour of cathedral fame, opened its eyes, and taking her simply for what she was, an ill-tempered, snappish, spiteful little woman, permitted her at once to drop into her proper place, and become — what she deserved to be — nothing.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Brooke had married her Major, and gone out to India with him; and Nigel, averse to the prospect of again leaving his native land, had disposed of his interest in the Calcutta business, and became a landed proprietor in Scotland instead.

When Nelly was first told of her husband's death, it seemed to affect her as little as did everything else. No thought of release from a chain which galled her, or dreams of a future which she might now indulge, entered her head. She had not felt the chain; she

did not believe in the future; but one idea possessed her — that she was on her road to Bertie.

Day after day she would linger by his grave, and in the haunts which had been theirs together: she did not avoid the mention of his name, but she resented, as an insult, any supposition that they should long be parted. All his selfishness, his indolence, his disregard of her convenience, had faded from her mind. She could remember nothing but the mournful beauty of his countenance, and the love which had been theirs. She thanked Heaven each night that she was one day nearer to his side; she almost grudged the meat and drink which kept her life in her, and herself from him.

But it was not right, and it was not natural that such a state of things should last. Little by little, though loath at first to part with her persuasion, Nelly came to comprehend that this world might still hold something pleasurable for her, even though Bertie lay in his grave.

Nigel Brooke was not slow to make his appearance at Little Bickton, as soon as he learnt that his wooing might be renewed, and try to convince her of the truth, and as soon as the twelvemonth had elapsed since Dr. Monkton's death, he married his cousin, and took her off to Scotland with him.

But here let me confess that happiness was not all at once their portion. They loved each other dearly. Nigel Brooke anticipated every desire of his wife, and Nelly looked up to her husband with an affection which had so much reverence mingled with it, as almost to be worship. And yet, notwithstanding the devotion which she exhibited towards himself, and the interest which she evidently took in all the beauties of her new home, a quiet, subdued melancholy seemed

to pervade every feeling and tone down every pleasure.

She was still as frank and trusting as she had ever been; she said that she could never express to him one half the gratitude she felt for his affection, and yet even whilst she spoke thus, her soft blue eyes would wander to the sky, and she seemed to remember that her home below was but a temporary thing.

She was as loving and as innocent as of old, but she was not the same Nelly that she had been at Little Bickton and at Orpington; her look had lost its brightness and her voice its ring, and she was for ever reminding her husband, by her chastened demeanour, that a great sorrow had passed over her young life.

Nigel had hoped for more than this; he had trusted that their mutual love and all the pleasures with which it was in his power to surround her, would have restored to her fourfold the happiness which had been so cruelly blighted.

He was disappointed — bitterly disappointed; and, after a little while, he told her so.

“Dearest Nigel,” she replied, “I am so grieved to hear you say it. I have everything that heart can wish for — indeed I have. But don’t you think the fault lies in your hoping for too much? If we are contented in this world, what more can we desire? There is no such thing as happiness below — and it is only the very young who expect to find it here. I did so once, I suppose from sheer ignorance of what life is, but I am wiser now, and have learned to be content with what Heaven sends me.”

“Then my love has no power to make you happy, Nelly?” said Nigel, mournfully.

“I *am* happy, dearest husband,” she replied, “quite

happy, and perfectly content;" and then her quiet, loving glance met his own, without a flash of light in it, and left him as disappointed as before.

Yet she was so good — so entirely unselfish and devoted, that he could not blame her, even in his thoughts.

And it came at last. Happiness rushed in upon them both, in a rich bright stream, which flowed all the stronger from having been delayed awhile.

It was on a spring morning — a day ever afterwards remembered by Nigel Brooke as the commencement of an unbroken vista of happy, cloudless years — that he was summoned to see his wife, for the first time, with baby on her breast.

"Oh! husband!" she exclaimed, drawing down his head, until it rested beside that of his new-born son, "oh! dearest husband, how could I ever be so wicked as to say that contentment was all we dare hope for in this world, when the memory of your patient, faithful love, borne in upon me at an hour like this, is happiness too great to be expressed, except in the same breath as thanks to Heaven."

And though by this time, her children are fast growing up around her, and her hair may even here and there be streaked with grey, and neither Bertie's life nor love are things forgotten, it is not too much to affirm that in all the fair broad land of Scotland, there is not a happier wife nor blither mother than dear NELLY BROOKE.

THE END.

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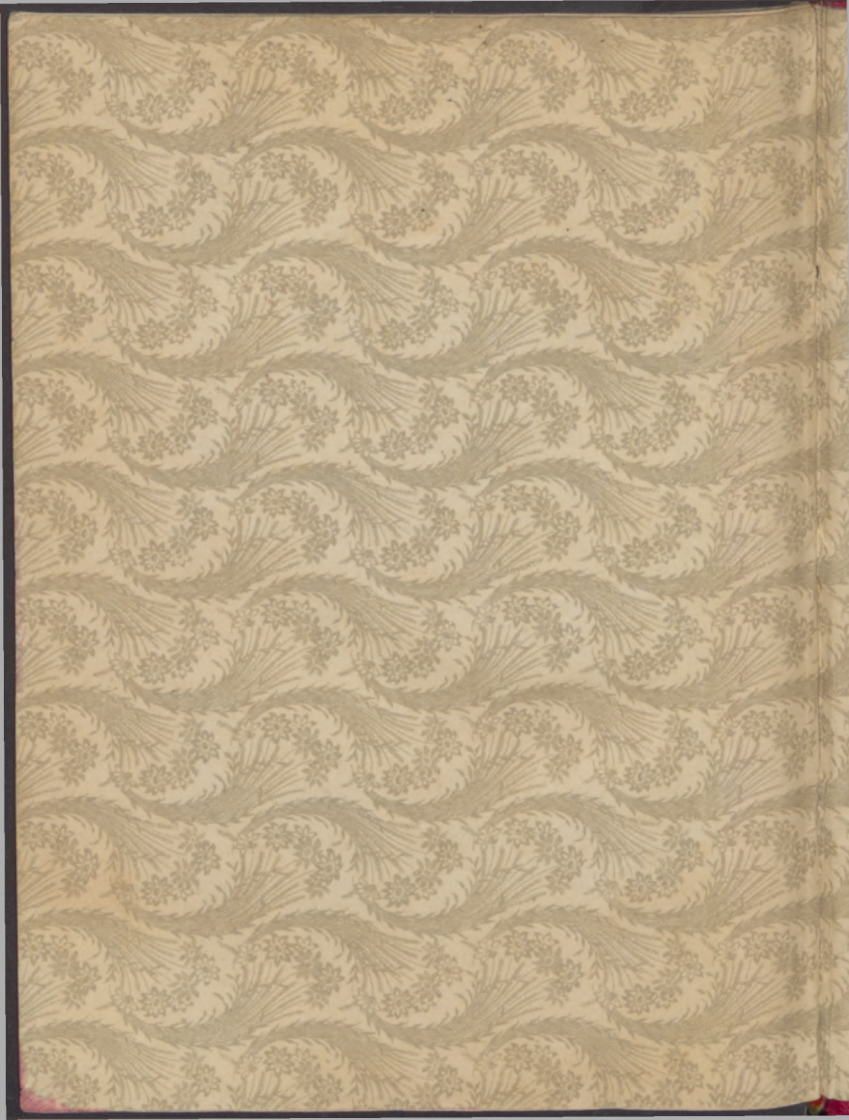


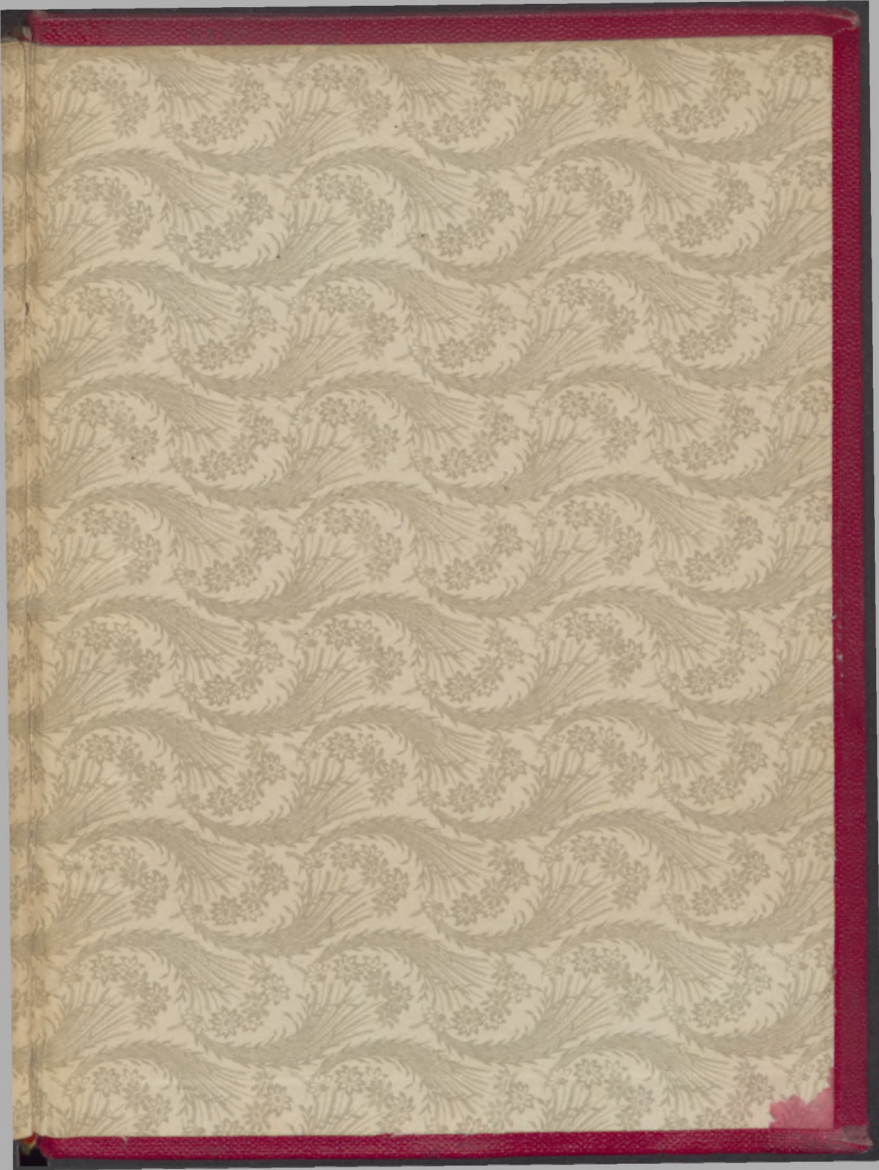
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