RYANT

A

KRUPT

EART

1

COLLECTION

OF

BRITISH AUTHORS

TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

VOL. 2995.

A BANKRUPT HEART. BY FLORENCE MARRYAT.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

By the same Author,

LOVE'S CONFLICT . . . 2 v.
FOR EVER AND EVER . . 2 v.
THE CONFESSIONS OF GERALD ESTCOURT . . . 2 v.
NELLY BROOKE . . . . 2 v.
VÉRONIQUE . . . . . 2 v.
PETRONEL . . . . . 2 v.
HER LORD AND MASTER . 2 v.
THE PREY OF THE GODS . 1 v.
LIFE OF CAPTAIN MARRYAT 1 v.
MAD DUMARESQ . . . . 2 v.
NO INTENTIONS . . . . 2 v.
FIGHTING THE AIR . . . 2 v.
A STAR AND A HEART . . 1 v.
THE POISON OF ASPS . . 1 v.
A LUCKY DISAPPOINTMENT 1 v.
"MY OWN CHILD" . . . 2 v.
HER FATHER'S NAME . . 2 v.
A HARVEST OF WILD OATS 2 v.
A LITTLE STEPSON . . . 1 v.
WRITTEN IN FIRE . . . 2 v.
HER WORLD AGAINST A LIE 2 v.
A BROKEN BLOSSOM . . . 2 v.
THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL . 2 v.
THE FAIR-HAIRED ALDA . 2 v.
WITH CUPID'S EYES . . . 2 v.
MY SISTER THE ACTRESS . 2 v.
PHYLLIDA . . . . . 2 v.
HOW THEY LOVED HIM . . 2 v.
FACING THE FOOTLIGHTS (WITH PORTRAIT) . . . 2 v.
A MOMENT OF MADNESS, ETC. 1 v.
THE GHOST OF CHARLOTTE CRAY, ETC. . . . . 1 v.
PEERESS AND PLAYER . . 2 v.
UNDER THE LILIES AND ROSES 2 v.
THE HEART OF JANE WARNER . . . . . 2 v.
THE HEIR PRESUMPTIVE . 2 v.
THE MASTER PASSION . . 2 v.
SPIDERS OF SOCIETY . . 2 v.
DRIVEN TO BAY . . . . 2 v.
A DAUGHTER OF THE TROPICS . . . . . 2 v.
GENTLEMAN AND COURTIER 2 v.
ON CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE . . . . . 2 v.
MOUNT EDEN . . . . . 2 v.
BLINDFOLD . . . . . 2 v.
A SCARLET SIN . . . . 1 v.

A BANKRUPT HEART

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT,

AUTHOR OF

"LOVE'S CONFLICT," "MY SISTER THE ACTRESS,"

ETC. ETC.

COPYRIGHT EDITION.

IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. I.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1894.

A BANKRUPT HEART.

CHAPTER I.

Miss Llewellyn was standing at the window of her own room, in the house of Lord Ilfracombe in Grosvenor Square, gazing at the dust-laden and burnt-up leaves and grass in the gardens before her. It was an afternoon towards the close of July, and all the fashionable world was already out of town. Miss Llewellyn had been reared in the country, and she could not help thinking how that same sun that had burnt up all the verdure of which London could boast, had glorified the vegetation of far-off Wales. How it must have enriched the pasture lands, and ripened the waving corn, and decked the very hedges and ditches with beautiful, fresh flowers, which were to be had for the gathering. Her thoughts went back to rural Usk where King Arthur built a bower for Guinevere, and

in fancy she felt the cool air blowing over its fragrant fields and woods. She heaved a deep sigh as she remembered the place of her birth, and, as if in reproach for such heresy to her present condition she drew a letter from her pocket and opened its pages.

Miss Llewellyn nominally held an inferior position in the house of the Earl of Ilfracombe. She was his housekeeper. Old-fashioned people who associate their ideas of a housekeeper with the image of a staid, middle-aged woman, whose sole business is to guard the morals and regulate the duties of the maidens of the establishment, would have stared at the notion of calling Miss Llewellyn by that name. All the same she was a very fair specimen of the up-to-date housekeeper of a rich bachelor of the present time, with one exception, perhaps. She was handsome beyond the majority of women. Her figure was a model. Tall and graceful without being thin, with a beautiful bust and shoulders, and a skin like white satin, Miss Llewellyn also possessed a face such as is seldom met with, even in these isles of boasted female beauty. Her features would have suited a princess. They were those of a carved Juno. Her abundant rippling hair was of a bright chestnut colour; her eyes dark hazel, like the tawny eyes of the leopardess; her lips full and red; and her complexion naturally as radiant as it usually is with women of her nationality, though London air had

toned it down to a pale cream tint. She was quietly, but well-dressed, too well-dressed for one in her station of life perhaps, but that would depend on the wages she earned and the appearance she was expected to make. Her gown of some light black material, like mousseline-de-laine, or canvass cloth, was much trimmed with lace, and on her wrists she wore heavy gold bangles. Her beautiful hair was worn in the prevailing fashion, and round her white throat was a velvet band, clasped by a diamond brooch. The room, too, which Miss Llewellyn occupied, and which was exclusively her own, was far beyond what we should associate with the idea of a dependant. It was a species of half study, half boudoir, and on the drawing-room floor, furnished by Liberty, and replete with every comfort and luxury. Yet Miss Llewellyn did not look out of place in it; on the contrary, she would have graced a far handsomer apartment by her presence. To whatever station of life she had been brought up, it was evident that circumstances, or habit, had made her quite familiar with her surroundings. As she perused the letter she drew from her pocket for perhaps the twentieth time she looked rather pale and anxious, as though she did not quite comprehend its meaning. Yet it seemed a very ordinary epistle, and one which anybody might have read over her shoulder with impunity. It was written in rather an irregular and unformed hand for a man

of thirty, and showed symptoms of a wavering and unsteadfast character.

"DEAR N.—I find I may be absent from England longer than I thought, so don't stay cooped up in town this beastly hot weather, but take a run down to Brighton, or any watering-place you may fancy. Warrender can look after the house. Malta is a deal hotter than London, as you may imagine, but I have made several friends here and enjoy the novelty of the place. They won't let me off, I expect, under another month or two, so I shall miss the grouse this season. However, I'm bound to be back in time for the partridges. Be sure and take a good holiday and freshen yourself up. Have you seen Sterndale yet? If not, you will soon. He has something to tell you. Whatever happens, remember your welfare will always be my first consideration.—

Yours truly,

"ILFRACOMBE."

Miss Llewellyn read these words over and over again, without arriving at any conclusion respecting their meaning.

"What can he mean?" she thought; "why should I see Mr. Sterndale, and what can he possibly have to tell me, that I do not already know? I hope Ilfracombe is not going to do anything so stupid as to make a

settlement on me, for I will not accept it. I much prefer to go on in the dear old way, and owe all I have to him. Has not my welfare always been his care? Dear Ilfracombe! How I wish I could persuade him to come home and go to Abergeldie instead! I am sure he runs a great risk out in that horrid climate, especially after the attack of fever he had last autumn. If he were to fall sick again, without me to nurse him, what should I do?"

As she spoke thus to herself, she turned involuntarily towards a painted photograph which stood in a silver frame on a side-table. It represented a good-looking young man in a rough shooting suit, with a gun over his shoulder. It was a handsome and aristocratic face, but a weak one, as was evidenced by the prominent blue eyes and the receding chin and mouth, which latter, however, was nearly hidden by a flaxen moustache. It is not difficult to discover with what sort of feeling a woman regards a man if you watch her as she is looking at his likeness. As Miss Llewellyn regarded that of Lord Ilfracombe, her face, so proud in its natural expression, softened until it might have been that of a mother gloating over her first-born. So inextricably is the element of protective love interwoven with the feelings of every true woman for the man who possesses her heart. The tears even rose to Miss Llewellyn's handsome eyes, as she gazed at Lord

Ilfracombe's picture, but she brushed them away with a nervous laugh.

"How foolish," she said to herself, "and when I am the happiest and most fortunate woman in all the world, and would not change my lot with the Queen herself. And so undeserving of it all, too."

Women who honestly love, invariably think themselves unworthy of their good fortune, when, perhaps, and very often too, the boot (to use a vulgar expression) is on the other foot. But love always makes us humble. If it does not, it is love of ourselves, and not of our lovers.

A sudden impulse seemed to seize Miss Llewellyn, and, sitting down to her pretty writing-table, she drew out pen, ink and paper, and wrote hurriedly,—

"My Dearest,—Do you think I could enjoy a holiday without you? No! Whilst you are away, my place is here, watching over your interests, and when you return I shall be too happy to leave you. But come back as soon as you can. I don't want to spoil your pleasure, but I am so afraid for your health. You get so careless when you are alone. Don't go bathing in cold water when you are hot, nor eating things which you know from experience disagree with you. You will laugh at my cautions, but if you only knew how I love

you and miss you, you would sympathise with my anxiety—"

Miss Llewellyn had written thus far, when a tap sounded on the door of her room, and on her giving permission to enter, a servant appeared and addressed her with all the deference usually extended to the mistress of a house.

"If you please, ma'am, there is a young man and woman from Usk below, who want to speak to you."

Miss Llewellyn became crimson, and then paled to the tint of a white rose.

"From Usk, Mary," she repeated, "are you sure? I don't expect anybody this evening. What is the name?"

"Oh, I'm quite sure, ma'am. They said their name was Owen, and they asked particularly for Miss Llewellyn, the housekeeper."

"What is the young woman like?"

"Rather nice-looking, ma'am, that is, for a person from the country. I'm sure they're not Londoners from the way they speak, though I don't know where Usk is; but she's got nice curly hair, much the colour of yours, ma'am."

"Well, well, show them into the housekeeper's room, Mary, or stay, as his lordship is away, you may as well put them in the library, and say I will be with them in a minute."

As soon as the servant had left her, Miss Llewellyn ran up to her bedroom, with her hand tightly pressed over her heart, and commenced to rapidly pull off her ornaments, and to take a plainer dress out of her wardrobe.

"If it should be a message from mother," she murmured breathlessly, as she stripped off her finery, "they mustn't go back and say they found me like this. Dear, dear mother. She would break her heart to find out the meaning of it all."

She threw the black lace dress upon the bed, and selecting a quaker-looking fawn cashmere from her wardrobe, put it on instead, and having somewhat smoothed down her rippling hair, she tied on a black silk apron, and took her way down to the library. She opened the door with a beating heart, for she had begun to fear lest the strangers might prove to be the bearers of bad news to her, but the moment she set eyes on the figure of the young woman, she gave vent to an exclamation of surprise and delight, and rushed into her extended arms.

"Hetty! Hetty!" she cried hysterically, "my own dear sister! Oh, how is it you are in London? Why did you not tell me you were coming? You have not brought bad news, have you? Oh, don't tell me that mother is ill, for I couldn't bear it."

"No, Nell, no!" exclaimed the younger sister, "they

are all as well at home as can be. Mother and father are just beautiful, and the crops first rate. But we—that is, Will and I—thought we would give you such a grand surprise. We have such news for you! You'd never guess it, Nell! Don't you see who's this with me? William Owen, our old playmate! Well, he's my husband. We were married the day before yesterday."

"Married!" repeated Miss Llewellyn, incredulously. "Little Hester, who was always such a baby compared to me, really married. This *is* a surprise!" And to prove how much she thought it so, Miss Llewellyn sat down on a sofa and burst into tears.

"Oh, Nelly! you are not vexed because we did not tell you sooner, are you?" cried Hetty, kneeling down beside her sister. "We thought you would like the grand surprise, dear, and I made Will promise that the first thing he did was to bring me up to London town to see my beautiful sister Nell! And oh, Nell, you do look such a lady. I'm sure I feel so countrified beside you, I can't say."

"You look too sweet for anything," replied Miss Llewellyn kissing her, "and I was only crying a little for joy, Hetty, to think you are so happy. But what a child to be married! Why, how old are you? Not more than seventeen, surely!"

"Oh, yes, Nell; you have not been home for such a time, you forget how it goes on. I was twenty-one

last spring, dear; and you are twenty-four! But how different you are from what you used to be. Is it London' life that makes you so grand? You look like a queen beside me! You must think I am a bumpkin in my wedding clothes."

"Nonsense, dear Hetty. One is obliged to be more particular in town than in the country. Besides, I am filling an important situation, you know, and am expected to dress up to it."

"Oh yes, I was telling Will all the way down from Usk, what a fine place you have, and such a rich master. Oh, Nell! is he at home? Lord Ilfracombe I mean. I should love to go back and tell them that I had seen a lord."

"No, Hetty, he is away in Malta, and not likely to be back for some time. But I've not spoken to my new brother-in-law yet. I suppose you can scarcely remember me, Will. Five years is a long time to be absent from the old home."

"Oh! I remember you well enough," replied the young man shamefacedly, for he was rather taken aback at encountering such a fine lady, instead of the maid-servant he had expected to see. "I and my brother Hugh used to have fine games of cricket with you and my little Hetty here, on the island years and years ago. I suppose you've heard that Hugh has been elected to the ministry since you left Usk, Miss Llewellyn?"

"No, indeed, I do not think that Hetty has ever mentioned it in her letters to me. But I remember your brother quite well. He was a very tall, shy lad, fonder of reading than anything else, even when a little boy."

"Yes, that's Hugh," replied the young man, "and he hasn't forgotten you either, I can answer for that."

"I suppose it makes you all very proud to have a minister in the family, William?" said Miss Llewellyn kindly.

"That it does; and he's a fine preacher too, as Hetty here can tell you, and draws the people to hear him for miles round, so that the parson up at the church is quite jealous of Hugh's influence with his parishioners. And that's something to be proud of, isn't it?"

"It is indeed. And what are you, Will?"

"Oh, he's a farmer, Nell," interposed Hetty, "and we are to live with his parents at Dale Farm as soon as we go back. So poor mother will be left alone. Oh, Nell, how I wish you could come back to Panty-cuckoo Farm, and stay with mother, now she's lost me."

Miss Llewellyn flushed scarlet at the idea.

"Hetty, how could I? How could I leave my place where I have been for so many years now, to go back and be a burden on my parents? Besides, dear, I'm

used to town life, and don't think I should know how to get on in the country."

"But you care for mother surely," said her sister, somewhat reproachfully, "and you can't think how bad she's been with sciatica this spring, quite doubled-up at times, and Dr. Cowell says it's bound to come back in the autumn. I'm sure I don't know what she'll do if it does! You should have heard how she used to cry out for you in the spring, Nell. She's always wanting her beautiful daughter. I'm nothing to mother, and never have been, compared to you. And I've heard her say dozens of times, that she wished that London town had been burned to the ground before the agency office had persuaded you to take service here. They do seem so hard on servants in this place. Here have you been five years away from home, and never once a holiday! I think Lord Ilfracombe must be very mean not to think that a servant girl would want to see her own people once in a way!"

"You mustn't blame Lord Ilfracombe, Hetty!" said her sister, hastily, "for it's not his fault. He would let me go to Usk if I asked him, I daresay; but I have the charge of all the other servants you see, and where would the house be without me? It is not as if there was a lady at the head of affairs."

"Then why doesn't he marry and get his wife to do all that for him?" demanded Hetty, with the audacity

of ignorance. "It does seem strange that a gentleman with such a heap of money should remain a bachelor. What does he do with it all, I wonder? And what is the good of such a big house to a man without a wife? Wouldn't you rather that he was married, Nell? It must be so funny taking all your orders from a man."

"You don't understand, Hetty," said Miss Llewellyn. "Lord Ilfracombe does not give me any orders. He never interferes in the household arrangements. It is to save himself all that trouble that he has engaged me. I hardly ever see him—that is, about dinners, or anything of that sort. When he is going to have a party, he tells me the number of people whom he expects, and I prepare for them accordingly. But this is all beyond your comprehension. It is past five o'clock. You and William will be glad of some tea."

Miss Llewellyn rose and rang the bell as she spoke, and having given her orders to a very magnificent looking footman, at whose servility Hetty stared, she resumed the conversation.

"Where are you two staying in town?"

"We have some rooms in Oxford Street," replied her sister. "Do you remember Mrs. Potter, Nell, who took Mrs. Upjohn's cottage when her husband died? Her sister lets lodgings, and when she heard we were coming to London for our honeymoon, she wrote to her sister to take us in, and we are very comfortable there,

aren't we, Will? And it's such a grand situation, such lots of things to see; and Mrs. Potter said, as it might be our last chance for many a day, we ought to see as much as we could whilst we are here."

"I think she is quite right," replied Miss Llewellyn, smiling; "and I should like to add to your pleasure if possible. Will you come out with me and have some dinner after your tea, and go to a theatre in the evening?"

"Oh, Nell, we had our dinner at one o'clock—roast pork and French beans, and very good it was, I suppose, for London town, though nothing like our pork at Usk. And aren't the strawberries and cherries dear here? Will gave sixpence this morning for a leaf of fruit that you'd throw over the hedge to a beggar child in Usk. I told the woman in the shop that she ought to come to Panty-cuckoo Farm if she wanted to see strawberries; but she said she had never heard of such a place."

"I think you'll be quite ready for the dinner, Hetty, for you will find our London teas very different from country ones," said Miss Llewellyn, as the footman reappeared with a teapot and cups and saucers, and a plate of very thin bread and butter on a silver tray; "and the theatre will keep us up rather late. I suppose you have been nowhere yet?"

No, of course they had been nowhere, and Miss

Llewellyn selected the Adelphi as the theatre most likely to give them pleasure.

"Nell," whispered Hetty, in a tone of awe as they found themselves once more alone, "do you always have a silver tray to eat your tea off?"

Nell coloured. She found a little evasion would be necessary in order to circumvent the sharp eyes of her sister.

"Not always, Hetty," she answered; "but as nobody else wants it just now, I suppose John thought we might as well have the advantage of it. When the cat's away, you know, the mice will play. And we can't wear it out by using it a little."

Hetty looked thoughtful.

"But I think mother would say," she answered after a pause, "that we ought not to use it unless Lord Ilfracombe knew of it and gave his leave. I remember once when Annie Roberts came to tea with me, and boasted of having brought her mistress's umbrella because she was away and it looked like rain, mother sent her straight home again, and threatened if Annie did not tell Mrs. Garey of what she had done, that she would tell her herself."

Miss Llewellyn looked just a little vexed. One might have seen that by the way she bit her lip and tapped the carpet with her neat little shoe.

"But your sister is not in the same position as Annie

Roberts, Hetty, my dear," interposed William Owen, observing their hostess's discomfiture.

"No, that is just it," said Miss Llewellyn, recovering herself. "I am allowed—all the servants know that they may bring these things up to me when I have friends. Life in London is so different from life in the country—one expects more privileges. But there, Hetty, dear, don't let us speak of it any more. You don't quite understand, but you may be sure I would not do anything of which Lord Ilfracombe would not approve."

"Oh, no, dear Nell, indeed you need not have told me that. I was only a little surprised. I am not used to such fine things, you know, and I just thought if your master was to walk in, how astonished he would be."

"Not at all," said Miss Llewellyn gaily. "You don't know how good and kind he is to us all. He would just laugh and tell us to go on enjoying ourselves. But if we are to go to the theatre, I must run up and put on my things. William, will you have a glass of wine before we start? I have a bottle of my own, so Hetty need not think I am going to drink Lord Ilfracombe's."

Young Owen refused the wine, but Hetty was eager to accompany her sister to her bedroom. This was just what Miss Llewellyn did not wish her to do. She was in a quandary. But her woman's wit (some people would say, her woman's trick of lying) came to her aid, and she answered,—

"Come upstairs with me by all means, Hetty. I should like you to see the house, but I will take you to one of the spare bedrooms, for mine is not habitable just at present. Plasterers and painters all over that floor. Come in here," and she turned as she spoke into a magnificently furnished apartment usually reserved for Lord Ilfracombe's guests.

Hetty stared with all her eyes at the magnificence surrounding her.

"Oh, Nell, how I wish mother could see this. It looks fit for a duchess to me."

"Well, it was actually a duke who slept in it last, you little goose," cried Miss Llewellyn, as she hastily assumed a bonnet and mantle which she had desired a servant to fetch from her own chamber. "But I don't think he was worthy of it. A nasty bloated little fellow, with a face covered with pimples, and an eyeglass always stuck in his eye."

"Doesn't Lord Ilfracombe wear an eyeglass, Nell?"

"Oh, no, thank goodness. I wouldn't—" But here Miss Llewellyn checked herself suddenly, and added, —"I mean, he would never do anything so silly. He can see perfectly well, and does not need a glass. But come, Hetty, dear, we are going to walk down to the theatre, so we had better start if we wish to get good seats."

As they entered the porch of the Adelphi, a sudden

thought struck innocent Hetty. She sidled up to her sister and whispered,—

"You must let William pay for our places, Nell."

"Nonsense, child, what are you thinking of? This is *my* treat. I asked you to come as my guests."

"But it isn't fair," continued the little bumpkin," for you to pay for us all out of your wages. Won't it cramp you for the next quarter, Nell?"

"No, dear, no; I have plenty for us all," returned her sister hastily, as she paid for three places in the dress circle, and conducted her relations to their destination. Here, seated well out of observation of the stalls, as she thought, Miss Llewellyn felt free for the next two hours at least, to remain quiet and think, an operation for which she had had no time since her sister had burst in so unexpectedly upon her. William and Hetty had naturally no eyes except for the play, the like of which they had never seen before. They followed the sensational incidents of one of Sim's and Buchanan's melodramas with absorbing interest. The varied scenes; the clap-trap changes; the pretty dresses, all chained them, eyes and ears, to the stage, whilst an occasional breathless exclamation from Hetty, of "Oh Nell, isn't that beautiful?" was all the demand they made upon her attention. She had seen the piece before, and if she had not done so, she had no heart to attend to it now. Her memories of home, and the old life she had

led there, had all been awakened by the sight of her sister and the manner she had spoken of it; and while Hetty was engrossed by the novel scenes before her, Miss Llewellyn was in fancy back again at Panty-cuckoo Farm, where she had been born and bred. She was wandering down the steep path which led to the farm-house, bordered on either side by whitened stones to enable the drivers to keep to it in the dark, and which had given the dear old place its fanciful name of "The Cuckoo's Dell." She could see the orchard of apple and pear trees, which grew around the house itself, and under which the pigs were digging with their black snouts for such succulent roots as their swinish souls loved. She sat well back in her seat listening to the notes of the cuckoo from the neighbouring thicket, and the woods that skirted the domains of General Sir Archibald Bowmant, who was the principal landowner for many miles around Usk at that period. What a marvellous, magnificent place she had thought the General's house once, when she had been admitted to view the principal rooms, by especial favour of the housekeeper. And now—why, they were nothing compared to Lord Ilfracombe's, the man whom little Hetty had called her "master." "And a very good name for him, too," thought Miss Llewellyn, as she finished her musings, " for he is my master, body and soul."

CHAPTER II.

At the close of the second act, as she was urging her sister and brother-in-law to take some refreshment, she was disagreeably interrupted by hearing a voice which she recognised as that of Mr. Portland, a friend of Lord Ilfracombe's. Jack Portland (as he was usually called by his own sex) was a man whom Miss Llewellyn particularly disliked, on account of his bad influence over the Earl. He was a well-known betting and sporting man, who lived on the turf, and whose lead Lord Ilfracombe was, unfortunately, but too ready to follow. She shrunk back as she encountered him, but Mr. Portland was not easily rebuffed.

"Ah, Miss Llewellyn," he exclaimed, as he scrambled over the vacant seat to reach her side, "is this really you? I thought I recognised you from the stalls, but could hardly believe my eyes. What are you doing in the dress circle? I have always seen you in a box before."

"I am with friends, Mr. Portland," replied Miss Llewellyn, with visible annoyance; "and one can see a

play like this much better from the circle. We have been enjoying it very much."

"You must be pretty well sick of it by this time, I should think, returned Mr. Portland, with his glass stuck in his eye," for I've seen you here twice with Ilfracombe already. By the way, how is Ilfracombe? When did you hear from him last?"

Miss Llewellyn was on thorns.

"Will you excuse me, Mr. Portland, she said, with a face of crimson, "but I and my friends were just going to have some ices at the buffet."

"By Jove, but you won't!" exclaimed the officious Portland. "I will send them to you. How many do you want? Three?"

"Yes, three if you please," answered Miss Llewellyn, who saw no other way of getting rid of her tormentor, and dreaded what he might say before her sister.

"Who is that gentleman, Nell?" inquired Hetty as soon as his back was turned.

"No one in particular," said the other, "only an acquaintance of Lord Ilfracombe's. Don't take any notice of him, Hetty. He talks a lot of nonsense."

She was praying all the time that Mr. Portland, having given his orders to the waiter, might see he was not wanted, and go back to his stall. But he was not the sort of man who gives something for nothing. He meant to be paid for the attention, though in his own

coin. The waiter soon appeared bearing the tray of ices and wafers, and in his train came Mr. Jack Portland, smiling as if he knew his welcome was assured.

"I've got you Neapolitan, Miss Llewellyn, you see. I remembered that Ilfracombe always orders Neapolitan. By the way, you never told me the contents of his last letter. He's very gay at Malta I hear. Always with those Abingers. Have you heard of the Abingers? He's the admiral there. By George, Miss Llewellyn, I'd recall Ilfracombe if I were you. Send him home orders, you know. He's been out there quite long enough, don't you think so?"

Miss Llewellyn saw that Hetty and William were listening with open eyes to this discourse, and did not know how to stop Mr. Portland's tongue. She would fain have got rid of him altogether, but of the two evils she chose what seemed to her the least. She lowered her voice, and begged him to cease his remarks on Lord Ilfracombe till they were alone.

"That's the way the land lies," he replied, with a wink in the direction of Hetty. "All right, mum's the word! How deucedly handsome you are looking to-night," he added in a lower voice, as he brought his bloated face in close proximity to hers. "Tell you what, Miss Llewellyn, Ilfracombe's a fool!—a d—d fool, by George! to leave such a face and figure as yours,

whilst he goes gallivanting after a set of noodles at Malta!"

At this remark Nell flushed indignantly, and, turning her back on the intruder, directed her attention to her sister, upon which Mr. Portland, with a familiar nod, and an easy good-night, took himself away. As soon as he was out of hearing Hetty pestered Nell to tell her his name, and to confess if he was anything to her.

"I can't say I think he's handsome," she said, with a little *moue,* "his face is so red, and he stares so; but do tell me the truth, Nell. Is he your young man?"

"My young man? Gracious, no, child! Why, I hate the fellow! I think he is the most odious, impertinent, presuming person I know! But he is a friend of Lord Ilfracombe's, so I am obliged to be civil to him."

"Ah, well, I wish you had a young man, Nell, all the same. Mother would be so glad to hear you were thinking of getting married. She often says that it is high time you were settled, and that you're far too handsome to be single in London, for that it's a dreadful dangerous place for girls, and especially if they're good looking. She *would* be pleased to hear you were keeping company with anyone that could keep you like a lady."

"But I'm not, Hetty, dear, nor likely to be, so you mustn't get any ideas of that sort into your head. But

let us attend to what is going on. I hope Will and you are enjoying yourselves,"

"Oh, lovely!" said Hetty, with a sigh of ineffable content.

But Miss Llewellyn had not got rid of Mr. Portland yet. As she was pushing her way out of the corridor when the play was over, she found him again by her side.

"Will you be at home to morrow, Miss Llewellyn?" he asked in a low voice.

"I believe so. Why?"

"Because I particularly want to speak to you. May I call about three?"

"Certainly, if you really wish to speak to me; but I cannot imagine what you can have to say that you cannot say now?"

"Oh, that would be quite impossible," rejoined Mr. Portland, looking her straight in the eyes; "I couldn't even explain what my business with you is, but you shall hear all about it if you will be so good as to receive me about three."

"I shall be at home," replied Miss Llewellyn coldly, as she pushed her way out into the street and entered a passing cab with her companions.

"I shall call for you both to-morrow about six o'clock, Hetty," she said, as she deposited them at the door of their lodging, "and take you to the Alhambra.

You'll see something there more beautiful than you have ever seen before."

"Oh, Nell, you *are* good!" cried her sister; and what a lot of money you must receive. It makes me wish that I, too, had come up to London town when you did, and gone to service, for then I might have saved some money to help Will furnish our rooms. I brought him nothing, you know, Nell—not even a penny. It seems so sad, doesn't it?"

"What nonsense!" replied Miss Llewellyn. "You brought him your true, pure heart and your honest soul, and they are worth all the money in the world, Hetty, and I am sure William thinks the same. Good-night. We shall meet again to-morrow."

And with a wave of her hand, she drove away to Grosvenor Square.

Her maid was waiting up for her, all consternation to find she had left the house without calling in her assistance.

"Dear me, ma'am!" she exclaimed, as she knelt down on the floor of Miss Llewellyn's bedroom to unbutton her dainty boots, "to think you could go out, and me not to dress you. When John told me you had left the house, and not even taken the carriage, you might have knocked me down with a feather. And in this dress and mantle, too! Dear, dear, wherever did you go? Not to the theatre, surely?"

"Yes, I did," responded her mistress. "I took some young friends from the country with me to the Adelphi; and you see, Susan, the fact is, they are not used to fashionable dressing, so I thought I would not make them feel uncomfortable by being smarter than themselves."

"Many ladies think the same," remarked the maid; "though I don't hold with it, for it's a real pleasure to look at such dresses as yours, even if one can't have 'em for oneself."

She spoke rather more familiarly than servants usually do to their mistresses, for she knew perfectly well, though she dared not say so openly, that Miss Llewellyn was not a gentlewoman any more than herself, but it was, she thought, to her profit to appear to think so. The Court favourite is generally the object of adulation and sycophancy until her reign is over. But Ellen Llewellyn had been accustomed to subservience for so long now that she had almost forgotten that it was not hers by right. It was only at times that the truth was borne in upon her that she held the luxuries of life on an uncertain tenure. Her maid undressed her, and put her blue cashmere dressing-gown about her shoulders, and would have hovered around her for an indefinite period, chattering of every bit of news she had heard that day, but Miss Llewellyn was in no mood to indulge her, and dismissed her at last

rather abruptly. She wanted to be alone to ponder over the surprise she had had that afternoon—to dream again of Panty-cuckoo Farm; to wonder how the dear old garden looked under the July sun; if her mother had aged much during the last five years; whether her father's figure was more bent and his steps feebler—above all, she wanted to communicate her thoughts to someone who would sympathise with them. She felt too excited to rest, so she took up her pen again and finished the letter in the writing of which she had been interrupted that afternoon by her sister's arrival.

"I had written thus far, my dearest, when I was interrupted by the appearance of my little sister Hetty, from Usk, and her husband, William Owen, when I never even knew that they were married. Oh, Ilfracombe, I was so surprised! They have come up to town for their wedding trip expressly to see me, so I felt compelled to show them some attention. But I was so nervous! I hurried them out of the house as soon as I could, and took them to the Adelphi; and there, who should spy us out but Mr. Portland, who would keep on talking to me of you till I was fairly obliged to run away from him. What a fool he must be to speak so openly before strangers. I could have boxed his ears! Oh, I never feel safe or happy except when I am by your side. How very glad I shall be when you come home again. Then you will take me up to

Abergeldie with you for the shooting, won't you? Till then I shall not stir. How could I enjoy myself at a watering-place all alone? I have seen nothing of Mr. Sterndale yet, and cannot imagine what he should have to say to me. We never had much in common; indeed, I regularly dislike him. He always looks at me so suspiciously as if he thought I was a wretched harpy, like some women we know of, and cared for nothing but your money and your title. Instead of which I love you so dearly that I could almost wish you were a ruined costermonger, Ilfracombe, instead of the grand gentleman you are, that I might prove my love by working for you and with you. Ah, if I only could do something to return all your goodness to me; but it is hopeless, and will never be. You are too high above me. All I can do is to love you."

And with much more in this strain the letter ended. The excitement that had been engendered in Nell by seeing friends from home had been continued by writing her feelings to the man she loved; but now that it was over, and she lay down on her bed, the natural reaction set in, and she turned her beautiful face on her pillow and shed a few quiet tears.

"Oh, how I wish Ilfracombe were here," she sobbed. "He has been away four months now, and my life is a desert without him. It is hardly bearable. And if Hetty or William should hear—if by chance anyone

who knows it, like that officious Jack Portland, should come across them and mention it, and they should tell mother, it would break her heart and mine too. If he would only have the courage to end it, and do what's right. But it's too much to expect. I must not think of such a thing. I have always known it was impossible. And I am as certain as I am that there is a heaven that he will never forsake me; he has said it so often. I am as secure as if I were really his wife. Only this world is so hard—so bitterly, bitterly hard!"

And so Nell cried herself to sleep.

But the next morning she was as bright and as gloriously beautiful as ever, and when she descended to breakfast the butler and footman waited on her as assiduously as if she had been a countess, and the coachman sent up to her for orders concerning the carriage, and the cook submitted the menu for that day's dinner for her approval. As soon as her breakfast was concluded she gave an interview to Lord Ilfracombe's stud groom, and went with him into the forage and stable accounts, detecting several errors that he had passed over, and consulting him as to whether his master might not, with some benefit to himself, try another corn merchant. So much had she identified herself with all the earl's interests that she more than once used the plural pronoun in speaking of the high prices quoted to her.

"This will never do, Farningham," she said once; "we cannot afford to go on with Field at this rate. His charges are enough to ruin a millionaire. With four horses here, and eleven down at Thistlemere, we shall have nothing left to feed ourselves soon."

"Very well, ma'am," replied the man, "I'll get the price list from two or three other corn merchants, and submit them to you. I don't fancy you'll find much difference, though, in their prices. You see, with the long drought we have had this season, hay has risen terribly, and oats ain't much better; they're so poor I've had to increase the feeds. Will his lordship be home for the hunting, ma'am?"

"Oh, yes, I hope so sincerely, Farningham. He says he shall miss the grouse this year; but I quite expect him for the partridge-shooting. And after that he is sure to go down to Thistlemere for the hunting season. He couldn't live without his hôrses for long, Farningham."

"No, ma'am, he's a true nobleman for that is his lordship, and I guessed as much; but I'm glad to hear you say so, for there's no heart in getting horses in first-rate order if no one's to see 'em or use 'em. Good morning, ma'am, and I hope we shall see his lordship soon again, for all our sakes," which hope Miss Llewellyn heartily echoed.

CHAPTER III.

THE morning was beautiful, though very warm, and Miss Llewellyn thought she could not spend it better than in taking a long drive. She felt as if she could not stay in the house. Some intuitive dread or fear, she knew not which, possessed her—as if she had an enemy in ambush, and anticipated an assault. When she tried to analyse this feeling, she laid it to the proximity of her relations and the possibility of their hearing more of her domestic life than she wished them to know.

"But it is all because Ilfracombe is not at home," she said to herself. "If he were here, he would laugh me out of such a piece of folly. As if they possibly *could* hear. Who could tell them, when they know no one in London. I am a silly fool."

When she entered the open carriage, and the footman attended her orders, she told him to drive as far into the country as possible.

"Tell Jenkins to go right away from town, up to Hampstead, or out to Barnes. I want all the fresh air I can get."

So she was carried swiftly towards Wimbledon, and had soon left the hot bricks and mortar behind her, and was revelling in the sight of green hedges and stretches of common.

"How fresh and sweet it all seems," she thought; "but not half so fresh and sweet as round Usk and by dear Panty-cuckoo Farm. How luscious the honeysuckle used to smell, that trailed over the porch by the side door. And how thickly it grew. I used to tear off the blossoms by thousands to suck their petals. And the apple orchard, it was a mass of white and pink flowers, in spring, like a bridal bouquet. They must have all fallen by this time, and left the little green apples in their stead. What a thief I was in my early days. I can remember lanky Hugh Owen catching me robbing Mr. Potter's plum tree, and the long-winded lecture he gave me on the rights of meum and tuum. I wonder if the sermons he preaches now are as prosy and as long. If so, I pity his congregation. He was always so terribly in earnest. What would he say if he knew all about me now?"

And here Miss Llewellyn's thoughts took a rather melancholy turn, and she sat in the carriage with folded arms, hardly noticing the rural scenes through which she was passing, as her memory went back to her girlhood's days and her girlhood's companions. She did not notice the time either, until a church

clock struck two, and reminded her that she had had no luncheon. She gave the order for home then, but it was nearly three before she reached Grosvenor Square, and the first words the footman, who opened the door to her, said, were to the effect that Mr. Portland was waiting for her in the drawing-room. Nell started. She had entirely forgotten the appointment of the day before.

"In the drawing-room, did you say?" she ejaculated. "I will go to him at once."

"Luncheon is on the table, madam," added the servant; "shall I tell them to take it downstairs till you are ready?"

"It is not worth while," replied Miss Llewellyn, "I shall only be a few minutes."

She walked straight up to the drawing-room as she spoke, throwing the hat she had worn on a side table as she entered.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr. Portland," she said as he held out his hand to her, "but I have been for a country drive, and quite forgot the time."

"That is a very cruel speech, Miss Llewellyn," remonstrated her visitor; "and when I have been counting the moments till we should meet."

Jack Portland was always a "horsey" looking man, and it struck Nell that to-day he seemed more horsey

than usual. By birth, he was a gentleman; but, like many other gentlemen by birth, he had degraded himself by a life of dissipation, till he had lost nearly all claim to the title. His features, good enough in themselves, were swollen and bloated by indulgence in drink; his manners were forward and repulsive; he had lost all respect for women, and only regarded them as expensive animals who cost, as a rule, much more than they were worth. To Nell he had always been most offensive, not in words, but looks and manners, and she was only decently civil to him for the earl's sake. Now, as he seemed disposed to approach her side, she got further and further away from him, till she had reached a sofa at the other end of the room. Mr. Portland was "got-up" in the flashiest style, but was evidently nervous, though she could not imagine why. His suit was cut in the latest racing fashion, and he wore an enormous "button-hole." But his florid face was more flushed than usual, and he kept fidgeting with his watch chain in a curious manner. At last he found his tongue.

"Were you very much surprised when I asked you for an interview, Miss Llewellyn?" he commenced.

"I was, rather. Because I cannot think what you can possibly have to say to me. We have but one subject of interest in common—Ilfracombe—and he is quite well and happy. Else, I might have frightened

myself by imagining you had some bad news to tell me concerning him."

Jack Portland looked at her rather curiously as he replied,—

"Oh, no, the old chap's all right. How often do you hear from him now? Every day. Is that the ticket?"

"I hear constantly," replied Miss Llewellyn in a dignified tone. "I had a letter yesterday. I was in hopes he might have fixed the date of his return, but he says his friends will not be persuaded to let him go, so that he shall be detained in Malta longer than he expected."

"Ah! his friends are the Abingers, of course," said Mr. Portland, sticking his glass into his eye, the better to observe her features.

"Perhaps. He did not mention them by name," she replied, "but I daresay you are right. However, he is sure to be home for the pheasant-shooting."

"Doubtless," replied Mr. Portland, "unless his friends persuade him to go somewhere else. But what are you going to do with yourself meanwhile, Miss Llewellyn?"

"I? Oh, I shall remain in town till his return, and then I suppose we shall go to the Highlands as usual. Ilfracombe wants me to go away at once to some watering-place to recruit, but I should be wretched there by myself. I shall wait for him at home. He is

sure to come straight to London, because all his things are here."

She was looking as handsome as paint that day. The long drive had tinged her face with a soft pink, and her lovely hazel eyes were humid with emotion, engendered by her subject. Her rich hair had become somewhat disordered by the open air and the haste with which she had removed her hat, and was ruffled and untidy. But that only added to her charms. What pretty woman ever looked so well with neatly arranged hair, as when it is rumpled and blown about? She was half sitting, half reclining on the sofa, and her fine figure was shewn to the best advantage. Portland's eyes glistened as he gazed at her. What a handsome hostess she would make—what a presider over the destinies of his bachelor establishment! How proud he would be to introduce her to his sporting and Bohemian friends—the only friends whom he affected, and be able to tell them that this glorious creature was his own! He became so excited by the idea that he dashed into the subject rather suddenly.

"Miss Llewellyn," he said, "you are aware, I think, of my position in life. Ilfracombe, dear old chap, has doubtless told you that I make a very neat little income, and that I am perfectly unencumbered."

This seemingly vague address made her stare.

"He has never entered into details with me, Mr.

Portland; but I have heard him say you are very well off—the luckiest fellow he knows he called you."

"I'm afraid I'm not quite that," said Mr. Portland; "but still I am in a position to give any reasonable woman everything she can possibly require. My income is pretty regular, and I would engage to make a handsome allowance to any lady who honoured me with her preference. I tell you this because Ilfracombe has often told me that you have an excellent head for business. By George!" said Mr. Portland, again screwing his glass into his unhappy and long-suffering eye, "with such beauty as yours, you have no right to know anything about business; still, if you do—there you are, you see!"

"But what has all this to do with me, Mr. Portland," remarked Miss Llewellyn with a puzzled air. "I am sure any lady you may choose to marry will be a very lucky woman. Ilfracombe has often called you the best fellow he knows. But why should you tell me this? Are you already engaged to be married?"

"By Jove! no, and not likely to be. Do I look like a marrying man, Miss Llewellyn? But there!—I can't beat about the bush any longer! You must have seen my admiration—my worship for you! It is on *you* my choice has fallen! Say that I have not been too presumptuous; that you will consent to share my fortune;

that you will, in fact, look as kindly on me as you have on my fortunate friend, Ilfracombe?"

At first she did not understand his meaning; she did not realise that this farrago of nonsense had been addressed to herself. It was so entirely unexpected, so utterly unthought of. But when she *did* take in the meaning of his words, when she awoke to the knowledge that Mr. Portland, the intimate friend of Lord Ilfracombe, had *dared* to offer her his protection, Nell sprung from her position on the sofa, and retreated to the back of it. Her tawny eyes were blazing with fire, her hands were clenched, her breast heaved violently, she could hardly speak. Under the indignation of her burning glances, the man before her seemed to shrivel like a dry leaf before the flame.

"How dare you?" she panted. "How *dare* you insult me like that? What do you mean? How can I be your friend, or the friend of any man but Ilfracombe? I am *his* wife; you know I am; and shall be till I die!"

"His *wife?* pooh!" said Jack Portland, "don't talk rubbish to me like that."

"Yes, his wife! How can I be *more* his wife than I am? I love him—he loves me! We are essentially *one* in heart and word and deed. What could a marriage ceremony have done more for us, than our mutual love has done. And then *you,* who know all

this, who have known us so many years, you dare to come here and insult me, in my own house, and under the pretence of friendship deal the deadliest insult you could possibly have hurled at my head. Oh, how I wish Ilfracombe had been at home to protect me from your insolence! He would not have let you finish your cowardly sentence! You would not have dared utter it had he been standing by! He would have taken you by the collar and spurned you from the door. I have no words in which to tell you how I despise you; how low and mean a thing you seem to me; how I wish I were a man that I might put you out of this room and this house myself! But rest assured that Lord Ilfracombe shall hear of your baseness, and will punish you as you deserve!"

Jack Portland still kept his glass fixed in his eye and stared insolently at her. He had elevated his brows once or twice as she proceeded with her speech, and shrugged his shoulders, as if she were not worth a second thought of his; and as she mentioned her lover's name he smiled scornfully and waved his hand.

"Pray don't take it in this fashion," he said, as she concluded. "I am sure Ilfracombe would tell you it was not worth making such a fuss about. As for insulting you, that is the last idea in my mind. I admire you far too much. Most ladies would, I flatter myself, have regarded my offer in a totally different

light; indeed, no reasonable person could say that it was an insult, especially from a man of my birth and position."

"It becomes an insult," she answered hotly, "when you address your proposals to the wife of another man, and that man your greatest friend."

"Perhaps it would, if she *were* his wife, or ever likely to be so," returned Mr. Portland, with a sneer.

"But I *am*, I *am*," cried Nell passionately, stamping her feet, "and each fresh word you say is a fresh affront. People with your low conceptions of life cannot understand the strength of the tie between Ilfracombe and myself, because it has not been ratified by the law. You are not honourable enough to see that that very fact renders it still more binding on a man of honour. Ilfracombe would die sooner than part from me, and I would die a thousand deaths, sooner than part from him. Our lives are bound up in each other. And even if it were not so, I could never exchange him for you. Now, do you understand, or must I say it all over again?"

Under the sting of what his proposal had suggested to her, she was blazing away at him with twice her natural ferocity. At that moment she hated him with such a deadly hatred for having presumed to remind her of the real position she held, that she could gladly have killed him.

"Pray say no more!" exclaimed Mr. Portland, as he prepared to leave her, "you've said more than enough, my pretty tigress, already; but the day may come when you will regret that you treated my offer with so much disdain. Young men's fancies do not last for ever, my dear, and a good, sound settlement is worth many vows. If Ilfracombe ever tires of you (or rather let me say *when* he tires of you), you will remember my words. Meanwhile, luckily for me, there are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it. So good-bye, my handsome fury. Won't you give me one kiss before we part, just to show there's no ill feeling? No? Well, I must try to do without it then, for the present at least, and hope for better luck next time. Remember me to old Ilfracombe when next you write. Ta-ta."

He lingered near her for a moment, as though expecting she would raise her eyes or put out her hand; but Nell did neither, and, after a while, he turned on his heel, and, insolently humming a tune, went on his way.

As soon as Miss Llewellyn heard the hall door close after him, she rushed up to her own room, and, after locking the door, threw herself on the sofa, face downwards, and sobbed and cried in the strength of her wounded feelings and the terrible doubt which Mr. Portland's words had seemed to imply. The servants came knocking at her door, and worrying her to come

down to luncheon, which was getting cold, in the dining-room, but she would not stir nor speak to any of them.

It was the first time since her acquaintance with the Earl of Ilfracombe that the untenability of her illegal position had been brought so forcibly before her, and she felt all the more angry because she had no right to feel angry at all. She believed implicitly in her lover. She had accepted his assurances of fidelity as gospel truth, and she was passionately indignant and sorely outraged because Mr. Portland had not considered the tie between her and his friend as inviolable as she did. And yet she was *not* Lord Ilfracombe's wife. Beautiful Nell Llewellyn knew this only too well as she lay on the couch, sobbing as if her heart would break. Say what women will in these days of misrule about the charms of liberty, and the horror of being enchained for life, there is a comfortable sense of security in knowing oneself to be honourably united to the man one loves; to have no need of concealment or misstating facts; no necessity of avoiding one's fellow men; no fear of encountering insult from one's inferiors in birth and morals, because one does not wear a wedding ring upon one's finger—that insignia of possession which is so insignificant and yet so powerful. What would poor Nell Llewellyn not have given to have had one upon her finger now?

How terrible is the first dread of the instability of the love on which one has fixed all one's earthly hopes! Had her lover been within reach, Nell would have rushed to him with the story of her trouble, and received a consolatory reassurance of his affection at once. But she was alone. She could confide in no one, and Mr. Portland's proposal, having made her see in what light men of the world regarded her tie to Lord Ilfracombe, had made her heart question if they could be correct, and he looked on it as they did. Her passionate nature, which was not formed for patience or long-suffering or humility, cried out against the suspense to which it was subjected, and raised such violent emotions in her breast that by the time they were exhausted she was quite ill. When at last she raised herself from her downcast position on the sofa, and tried, with swollen eyes and throbbing brain, to collect her thoughts, she found to her dismay that it was past five o'clock, and she had promised to call for Hetty and her husband at six. Her first thought was to remove the traces of her tears. She could not bear that the servants should see that she had been crying. She would never let them perceive that her position in the house cost her any anxiety or remorse, but bore herself bravely in their presence as their mistress, who had not a thought of ever being otherwise. As soon as she had bathed her eyes and arranged her hair, Miss

Llewellyn sat down at a davenport that stood by her sofa and scribbled a note to Hetty, enclosing her the seats for the Alhambra for that evening, and excusing herself from accompanying them on the score of a violent attack of neuralgia. Then she rang the bell for her maid, and desired her to send the letter at once to Oxford Street by hand.

"One of the grooms can go on horseback," she said, "or James can take a hansom; but it must be delivered as soon as possible. And then you can bring me a cup of coffee, Susan, for I have such a headache that I can hardly open my eyes."

"Lor! yes, ma'am, you do look bad!" returned the servant. "Your eyes are quite red-like, as if they was inflamed. You must have caught cold last night. I thought you would, staying out so late, and without the carriage."

"Well, never mind, go and do as I tell you," replied Miss Llewellyn, who felt as if she could not endure her chatter one moment longer.

It was characteristic of this woman that what had occurred had planted far less dread of the insecurity of the position she held in her mind than a deep sense of the insult that had been offered to her love and Lord Ilfracombe's. She felt it on his account, more than on her own—that anyone should have *dared* so to question his honour, and suspect his constancy.

Hers was so ardent and generous a temperament, that where she gave, she gave all, and without a question if she should gain or lose by the transaction. She loved the man whom she regarded as her husband with the very deepest feelings she possessed; it is not too much to say that she adored him, for he was so much above her, in rank and birth and station, that she looked up to him as a god—the only god, indeed, that poor Nell had learned to acknowledge. He was her world—her all! That they should ever be separated never entered into her calculations. He had been struck with her unusual beauty, three years before, and taken her from a very lowly position as nursemaid to be his housekeeper—then, by degrees, the rest had followed. All Lord Ilfracombe's friends knew and admired her, and considered him a deuced lucky fellow to have secured such a goddess to preside over his bachelor establishment. Naturally, the elder ones said it was a pity, and it was to be hoped that Lord Ilfracombe's eyes would be opened before long to the necessity of marriage and an heir to the fine old estate and title. Especially did his father's old friend and adviser, Mr. Sterndale, lament over the connection, and try by every means in his power to persuade Ilfracombe to dissolve it. But the earl was of a careless and frivolous nature —easily led in some things, and very blind as yet to the necessity of marriage. Besides, he loved Nell—not

as she loved him by any manner of means, but in an indolent, indulgent fashion, which granted her all her desires, and gave her as much money as she knew what to do with. But had he been asked if he would marry her, he would have answered decidedly, "No."

CHAPTER IV.

MEANTIME the golden hours were slipping away in a very agreeable manner for Lord Ilfracombe at Malta. He had been accustomed to spend several weeks of each summer yachting with a few chosen companions, and as soon as his little yacht, *Débutante,* had anchored in view of Valetta, a score of husbands, fathers and brothers had scrambled aboard, carrying a score of invitations for the newcomer from their womankind. A young, good-looking and unmarried earl was not so common a visitor to Malta as to be allowed to consider himself neglected, and before Lord Ilfracombe and his friends had been located a week in Valetta, they were the lions of the place, each family vying with the other to do them honour. Naturally, the earl was pretty well used to that sort of thing, especially as he had enjoyed his title for the last ten years. There is such an ingrained snobbishness in the English nature, that it is only necessary to have a handle to one's name to get off scot-free, whatever one may do. There was a divorce case, not so very long ago, which was as flagrant as such a case could well be; but where the titled wife

came off triumphant, simply because the titled husband had been as immoral as herself. The lady had money and the lady had good looks—how far they went to salve over the little errors of which she had been accused it is impossible to say, but the bulk of the public forgave her, and the parsons prayed over her, and she is to be met everywhere, and usually surrounded by a clique of adoring tuft hunters. Sometimes I have wondered, had she been plain Mrs. Brown, instead of Lady Marcus Marengo, if the satellites would have continued to revolve so faithfully. But in sweet, simple Christian England, a title, even a borrowed one, covers a multitude of sins. The Earl of Ilfracombe had naturally not been left to find out this truth for himself, but to give him his due, it had never affected him in the least. He despised servility, though, like most of his sex, he was open to flattery—the flattery of deeds, not words. Amongst the many families who threw wide their doors to him in Malta was that of Admiral Sir Richard Abinger, who had been stationed there for many years. Sir Richard was a regular family man. He had married sons and daughters; a bevy of girls on their promotion; and a nursery of little ones. The Abinger girls, as they were called, were an institution in Valetta. On account of their father's professional duties, and their mother's constant occupation with her younger children, they were allowed to go about a great

deal alone, and had become frank and fearless, and very well able to take care of themselves in consequence. They personally conducted Lord Ilfracombe and his friends to see everything worth seeing in Malta, and a considerable intimacy was the result. There were three sisters of the respective ages of eighteen, twenty, and twenty-two, and it was the middle one of these three, Leonora, or Nora, as she was generally called, who attracted Lord Ilfracombe most. She was not exactly pretty, but graceful and piquant. Her complexion was pale. Her eyes brown and not very large; her nose sharp and inclined to be long; her mouth of an ordinary size, but her teeth ravishingly white and regular. A connoisseur, summing up her perfections, would have totalled them by pronouncing her to have long eyelashes, well-marked eyebrows, good teeth and red lips. But Nora Abinger's chief charm did not lie in physical attractions. To many it would not have counted as a charm at all. They would have set it down as a decided disqualification. This was her freedom of speech; her quickness of *repartee;* her sense of the ridiculous; and her power of sustaining a conversation. Young men of the present day, who find their greatest pleasure in associating with women whom they would not dare introduce to their mothers and sisters, are apt to become rather dumb when they find themselves in respectable society. This had been much

the case hitherto with the Earl of Ilfracombe. He had assiduously neglected his duties to society (if indeed we *do* owe any duty to such a mass of corruption and deceit) and had found his pleasure amongst his own sex, and in pursuing the delights of sport, not excepting that of the racing field, on which he had lost, at times, a considerable amount of money. To find that his ignorance of society squibs and fashions, his slowness of speech and ideas, his inability to make jokes, and sometimes even to see them, was no drawback in Nora's eyes, and that she chatted no less glibly because he was silent, raised him in his own estimation. In fact, Nora was a girl who *made* conversation for her companions. She rubbed up their wits by friction with her own; and people who had been half an hour in her company felt all the brightness with which she had infused them, and were better pleased with themselves in consequence. Lord Ilfracombe experienced this to the fullest extent. For the first time perhaps in his life he walked and talked with a young lady without feeling himself ill at ease, or with nothing to say. Nora talked with him about Malta and its inhabitants, many of whom she took off to the life for his amusement. She drew him out on the subject of England (which she had not visited since she was a child), and his particular bit of England before all the rest; made him tell her of his favourite pursuits, and found, strange to

say, that they all agreed with her own tastes; and lamented often and openly that there was no chance of her father leaving that abominable, stupid island of which she was so sick. Miss Nora Abinger had indeed determined from the very first to secure the earl if possible for herself. Her two sisters, Mabel and Susan, entertained the same aspiration, but they stood no chance against keen-witted Nora, who was as knowing a young lady as the present century can produce. She was tired to death, as she frankly said, of their family life. The admiral would have been well off if he had not had such a large family; but thirteen children are enough to try the resources of any profession. Five of the brothers and sisters were married, and should have been independent, but the many expenses contingent on matrimony, and the numerous grandchildren with which they annually endowed him, often brought them back in *forma pauperis* on their father's hands. His nursery offspring, too, would soon be needing education and a return to England, so that Sir Richard had to think twice before he acceded to the requests of his marriageable maidens for ball dresses and pocket-money. All these drawbacks in her domestic life Nora confided, little by little, to her new friend, the earl, until the young man yearned to carry the girl away to England with him and give her all that she desired. He could not help thinking, as he listened to her gay, rattling

talk, how splendidly she would do the honours of Thistlemere and Cotswood for him; what a graceful, elegant, witty countess she would make; what an attraction for his bachelor friends; what a hostess to receive the ladies of his family. The upshot was just what might have been expected. Lounging one day on a bench under the shade of the orange-trees which overhang the water's edge, whilst their companions had wandered along the quay, Lord Ilfracombe asked her if she would go back to England with him. Nora was secretly delighted with the offer, but not at all taken aback.

"What do you think?" she inquired, looking up at him archly with her bright eyes. "You know I've liked you ever since you came here, and if you can manage to pull along with me, I'm sure I can with you."

"Pull along with you, my darling!" cried the young man. "Why, I adore you beyond anything. I don't know how I should get on now without your bright talk and fascinating ways to cheer my life."

"Well, you'll have to talk to papa about it, you know," resumed Nora. "I don't suppose he'll make any objection (he'll be a great fool if he does), still there's just the chance of it, so I can't say anything for certain till you've seen him. He's awfully particular, very religious, you know, and always says he'd rather marry us to parsons without a halfpenny, than dukes

who were not all they ought to be. But that may be all talkee-talkee! Though I hope you're a good boy, all the same, for my own sake!"

"Oh, I'm an awfully good boy," replied Lord Ilfracombe. "This is the very first offer I ever made a girl in my life, and if you won't have me, Nora, it will be the last. Say you like me a little, darling, whatever papa may say."

"I *do* like you ever so much, and I don't believe there'll be any hitch in the matter."

"But if there were—if your father has any objection to me as a son-in-law—will that make you break with me, Nora?"

"Of course not. There's my hand on it! But I don't see how we are to get married in this poky little place without his consent. But there—don't let us think of such a thing. He'll give it fast enough. But we had better go home now and get the matter over at once."

"You'll give me one kiss before we go, Nora," pleaded Ilfracombe; "no one can see us here. Just one, to prove you love me!"

"Out in the open!" cried the girl, with comical dismay. "Oh, Lord Ilfracombe, what are you thinking of? You don't know what a horrid place this is for scandal! Why, if a boatman or beggar came by, it would be all over the town before the evening. Oh, no; you must

wait till we are properly engaged before you ask for such a thing."

"I'll take my revenge on you, then," said the young man gaily; but he was disappointed, all the same, that Nora had not given in to him.

Sir Richard Abinger was unaffectedly surprised when the earl asked for an interview, and made his wishes known. His daughters had walked about and talked with so many men before, without receiving a proposal. And that Lord Ilfracombe should have fixed on Nora seemed to him the greatest surprise of all.

"Nora?" he reiterated, "*Nora?* Are you sure that you mean Nora? I should have thought that Mabel or Susie would have been more likely to take your fancy. People tell me that Susie is the beauty of the family—that she is so very much admired. We have always considered Nora to be the plainest of them all."

"I do not consider her so, Sir Richard, I can assure you," replied the earl, "although, at the same time, I have chosen her much more for her mind than her looks. She is the most charmingly vivacious girl I have ever come across. She is as clever as they're made."

"Oh, yes, yes, very clever," said the old man; "but now we come to the most important matter—"

"The settlements? Oh, yes! I hope I shall be able to satisfy you thoroughly with respect to them."

"No, Lord Ifracombe, not the settlements, though, of course, they are necessary; but, in my eyes, quite a minor consideration. My daughter, Nora, is—well, to be frank with you, she is not my favourite daughter. Perhaps it is our own fault (for the poor child has been left a great deal to herself), but she is more heedless, less reliable—how shall I put it? Let me say, more headstrong and inclined to have her own way than her sisters. It will require a strong man, and a sensible man, to guide her through life; aye, more than these, a *good* man. The position you offer her is a very brilliant one, and I should be proud to see her fill it; but, before I give my consent to her marrying you, I must be assured that the example you set her will be such as to raise instead of debase her."

"I do not understand what you mean," replied the young man, with a puzzled air. "How can you possibly suspect me of setting my wife a bad example?"

"Not practically, perhaps, but theoretically, Lord Ilfracombe. Forgive me, if I touch upon a delicate subject; but, in the interests of my daughter, I must lay aside all false scruples. I have heard something of your domestic life in England, from the men who have come over here, and I must ascertain for certain that everything of that kind will be put a stop to before you marry Nora."

Lord Ilfracombe reddened with shame.

"Of course, of course," he said, after a pause. "How can you doubt it?"

"I am aware," continued the admiral, "that men of the present day think little of such matters—that they believe all that goes on before marriage is of no consequence to anyone but themselves. But it is not so. Some years back, perhaps, our women were kept in such ignorance of the ways of the world, that they only believed what their husbands chose to tell them. Now it is very different. Their eyes seem to have been opened, and they see for themselves, and act for themselves. I am often astonished at the insight given to me by my own daughters to female nature. Where they have learned it in this quiet, little place, I cannot imagine. It seems to me as if they were born wide-awake. And Nora is especially so. She is ready to be anything you choose to make her. And if she found out that you had deceived her, I would not answer for the consequences."

"You may rely on my word, sir, that, in the future, I will never deceive her. With regard to the past, I should like to make a clean breast to you, in order that hereafter you may not be able to say I have kept anything back. Others may also have represented my life as worse than it has been, and, as my future father-in-law, I should wish you to think the best of me. Some three years ago, I fell in with a very beautiful

young woman, in a humble station of life, whom I took into my household as housekeeper. After a while—there was nothing coarse or vulgar about her, and her beauty was something extraordinary—I succumbed to the temptation of seeing her constantly before my eyes, and raised her to the position of my mistress."

"I beg your pardon, Lord Ilfracombe," said the admiral, looking up.

"Well, not *raised* exactly, perhaps, but you know what I mean. We were mutually attracted, but, of course, it was understood from the beginning that the connection would only last until I thought fit to marry. Now, of course, I shall pension her off, and have already written to my solicitor on the subject. That is really all that any man can say against me, Sir Richard, and it is far less than the generality of young fellows of the present day have to confess to. My life has always been a clean one. I have no debts, my property is unencumbered, and I have no proclivities for low tastes or companions. If you will trust your daughter to my care, I promise that her private rights shall be protected as rigorously as her public ones."

"It is a grand position," said the father, thoughtfully, "and I do not know that I should be justified in refusing it for Nora. Only it seems very terrible to me about this other young woman. How is your marriage likely to affect her. I could have no faith in the

stability of my daughter's happiness if it were built up on the misery of another."

Lord Ilfracombe looked up astonished.

"Oh, Sir Richard, you need have no scruples on that account, I assure you. These people do not feel as we do. I should have ended the business any way, for I was getting rather sick of it. To prove what I say is correct, I have already written to my man of business, Mr. Sterndale, to draw up a deed settling five thousand pounds upon her, which will secure an ample annuity for a woman in her sphere of life. She was only a country girl somewhere out of Scotland, I believe. She will be all right, and, honestly, I never wish to hear her name again."

"Very well, Lord Ilfracombe, of course, under any circumstances, the termination of such a connection is a good thing, and I am glad to hear that the remembrance of it is distasteful to you. You are a man of honour, and, therefore, I accept your assurance that it is all over henceforth, and that you will make my daughter a kind and faithful husband. But be careful of her, and don't let her have too much of her own way. I've seen the bad effects of such a course of behaviour before now."

So it was a settled thing that Miss Nora Abinger was to become the Countess of Ilfracombe, and she

rose in the estimation of the residents of Malta accordingly. She had been a fast, bold, flirting girl as Nora Abinger, but when she was announced as the future Lady Ilfracombe, it was suddenly discovered that she was really excessively clever and witty, and though no one could call her exactly pretty, there was something, a *je ne sais quoi,* about her manner of holding herself and the way she turned her head that was certainly very fascinating. Her promised husband, who had discovered her fascinations before, and was admitted to the full enjoyments of all her wilful moods and witty sayings, fell more deeply in love with her every day, and had hardly patience to wait till the wedding preparations were completed for the fulfilment of his happiness. If a thought of Nell Llewellyn crossed his mind at this period it was only to hope that her interview with Sterndale had passed off quietly, and that she would have the sense to clear out without any fuss. So intensely selfish does a new passion make a man! The time had been when Nell, who was twice as strong, mentally and physically, as Nora Abinger, was Lord Ilfracombe's ideal of a woman. Her finely moulded form had seemed to him the perfection of symmetry; her majestic movements, the bearing of a queen; the calm, classic expression of her features, just what that of a well-bred gentlewoman's should be. Now he was gazing rapturously, day after day, upon Nora's mobile

face, on her slim and lissom figure, which, stripped of its clothing, resembled nothing better than a willow wand, and listening eagerly to her flow of nonsensical chatter, during which she successively "cheeked" her parents and himself, ridiculed her acquaintances, scolded her younger brethren, and took her own way in everything. In truth, she differed as greatly from the loving, submissive woman, who lived but to please him, in England, as she possibly could do, and herein lay her attraction for him. Nell Llewellyn was more beautiful, more obedient and more loving, but Nora was more *new*. He had become just a little bit tired of Nell, and he had never met a girl who treated him as Nora did, before. She spoke to him exactly as she chose; she didn't seem to care a pin about his title or his money. She contradicted him freely; refused his wishes whenever they clashed in any degree with her own, and let him fully understand that she intended to do exactly as she chose for the remainder of her life. She was a new experience to Lord Ilfracombe, who had been accustomed to be deferred to in everything. Perhaps she knew this; perhaps she was "cute" enough to guess the likeliest method by which to snare the fish she had set her heart on catching; anyway the bait took and the gudgeon was netted. The Earl of Ilfracombe and Miss Nora Abinger were formally engaged and the wedding-day was fixed. But still the young lady did not relax

her discipline, and her lover's privileges remained few and far between.

"Paws off, Pompey!" she would cry if he attempted to take any of the familiarities permissable to engaged people. "Do you want Vicenzo or Giorgione to make us the jest of Valetta? Don't you know that 'spooning' is out of fashion? We leave all that sort of thing to the *oi polloi* now-a-days."

"Oh, do we?" the young man would retort, playfully; "then I'll belong to the *oi polloi,* Nora, if you please! At all events, I'm going to have a kiss!"

"At all events, you're going to have no such thing; at least, not now. There'll be plenty of time for all that kind of nonsense after we're married, and we're not there yet, you know. Don't forget 'there's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip.'"

Then, seeing him frown, she would add coaxingly, twisting her mouth up into the most seductive curves as she spoke,—

"There, don't be vexed, you'll have too much of kissing some day, you know. Come out in the boat with me. You're the most troublesome boy I ever knew. There's no keeping you in order in the house."

So he would follow her obediently, with his longing still ungratified, and always looking forward to a luckier to-morrow. Whoever had been her instructor, Miss Nora Abinger had certainly learnt the art of keeping a

man at her feet. Perhaps the same thought struck him also, for one day, when they were alone together, he asked her if he were the only man she had ever loved. Nora looked at him with the keenest appreciation lurking in the corners of her mirthful eyes.

"Are you the only man I've ever loved, Ilfracombe?" she repeated after him. "Well, I don't think so."

"You don't think so? Good heavens, do you mean to tell me you've had lovers beside myself!" he exclaimed, getting into a sudden fury.

"My dear boy, do you know how old I am? Twenty, last birthday! What are you dreaming of? Do you suppose all the men in Malta are deaf, dumb, and blind? Of course I've had other lovers—scores of them!"

"But you didn't love them, Nora; not as you love me," Lord Ilfracombe asked anxiously.

"Well, before I can answer that question, we must decide how much I *do* love you. Anyway, I didn't marry any of them, though I might have a dozen husbands by this time if I had accepted them all. As it is, you see, I chucked them over."

"But were you engaged to any of them, Nora?" he persisted.

She might easily have said "no," but it was not in this girl's nature to deceive. She was frankly naughty, defiantly so, some people might have said, and rather

glorified in her faults than otherwise. Besides, she dearly loved to tease her lover, and tyrannise over him.

"Oh, yes I was," she replied, "that is, I had a kind of a sort of an engagement with several of them. But it amounted to nothing. There was only one of the whole lot I shed a single tear for."

"And pray, who may he have been?" demanded Lord Ilfracombe, with a sudden access of dignity.

"Find it out for yourself," she said pertly. "Oh, he *was* a dear, quite six foot high, with the goldenest golden hair you ever saw; not a bit like yours. I call yours flaxen. It's too pale, but his had a rich tinge in it, and he had such lovely eyes, just like a summer night, I nearly cried myself blind when he left Malta."

"It seems to me," said the earl, with the same offended air he had assumed before, "that I am *de trop* here, since the recollection of this fascinating admirer is still so fresh. Perhaps I had better resign in favour of him while there is still time?"

"Just as you like!" returned Nora indifferently. "I have no wish to bias your movements in any way. But if you did not want an answer, why did you put the question to me?"

"But, Nora, my darling, you did not mean what you said? You did not waste any of your precious tears on this brute, surely? You said it only to tease me?"

"Indeed I did not! Do you imagine you are the only nice man I have ever seen—that I have been shut up on this island like poor Miranda and never met a man before? What a simpleton you must be! Of course I was engaged to him, and should have been married to him by this time, only the poor dear had no certain income, and papa would not hear of it! And I cried for weeks afterwards whenever I heard his name mentioned. Would you have had me an insensible block, and not care whether we had to give each other up or no?"

"No, no, of course not, but it is terrible to me, Nora, to think you could have cared for another man."

"Rubbish!" cried the young lady. "How many women have you cared for yourself? Come now, let us have the list?"

The earl blushed uneasily.

"I have told you already," he replied, "that you are the first woman I have ever asked to be the Countess of Ilfracombe!"

"And I didn't ask you how many women you had proposed to, but how many you had thought you loved. The list can't be so long that you have forgotten them all? Let's begin at the end. That will make it easier. Who was the last woman before me?"

"That is a very silly question, Nora, and I consider

that I have already answered it. Besides, I am not a young lady, and that makes all the difference."

"In your idea, Ilfracombe, perhaps, but not mine. We women see no difference in the two things at all. And if you cannot produce a clean bill of health in the matter of having loved before, you have no right to expect it of me. Besides, my dear boy," she continued in a more soothing voice, "do you mean to tell me, in this nineteenth century, that you have reached your present age—what is your present age, Ilfracombe, nine and twenty, is it not?—without having made love to heaps of women? Not that I care one jot! I am not such a zany! I think it's all for the best since 'pot will not be able to call kettle black,' eh?"

And she glanced up into his face from under her long eyelashes in so fascinating a manner, that the earl caught her in his arms before she had time to remonstrate, and forgot all about the former lover. So the time wore away, each day more delightful than the last, spent under the orange and myrtle trees, or in sailing round the bay, until the longed-for wedding morning broke, and they were married in the English church at Malta. Their plans were to go to an hotel higher up in the island, for a fortnight's honeymoon, after which they were to start in the *Débutante* for the Grecian Isles, before returning to England. A few days after his marriage, Lord Ilfracombe received a letter by

the English mail that seemed greatly to disturb him. He was most anxious to conceal it, and his own feelings regarding it, from the observation of his wife, and this he had no difficulty in doing, as she did not appear even to have noticed that he was unlike himself. The letter was from a woman, long and diffusive, and he read it many times. Then he entered the sitting-room and addressed Lady Ilfracombe.

"Have you torn up the paper that contained the description of our marriage, darling?" he inquired.

"What, that local thing? No, I never looked at it a second time. It is somewhere about. What can you possibly want with it, Ilfracombe?"

"Only to send to one of my English friends, Nora. It is so funnily worded, it will amuse them."

And then he found it, and put it in a wrapper and directed it to Miss Llewellyn, 999 Grosvenor Square, London.

CHAPTER V.

MISS LLEWELLYN had almost forgotten that she was to expect a visit from Lord Ilfracombe's solicitor, Mr. Sterndale, when one day, as she was sitting alone, his card was brought in to her. Hetty and William had returned to Usk by this time. Their modest resources could not stand out against more than a week in London, though their sister had helped them as much as they would allow her. So they were gone, taking the fresh smell of the country with them, and leaving Miss Llewellyn more melancholy and depressed than they had found her. For she had not heard again from Lord Ilfracombe since the few lines she had received on the day of their arrival, and she was beginning to dread all sorts of unlikely things, just because the unusual silence frightened her, like a child left alone in the dark. Hetty and Will had been most urgent that she should accompany them back to Usk, and for a moment Nell thought the temptation too great to be resisted. What would she not give for a sight of her dear mother's face, she thought—for her father's grave smile; for a

night or two spent in the old farmhouse where she had been so careless and so happy; to lie down to sleep with the scent of the climbing roses and honeysuckle in her nostrils, and the lowing of the cattle and twittering of the wild birds in her ears. And Ilfracombe had urged her to take change of air, too. He would be pleased to hear she had left London for awhile! But here came the idea that he might return home any day, perhaps unexpectedly and sooner than he imagined, and then if she were absent what would he think?—what would she suffer? She would not cease to reproach herself. Oh, no, it was useless for Hetty to plead with her. She would come back some day, when she could have a holiday without inconvenience, but just now with the master of the house absent, her mother would understand it was impossible; it would not be right for her, in her position as housekeeper, to leave the servants to look after themselves. So Hetty, having been brought up very strictly with regard to duty, was fain to acquiesce in her sister's decision, and comfort herself with the hope that she would fulfil her promise some day. But when they had left London, Nell felt as if she had escaped a great danger, and was only just able to breathe freely again. And had she accompanied them to Usk, and gone to stay at Panty-cuckoo Farm, she would have felt almost as bad. To live under the eyes of her parents day after day; to

have to submit to their eager questioning; to evade their sharpness—for country people are sometimes very sharp in matters that affect their domestic happiness and very eager for revenge when their family honour is compromised; all this Nell felt she dared not, under present circumstances, undergo. So she was sorry and glad to part with her sister at the same time; but her advent had so put other matters out of her head, that she was quite startled at receiving Mr. Sterndale's card. It revived all the old curiosity, which the first notice of his coming had evoked in her mind. What on earth could he possibly have to say to her? However, that question would soon be put to rest, and she was bound, for Ilfracombe's sake, to receive him. She happened to be in her boudoir at the time, and told the servant to desire her visitor to walk up there. Nell knew that the lawyer did not like her, and the feeling was reciprocal. Mr. Sterndale was a little, old man of sixty, with silver hair. A very cute lawyer, and a firm friend, but uncompromising to a degree—a man from whom a fallen woman might expect no mercy. Miss Llewellyn had said in her letter to her lover, that she knew Mr. Sterndale regarded her as a harpy who cared for nothing but his money, and this estimate of his opinion was strictly true. With him, women were divided into only two classes—moral and immoral. The class to which poor Nell belonged was generally mercenary

and grasping, and deserted a poor man to join a richer one, and he had no idea that she was any different. She was beautiful, he saw, so much the more dangerous; and all his fear of late years had been lest the earl should have taken it in his head to marry her, as indeed, except for Mr. Sterndale's constant warnings and entreaties, he would have done. Now he rejoiced to think that his client was about to be wedded to a woman in his own sphere of life, for the news of the marriage had not yet reached England, and he had come to Grosvenor Square to fulfil Lord Ilfracombe's request that he would break the intelligence to Miss Llewellyn, as calmly and deliberately as if he were the bearer of the best of news. She did not rise as he entered, but, bowing rather curtly, begged he would be seated and disclose his business with her. She had been accustomed for so long to be treated by this man as the mistress of the establishment, that she had come to regard him much as Lord Ilfracombe did, in the light of a servant. Mr. Sterndale noted the easy familiarity with which she motioned him to take a chair, and chuckled inwardly, to think how soon their relative positions would be reversed.

"Good morning," began Miss Llewellyn. "Ilfracombe wrote me word I might expect to see you, Mr. Sterndale, but I have no idea for what purpose."

"Perhaps not, madam," was the reply, "but it will

soon be explained. Have you heard from his lordship lately?"

Miss Llewellyn raised her head proudly.

"I hear constantly, as you know. Ilfracombe is well, I am thankful to say, and apparently enjoying himself. He has made some pleasant acquaintances in Valetta, and they are urging him to stay on with them a little longer. Else he would have returned before now. He is longing to get home again, I know."

"Ah, perhaps, very likely," replied Mr. Sterndale, who was fumbling with some papers he held in his hand. "Indeed, I have no doubt his lordship will be back before long—when he has completed another little trip he has in contemplation to the Grecian Isles."

Nell's face assumed a look of perplexity.

"Another yachting trip, and not homewards? Oh, I think you must be mistaken, Mr. Sterndale, or are you saying it to tease me? He has been gone four months already, ever since the fifth of April, and I am expecting to hear he has started for home by every mail. What has put such an idea into your head?"

"No one less than his lordship himself, Miss Llewellyn. In a letter from him, dated the beginning of the month, but which, for reasons which I will explain hereafter, I have not thought fit to bring to you till now, he distinctly says that when certain arrangements which

he is making in Malta are completed, he intends to sail for the Grecian Isles, and does not expect to be home at Thistlemere till late in the autumn.

Nell looked fearfully anxious and distressed.

"I cannot believe it," she said incredulously. Why should Ilfracombe make such arrangements without consulting me first? He always has done so. I might have wished to join him in Malta. We have been separated for such a long time now—longer than ever before, and I have told him how sick and weary I am of it—how I long to see him again."

"The money has not run short, has it?" inquired the solicitor; "for, if so, you should have applied to me."

She gave a shrug of impatience.

"My money has never run short, thank you," she replied. "Ilfracombe thinks too much of my comfort for that."

"It is his prolonged stay abroad, then, that is puzzling you," continued Mr. Sterndale; "but I am in a position to explain that. I have a painful duty before me, Miss Llewellyn, but I don't know that I shall make it any better by beating about the bush."

"A painful task," she echoed, with staring eyes. "For God's sake, don't tell me that my—that Ilfracombe is ill?"

"No, no, nothing of the sort. But has it never

occurred to you, Miss Llewellyn, that circumstances may alter in this life, that a tie like that between you and Lord Ilfracombe, for example, does not, as a rule, last for ever."

"No, never," she answered firmly, "because it is no ordinary tie, and Lord Ilfracombe is a gentleman. I am as sure of him as I am of myself. He would never break his word to me."

"There is no question of breaking his word. You knew the conditions under which you took up your residence in this house, and that you have no legal right here."

"Have you come here to insult me?" cried Nell shrilly. "How dare you allude to any agreement between Lord Ilfracombe and myself? I *am* here, that is quite enough for you to know, and the earl has said that I am to remain. I am sure he never desired you to come here and taunt me with my position?"

"*Taunt*, my dear lady. That is scarcely the word to use. I was only reminding you, as gently as I knew how, that your position is untenable, and that young men are apt to change their minds."

"Lord Ilfracombe will not change his," replied Miss Llewellyn proudly. "I am aware you have done your best to try and make him do so, Mr. Sterndale, but you have not succeded."

"Perhaps not. I have certainly nothing to do with

his lordship's prolonged absence from England. But, since you profess to be much attached to him, Miss Llewellyn, has it never occurred to you what a very disadvantageous thing for the earl this connection between you is?"

"That is for the earl to decide," said Miss Llewellyn.

"You are right, and he has decided. Lord Ilfracombe is a young man who owes a duty to Society and the exalted station he occupies. His friends and family have been shocked and scandalised for the last three years to witness the outrage he has committed against the world and them, and that he has never considered the importance of founding a family to succeed him, and of leaving an heir to inherit his ancient title."

Miss Llewellyn's lip trembled as she replied,—

"All very true, I daresay, but Lord Ilfracombe prefers the present state of affairs to the opinion of the world."

"Happily, I am in a position to inform you, Miss Llewellyn, that he has at last come to his senses, and determined to do his duty in that respect. In this letter," said Mr. Sterndale, dangling one in his hand as he spoke, "Lord Ilfracombe desires me to break the news to you of his approaching marriage with Miss Leonora Abinger, the daughter of Sir Richard Abinger, which is fixed to come off at an early date."

"It is a lie!" cried Miss Llewellyn, as she rose to

her feet and drew herself up to her full height, "a mean, wicked lie, which you have forged for some purpose of your own. Oh, you need not look at me like that, Mr. Sterndale. I have known for long how you hate me, and how glad you would be to get rid of me. I have too much influence over Ilfracombe to suit your book. If you could persuade me to leave this house, and then convince him that I had gone off with some other man it would fit in nicely with your own little plans, wouldn't it? But you don't hoodwink me. I know your master too well. He never wished me to leave his protection, nor told you to forge that lie in his name. He has no intention of marrying—if he had he would have told me so himself—and not left it to an attorney to deal the worst blow that life could give me. Leave this house, sir! Till the man whom I regard as my husband returns to it there is no master here but I. Go! and take your lies with you. I will believe your statement on no authority but that of Ilfracombe himself."

"And that is just the authority with which I am armed, Miss Llewellyn, if you will but listen to me quietly. What is the use of making all this fuss over the inevitable? You are acquainted with the earl's handwriting. Will you kindly glance at this, and tell me if you recognise it as his?"

"Yes, it is his."

"Let me read it to you, and pray remember that the servants are near at hand, and ready to make copy out of all they hear. Are you listening to me?"

"Yes."

"This letter is dated 2d of July. 'DEAR STERNDALE,—You will be surprised, and I suppose delighted, to hear that I am engaged to be married to Miss Leonora Abinger, the second daughter of Admiral Sir Richard Abinger, a young lady of twenty. The wedding will take place within six weeks or so. Of course, the only difficulty with me is Miss Llewellyn. The news will be unexpected to her, and I am not quite sure how she will take it. We have been together now for three years, and that is a long time. However, she is a very sensible woman, and must have known from the beginning that it was impossible such a state of things could go on for ever. Will you go, like a good soul, and break it to her? Of course, she must be well provided for. What would be a suitable sum? Five thousand pounds? Draw up a settlement for what you consider best, but I want to be generous to her, for she has been very good to me. I should consider myself a scoundrel if I did not provide for her for life; but she will doubtless marry before long, and a few thousand will form a nice little dot for her. After my marriage I am going to take my wife straight to the Grecian Isles in the *Débutante,* so that we shall not be home till late in the

autumn. You will see, like a good friend, that the coast is quite clear before then. We mean to go to Thistlemere for Christmas, and while the town house is being done up."

"There, Miss Llewellyn," said Mr. Sterndale, as he came to a full stop, "that is all of the letter that concerns you. The rest consists of directions about draining and decoration, and matters that ladies do not trouble their heads about. You perfectly understand now, I am sure, and will absolve me from attempting to deceive you in the business."

He glanced at her as he spoke, and observed she was sitting on the couch with her head drooping on her breast.

"May I see the letter?" was all she said.

He placed it in her hands, and she perused the portion he had read aloud, mechanically. Then she held it out to him again, and he pocketed it. But he wished she would say something. He did not like her total silence. It was so unlike Miss Llewellyn. With a view to disperse it, he continued,—

"I told you I had a reason for not having called on you before. It was because I thought it best to have the settlement, which his lordship proposes to make upon you, drawn up, that you may be perfectly convinced of his good intentions towards you. The deed, of course, will not be complete without his signature

but, with a man of Lord Ilfracombe's honour, you may rest assured of his signing it on the first possible occasion, and meanwhile I am prepared, on my own account, to advance you any sum of money of which you may stand in need."

Still she did not answer his remarks, but sat silent and immovable, with her features concealed by the drooping of her head.

"His lordship is sure to be home before the winter, but if you wish to have this sum invested for you at once, I know I shall only be meeting his wishes in helping you to do so. Perhaps you would like me to put the money into the earl's own coal mines, Miss Llewellyn. They are an excellent investment, and the shares are paying seven per cent., a rate of interest which you are not likely to get elsewhere. And it would have this further advantage, that in case of any unforeseen accident, or depreciation in the market, I feel sure the earl would never hear of your losing your money, whatever the other shareholders might do. The John Penn Mine is yielding wonderfully, so is the Llewellyn, which, if I mistake not, the earl called after yourself."

"Are you a man?" demanded Nell, slowly raising her head, "or are you a devil? Cease chattering to me about your coal mines and shareholders! When I want to invest money, I shall not come to you to help

or advise me. Do you suppose that I don't know that if this letter speaks truth—that if my—if the earl contemplates doing what he says, it is owing in a great measure to your advice and exhortations? You were for ever dinning the necessity of marriage into his ears. We have laughed over it together."

"Have you indeed? Well, I don't deny it. I have done my duty by Lord Ilfracombe, and I'm very glad to find that my advice has had a good effect. You laughed too soon, you see, Miss Llewellyn. But whatever influence has been brought to bear upon his lordship, the fact remains that it has been successful, and he is about to be married—may even be married at the present moment. Nothing now remains to be done but for you to look at this settlement and decide how soon it will be convenient for you to leave Grosvenor Square."

He laid the paper on her lap as he spoke, but Miss Llewellyn sprang to her feet, and, seizing the document in her strong grasp, tore it across and flung the fragments in the solicitor's face.

"Go back to your master!" she exclaimed, "to the man who was good and true and honourable until your crafty advice and insinuations made him forget his nobler nature, and tell him to take his money and spend it on the woman he marries, for I will have none of it! Does he think he can *pay* me for my love, my

faith, my honour? In God's sight, I am the wife of Lord Ilfracombe, and I will not accept his alms, as if I were a beggar. For three years I have lived by his side, sharing all that was his — his pleasures, his troubles, and his pains. He has had all my love, my devotion, my duty! I have nursed him in sickness, and looked after his interests at all times, and I will not be remunerated for my services as if I were a hireling. Tell him I am his wife, and I throw his money back in his face. He can never pay me for what I have been to him. He will never find another woman to fill my place."

"But, my dear madam, this is folly! Let me entreat you to be reasonable," said Mr. Sterndale, as he picked up the torn settlement. "You may have *thought* all this, but you know it is not tenable. You are *not* Lord Ilfracombe's wife, and you never will be! You have been the most excellent of friends and companions, I admit that freely; but the time has come for parting, and the wisest and most sensible thing for you to do is to acquiesce in his lordship's decision, and effect this little alteration in his domestic arrangements as quietly as possible. It *must* be, you know! Why not let it pass without scandal?"

"We have not been only friends and companions," she repeated scornfully, "we have been the dearest and closest of lovers and *confidantes*. Oh, why should I

speak to you of it? What should *you* know of such things? It is not in you to love anyone as I have loved Ilfracombe and he has loved me. But I do not believe your story, not even from the letter you showed me. I don't believe he wrote it. You lawyers are cunning enough for anything. You may have forged his writing. So I reject your news and your settlement and yourself. Leave me at once and don't come near me again. I will accept this assurance from no one but Ilfracombe, and I shall not quit his house till he tells me to do so. He left me in charge here, and I do not relinquish it till my master bids me go.

"He'll bid you fast enough," replied the solicitor, as he gathered up his papers and prepared to leave her; "and it will be your own fault, Miss Llewellyn, if your exit is made more unpleasant to you than it need have been. The decorators will be in the house, probably, before you get any answer to your appeal to his lordship."

"Then I shall superintend the decorators," she said haughtily. "As long as anyone sleeps here, I shall sleep here, unless Ilfracombe himself tells me to go."

"Very ill-advised — very foolish," remarked Mr. Sterndale; "but don't blame me if you suffer for your obstinacy."

"All I want is to get rid of you," she cried. "I have always disliked you, and now I hate you like poison."

"Much obliged, I'm sure," he said, as he left the room. But he revenged himself for the affronts she had put upon him as he went downstairs.

"You must tell the women to look after poor Miss Llewellyn," he whispered to the footman, who let him out, "for I have been the bearer of bad news to her."

"Indeed, sir," said the man.

"Yes, though it is the best possible for all the rest of you. Your master is about to be married very shortly to a young lady in Malta. There will be high jinks for all of you servants when he brings his bride home to England, but you must know what it will mean for *her,*" jerking his thumb towards the upper storey.

"Well, naturally," acquiesced the footman with a wink.

"She won't be here long, but you must make her as comfortable as you can during her stay. And you are welcome to tell the news everywhere. It's no secret. I've a letter from the earl in my pocket to say he will bring her ladyship home in time for the Christmas festivities at Thistlemere. Good morning."

"Good morning, sir," echoed the footman, and rushed down to the servants' hall to disseminate the tidings.

Meanwhile Nell, with her limbs as cold as stone, and all her pulses at fever heat, was dashing off the

impassioned letter which Lord Ilfracombe received a few days after his wedding.

"My darling, my own," she wrote, heedless of who should see the letter,—"Mr. Sterndale has just been here to tell me you are thinking of getting married. But it is not true—I don't believe it—I told him so to his face. Oh, Ilfracombe, it cannot be true. Write to me for God's sake as soon as you receive this, and tell me it is a lie. The old man has said it to make me miserable—to try and get rid of me. He has always hated me, and been jealous of my influence over you. And yet—he showed me a letter in your handwriting, or what looked just like it, in which you said that it was true. My God! is it possible? Can you seriously think of deserting me? Oh, no, I will not believe it till you tell me so yourself. You could not part with me after all these years. Darling, think of the time when you first saw me at Mrs. Beresford's, when she brought you up into the nursery to see her little baby, and I was sitting on a footstool before the fire nursing it. I stood up when you and my mistress entered, but instead of looking at the baby, you looked at me. I overheard Mrs. Beresford chaff you about it as you went downstairs again, and you said,—"Well, you shouldn't have such lovely nursemaids then." I was only twenty, dearest, and with no more sense than a town-bred girl of sixteen. I dreamed of those words of

yours, and I dreamed of you, as the noblest and handsomest gentleman I had ever seen, as indeed you were. And then you began to call at Mrs. Beresford's two and three times a week and to meet me in the park, until that happy day came when you asked me if I would leave my place and be your housekeeper in Grosvenor Square. I thought it was a grand rise for me, and wrote and told my people so; but even then I didn't guess at what you meant or that you loved me in *that* way. Ilfracombe, you *know* I was an innocent, good girl when I first came to this house, and that I shouldn't have ever been otherwise had you not persuaded me that if our hearts were truly each others our marriage would be as lasting as if we had gone to church together. I believed you. I knew it was wrong, but I loved you and I believed you. Oh, my own only darling, don't desert me now. What is to become of me if you do? I can't go back to my own people: I am no longer fit to associate with them. You have raised me to the dignity of your companionship. You have unfitted me for country life, and how can I go out to service again? Who would take me? Everybody knows our history. I have no character. Darling, do you remember the time when you had the typhoid fever and were so ill, we thought that you would die. Oh, what a fearful time that was. And when you recovered you were going to marry me, at least you said

so, and I was so happy and yet so afraid of what your family would think. But you had quite made up your mind about it, till Mr. Sterndale heard you mention the subject and talked you out of it. You never told me, but I guessed it all the same. I never reproached you for it, did I? or reminded you of your promise. I knew I was no fit wife for you—only fit to love and serve you as I have done, gladly and faithfully. How can you marry another woman when I have been your wife for three long, happy years? Won't the remembrance of me come between you and her? Won't you often think of the many, many times you have declared you should never think of marrying whilst I lived—that I was your wife to all intents and purposes, and that any other woman would seem an interloper. Oh, Ilfracombe, do try and remember all these things before you perpetrate an action for which you will reproach yourself all your life. I know your nature. Who should know it so well as I? You are weak and easily led, but you are sensitive and generous, and I know you will not forget me easily. Dearest, write to me and tell me it is a lie, and I will serve you all my life as no servant and no wife will ever do. For you are far more than a husband to me. You are my world and my all—my one friend—my one hope and support. Oh, Ilfracombe, don't leave me. I live in you and your love, and if you desert me I cannot live. For God's sake—

for the sake of Heaven—for your honour's sake, don't leave me,—Your broken-hearted, NELL."

So the poor girl wrote, as other poor, forsaken wretches have written before her, thinking to move the heart of a man who was already tired of her. As soon hope to move the heart of a stone as that of a lover hot on a new fancy. Her letter reached him, as we have seen, when the step she deprecated was taken beyond remedy, but it stirred his sense of having committed an injustice if it could not requicken his burnt-out flame. He did not know how to answer it. He had nothing to say in defence of himself, or his broken promises. So, like many a man in similar circumstances, he shirked his duty, and seized the first opportunity that presented itself of putting it on the shoulders of someone else. Since Sterndale had failed in his commission, the newspaper must convey to his cast-off mistress the news she refused to believe. So he posted the little sheet of paper, printed for the edification of the British residents in Malta, to her address, and transcribed it in his own hand. She couldn't make any mistake about *that,* he said to himself, as he returned to the agreeable task of making love to his countess. But the incident did not increase the flavour of his courtship. There is a sense called Memory, that has on occasions an inconveniently loud voice and not the slightest scruple in making itself heard, when least

required. The Earl of Ilfracombe had yet to learn if the charms of his newly-wedded wife were sufficiently powerful to have made it worth his while, in order to possess them, to have invoked the demon of Memory to dog his footsteps for the remainder of his life. But for the nonce he put it away from him as an unclean thing. Nora, Countess of Ilfracombe, reigned triumphant, and Nell Llewellyn, disgraced and disherited, was ordered to "move on," and find herself another home! Meanwhile, she awaited her lover's answer in his own house. She refused to "move on" until she received it.

It was a very miserable fortnight. She felt, for the first time, so debased and degraded, that she would not leave the house, but sat indoors all day, without employment and without hope, only waiting in silence and despair for the assurance of the calamity that had been announced to her. Her sufferings were augmented at this time by the altered demeanour of the servants towards her. She had always been an indulgent mistress, and they had liked her, so that she did not experience anything like rudeness at their hands. On the contrary, it was the increase of their attentions and familiarity that annoyed and made her more unhappy. She read in it, too surely, the signs of the coming times; the signs that they knew her reign was over, and the marriage of their master a certain thing. Nell felt as if she had been turned to stone in those days,

as if the wheels of her life's machinery had been arrested, and all she could do was to await the verdict. It came all too soon. One lovely night, about a fortnight after she had written to Lord Ilfracombe, a newspaper was put into her hand. This was such a very unusual occurrence, that she tore off the wrapper hastily, and turned the sheets over with trembling fingers. She was not long in finding the announcement of her death warrant.

"On the 28th of July, at Malta, the Right Honourable the Earl of Ilfracombe, to Leonora Adelaide Maria, fourth daughter of Admiral Sir Richard Abinger, R.N.C.B."

And in another part of the paper was a long description of the wedding festivities, the number of invited guests, and the dresses of the bride and bridesmaids. Miss Llewellyn read the account through to the very end, and then tottered to her feet to seek her bedroom.

"Lor, miss, you do look bad!" exclaimed a sympathising housemaid, whom she met on the way—it was a significant fact that since the news of his lordship's intended marriage had been made public in the servants' hall, poor Nell had been degraded from madam to miss—"let me fetch you a cup of tea, or a drop of brandy and water. Now do, there's a dear. You might have seen a ghost by the look of you."

"No, thank you, Sarah," replied Miss Llewellyn, with a faint smile; "you are very kind, but I have not met a ghost, only the day has been warm and I long for a breath of fresh air. Don't worry about me. I will go out into the square for half an hour, and that will do me good."

The servant went on her way, and Nell turned into her bedroom. What a luxurious room it was. The furniture was upholstered in soft shades of grey and pink, and the walls were hung with engravings, all chosen by the earl himself. There was a spring couch by the fireplace before which was spread a thick white fur rug. The toilet-table was strewn with toys of china and glass and silver. It was the room of a lady, but it was Nell's no longer. She walked deliberately to the toilet-table, and, opening her trinket case, examined its contents, to see if everything she had received at her lover's hands was in its place. Then she quietly took off her dainty little watch, encrusted with diamonds, and her bangle bracelets, and two or three handsome rings which he had given her, amongst which was a wedding ring which she usually wore. She put them all carefully in the trinket-case, and scribbling on the outside of an old envelope, in pencil, the words, "Good-bye, my only love, I cannot live without you," she placed it with the jewellery, and, locking the box, threw the key out of the window.

"That will prevent the servants opening it," she thought. "They will be afraid to force the lock, but *he* will, by-and-bye, and then he will guess the truth. I do not rob him much by taking this gown," she said, smiling mournfully, as she gazed at her simple print frock, "and he would not mind if I did. He was always generous, to me and everybody. Then, overburdened by a sudden rush of memory, she sank on her knees by the couch crying, "Oh my love, my love! why did you leave me? It is so very, very hard to part with you thus."

But when her little outburst was over, Nell dried her eyes, and crept softly downstairs. It was dark by this time; the servants were making merry over their supper in the hall; and the crowds not having yet issued from the theatres, the streets were comparatively free. Nell walked straight but steadily through Piccadilly and the Strand till she came to Waterloo Street. She was dressed so quietly and walking so deliberately that a stranger might have thought she was going to see a friend; certainly no one would have dreamt of the fire of passion that was raging in her breast. No one looked round at her—not an official of the law asked her business, or followed in her track. She even turned to cross Waterloo Bridge without exciting any suspicion in the bystanders. Why should she not be a peaceful citizen like the rest of them, bent on a com-

mon errand. Had it been later at night, it might have been different. It was the early hour of ten and the crowded pathway that lulled all suspicion. Yet Nell was as distraught as any lunatic who ever contemplated suicide. She was walking to her death, and it was only a proof of the state of her mind that she went without a thought excepting that the rest of forgetfulness was so near. As she came to the centre of the bridge, she stopped for a moment and looked over the coping wall at the calm water.

"How deep it is," she thought. "What a fool I am to deliberate. It will be over in a minute, and it will be so sweet never to dream again."

As she mused in this manner, she gave a sudden leap and was over before the passers-by could catch hold of her clothing. They gave the alarm at once, and a policeman, who was half way down on the other side, heard it and came hurrying up. But the waters of old Father Thames, who has received so many of his despairing children to his bosom, had already closed over the bright hair and beautiful face of Nell Llewellyn.

CHAPTER VI.

ALL the women who had witnessed the accident hung over the parapet of the bridge, screaming at the top of their voices after the manner of their kind, whilst the men ran off for assistance. The police were summoned; boats, with grappling irons, were put out; and every effort made to rescue the unfortunate suicide, but in vain. Nothing was seen or heard of the body. No crafts had been immediately under the bridge at the moment. Two or three empty barges were moored in its vicinity, but their black beams could tell no tales. The search was not given up until it was pronounced unavailing, and the police went back to report the circumstance at headquarters. Next morning there appeared a paragraph in the dailies with the headline —"Mysterious Suicide from Waterloo Bridge."

"Last evening, as the large audiences were turning out of the transpontine theatres, and wending their way homewards, a thrilling accident, or what may have been so, occurred on Waterloo Bridge. A tall, lady-like, well-dressed young woman was walking quietly amongst the passengers, apparently as soberly-disposed as any

amongst them, when, without sound or warning, she suddenly vaulted over the parapet and dashed into the river. The act was so unpremeditated, and took the bystanders so completely by surprise, that there was no opportunity of preventing the terrible catastrophe. The peaceful crowd was immediately transformed into an agitated mass; all striving to give the alarm, or aid in rescuing the unfortunate woman. The police behaved magnificently on the occasion. In less time than we could write the words, boats were put out and every possible assistance given, but no trace of the body could be found, though the grappling-irons were used in every direction. It is supposed that she must have fractured her skull against one of the empty barges moored in proximity to the bridge, and sunk beyond recall. The occurrence created a painful sensation among the bystanders. Women were fainting, and men rushing about in all directions. Some people, who had followed the unfortunate woman across the bridge from the Strand, describe her to have had a tall and very elegant figure, and say that she was dressed in a black mantle, and wore a broad, black hat with a drooping feather. Everybody seems agreed that she did not belong to the lower classes, and it is to be feared, from the determination with which she sprang over the parapet, that her loss can be ascribed to nothing but deliberate suicide. The police are on the look-out for the body,

which will probably turn up further down the river, when some light may be thrown on the identity of the unfortunate lady. The strangers who walked in her wake across the bridge observed that she possessed an abundant quantity of bright chestnut hair, coiled low upon her neck, and that her hands, which were bare, were long and white. This makes the fifteenth suicide that has taken place from Waterloo Bridge in twelve months."

Mr. Sterndale, the solicitor, sitting alone in his office, read this paragraph, and was very much struck by it, especially as Warrender, Lord Ilfracombe's butler, had been to see him not half an hour ago with the intelligence that Miss Llewellyn had left the house the night before and not been home since. Mr. Sterndale, with his cynical ideas concerning women, had not paid much attention nor attached much importance to the man's statement. He thought the quondam housekeeper of Grosvenor Square had found another place, or another lover, and no longer held herself responsible to the earl or anybody else for what she might choose to do. He had told Warrender that he did not think there was any reason for alarm; that Miss Llewellyn was quite old enough to take care of herself, and that she had probably gone to visit friends and spent the night with them. She would be sure to return for her boxes. The butler had not seemed satisfied.

"But, begging your pardon, sir, the maid who saw her last, Susan, says she was looking very ill, poor lady! She said she was going into the square for a breath of fresh air, and it was past nine o'clock then. Susan and I waited up for Miss Llewellyn till twelve, and then I only lay down on the bench in the hall till four this morning. But she never came back, and, begging your pardon, sir, it's what Miss Llewellyn haven't never done, not since she's been under his lordship's protection."

"Ah, well, Warrender, she's got her orders to quit, you know, and I daresay she considers she can do as she likes, as indeed there's no reason she should not. She's a very obstinate young woman or she would have left the house before now, and she's putting me to a great deal of inconvenience. Indeed, if she does not leave soon, she will compel me to exercise the authority vested in me by Lord Ilfracombe, and order her to pack up her boxes and go."

The old servant looked troubled.

"Oh, I hope not, sir, I hope not. Perhaps it's not my place to say anything, but Miss Llewellyn has been a kind mistress to us all, and so much at home, and there, there, I don't understand these things, of course, and what's for his lordship's good is for the good of all of us; but there's not a servant in the hall but will be sorry that poor Miss Llewellyn is to be the sufferer. She had a kind heart, poor thing! if any lady had."

"No doubt, Warrender, no doubt. No one denies that she has good qualities, but they have been exercised greatly to the detriment of the earl. Young men will be young men, but there comes a time when such things must be put a stop to, and the time has come to stop this. You will have a legal mistress now—a lady of high birth, who will rule the house as it should be ruled, and the sooner you all forget that such a person as Miss Llewellyn existed the better!"

"Perhaps so, sir; but, meanwhile, what are we to do about this?"

"Do nothing at all! She will come back safe enough, you may depend upon that, and I will write to her to-morrow and tell her she must fix a day for leaving the house. I want to put the workmen in as soon as possible!"

"Very good, sir," said the butler, humbly, as he retired.

But the next thing Mr. Sterndale did was to read the account in his *Standard* of Nell's attempted suicide, and the coincidence naturally struck him. It did not flurry him in the least. It only made the thought flash through his mind what a fortunate thing it would be if it were true. He threw up his engagements for the day and took his way at once to the river police station to make all possible inquiries about the suicide. He did not hear much more than he had read; but the de-

scription of the woman's figure and dress, together with the time the accident occurred, all tallied so wonderfully with the fact of Nell's disappearance that the solicitor considered that he had every reason to hope it might have been herself who had thus most opportunely left the course clear for the happiness of Lord Ilfracombe and his bride. He seconded the efforts of the police to discover the truth, offering a handsome reward for the recovery of the body for identification, and when a week passed without its being found, or Miss Llewellyn returning to Grosvenor Square, he considered it his duty to institute a search amongst the property she had left behind to see if he could find any clue to the mystery. He told the servants that he did so in order to try and find an address to send them after her to; but they all knew by this time that something had happened to their late mistress, and that it was unlikely they should ever see her again, and, to do them justice, there was very sincere sorrow in the servants' hall at the idea. Mr. Sterndale would not allow anybody to assist him in his search. He ransacked poor Nell's chest of drawers and wardrobe by himself, turned over her dainty dresses and laced and embroidered stock of linen, opened all her workbags and boxes, her desk and blotting books, but found not a line to intimate she had entertained any idea of taking her own life.

"Pooh!" said Mr. Sterndale to himself, as he wiped the dew off his pale face, "I've been alarming myself for nothing! It's another lover the jade will be looking after, and not a watery grave! People in their right mind don't commit suicide, and she was as sane as I am. She has most probably sought shelter with Mr. Jack Portland or some other of the earl's swell friends. I know she was universally admired, and there will be a rush to the bidding as soon as it becomes known that she's put up for sale. However, these pretty things had better be put under lock and key till his lordship sends word how they are to be disposed of."

With that he came to the trinket-case which Nell had locked, and the key of which she had thrown out of the window.

"Holloa!" he thought, "what is this? Another work-box? No. I fancy it is the sort of article women keep their rings in. He gave her some beauties; but I don't suppose she has been such a fool as to leave them behind her."

He tried every key on a bunch he had found on the dressing-table, but none would fit; so, after a few attempts with another bunch from his own pocket, he took out his penknife and prised the lock open. The first thing he saw, laid on the top of the rings, brooches and bracelets, was Nell's pathetic message to her lover. "Good-bye, my only love—I cannot live without you!"

Mr. Sterndale read it, and shivered like an aspen leaf. Had Nell's ghost stood by his side, he could not have been more alarmed and nervous. "Good-bye, my only love—I cannot live without you!" he muttered to himself, while he trembled anew and glanced fearfully over his shoulder.

"So that must really have been her, and she has destroyed herself!" he thought. "I never really believed it would come to that—never. But it is Lord Ilfracombe's concern, not mine. It was he that drove her to it. I only acted on his orders, and I am bound to obey him, if he tells me to do a thing. But who would have thought it was in her. She must have felt his marriage very much. I didn't believe it was *in* women to care for any man to such an extent. But, perhaps, after all, it was only the loss of her position, illegal as it was, that turned her a bit crazy. It can't be pleasant after having enjoyed such a home as this to go back to work. Yet she wouldn't take the money he offered her—a noble compensation. She didn't seem to think even that enough. Well, well, it is incomprehensible. All the female sex are. To think that she should have preferred death—death! But what am I saying? It may not have been Miss Llewellyn after all. We have no proof. Doubtless, it was some unfortunate who had come to the end of her tether. But it would never do to tell Lord Ilfracombe my suspicions

—not yet, at all events, while he is on his wedding tour. Time enough when he has sobered down into a steady married man; then, perhaps, the news will come rather as a relief from all fear of meeting the object of his youthful indiscretion again. Yet, under the water —that beautiful face and figure! It seems too terrible. I must not think of it. There is no reason it should trouble me in the very slightest degree."

Mr. Sterndale rang the bell at this juncture, and ordered the lady's maid, who had waited upon Miss Llewellyn, to have all her belongings properly packed and locked away, until his lordship's pleasure concerning them should be known. But the trinket-box he put his own seal on, and carried off to place in his safe with other property belonging to his client. Yet Mr. Sterndale, try as he would, could not lock away with it all remembrance of the woman whom he firmly believed to be lying stark and dead beneath the water. His last interview with her kept on returning to his memory, and made him wretched. Her proud, flashing glances, her complete incredulity, and then her bowed head and subdued voice; her attitude of utter despair, her silence, and her final accusation that her lover's determination had been brought about through his influence. It had in a great measure been so; he knew it and had confessed as much to her. And so she had thought fit to end the matter. Very foolish, very rash,

and decidedly unpleasant to think of. So he would put the remembrance away from him at once and for ever. He informed the servants that Miss Llewellyn had returned home to her own people, and that her things were to remain there until they received further orders.

But none of them believed his story.

Meantime, Nell's complete disappearance, though apparently so mysterious, was in reality no mystery at all. Few things are, when once unravelled. Her precipitate fall into the water had brought her head downwards against the black side of an empty barge. The blow stunned her, and she was immediately sucked under, and borne by the running current some way lower down, where her body rose under the bows of a rowing boat, whose owners were just preparing to shelve her on the mud-bank which fringes either side the Thames. They were watermen of the lowest class, but honest and kindly-hearted.

"'Ullo, Jim," cried one of them, as Nell's body rose alongside, "what's that? By Gawd, if it isn't a woman's 'and. Here, give us an 'and, and lift 'er over. Quick, now, will yer?"

"It's a corpus," said Jim, shrinking back, as most people do from contact with the dead. "Let it be, Garge. Don't bring it over here. It's no concarn of ourn, and the perlice will find it soon enough. Row

on, man, do, and leave it be'ind. The look of it's quite enough for me."

"You're a nice 'un," retorted Garge, as he leant over the boat's side and seized hold of Nell Llewellyn. "What d'ye mean? Would yer leave a poor gal to drown, when maybe she ain't 'alf dead? Here, lend an 'and, will yer, or I'll knock yer bloomin' brains out with my oar."

Thus admonished, Jim joined his forces to those of his comrade, and by their united efforts they hauled the body into the boat. As soon as Garge saw her lovely face, which looked almost unearthly in its beauty, he became eager to take her home to his mother, to be succoured and taken care of.

"Now, Garge, mark what I'm sayin' of," argued Jim, "you 'ad better by 'alf take 'er to the station at once. 'Tain't no business of yourn, and you'll maybe get into trouble by taking it on yerself. She's committed suicide, there's where it is, and you should leave 'er to the perlice. I thought I 'eard a lot o' shoutin' from the bridge jest now, and it was after this 'ere, you may take yer oath of it. A bad lot all round, and will bring you into trouble. Now, be wise and jest drop 'er into the water agin. She's as dead as a door-nail!"

"That's yer opinion, is it?" said Garge, contemptuously, "and 'ow long 'ave you sot up as a doctor, eh? Now, jest do as I tell yer, or I'll know the reason why.

Lift 'er up by the petticoats, and I'll take 'er 'ead and shoulders. That's it, and now for mother's."

"Mother's" was the cellar floor of one of those tenements which abound on the river's side, and afford shelter for the "water-rats" who make their living on its bosom and its shores. The two young men had not far to carry their burden, but Nell was heavy, and they stumbled over the threshold of the house and down the cellar steps, and were glad enough to lay her dripping body on the floor.

"Hello, lads, what 'ave yer got there?" exclaimed an old woman, who came out of the Cimmerian darkness, carrying a tallow candle stuck in the neck of an old beer bottle. "Mercy me! not a corpus, surely? Why, what on airth made you bring it in 'ere? A gal too, and a purty one! Garge, tell me the rights of it all, or I'll 'ave none of 'er 'ere."

"Theer ain't no rights, nor wrongs neither, mother," replied Garge, "only this body floated under our bows, and I don't believe the pore gal is dead, and no one knows better 'ow to rewive a corpus than you do, so we carried 'er 'ome to you at onst. She's a lady, and maybe a rich 'un, and you may git a good reward for rewivin' 'er, from er' friends. So, wheer's the blankets and the 'ot water? Yer've got some bilin' to make our tea, I know, and I'll go and call Mrs. Benson to 'elp yer with 'er.'

"That's it, my lad," replied the mother, who, though most people would have designated her as a filthy hag, was a kind-hearted old body. "And Jim and you must make yerself scarce for to-night, for I can't do nothin' till you two are gone. Take Garge 'ome with you, Jim, and if this gal's too fur gone to do anything with, yer must give notice fust thing in the mornin' to the perlice, for I can't keep a dead body 'ere longer than the mornin'."

"I don't believe as she is dead," said Garge, who had been bending over Nell's body and listening with his ear upon her chest. "Yer can't deceive me much, yer know, mother, for I've seen too many on 'em. 'Owever, I'll fetch Mrs. Benson at once, and I'll look in larst thing to 'ear your news."

The old woman had lighted a fire by this time and dragged the body in front of it, and as soon as her neighbour joined her, they commenced rubbing and thumping and chafing the limbs of the apparently drowned girl, and though their remedies were rough, they were successful, for after some fifteen or twenty minutes of this treatment, Nell sighed deeply, gasped for breath, and finally opened her eyes and looked at her good Samaritans. She attempted to rise, but they held her down with their strong hands, and continued their original massage treatment with redoubled energy. At last their patient ejaculated, "Where am I?" Which

is invariably the first question asked by a woman recovering from a fit of unconsciousness.

"Wheer are ye, honey?" repeated Garge's mother. "Why, afore the fire, of course, and on the floor, which is rather a hard bed I 'spect for one like you, but we'd no better place to lay you on."

"But how did I come here?" said Nell, and then, as remembrance poured back upon her, she moaned,—"Ah, the water, I remember, the water!" and closed her eyes again. But as her strength returned more fully she started to a sitting posture and cried fiercely,—"Who brought me here? Who told you to do this? What right have you to interfere with me? I thought it would have been all over by this time, and now it has all to come over again—all over again!"

"Oh, no, it won't, honey," replied her companion. "You won't go to do anythink so foolish agin. Why, you've as near lost yer life as possible. It wore jest touch and go with yer, wern't it, Mrs. Benson?"

"That it wure, indeed," said that worthy. "And you're too fine a gal to throw yerself away in sich a fashion, yer should leave that sorter thing to the poor gutter drabs. My Garge, 'e found yer and brought yer 'ome, and I've no doubt you've fine friends as will be real glad to git yer back agin!"

"No, I haven't. I have no friends," said Nell.

"What, no father nor mother?" exclaimed her hostess. "Pore gal! But I daresay you've got a young man, or if yer aven't yer'll git one. You're much too fine a gal to go beggin'. And whatever made yer think of makin' an 'ole in the water puzzles me. Now, you jest wrap this blanket right round yer, and drink this posset. 'Tain't to yer taste, p'r'aps, but 'tis the best thing out to warm your blood arter a soakin'."

She held a filthy mug, filled with a filthy but steaming decoction of treacle and beer to Nell's lips as she spoke, and the girl opened her mouth mechanically and took it all in. Then, sickened of life and everything in it, including the treacle posset, she rolled herself in the blanket, and with her face towards the fire, sank into a sleep of exhaustion and despair. Garge, true to his trust, sneaked round at about midnight to ask what news there was of his patient, and was delighted in his rough way to hear that she had recovered.

"She *is* a beauty!" he exclaimed, as he gazed at her pale face, on which the light of the burning logs was playing, "a rale rare 'un, that's wot I thinks! Don't yer let that fire out afore the morning, mother, for she'll feel cold when she wakes though it is so 'ot; and now, wasn't I wise to bring 'er 'ome, 'stead of the perlice station. I bet yer'll make a pot of money over this, mother, 'stead of the coppers takin' it. Well, good-

night, and don't yer let 'er go till I've seen 'er agin in the mornin'."

But long before Garge's mother had roused herself again her visitor had gone. The old woman was tired with the exertions she had made on her behalf, and had taken just the smallest drop of gin to quiet her own perturbed feelings before she turned into bed. But Nell had soon started up from her short, feverish slumber, and lain before the fire with wide-open eyes, staring at the flickering flames, and wondering what the next move of her unhappy life would be. The old woman's words rang in her ears. "What, no father nor mother? Pore gal!" How ungrateful it had been of her not to remember that she had both father and mother, before she took the fatal plunge which might have separated her from them for ever. Already she felt ashamed of her impetuosity and despair. She resolved, as she lay there, that she would go back to her parents and her home. She would return to Panty-cuckoo Farm, and try to forget that she had ever left it. It would be sweet, she thought feverishly, to smell the woodbine and the roses again—it would cool her brain to lie down on the dewy grass and press her hot cheek to the wild thyme and the daisies that bedecked it. Her mind was still in a bewildered and chaotic state, or Nell would have dreaded the questions that awaited her at Panty-cuckoo Farm; but, luckily, it led her in

the right direction. A sudden horror of the publicity she had courted by her rash act took possession of her, and she panted to get up and away before the good Samaritans who had brought her back to life were able to gain any particulars regarding her name or former condition. With this desire strong upon her, she raised herself, weak as she was, and glanced at her surroundings. The logs still burnt brightly on the hearth; the old woman snored mellifluously on a pallet in the corner—for the rest, she was alone. The clothes they had taken off her were hung out to dry on a chair. Nell felt them. They were fit to put on again. She raised herself gently and resumed her attire, which consisted of a dark print dress, a black mantle and a large straw hat, which had not become detached from her head when she went under the water. But she could not go without leaving some token of her gratitude behind her. She felt in the pocket of her dress. Her purse was still there, and it contained several pounds. Nell took out two, and, wrapping them in a piece of paper, placed them in a conspicuous position on the chair. Then she crept softly across the cellar, and, climbing the stone steps that led to the entrance of the tenement, found, to her relief, that the outer door was ajar. There were too many people in the house, and they were of too lawless a kind for anyone to notice her departure, or think it singular if they had.

The dawn was just breaking as Nell stepped into the open air; and, though she knew she must look very forlorn, the few wayfarers whom she encountered looked more forlorn still, and no one molested or questioned her. She found she had sufficient money to take her straight away to Usk had she so desired, but she dared not present herself before her people in her present draggled state. So she went into a little lodging in the Waterloo Road, where she was confident that no one would recognise her; and, after staying two nights there, she had so far remedied the state of her wardrobe as to feel able to go back to Wales without exciting too much inquiry. But still, Nell was far from being in her normal condition, and moved and spoke like a woman in a dream.

CHAPTER VII.

When visitors went for the first time to Usk, and their hostesses wished to imbue them with a sense of the beauties of the place, they generally said, "Oh, let us drive to Panty-cuckoo Farm! You must not leave Usk without seeing Panty-cuckoo Farm! The sweetest, most picturesque old place you ever set eyes on; quite a leaf out of the past ages. Sir Archibald Bowmant says it dates from the fourteenth century. And Mrs. Llewellyn is such a quaint old woman. You don't meet with such people in her class now-a-days. We always have our eggs and butter and pork from her, and she will give us a lovely cup of tea, with the best of cream. You must come!"

And the visitors usually agreed that their hostess's description of the farm and its inhabitants had not been exaggerated, and came back delighted with what they had seen. They drove for some way out of the town of Usk, along an undulating road, almost overshadowed by the meeting branches of lofty elm and oak trees, and fringed by hedges, fragrant at this time of year with meadow-sweet and climbing travellers' joy

and wild roses. A sudden curve in the road brought them to a wide, white gate, which led by a most precipitous pathway to the farmhouse. On either side this pathway were placed large, whitewashed blocks of stone, to enable the wheels of cart or carriage to keep from rolling into the little trench by which it was bordered. On one side the trench or ditch was a large orchard stretching away beyond where the eye could reach, and well stocked with apple, and pear, and cherry trees. Beneath their shade were numerous coops of hens, with their broods of little white chickens scattered round them like fallen blossoms of May; and flying like the wind at their mother's call, as the black porkers, for which Farmer Llewellyn was famous, came grunting behind each other, eating the windfalls, and turning the refuse over with their ringed snouts. Opposite to the orchard was a plot of grass, which ran along the side of the house, and was decorated by garden beds, filled with carnations, lilies, mignonette, geraniums, and such common sweet-smelling flowers. This part of the house had been built subsequently to the original portion, and had a side entrance of its own beneath a little porch covered with honeysuckle and clematis. It consisted of only two rooms, and as the farmer's family had never consisted of more than his two daughters, Mrs. Llewellyn had been in the habit of letting these rooms to casual visitors to Usk

who required a lodging for a few nights. Especially had they been at the service of Sir Archibald Bowmant during the shooting season, as he often had more bachelors staying at Usk Hall than he could accommodate, and knew he could trust their comfort with safety to his old tenant, Mrs. Llewellyn. Sir Archibald's woods skirted the road opposite Panty-cuckoo Farm, so that his guests had only to cross the park to gain their nightly lodgings, and so much trust had Mrs. Llewellyn in her landlord's visitors, that when her rooms were occupied she let the young gentlemen come and go as they liked, without holding any inquisitorial espionage over their proceedings. But this wing of the house had nothing to do with the farm itself; visitors to the Llewellyns drove straight down the precipitous drive till they turned round at the foot to face the front of the farm, which consisted of a low, rambling building, of dark red brick, with a thatched roof. Before it was a prim, old-fashioned strip of ground, guarded by a row of eight box trees, cut in the shape of peacocks. On the walls of the house were a magnificent magnolia, and some plants of the crimson pyrus japonica, which gave it a wonderfully warm appearance. As soon as carriage wheels were heard, Mrs. Llewellyn usually opened the door and came down the bricked path to welcome her visitors. She would never hear of their leaving before they had partaken of her tea

and cream. The parlour was entered immediately from the front door, and was wainscoted half-way to the ceiling with rich, dark oak, of which the ceiling itself was formed, divided into squares, with a plain but different device carved in each. The windows of this room were lattice-paned, and contained window-seats in the shape of oak settles, which opened like boxes to store the house linen. The fireplace was a mass of carving, without any mantelpiece, but a wide range below for logs, and iron dogs on either side to support them. Mrs. Llewellyn much prided herself on this parlour. She knew the value and beauty of it as much as anybody, though she sometimes grumbled at its inconveniences, and said she would exchange it any day for a modern-built house. It opened into a wide, bricked passage, or ante-room, where the farmer hung his coats, and a table stood piled with the prayer-books of the family, ready to be distributed when church time came round again. Nell's still lay amongst them. Her mother often sighed when she accidentally touched it; sometimes she had been seen to raise it furtively to her lips before she laid it down again. It was outside this ante-chamber that the two rooms had been added that were occasionally let as lodgings, and the door, which originally had opened from it to the garden, now led to them. Visitors passed through it to the dairy, where the shelves

were piled with the year's cheeses, and marble slabs held the mounds of fresh butter, waiting to be made into rolls or pats by the rosy-cheeked dairy-maid, and the pans were standing covered with thick, rich, yellow cream, such as Mrs. Llewellyn was famed for all the country side. This dairy led across a covered-in yard to the baking-house, and in the centre of the yard stood a well, centuries old, with an Elizabethan cross surmounting its quaint, arched roof. In fact, there was no end to the curiosities in Panty-cuckoo Farm, and ladies with purses full of money had tried over and over again to induce the farmer and his wife to part with some of their bits of blue china, and yellow lace, and old wood carving, that they might carry them back to adorn their drawing-rooms in Kensington or Westminster. But the Llewellyns were steadfast in their courteous refusals. No amount of coin would have made them sell the little relics that adorned their rooms, and had come down to them from unknown ancestors. They would as soon have sold their own flesh and blood. There was something about these people above the general run of farmers and their wives. Countrified they necessarily were, but not vulgar nor common, and even in the lowly position they occupied they managed to infuse so much dignity that even their superiors recognised it, and met it with respect. It was rather an important occasion with Mrs. Llewellyn when

we are first introduced to her, for her daughter Hetty was coming, with her husband and several of her new relations, to take tea at Panty-cuckoo Farm for the first time since her return from London, and her mother was eager to do her honour. Mrs. Llewellyn had evidently been a very handsome woman in her youth, and as she moved about her rooms, clad in her gala dress of grey merino, with a white muslin kerchief pinned across her bosom, and a large cap covering her iron-grey hair, it was evident from whom poor Nell had inherited the beauty that had proved such a misfortune to her. Tall and upright, with a fresh colour in her face, and her hazel eyes beaming with expectation and pride in her table, Mrs. Llewellyn looked quite a picture as she moved about her room and arranged the feast for her expected guests. The brown bread and fresh butter, the cream and new-laid eggs, the honeycomb and home-made preserves, the cut ham and water-cresses, made up a picture of beauty that any housewife might have been proud of; and Farmer Llewellyn chuckled with satisfaction as he sat in one of the window settles and watched the tempting display.

"That's right, wife!" he exclaimed, "stuff them well. You'll get more friends through their stomachs than you'll ever do through their hearts."

"Oh, Griffith," she replied, "that's a poor way of looking at it; not but what a good meal's a good thing

after all. But I shouldn't like the Owens to go home and say they hadn't had enough to eat. And it's our Hetty's first visit, too," and here Mrs. Llewellyn heaved a deep sigh.

"What's up now?" said her husband. "You can't expect to keep your girls with you for ever, you know, Mary; and William Owen is as good a lad as ever stepped in shoe leather, and will keep our Hetty well. We might have gone further and fared worse for a husband for her."

"Oh, yes, I know that, father, and I'm quite satisfied. I like Will myself. He's like a son to me. No, I wasn't thinking of Hetty at all, but of our Nell. I've been thinking of her a deal lately. I don't seem as if I could get her out of my mind. It seems so hard that Hetty should see her and not I. Five years is a long time not to set eyes on one's own child. Sometimes the longing for a sight of her is so bad, I feel as if I must go up to London, if I walk every step of the way."

"Oh, that's the way the crow flies," chuckled the farmer. "You're jealous of your daughter, are you? You'll be worrying me to take you a second honeymoon tour next. *You* want to see London town, now."

"Oh, Grif, how I wish I could, not for the sake of the sights, you know. The only sight I want is that of my girl. If I had ever thought that servants were such

slaves up there, I'd have cut her legs off before she should have left Usk. My pretty Nell! If she goes and marries away from me, where, perhaps, I may never have a glimpse of her, or her little ones, it would drive me crazy."

"Come now, mistress!" exclaimed the farmer in his old-fashioned way, "you must just put off your fit of the mopes for a bit, for here are all your guests coming down the dell in their wedding bravery. Here's Hetty, blooming like a rose, and trying to look as if nobody had ever been married in the world before her. How are you, my little bride, and how are you, William, my lad? Mind the step, Mrs. Owen, ma'am, for it's broken at the edge. (You mind me to have that set right, Mary!) Well, farmer, you look famous, and so does Hugh here. I went to hear you spouting last Sunday night, lad, and you have the gift of the gab and no mistake. You made my wife, here, cry. You hit so neatly on her favourite sins."

"Oh, no, Hugh, you won't believe that, I hope," cried Mrs. Llewellyn, blushing like one of her daughters. "Father's only chaffing you. It was looking at you and thinking of my Nell that made me cry. The sight of you brings back the time so plain, when you and she used to play and quarrel all day long. You were main sweet on her then, and used to call her your little wife. Aye, but how glad I should be if she had stayed at

home like my Hetty and married in Usk. My heart is very sore sometimes, when I think of her so far away and I not near her, in sickness or trouble. Sometimes I fancy I'll never set eyes on her again."

"Oh, mother, you musn't say that," interposed Hetty, "for Nell promised Will and me that as soon as ever she got a holiday she should come back to see us all at Usk. But Lord Ilfracombe has gone abroad and left her in charge of everything, so she can't possibly leave the house just yet."

"In charge of everything? Doesn't that seem strange?" said the mother, with a proud smile. "My careless Nell! Lord Ilfracombe must think a deal of her to trust her like that."

"Oh, he *does* think a deal of her, mother. Anyone could see that. He must give her heaps and heaps of money. You should have seen how she was dressed. Oh, lovely! And her hair was done just like a lady's, and when we had tea with her, the footman waited on us as if we had been the owners of the house, and he brought the tea up on a beautiful silver tray and we sat in the best room, and it was like fairyland, wasn't it, Will?"

"I hope Nell did not do anything she ought not," remarked the prudent mother. "I hope she won't get into a scrape for this."

"Just what I said," laughed Hetty; "but Nell said

Lord Ilfracombe is so good-natured that if he came back, sudden-like, he'd only smile and say,—"That's right, go on and enjoy yourselves." And a gentleman who came and spoke to us when we were at the play, and sent us the most beautiful ices, talked as if Lord Ilfracombe thought all the world of our Nell; didn't he, Will?"

"Aye, that's so," acquiesced Will.

The farmer and his wife, all unconscious of wrong, rather bridled at this information, but Hugh Owen looked grave and his dark eyes seemed to question eagerly for more. This last was rather a remarkable young man, both outwardly and inwardly. From a child he had been a student, and now might almost have been termed a scholar, though a self-taught one. His face was so earnest and introspective in its expression, that it made one forget that his features were not strictly handsome. His sallow complexion, dark grey eyes, large nose, and thin-lipped mouth, were far less attractive than his younger brother's fair skin and Saxon characteristics, but no one looked twice at William Owen, while few could forget Hugh. His tall, gaunt frame, nervous hands, and straight hair, all told the same tale, of a man who had used his intellect more than his muscle, and cared for his brains before his body. From a child Hugh Owen had felt the power within him, and had delighted to mount a rostrum

of his own erection, and hold forth to his playmates on any subject which occupied his mind at the moment. As he grew into a lad, he scorned farm work and only wanted to be left alone with his book and studies, until his father, not knowing what to make of him, and fearing he was 'daft,' consulted the minister about him. This minister was a Wesleyan, an earnest, devout man, though rather unlearned, who saw in young Owen's proclivities only a 'call' to the ministry, and persuaded his proud parents to send him to school at Newport, whence, after several years of study, he returned to Usk and was elected to take part in the services of the dissenting chapel. But, added to his ministerial duties, Hugh Owen had taken to preaching at the corners of the bye-roads and on the common, or wherever he could collect an audience or obtain a hearing. Some people said he was mad, others that he was a saint. His parents and friends thought the latter, but he was only a young enthusiast, whose whole heart and soul and mind were filled with one idea, with which he panted to imbue the whole world. As Hetty chattered about Nell, and what she had done and said in London, Hugh's eyes became strained and anxious, and his attention was wholly enchained.

"I never heard before," he said presently, "of maid-servants drinking their tea off silver trays and sitting in the best rooms."

"That's only because you don't know anything of London life," cried Hetty, tossing her little head. "Nell says it's quite different from the country, and anyone can see so for themselves. Why, the gentleman who met us at the play (I forget his name) spoke to our Nell just as if she was a lady, and took off his hat when we drove away in the cab, as if we were duchesses. Oh, it was lovely; I wish we lived in London always."

"You've had quite enough of town life for awhile, my lass," observed her father. "Your head would be turned with much more. You'll be expecting mother to give you your tea on a silver tray next."

"Oh, never mind the tray!" exclaimed Mrs. Llewellyn impatiently. "If it had been of gold, it couldn't have been too good for our Nell. But tell me how she looked, Hetty. Is she quite well and bonny? Does she seem happy in this grand place? Does she have plenty to eat, or did you see any signs of fretting after the old home in my girl? for if so, I'll have her back, aye, if she was housekeeper to twenty lords, or the Prince of Wales himself; God bless him."

"Oh, no, mother, don't you worry. Nell is as happy as happy can be. I'm sure of that. Of course she'd like to come home for a bit. I could see the tears in her eyes when she spoke of you and father—"

"God bless my lass," cried her mother, interrupting

her. "When you say that, I feel as if I couldn't rest another night without she came home. What a pretty thing she was at sixteen—you remember her, Hugh, with her bright hair streaming down her back, and her eyes dancing with fun and mischief. The prettiest lass in all Usk, or for miles around. Everybody said so. Didn't they, Hugh?"

"Yes, Mrs. Llewellyn, you are right; they did so," replied Hugh.

"A bit wild and wilful like, but no harm in her," continued the mother. "And might have married well if she had stayed here. Well, I miss her sorely, and always have done so, and shall all the more now that Hetty's gone and got married. I've never seen the girl that was a patch on my Nell."

"Now, mother, suppose you stop your bemoanings and pass round the griddle cakes," interposed the farmer. "I don't call it much of a compliment to William and Hetty here, for you to amuse us with praises of our Nell. You heard what Het says, that she means to come to Usk the first holiday she gets, and what do you want more? She might have married and gone out to America, and then you'd have had to do without her altogether."

"God forbid," said his wife, as she busied herself with looking after her guests.

They were soon started on another subject. Farmer

Owen had had an uncommonly heavy crop of hay that year, and as most husbandmen had lost theirs through the drought, his good luck, and the way he had secured it, formed a grand subject of conversation between him and Mr. Llewellyn. The little bride had not half exhausted her tales of the wonders she had been introduced to in London, and they were all in full chatter, asking questions and answering them, when Hugh Owen said suddenly,—

"Who's this coming down the glen?"

All eyes were instantly directed towards the steep hill which led to the farmhouse, and down which a tall female figure was walking with rather slow footsteps.

"It's a lady," quoth Mrs. Llewellyn, wonderingly. "Whoever can she be? It's a stranger. I've never seen her in Usk before."

The woman was dressed very plainly, but she seemed to wear her clothes differently from the common herd. She raised her head every now and then, expectantly, and yet timidly, and during one of these movements Hetty caught sight of her face.

"Mother," she screamed, as she jumped up from her seat, "it's our Nell!"

"*Nell!*" echoed her mother. "Never!"

But Hetty had already left the house, and, meeting the advancing figure, had thrown both her arms around it.

"Nell! Nell!" she cried. "Oh, Nell, we were just talking of you. What joy it is to welcome you home."

She seized her two hands and dragged her along till she stood in the midst of the astonished group.

"Mother, can't you see? It *is* our Nell. She has got her holiday at last, and has come to spend it with us."

"Yes, at last!" exclaimed Nell, as she fell into her mother's opened arms. "Mother, I've come home, and I never mean to leave you again."

At first in their delight and surprise at her unexpected appearance, they could do nothing but kiss her and gaze at her; but when their excitement had somewhat subsided, all their anxiety was to hear why Nell had not given them warning of her return, and when she was going back to her situation again.

"Going back," she echoed, with a shrill laugh; "I'm *never* going back at all, mother. I'm going to live with you now, and help you as Hetty used to do. I shall never go back unless you tell me you don't want me."

Her mother's only answer was to cry over her, and say how much she had longed for her return, but Hetty was gazing at her sister with amazement. What had happened to her since they had parted in London? Nell was as pale as death; she almost looked thinner

than when she had seen her last; her eyes were abnormally large, and there were dark lines under them. Above all, there was a harsh shrillness in her voice which she had not noticed before.

"My darling lass," said Mrs. Llewellyn, "if you wait till your father and I bid you go, you'll stay here for ever. But have you been ailing, Nell? Hetty, here, said you were looking so well. But you don't look so to me. London air can't agree with you to leave your cheeks so white and your lips so pale. Are you sure you are quite well, my lass? If not, your mother will nurse you till you are. She hasn't lost much of her good looks, has she, Hugh?"

"Who's that?" said Nell, turning round. "What, my old sweetheart? How are you, Hugh? How are you, Mrs. Owen? I didn't know mother had a tea-party, you see, or I would have come to-morrow instead of to-day."

Then she suddenly burst into a wild fit of laughter.

"Isn't it funny to be sitting amongst you all again? I feel as if I had never left home. Ah, it's a long time ago, isn't it, mother? a long, weary while. But it's over now, thank God, over for good and all. I mean to stay at dear Panty-cuckoo Farm for the rest of my life, and look after the dairy and the baking and the washing, and let dear mother sit down and rest. You'll think I've forgotten all about it, mother, but you'll find

you're mistaken. In two or three days, I shall have forgotten that I ever left Usk, and be as good a farm maid as ever."

"Oh, Nell, my girl, you know how glad I shall be to have your help, but what made you think of coming home to give it me? I'm fairly puzzled what put it in your mind. Hetty understood you weren't likely to get leave for a long time to come."

"What put it in my mind?" repeated Nell, with a repetition of her shrill laugh. "Why, Hetty to be sure. She drew such a pitiful picture of mother, left without a daughter to help in her dairy work, that I couldn't resist the temptation to run home and give you all a surprise. Aren't you glad to see me, father? Your bonnie girl, as you used to call me. I remember you were vexed enough when I decided to go out to service. You threatened to lock me up on bread and water."

"Glad to have you back, lass? Aye, more glad than I can say. But I confess you've taken us rather by surprise. What did your master say to your leaving him in such a hurry? Wasn't he a bit put out? Hetty said he had left you in charge of the house."

Nell flushed suddenly like a scarlet rose.

"So he did, but he's altered his plans, and isn't coming home now for a long time. And so, as a servant isn't a slave, I've given him warning. He told me in his last letter I could leave London when I liked,

and I liked to do so now—now, at once. I couldn't stay. I wanted my mother. I wanted Panty-cuckoo Farm. I wanted you all—and rest, rest!"

She uttered the last words almost like a sigh. As they escaped her lips she turned and caught Hugh Owen's eyes fixed on her. Nell threw back her head defiantly, as though she dared him to guess at anything she thought or felt.

"Rest," said Mrs. Llewellyn sympathisingly, "of course you want rest, my poor child, and you shall have it here. They've worked you too hard in London. I was afraid of it when I heard what Hetty had to tell me about you. But you shall rest now, my bonnie lass, you shall rest now!"

CHAPTER VIII.

FARMER OWEN was considered quite a proficient on the violin in Usk, and as soon as the party, with the exception of Nell, had discussed the good things provided for them, he drew his instrument from its green baize case, and proceeded to play a plaintive ballad. His friends listened with respectful attention, but the melancholy strain was too much for Nell's over-strung nerves.

"Oh, give us something livelier, Mr. Owen, do," she cried, jumping up from her seat. 'Robin Adair' is enough to give one the blues! Let's have a dance instead. Here, Hetty, help me to wheel the table into the corner, and we'll stand up for a good old country reel. Did I tell you that Lord Ilfracombe is married? We'll dance in honour of the wedding."

"The earl *married!*" exclaimed her sister, standing still in her amazement. "Why, Nell, when did that happen? Wasn't it very sudden? You said nothing about it when we were in London."

"Oh, it seems he had been thinking of it for a long while, but gentlemen don't tell their secrets to their

servants, you know. They take the responsibility and trouble and expense, and all the servants have to do is to smile and look happy and dance at the wedding. Come along, Hugh," she continued, pulling that young man by the arm, "you shall be my partner. Hetty and Will must open the ball, of course, but we'll show them how to dance at it. Up the middle and down again; hands across and turn your partner; as we used in the days gone by. That's right, Mr. Owen, give us 'Yankee Doodle.' That's the tune to make one's feet fly. Now, Hugh!"

She was dragging at his arm as hard as she could to make him rise from his seat, and she looked so beautiful, with her flushed cheeks and disordered hair, that he found it hard to resist her.

"But Nell—Miss Llewellyn," he remonstrated shyly, "you forget—I cannot—it would not be seemly for me in my character as minister to dance. I have not done such a thing for years, and I shall never do it again."

Nell regarded him for a moment with grave surprise, and then, with a hard laugh, flung his hand away from her.

"You stupid! Do you really mean it? So much the worse for you. I shall dance with my dad, then. *He* won't refuse me; will you, daddy? You'll have a fling with your girl in honour of her master's wedding."

And she pulled the old farmer into the middle of

the room as she spoke, whilst he, well pleased at her audacity and good spirits, allowed himself to be turned and twisted at the will of his handsome daughter, who flew up and down the dance as if she had never had a care or a sorrow in her life. Hugh Owen sat by and watched her with troubled anxious eyes. He almost regretted at that moment that his chosen vocation forbade his joining in the festivities before him. He would have given a good deal to have had his arm round his old sweetheart's waist and danced hand in hand with her to the merry tune his father played with so much spirit. Mrs. Llewellyn, though still on hospitable cares intent, and engaged at the sideboard with currant and orange wine and queen cakes, was delighted to watch the antics of her daughters as they beat time with their flying feet to the strains of "Yankee Doodle," but her pleasure was somewhat tempered by anxiety lest Nell should fatigue herself too much after her long journey.

"There, there, my lass," she remonstrated, as she heard her urging Mr. Owen to play them another country dance, "you mustn't forget you have come off a tiring journey, and haven't eaten a morsel since you entered the house. You ought to be in bed, my Nell, instead of cutting such jinks. I shall have you ill to-morrow if you don't take care."

"I'll? Tired?" cried Nell. "Fiddle-de-dee, mother; no such thing. I shall be up at cock-crow to see after

the hens and chickens, or to have a ride on Kitty. How's the dear old mare, father?"

"Old Kitty, my lass?" replied Farmer Llewellyn. "Why, she's been dead the best part of a year. Surely your mother or Hetty told you that. You must have forgotten it, Nell."

A shade came over the young woman's laughing face.

"Old Kitty dead," she murmured in a subdued voice. "Dear old Kitty, that I used to ride astride when I was in short frocks. Oh, I *am* sorry. No one told me, I am sure. I couldn't have forgotten it. I loved old Kitty so well. She was part of home to me."

"Ah, my girl," said her father, "if the old mare is the only thing you've forgotten in Usk you've no call to blame yourself. I've been sometimes afraid that your grand ways and friends up in London might make you too fine for Panty-cuckoo Farm, but it don't seem so now. They've made a lady of you, Nell; but not too fine a one to forget the old folks at home. Thank God for that! You won't look down on your mother and sister because their ways of speaking are not so grand as what you've been accustomed to hear, nor despise them and the old farm if we can't give you as many luxuries as you get in your fine place in London."

"Despise them? Look down on them?" echoed Nell. "Oh, dad, you don't know what you are talking of. It is London that I hate and despise and look down upon. It is the people there who are false and cold and cruel. I want to forget it all. I want to forget I ever went there. I hate service. It is degrading and despicable, and oh! so lonely to be far away from home and mother and you. When I heard Hetty speak of you both I could stand it no longer. I was obliged to come straight back to you all again."

"And now we've got you we sha'n't let you go again in a hurry, Nell. You must stay and be the comfort of our old age. But you had better be handing round your wine and cakes, wife. It's getting on for ten o'clock, and our friends here have a matter of a couple of miles to walk to Dale Farm. I'll have the mare put in the cart in two minutes, farmer, and drive you home myself, if you'll only say the word."

"Not for us, sir," replied Owen. "My missus here likes a walk, and as for the young 'uns it does them good. Come on, Hetty. You'll be main proud and happy now you've got your sister back again, and I expect we shall have a job to keep you at Dale Farm. There'll be a message or a summat for Panty-cuckoo most days of the week, *I* know.

Meanwhile Hugh Owen had drawn near to Nell Llewellyn.

"I am glad to find you haven't quite forgotten me," he said, as he held her hand, "and I hope you will let me come sometimes and pay you a visit at Panty-cuckoo Farm as I used to do."

"Why, surely. You are often here with Hetty and Will I suppose?"

"Not often. My duties take up so much of my time. But sometimes I have an hour to spare in the evening, and I shouldn't like to let our friendship drop now it has been renewed. Are you fond of reading?"

"It depends on what I have to read. I'm not over fond of sermons, such as you used to give me in the old days, Hugh."

The young man coloured.

"Used I to give you sermons? It must have been very presumptuous of me. I will promise to give you no more—at least in private. But I have a very fair library of books, and they are all at your service if you should require them."

"Thank you. I will tell you if I should want something to amuse me, but for the present I shall be too busy helping mother, and getting my hand in for dairy and laundry work."

"You will never come back to that now. You have grown above it," replied the young man, gazing admiringly at her smooth, pallid complexion and white hands.

"What do you know about it?" said Nell curtly. "Don't bet against me, Hugh, or you'll lose your money. Good-night. Mother says you preach out in the fields, and some day I'll come with her to hear you, just for old times' sake. But if you are very prosy I shall walk straight home again, so I give you fair warning."

"Only tell me when you're coming, and I'll not be prosy," cried Hugh eagerly.

The rest of the party had put on their wraps by this time, and were prepared to start. Hetty wound her arm around her sister's waist, and they walked together up the steep incline to the wide, white gate, where the Dale Farm people joined forces and set out for home. Nell stood in the moonlight, gazing after them till they had disappeared round the turning of the road, and then retraced her footsteps. As she found herself alone in the white moonlight, with only the solitude and the silence, all the forced gaiety she had maintained throughout the evening deserted her, and she staggered and caught at the slender trunk of an apple-tree to prevent herself from falling, "O, my God, my God," she prayed, "how shall I bear it?"

Her eyes were strained to the starry sky; her face looked ghastly in the moonlight; her frame trembled as if she could not support herself. She might have remained thus for an indefinite time had she not been

roused by the sound of her mother's voice calling her from the farm-house door.

"Nell, my lass, where are you? Come in quick; there's a dear. You will catch a chill standing out there with nought on."

She was hungering, poor mother, to take her stray lamb back to her bosom, and have her all to herself. She had seen with concern that Nell had neither eaten nor drank since she had returned home, and she feared the effect of the excitement on her health.

At the sound of her appeal, Nell came slowly down the dell again, and entered the sitting-room.

"Now, my lass," said Mrs. Llewellyn, "you must just sit down here on the old settle, and eat and drink a bit. I'm afraid our fare seems different from what you've been accustomed to in London; but you'll soon relish it again. London folk haven't the appetites of country people, so they're obliged to coax their stomachs; but you'll take this junket, I'm sure, and a glass of wine, just to please your mother."

And as she sat her on the settle, and pressed the dainties on her, Nell felt constrained to eat them, though they tasted like leather in her mouth.

Now that the excitement was over, her white, strained looks and hollow cheeks went to her mother's heart.

"Aye," she said complainingly, "but you are thin

and pale, my lass. I haven't had time to see you rightly till now. Why, you're shaking like an aspen. Have you been ill, Nell, or is this the effects of London?"

"No, indeed, I am not ill," returned Nell, with quivering lips, "only rather tired after my journey, and maybe the excitement of coming to my dear old home. I think I had better go to bed now. I have taken you terribly by surprise; but I'm sure you'll find a bed for me somewhere, mother."

"Find a bed for you, darling?" said Mrs. Llewellyn. "Why, your father and I would turn out of our own sooner than you shouldn't lie easy the first night you come back to us. But your own room is ready for you, Nell. No one has slept in it since you went away,—not even Hetty—and Martha has been setting it to rights for you all the evening. Will you come to it now, my dear, for you look ready to drop with fatigue?"

Nell was only too glad to accept the offer, and Mrs. Llewellyn conducted her upstairs, and undressed her, and put her to bed with all the tenderness and solicitude she had shown in performing the same offices when she was a little child.

Is there ever a time when a mother ceases to regard the creature she has brought into the world as other than a child? He may be a bearded man, the father

of a family, or the hero of a nation—or she may be a weary and harassed woman, full of care and anxieties; but to their mothers they are always children, to be looked after, loved and cared for. There is no position in which maternal love shines more brightly than when the infant she has nourished at her breast is returned upon her hands, a man or woman, perhaps in middle age, but weak, ill, helpless, and requiring a mother's care. She may mourn over the necessity, but how she revels in having her baby back again, as dependant on her as when he or she had not yet begun to walk! Who would nurse him and watch him, and know neither fatigue or privation for his sake as she can do? Happy those who have a mother to fly to when they are ill or miserable!

Mrs. Llewellyn smoothed out Nell's luxuriant braids of hair, revelling in their beauty, and put her own best night-dress on her, and laid her between the snow-white sheets as if she had been four years old, instead of four-and-twenty. But this latter necessity brought an awkward question in its train. Where had Nell left her own things? Had she brought them with her and deposited them at the railway station, or were they to follow her from London?

At first the girl was silent. She did not know what to say. The awkwardness of the situation had not struck her before. Her face blanched still paler, and

her mother saw she had introduced an embarrassing subject. Nell had turned round on her pillow and hidden her face from view.

"Never mind thinking about it to-night, my dear," said Mrs. Llewellyn kindly; "you're too tired. Try and go to sleep, Nell, and you can tell me everything to-morrow."

"Yes," murmured Nell, with her face still hidden, "you shall hear all about it to-morrow. I have no box with me, mother. I—I got into a little scrape—debt, you know—and I had to part with my clothes. You won't be angry with me?"

"Angry with you, my dear? Don't get any foolish notions like that into your head. If you sold your things to pay your debt, it was an honest thing to do, and we'd be the last, father and I, to blame you for it. And we've got enough money in the stocking to buy you more. So set your mind at rest about that, my girl, and now go to sleep and wake bright to-morrow."

She kissed her daughter as she spoke, and went back to the parlour to rejoin her husband. But the first words the farmer uttered fanned the little breath of suspicion which she had entertained about Nell's sudden coming home into a flame.

"Well, how is she?" demanded Llewellyn, as his wife entered the parlour.

"Oh, well enough, Griffith," she replied; "very tired,

as you may have seen, and a bit inclined to be hysterical, but that'll all wear off by to-morrow."

"I hope it may," said the farmer; "but I don't quite understand why she came home without giving us the least warning. It seems queer now, don't it? Here was the girl in a first-class place, drawing big wages, as Hetty said she must from the lavish way in which she spent money whilst they were in town, and without word or warning she chucks it all up and rushes home to us."

"Well, father, you wouldn't be the one to blame her for that, surely?"

"Not I, if she'd done it in a decent way. Haven't I asked her a dozen times since she left us to come home if she felt inclined? But big situations ain't thrown up in that way, Mary. Servants have to give a month's notice before they leave. Has she left Lord Ilfracombe's service before he has got someone to fill her place? There's something I don't understand about it all, and I wish Nell had come back in a more regular manner. Where's her boxes and things? Has she left them in London, or brought them with her? And if so, why didn't she bring them on in Johnson's fly, or ask me to send Bob with the cart to fetch them?"

At this query Mrs. Llewellyn almost began to cry.

"Oh, Griffith, my man, you mustn't be hard on the lass, but she hasn't got anything with her. No box,

nor nothing—only the clothes she stands upright in. She has just told me so."

"What, from a situation like Lord Ilfracombe's!" exclaimed the farmer. "What has she done with them then? There's some mystery about all this that I don't like, Mary, and I mean to get to the bottom of it."

"There's no mystery, Griffith, only a misfortune. Nell has told me all about it. I think she must have spent more than she could afford—perhaps on her sister when she was in London—any way our Nell got in debt, and sold her things to pay it. It was very unfortunate, but it was honourable, you see. And she is but a girl after all. We mustn't judge her too hardly. She didn't know how much she owed perhaps, or she thought she'd make it up from her wages, and then this marriage took place, and she left and found herself in a fix. It seems very plain to me."

"But why should she leave when his lordship got married? He'll want a housekeeper just the same. And likely would have raised Nell's wages. It was the very time for her to stay on."

"Ah, well, father, she longed to see us all again. You heard the dear lass say so, and you'd be the last to blame her for that, I'm sure."

"Of course," replied her husband, "no one is better pleased to have the girl back than I am, but I wish it had been all straight and above board, and with no

mystery about it. For I'd lay my life you haven't got at the bottom of it yet, wife, nor ever will if the jade don't mean you to. You don't know the tricks they learns them up in London. Well, now she's come back, she stays. I won't have no more London, and no more mysteries. She's welcome back as the flowers in May, but I wish she'd told the whole truth about it."

CHAPTER IX.

NELL slept only by snatches through that night, and waked the next morning with a heart of lead in her bosom. She had been so long unused to country sights and sounds, that she opened her eyes with the first gleam of sunshine that streamed through her window. The air was so pure, and the surroundings so peaceful, that she could hear the gardeners whetting their scythes in Sir Archibald Bowmant's grounds, and the milkers whistling, or talking to each other, as they took their way to the cowsheds. A lark was executing his wonderful, untaught trills far up somewhere in the blue heavens, and the farmyard chorus had commenced to tune up—hens clucking, ducks quacking, pigs grunting and cows lowing, as they asked to be delivered of their burden of milk. The honeysuckle and roses, which clambered outside her window and tapped against the panes, were filling the morning air with their fragrance; the dew-laden grass sent forth a sweet, faint odour; the smell of ripening fruit and ripened vegetables permeated the air. These were the things of which Nell had dreamed in her town life with intense longing;

which she had sickened to see and hear again; the re-enjoyment of which she had believed would prove the panacea for every pain, the cure for every trouble. And now they were all before her in their fullest beauty, and she turned her face from them and hid it on her pillows. The innocent sights and sounds made her tremble and turn faint with despair. They were no longer for her; she had outgrown them. The simple tastes of her childhood mocked her as she lay there—a deceiver, a pretender, an acting lie in her father's household. Nell had kept back the truth for years, but she had never perverted it before—stooped to falsehoods to hide her shame, deceived her father and her mother, and come back to take her place amongst them as a pure woman, when she knew herself to be no longer pure. The very things which she had believed would be her balm had proved her bane. The very daisies and buttercups rose up in judgment against her, until she felt herself unworthy even to pluck the flowers of the field. These thoughts so depressed her, that she rose in a melancholy mood, that quite precluded her keeping up the farce of gaiety which she had played the night before. She appeared at the breakfast-table so pale and heavy-eyed and languid, that her father gazed at her with surprise, and her mother, in pity for her looks, tried to divert her husband's attention from them as much as possible by talking of

Hetty and their acquaintances in Usk. The conversation came round in time to their landlord, Sir Archibald Bowmant.

"Are the family at home, mother?" asked Nell. "I could hear the men mowing the lawn distinctly from my window this morning, and I fancied I could smell the scent from those huge mounds of heliotrope they used to have in front of the dining-room windows. I have never seen heliotrope grow in such profusion anywhere else."

"No, my girl, there's nobody there, nor likely to be till the summer is well over. Sir Archibald is our landlord, and a liberal one, so we've no call to say anything against him, and perhaps it's no business of ours, but he is a very different gentleman since he married again. The first Lady Bowmant was a good woman, and though I suppose Sir Archibald was always inclined to be wild, she kept him straight as you may say. But since his second marriage, well, Usk Hall is not the same place."

"How is it altered?" said Nell, trying to take a languid interest in her mother's conversation.

"Oh, in everything, my dear. In *my* lady's time (I always call her *my* lady, you know, Nell, on account of my having been her maid before her marriage) the family used to go to church regularly every Sunday; he and she in their carriage, and as many servants as

could be spared following them up the aisle. But now their pew's empty from week's end to week's end. Of course, if the master and mistress don't attend church, the servants can't be expected to do so. And I doubt if they'd have the time, for they seem to be kept working more on Sundays than on any other day in the week."

"How is that, mother?"

"They keep such a heap of company, my dear, and when they're not tearing over the country on horseback they're playing cards all day. James Powell, the under footman, says it's something awful—like hell opened, was his words. They begin the first thing after breakfast, and then it's gambling and swearing, and brandies and sodas, till night. My lady seems to think nothing of it. She has a lot of brothers, and I suppose she was brought up amongst it all. She drives a tandem, and has nearly killed several people by her fast driving—she *did* run over Betsy Rigden's little girl oue day; but it wasn't much hurt, and Sir Archibald sent Betsy a ten-pound note, so nothing more was said about it; but, to my mind, it isn't decent that just as sober people are on their way to church, my lady should come tearing down the road in her tandem, with some young gentleman by her side, and both laughing so loud you might hear them half a mile off: Ah, it's a very different house to what it used to be."

"But they're not at home uow, you say."

"No, my lass, nor won't be till October or thereabouts, and then they will keep it up till it's time to go back to London, or off to some of those foreign places Sir Archibald is so fond of, and where, I hear, they do nothing but gamble. It's a dreadful habit for them to have got into. I never thought at one time that I should have lived to see Sir Archibald the worse for liquor, but I'm sorry to say I have, more than once. However, as I said before, he's been a good landlord to father there, so we're the last as should speak against him. He fills my two rooms every autumn, and far into spring; and if I had six I could let them to him. Last year he came to ask me to let him have the whole farmhouse, and find beds for ourselves elsewhere, and he would have made it worth our while too, but I told him it couldn't be. I couldn't sleep away from my dairy and bakehouse; nothing would go right if I wasn't on the spot."

"Do you go to church still, mother, or to chapel?" asked her daughter.

"Why, to church, Nell, of course. What makes you think we should change our religion? You go to church too, I hope?"

Nell waived the question.

"Only because of Hugh Owen," she said. "You

spoke so well of his preaching, that I thought you might have gone over to the Dissenters."

"No, no, my lass. No going over for us. Father and I were born and bred church people, and we'll be buried as such, eh, father?"

"Why, certainly," replied the farmer. "I never hold with chopping and changing. Live as you've been bred. That's my motto."

"Of course the Owens have always been Dissenters," continued Mrs. Llewellyn, "so I would never say nothing against Hetty going to chapel with her husband, for where he goes it's her duty to follow; but we only went to hear Hugh preach for friendship's sake. But there, it was beautiful and no mistake. The words seemed to come flowing out of his mouth like milk and honey. They say as Mr. Johnson, the curate, is quite jealous of the way that Hugh draws his congregation away to chapel. You must come with me and hear him one evening, Nell. It's mostly Wednesday evenings that he takes the open-air service in Mr. Tasker's field. He stands on a high bench, and the people crowd round to hear him. He seems to speak so much from his heart. I'm sure if there was one woman crying, last Wednesday, there was a dozen."

"Including Mrs. Llewellyn," remarked the farmer, as he rose from table, and shook the crumbs from his coat.

"Well, I don't deny it, and I'm not ashamed of it," replied his wife, "Nell will cry too, maybe, when she hears her old sweetheart talk. It's not much of a match for Hetty, Nell—not such a match as I hope to see *you* make some day, my girl—but they're good people, the Owens, and she's safe under their care."

"And what do you want more?" demanded the farmer. "It's far better than if she'd married some half-and-half fellow, who'd have brought her down to poverty, or worse. All I want for my girls is respectable husbands, men as will stick to them and work for them, not fashionable popinjays that would give 'em fine clothes and fine words for awhile, and then maybe desert 'em for another woman. You had better make a lot of Will Owen, wife, for you won't get another son-in-law as good as he in a hurry."

With which Mr. Llewellyn took his thick, crabthorn walking-stick, and went on his way.

"Lor," said his wife, as he disappeared, "the way father do stick up for the Owens is wonderful. Not that I've a word to say against them, but I should have looked higher for Hetty myself. William is a good lad, but not more than a labourer on his father's farm, and John Nelson at the post-office proposed twice for her, but she wouldn't look at him, though he makes three hundred a year in hard cash. But I won't hear of any farm hand for you, Nell. You've got the looks

to make a good marriage, my girl, and I hope you'll make it. You're rather peaky now, and your eyes are sunken and dark underneath. I shouldn't wonder if your liver wasn't out of order, but country fare and air will soon set you right again, and then there won't be a prettier girl for miles round. It was time you came back to us, for you'd have lost all your good looks if you'd remained in London much longer."

Nell had listened to this lengthy discourse almost in silence. She had been thinking all the time, "Oh, if they knew—if they only knew!" She had tried to pull herself together several times, and laugh and chat as she had done the night before, but she had found it impossible. It was as if some weight had been attached to all her mental powers and dragged them down. She had a horrible feeling that if she spoke at all she should blurt out the truth and tell them everything. So she remained silent and miserable, wishing that she had never come back to Usk, but been drowned in the deep bosom of the Thames.

"I'm afraid you've got a bit of a headache still, my dear," remarked her voluble mother, as she rose from the breakfast-table, "and so I won't ask you to come round the dairy with me this morning. You'd rather rest on the sofa and read a book, I daresay?"

"No, no," cried Nell, rousing herself, "I'd rather go where you go, mother. I should go mad—I mean, I

should feel my headache much more sitting here by myself. Let me come and see all over the dear old house with you. It will do me good—I must keep stirring, or I shall feel things—my headache, so much worse for thinking of it."

So she made a great effort, and followed her mother on her various vocations, and made the dairy-maids open their eyes to hear the refinement of her speech and to see her graceful movements and the daintiness with which her clothes were made and worn. Had they but been able to read her mind they would have seen with amazement that she shrunk from contact with them, because her dread secret was eating into her very soul and making her feel unfit to associate with her fellow-men. She had only realised the truth, and what her love for Lord Ilfracombe had made her, by fits and starts in London, but here, in the heart of God's country, it was borne in upon her to such an extent that she felt as if every innocent animal, and fresh, modest, wild blossom must proclaim it to the world. So she went moodily about the farmhouse all day, and her mother believed that she was ill, and ransacked her brain to think of a remedy for her. In the evening, as they were all sitting quietly together (for Mrs. Llewellyn had been asking her husband for some money to get Nell a new outfit, which had recalled to his mind the impoverished condition in

which his daughter had returned home), who should walk in amongst them, to the general surprise, but Hugh Owen. He looked rather conscious as he entered the room, but excused his visit on the score of asking how Nell had borne her journey, and to bring her a book which he thought she might like to read.

"You need no excuses for coming to Panty-cuckoo Farm, my lad!" exclaimed the farmer; "you're always welcome here. What's the day? Tuesday? Ah, then to-morrow's the grand field night, which accounts for your having the time to come over this evening."

The young man blushed, and looked at Nell.

"Yes," he answered, "to-morrow is my field night, as you call it, farmer. I hope it may prove a harvest field."

"Now, just tell me how you do it, lad," said the old man. "Do you lie awake of nights, and make up all you're going to say, or do you wait till the people are before you, and then just tell 'em what's in your mind? I'm curious to know, for your flow of words is wonderful, and I can't understand how any man can talk for two mortal hours as you did last Wednesday, unless he's stored it all up beforehand. It beats me altogether. I never heard the like before.

He had got Hugh astride his hobby, and the young man found his tongue at once.

"Oh, Mr. Llewellyn, if you loved the people as I

do, you would find it quite as easy as talking to your family at home. I do think of what I wish to say to them; sometimes the thought walks with me, as you might say, all day long; but I seldom use the words I've been dreaming of. I go to the spot with my mind full of some set speech, but when I see the people who wait for me—all of them old neighbours or children whom I've seen grow up amongst us—and most of them dear friends, I feel as if my very soul went out to meet them, yearning to gather them all safe into the fold. The words in which to warn and entreat them come too quick then to my lips for utterance, and sometimes I've had to swallow down my sobs before I could find a voice with which to speak. The difficulty is *not* to speak, Mr. Llewellyn. The hard part is to keep silence, when one sees so many whom one loves living for nothing but to eat and to drink, and as if there were no God in the world."

The farmer and his wife had been regarding Hugh Owen during this speech with open-eyed amazement—Nell, with a scared look, half-fear and half annoyance.

"Eh, lad," said Mr. Llewellyn, "but it's a rare gift, and you've got it, there's no doubt of that. But as for living to eat and drink, we must do it, or we shouldn't live at all, and we do it for others as well as ourselves. What would become of my missus there, and Nell now

for the matter of that, if I didn't see after the ploughing and reaping, and wife after the dairy and the bakehouse. We'd all be dead of starvation by the end of the year if I took to preaching in the fields like you, instead of farming them."

"Indeed, yes, Mr. Llewellyn, you quite mistake if you think I consider it part of religion to neglect the work we have been given to do. But we can live to God and do our duty at one and the same time. It seems so difficult to me," continued the young enthusiast, as he flung his hair off his brow, and lifted his dark eyes to Nell's face, "to live in the country, surrounded by God's works, and *not* remember Him. Why, a countryside like Usk is a continual churchgoing. Every leafy tree is a cathedral—the flowery meadows are altar carpets—each wild bird singing in its thankfulness a chorister. God's face is reflected in the least of His works. How can we look at them and forget Him?"

"Aye, aye, my lad," responded the farmer, as with a glance at his wife, as much as to say, "he's as mad as a March hare," he rose to quit the house for the stables.

Hugh directed his attention more particularly to Nell.

"I hope I haven't worried you," he said sweetly. "I do not often introduce these subjects into my ordinary

conversation, but your father drew me on before I was quite aware of it. I have brought you a book to read, which cannot fail to interest you, Livingstone's Travels in Africa. Have you seen it yet?"

She took the volume listlessly, and answered "No."

"How I should love to travel amongst those wild tribes," continued Hugh enthusiastically; "to make friends with them, and bring them to a knowledge of the truth. The fauna and the flora, too, of strange climates, how interesting they must be. To have undertaken such a journey—to have left such a record behind one—would almost satisfy the ambition of a lifetime."

"You should be a missionary," said Nell; "you are cut out for it."

"Do you really think so, that I could be worthy of so high a vocation? I have sometimes thought of it, but always shrunk back from so great a responsibility."

"You seem fond of sacrifices," said Nell, half mockingly; "you were talking of making them just now. You would have plenty then. You would have to leave your parents and brother and sister, perhaps for ever; and be eaten up by a lion or your interesting cannibals instead."

"Yes, yes, it would be hard," he answered, ignoring, or not perceiving, the joking spirit in which she treated the idea, "and harder now than it has ever seemed be-

fore; but the prospect will be always before me, to my life's end, as something that may come to pass, if I find no higher duties to keep me at home. But I am tiring you perhaps. You have not yet recovered from your long journey, Nell—if I may call you so—your eyes look weary, and your hands tremble. Are you sure you are quite well?"

"Yes, yes, perfectly so, only fatigued, as you surmise, and in need of fresh air. All Londoners are obliged, as a rule, to leave town after the hot season, you know, in order to recruit. I shall be all right when I have spent a few weeks in Usk."

"And then I hope you will cease to speak or think of yourself as a Londoner. I have never been there, but I have heard it is full of temptations to frivolity and careless living, and that it is difficult to keep close to God in London. Tell me something of your life there, Nell. Had you liberty to go to church whenever you chose, and did you hear any fine preachers, such as Dr. Liddon and Dr. Irons? Did you ever go amongst the poor—the poor who live in alleys and back slums, or did your employer disapprove of your visiting such?"

"I know nothing—I mean, I can tell you nothing," cried Nell, suddenly rising to her feet. "I am weary. I must go to my own room. It will take me days to recover the fatigue I have gone through. Good-night.

Don't think me rude, but I cannot talk to you of such things now."

And with a curt nod Nell went off in search of her mother, leaving him alone, and somewhat disconcerted at the abrupt ending of their conversation. Mrs. Llewellyn was almost as puzzled as Hugh Owen at her daughter's strange behaviour. She could not understand her. The next day dragged itself disappointingly away. Nell continued in the same passive, indifferent disposition, and when some neighbours, who had heard of her return home, called at Panty-cuckoo Farm expressly to welcome her, she locked herself into her bedroom, and refused even to answer Mrs. Llewellyn's entreaties that she would make an effort to come down and see them. Towards evening, however, she became feverishly excitable again, and seemed impatient to find some vent for it.

"What can we do, mother?" she exclaimed as they rose from the tea-table. "Isn't this the night for Hugh Owen's preaching? Let's go and hear him. It'll make me scream with laughter to see old Hugh stuck up as a minister."

"Aye, but, dearie, you mustn't laugh when you get there, or there will be a scandal, and poor Hugh will be main hurt. Besides, you had better rest in the garden; the field's more than a mile off, and I'm afraid you'll feel tired before you get there."

"Not a bit of it," cried the girl. "I'm just in the humour for walking this evening, mother. I couldn't remain in the garden; it's too slow, so, if you don't want to hear Hugh, I'll go by myself."

"Oh, no, you don't do that," replied Mrs. Llewellyn hastily. "I'm too proud of getting my handsome daughter back again after so many years to let her go tramping over Usk by herself the first day she is at home. The Owens are sure to be there, and Hetty will be main glad to see us. So put on your hat, Nell, and we'll be off. I wish you'd something a bit smarter to wear than that big black thing; however, I can't deny but it suits you all the same."

So chattering, the old woman trotted off by her tall daughter's side, until they had reached Mr. Tasker's field. The open-air service had commenced some time when they arrived there. The thirty or forty people assembled had sung several hymns and listened to Hugh Owen's earnest prayer, and were now engrossed by his address. The young preacher stood upon a bench, his long hair waving in the summer breeeze, his eyes fixed upon his small congregation, and his arms stretched out as though to embrace them. He was not so enrapt, though, but that he perceived the approach of Nell and her mother, who took up their stand on the outside of the little group. His pale cheek glowed for a moment, and his heart beat more rapidly,

but he soon subdued these feelings and threw his soul once more into the work he had appointed himself to do. He paused for one instant to recover his equanimity, and then proceeded with his discourse.

"What is the great evil of this world, my friends?" he said. "What is the greatest sin we sin against each other and ourselves? The sin of deceit. We deceive each other in trading—even the smallest grain of cheating, be it the quarter of a quarter of an ounce less in the scales than it should be, is as great a robbery in God's eyes; as great a wrong to our neighbour; as great a wrong to ourselves, as if it had been a hundredweight! We deceive each other in religion. We go to church or chapel because others do, and others would think us irreligious if we neglected to do so, but we do not tell our neighbours this. We profess that we attend service for the love of God—because we could not be happy without attending; because the duty is a comfort and a delight to us. Can any duty so fulfilled bring any blessing in its train? And many of us are living lies! This seems a hard judgment, but look into your own hearts and say if it is not true! which of you shows yourself in your true light to the world? Your small meannesses—your hasty tempers—your neglected duties—your back-bitings—you put them all aside in public, and let your neighbours think you good mistresses; kind wives and husbands; liberal

parents, and faithful friends. But do you imagine you can deceive God—the God of truth, who hates a lie—from whose heaven, we are told, all liars shall be excluded! How many of you now before me could enter that heaven to-day? How many are there who, if their real characters were known—if their secret sins were laid bare—would be received with the love and respect which you all accept as your due? Many a pure and beautiful outside conceals a deceitful soul—many an apparently innocent face is the mask for a guilty conscience; but you cannot deceive your God; he knows every sin you have committed—every wrong thought you have entertained. Is it not strange that what you are not afraid to let your God know you have done, you would not have your neighbour find out for all the world! But which is better, to be rejected of men to-day or of God in the days to come?—to endure a little scorn and contumely now, in a life which can only last at the best for a few years, or to be shut out from God's love for ever? Think, my dearest friends, of what His love *for ever* means! For ever and for ever and for ever!—without sorrow, or sickness, or sin—wrapped in the arms of His boundless mercy and protection for all time, and then compare it with the paltry gain of keeping the good opinion of your neighbour here below—one, who probably (if the truth were known) has sinned in like proportion with yourself! If I could only

make you realise what God's love is like, you would, in order to gain it, throw all earthly consideration to the winds and think of Him and of Him only! He loves you as no mortal man can ever love you, and He hates a liar. He has said He will have none of them —that if men will not confess their sins before the world, He will not number them with His elect in heaven; and this confessing includes—"

But here Hugh Owen's discourse was interrupted by a shrill scream, as Nell Llewellyn fell back in her mother's arms in a fit of violent hysterics. Of course everyone present (who had been longing for the address to be concluded, that they might renew their acquaintance with her), rushed forward simultaneously to offer their advice, or assistance. But Nell shrunk from them all alike, as she tried to quell the distressing cries that rose involuntarily from her, in her mother's bosom.

"Just stand aside a bit and let the poor lass have air," said Mrs. Llewellyn. "She's so weak and faint after that nasty London, that the walk's been too much for her. I was afraid it might be, but she was so bent on hearing Hugh Owen preach! There! Nell—there, my lass! try and control yourself, do! Lean on me, and we'll go slowly home again. I'm main sorry we've interrupted your discourse, Hugh, but I hope you'll go on now all the same! And you must forgive poor Nell! It's all because she's so weak and upset like!"

"I'm sorry she came this evening," replied Hugh, who was the picture of distress, but let me take her, Mrs. Llewellyn, I am stronger than you are and Nell can lean as hard as she likes on me!"

But Nell turned her head away, and at this juncture, one of the neighbours, who lived close by, returned with a little chaise drawn by a ragged pony, which he had been to fetch, and putting Nell and her mother in it, he drove them home; and Mrs. Llewellyn's whole care was then directed to getting her daughter into bed, where she trusted she would sleep and recuperate her exhausted strength. But creeping up an hour afterwards to see how she was going on, she found her so ill that she sent for the village doctor, who pronounced her to be in a very critical condition, and before another twelve hours were over her head, Nell was raving in the delirium of a nervous fever.

CHAPTER X.

LORD and Lady Ilfracombe had a pleasant time, yachting in the Mediterranean. The weather was perfect; their companions, Captain Knyvett and Mr. Castelon, whom they had invited to accompany them, proved to be agreeable and entertaining; and the *Débutante* was as luxurious a little vessel as can well be imagined. Nora, who was the only lady on board, fascinated the whole crew, gentlemen and sailors alike. Without being in the least masculine, she was as energetic and as much to the fore as any man aboard. She did not suffer from *mal de mer,* and had no feminine fads, fancies, or fears. She never failed to appear at the breakfast table, or to sit up playing cards, or singing songs to her banjo, till the most wakeful among them was ready to turn in. She sat on deck in all weathers, even when they encountered a sharp squall and a downpour of rain. Lady Ilfracombe said she preferred the open air to the saloon cabin, and had her wicker chair lashed to the mast, and sat there, enveloped in her husband's rough great coat and her own spicy little naval cap with a peaked brim, encouraging

the efforts of the sailors, and chatting with her friends, as if she did not know the name of danger. She was always lively, interested, and good-tempered, and a general favourite with everybody. And yet the earl, although he admired and was proud of his wife, did not feel so happy in her possession as he had hoped to do. Nora's disposition had not altered with marriage. What woman's ever did? The prudence or coldness which had induced her to refuse her lover a kiss or an embrace before marriage, extended in a great measure to her behaviour to her husband. Ilfracombe, like many another man in the same position, had imagined her coolness to be due to maidenly reserve, and thought that it would all disappear with wifehood. The greatest mistake men ever make. Of matrimony, it might be written, as the terms on which we are supposed to enter heaven are written of in the Bible, "Let the flirt be a flirt still, and the prude be a prude still." Marriage is far more likely to cool the ardent, than to warm the cold. And the Countess of Ilfracombe had proved the truth of it. She did not actually repulse her bridegroom, but she only permitted his attentions—she never returned them. The earl was more in love with her than ever he had been, perhaps, for this very reason, but he could not help wishing sometimes, with a sigh of disappointment, that she would put her arms round his neck of her own accord, and press her lips to his,

with some little show of passion. Perhaps at such moments a memory would come to him, of a perfect mouth that had been used to cling to his with unconcealed rapture, and a pair of white arms that would hold him so closely, that he would unlock them by force, and tell their owner jestingly, that she would squeeze him to death if she did not take greater care. He had enjoyed these things until he had wearied of them, according to the manner of men, but now— He almost thought sometimes that Nora was colder and more distant to him than she had been before marriage, but that seemed an impossibility. She preserved the proprieties in public with the greatest care, was always courteous, and even respectful to him, before company —listened quietly whilst he spoke, and deferred to his opinion in everything. But when they were alone, she was just as courteous, that was all; and if he pressed his attentions on her, was apt to show the least signs of peevishness, or weariness, or sudden illness, which never exhibited itself on other occasions. But men in the flush of a new love are satisfied with very little, and Nora's indifference only served to keep the flame bright and burning. One day, as she was reclining in her wicker chair, surrounded by her court, she gave vent to the wish that they had brought her favourite sister, Susie, with them, as she was sure she would have enjoyed herself so much.

"I wish we had," acquiesced Ilfracombe heartily. "And I wish I had brought my old chum, Jack Portland, with me too! I invited him to come out with me on the *Débutante,* but that would have entailed his missing the Derby, and I don't believe Jack would enter heaven, if he had the chance, if the Derby had yet to be run!"

"Ay! *if* he had the chance—which I much doubt he ever will have," laughed Captain Knyvett.

"Jack—who?" demanded Nora.

"Jack Portland, my darling," replied her husband, "I must have mentioned him to you, surely! He's one of my greatest friends, we've been a lot together, on the turf and elsewhere. Jack's one of the most reliable prophets I ever came across. He can always give a fellow the straight tip, and he's marvellously correct; isn't he, Castelon?"

"Oh, yes, very good when he likes," acquiesced that gentleman.

"Oh, come Castelon, that's not fair," cried the earl; "old Jack's always ready to oblige a chum, and I never knew him to make a wrong un. I know he's won me pots of money, over and over again!"

"And lost them for you too, Ilfracombe," replied Mr. Castelon.

"Are we likely to see much of this immaculate being on our return to England?" inquired the countess

in a rather tart tone. "He does not appear to me to be a very desirable acquaintance."

"Oh, my darling, you are quite mistaken," exclaimed Ilfracombe. "Poor old Jack is the best-natured fellow in the world. I am sure you will like him immensely. You mustn't think that he obtrudes his sporting proclivities on the drawing-room. No man knows better how to behave in the company of ladies than Jack Portland—indeed, he has rather a character for liking their society too much. See the mischief you have done, Castelon! You have made my wife's lip curl at the mere idea of our sporting friend."

"Indeed, Mr. Castelon has done nothing of the sort, Ilfracombe, for as it happens, I already know Mr. Portland, though I had no idea he was one of your friends."

"You know Jack Portland!" cried the earl with unaffected surprise. "Where on earth did you meet him, and why have you not spoken of him to me before?"

"To answer your last question first, Ilfracombe, simply because the subject was not sufficiently interesting to recall itself to my mind. And as for where I met him, it was of course in Malta, where, as you know, I have vegetated for the best part of my life!"

"In Malta?" echoed the earl," "why, of course Jack has been there. It never occurred to me before, but it

was his recommendation of the place that took me there. So I may almost say that I owe the happiness of meeting you to him. Let me see! How long was it ago? Two years?"

"There or thereabouts," said Nora indifferently.

"And did you not like him, Nora? Did you not think him a very charming man?"

The countess shrugged her shoulders.

"Am I to tell you the truth, or to bow to the fact that Mr. Portland is one of your greatest friends, Ilfracombe?" she replied.

"The truth, of course, darling. I can hardly expect you to see everybody with the same eyes as myself; but I cannot imagine anybody, and especially any woman, disliking old Jack."

"Then I'm the odd man out," said his wife, with a *moue*.

"Really. What did he do to offend you? I'm sure he must have fallen in love with you; but you have experienced that sort of thing too often to make it a cause of offence."

"Is it necessary for a person to actually affront you in order to create a dislike? I don't think I saw enough of Mr. Portland to do him that honour. He stayed, if I remember rightly, with Captain and Mrs. Loveless, in the dockyard, and they brought him to see my mother. He is a tall, broad-shouldered fellow, is

he not, with blue eyes and reddish hair? Well, he struck me as horsey decidedly; and, perhaps, that was the reason I didn't cotton to him. But, pray, don't imagine, Ilfracombe, that I am going to make myself disagreeable to any friend of yours. It is only that I am indifferent to him. My welcome will be just in proportion to your wishes."

"My dearest girl, I am sure of that, and when you know him better, you will like him as much as I do. He's rattling good fun; isn't he, Castelon?"

"Yes, according to our ideas, perhaps, Ilfracombe, but he might not suit a lady as well. Jack has drunk rather more than he ought to have done of late years, and spoilt his beauty in consequence. Else he used to be one of the handsomest fellows on the turf."

"Is it necessary to talk about Mr. Portland any longer?" demanded the countess, with a yawn behind her hand. "Captain Knyvett, do fetch the cards from the saloon, and let us have a game. We've been fooling all the afternoon away. It is time we exercised our brains a little."

"What a strange thing it seems," said Ilfracombe afterwards to Castelon, as they were smoking together on the poop, "that men and women see with such different eyes! I should have thought Jack Portland would have been an universal favourite with the *beau sexe*. He's a fine, manly, good-looking chap, with any

amount of brains; and yet Lady Ilfracombe, who really admires our sex more than her own—a regular man's woman she is, as any man, I think, would admit—can't see anything, apparently, to like in him. It is incredible to me! I shall make a point of bringing them together as soon as we are settled at Thistlemere."

"Lady Ilfracombe is so thoroughly charming in every respect," replied Castelon, with admirable tact, "that I should feel inclined to trust her judgment before my own. It is not at all necessary that a man and his wife should have the same friends, or so I take it. That would entail a great deal of irksome duty on your part, paid to women whom, perhaps, you did not like. Mr. Jack Portland is bound to get his full dues from so perfect a hostess as Lady Ilfracombe, without thrusting his company continually on her. And between ourselves, old fellow, I really think his conversation and ideas are more fit for the stables than the drawing-room."

"No, no! I won't have you say that," cried the loyal earl. "Jack's a gentleman, and no man can be more. My wife will learn to like him for my sake. Castelon, old chap! why don't you get married? It's the loveliest experience in the world. Don't believe all the humbug people talk on the subject. Only try it, and you'll agree with me."

"Perhaps I might and perhaps I mightn't, my boy,"

replied his companion. "I expect matrimony depends a great deal on the woman, and we can't all expect to draw a prize. You've drawn the lucky number, Ilfracombe, and I might get a blank; so rest satisfied with your *coup de main*, and don't persuade your friends to come a cropper in hopes of clearing the thorny fence as you have. But I congratulate you, old fellow. I never saw a man so spooney in all my life; and it must really be a delicious sensation when the object is your own wife, and not that of some other man. By the way, now we are quite alone, may I ask you what has become of Miss Llewellyn?"

The earl looked round to see what his wife was doing before he replied, in a low tone,—

"Oh! that's all right, old boy. I've pensioned her off handsomely, and she has gone back to her friends."

Castelon opened his eyes.

"Really! I shouldn't have thought she was that sort of woman."

"What do you mean by 'that sort of woman'?"

"No offence, old chappie, be sure of that. No one admired her more than I did. I think she is, without exception, the most beautiful creature I ever saw, and as good as she is beautiful. But I fancied she was too much attached to you to accept a pension."

"Oh, as to that," said the earl, rather shamefacedly, "she must be provided for. I wouldn't hear

of anything else. You see, Castelon, you mustn't think me a brute; but it was on the cards that sooner or later I should marry. My uncles were always at me about the necessity of an heir, and all that sort of thing; and I suppose it is the penalty of inheriting a title, that one must think of carrying it on. You know I was fond of the woman—very fond, at one time—so was she of me, but it had gone on long enough. Sterndale has managed the business for me. I don't know that I should have had enough nerve to do it for myself. But it's all happily ended by this time, and I'm going to give up such frivolities for the future!"

"Of course, of course—naturally," said his friend.

But when Lord Ilfracombe met his wife in the sanctity of their state-cabin, he alluded again to the subject of Jack Portland.

"It's the most extraordinary thing in the world to me, Nora," he commenced," that Jack has not told me that he met you in Malta. For I have had two letters from him since our marriage."

"Most likely he did not remember my name," replied Nora; "I was hardly out of the nursery then, remember!"

"What? at eighteen? Nonsense! You are not a woman for a man to see and forget. He has never said that he met your father. And that you should have never spoken his name, beats me altogether."

"Why, you never mentioned him yourself till to-day," she retorted. "Considering he is such an intimate friend of yours, is that not more wonderful than the other?"

"Oh, I know such lots of men!"

"So do I," said Nora.

She was sitting on the side of the bed as she spoke, nursing her knees and looking her husband straight in the face.

"You talk like a fool," she continued hotly. "As if a girl could remember every man she has met! And you have not mentioned people much nearer home to me. Who is Miss Llewellyn?"

The question took Ilfracombe so completely by surprise, that he did not know what to say.

"Miss Llewellyn!" he stammered. "Who has ever said anything to you about Miss Llewellyn?"

"I heard you mention her name this evening to Mr. Castelon."

"Indeed! what sharp ears you must have!"

"Perhaps, but that is no answer to my question. Who is she?"

"Well, if you must know, she is, or rather was, my housekeeper. An interesting discovery, isn't it?"

"*Cela depend!* And is she to be our housekeeper now?"

"Certainly not! That is to say, she has gone home —her mother was sick and wanted her—"

The countess got off the bed, and going up to her husband, laid her hand upon his mouth,—

"There, there, that will do," she said quietly; don't soil your soul any more on my account, for it is a matter of the most perfect indifference to me who she was or why she went. There are plenty more housekeepers to be procured, I suppose, in England. But don't forget what I told you in Malta about the pot that called the kettle black, *voila tout!*"

She gave him a little kiss to sweeten the unpalatable dose as she concluded, and the ordeal was over—only the earl would rather she had shown a little jealousy on the subject instead. He did not know how much or how little she had overheard of his conversation with Castelon, and he did not like to ask, lest she might blurt out some disagreeable truths in his face. But the circumstance made him think a great deal more of Nell Llewellyn than he would otherwise have done whilst on his wedding tour. He wondered more than once if it were possible that Nell would try to make things unpleasant for him and Nora, or if there were any chance of a rencontre between the two women. Nora might overlook or ignore a *liaison* of the sort if it were not brought beneath her immediate notice, but he felt sure she would hold her own—perhaps make a public scandal if it became a personal affront. He had heard nothing from Mr. Sterndale since a letter in which he

had assured him that his instructions regarding Miss Llewellyn should be faithfully carried out, and he could not expect to hear more until he met the solicitor in England. He tried as far as possible to dismiss the idea from his mind for the rest of the voyage, but he became restless and uneasy as they approached the termination of it; and when, towards the end of October, he found himself safely installed with his wife at Thistlemere, the first thing he did was to summons his old friend to render up an account of his stewardship. With the solicitor arrived Mr. Portland. Lord Ilfracombe had not advised the countess of his advent. He wanted to give them both a surprise. Perhaps also to find out for himself how far Nora had told the truth concerning her acquaintance with him. Ilfracombe had always been perfectly frank whilst living with Nell Llewellyn. Under the influence of Nora he was beginning to keep back things which, theretofore, he would have never dreamed of concealing. So truly do our intimate companions rule, to a great degree, our characters. We are told that we cannot touch pitch without being defiled. So must we always derive good or evil from those we associate with. But if Lord Ilfracombe fancied he was a match for either his wife or Jack Portland, he was very much mistaken. At any rate, neither he nor anyone could have discovered a domestic plot against his peace from the perfectly

natural way in which they met each other, for if anything was apparent, it was an almost unnatural indifference on both sides. The countess was in the drawing-room when her husband entered with both men in his train.

"Nora," he commenced, "I bring an old friend of yours to offer his congratulations on your having obtained such a prize as myself."

Nora glanced at the two gentlemen with affected surprise.

"Mr. Sterndale is an old friend of *yours,* I know, Ilfracombe," she said, sweetly; "and, therefore, if he will accept me as such, I trust he will consider me his friend also. But—" turning to where Jack Portland stood bowing lowly before her, "this gentleman—surely I have met him before! Why, of course, it is the very Mr. Portland of whom we spoke once on board the *Débutante.* How are you, Mr. Portland? Do you remember me after all this time? Did we not meet at Captain Loveless's once at a ball? Were you not staying with them?"

"I was, Lady Ilfracombe. Mrs. Loveless is my sister. What a long time ago it seems. How little I imagined, when dear old Ilfracombe here wrote me he was engaged to a Miss Abinger, that it actually was *the* Miss Abinger with whom I had had the honour of dancing! But there were so many of you!"

"Dear me, yes—dozens! I have three sisters married besides myself! Perhaps it was Bella or Marion, after all, whom you danced with instead of me. We are considered very much alike."

"If you will excuse me saying so, I do not think I could have made a mistake. But you must have been very young at the time?"

"I was eighteen; I am twenty now," laughed Nora in a nervous manner. I never conceal my age, and never mean to. It is such folly. If a woman looks too young for it, all the better. If too old, it will only make a bad matter worse to take off a few years. Don't you agree with me, Mr. Sterndale?"

"I agree with everything your ladyship says, even if it went against my own judgment," replied the solicitor.

"My goodness, you're quite a courtier! I thought the law allowed men no time for cultivating the smaller graces. If ever I want to get a separation from Ilfracombe, Mr. Sterndale, I shall come to you to make terms for me."

"Oh, dear me!" exclaimed the solicitor, laughing; "your ladyship must not depend on me in such a case, really! I have been his lordship's man of business for years, and I am not sure if such an unmitigated piece of treachery would not rank with high treason."

"Well, here is dinner, which appeals to us all alike," cried Lady Ilfracombe, as she placed her hand

on the arm of Mr. Jack Portland, "so let us drop all discussion, except that of good things, until it is over," and the earl and the solicitor followed her gaily to the dining-room. But Ilfracombe was longing to have a private interview with Mr. Sterndale, and as soon as the meal was concluded, he asked the pardon of the others if he detained the solicitor for half an hour.

"You can send us word when coffee is ready, Nora," he said to his wife as Mr. Portland held the door open for her ladyship to pass through, and then, with a nod to his host, went after her.

As soon as they were well out of hearing, Ilfracombe leant over the table and said to Sterndale in a lowered voice,—

"I don't see why we need go to the library; I am not in a mood for accounts or anything of that sort to-night. I only want to ask you about Miss Llewellyn. How did she take the news of my marriage, Sterndale, and is she well out of England? Where did she go to, and was she satisfied with the provision I made for her? To tell you the truth, the thought of her has been bothering me a good deal lately. The countess is a noble, generous girl, and quite up to snuff, but she is high-spirited, and if there were any chance of her meeting the other, or hearing much about her, I wouldn't answer for the consequences."

"You need not be in the least afraid of that, Lord Ilfracombe," replied the solicitor.

"Are you sure? Did she accept a sum down, or did you invest the money for her, and if so, how and where? Is she out of England, and likely to remain so? I daresay you will vote me an alarmist, Sterndale, but you see, when all's said and done, Nell was very fond of me, and women turn into perfect devils sometimes when they are crossed in such matters."

"I repeat, my lord, that you have no cause to fear the least annoyance from Miss Llewellyn."

"Thank God for that," said the earl, with a look of relief. "And now, tell me all you can about it, Sterndale. Was she much upset at the idea of my giving her up? Had you any difficulty about it? Or did she accept the inevitable, and clear out quietly?"

Mr. Sterndale prepared himself for a conference, previously to commencing which he rose, and having seen that the dining-room door was securely fastened, sat down again opposite to the earl.

"I have rather a painful duty before me, my lord. Painful, that is to say, in one sense, but, to my mind, providential in another. Your lordship is now happily married, and, doubtless, would wish to cast even the memory of the past behind you."

"It is my desire to do so, to forget it ever existed, if possible," said the young man eagerly; "but still I

feel that will not be feasible until I am assured that Miss Llewellyn is well provided for, and in a fair way to be happy."

"Very praiseworthy and generous," murmured the solicitor, "but quite unnecessary. In the first place, my lord, Miss Llewellyn blankly refused to accept any settlement or provision at your hands. She took the draft which I submitted for her approval and tore it across, and flung the pieces in my face. Indeed, I may say, the young woman was exceedingly rude to me, but I can afford to forgive it now."

"I am sorry to hear that, Sterndale, but I suppose your news upset her. She was not accustomed to be rude in manners or speech to any of my friends. But, doubtless, she apologised. She took the settlement on reconsideration."

"Indeed, she did not, Lord Ilfracombe! She has never taken it."

"Then how is she living?" asked the earl eagerly. "Where is she at present?"

"I must prepare your lordship for a slight shock," replied the solicitor gravely, "for it was a shock to me. Miss Llewellyn is no more."

"*No more!* Do you mean me to understand that she is dead?" exclaimed Ilfracombe with a look of horror.

"Exactly so, my lord. The unfortunate young

woman is certainly dead. She had an ungovernable temper, and it led her to a rash end. She threw herself into the river."

The earl's eyes were almost starting out of his head.

"She committed suicide, and for my sake?" he exclaimed. "Oh, my God! my God!"

He bent his head down on his hands, and the tears trickled through his clasped hands.

"Nell dead," he kept on murmuring, "Nell under the water. Oh, it is impossible. I cannot believe it. My poor Nell. This news will wreck all my happiness."

"Lord Ilfracombe," exclaimed Mr. Sterndale, quickly, "I beg of you to compose yourself. What if the servants, or her ladyship, were to enter the room! This unfortunate affair is none of your doing. You have no occasion to blame yourself. You did all, and more than most men would have done to secure the welfare of the young person in question, and if she choose to fling your kindness back in your face, the blame lies at her own door."

"Are you *sure* of it?" said Ilfracombe presently, as he made a great effort to control his feelings. "How did you hear of it? Did you actually see and recognise her dead body?"

"No, I cannot go so far as to say that, my lord, but

I have every circumstantial evidence of the fact. Miss Llewellyn disappeared from Grosvenor Square, as Warrender can tell you, on the night of the 20th of August, and has never been seen or heard of since. On that night a woman threw herself into the Thames, whose description tallies with hers. Here is the account of the affair published in the next morning's papers," handing the earl the paragraph he had cut from the *Standard,* "and on instituting every inquiry, I had no reason to doubt that the young woman, who either threw herself or fell into the river, was our unfortunate friend. With a view to ascertaining the truth more accurately, I examined her belongings in Grosvenor Square, none of which she had taken with her, another fact which points conclusively, in my mind, to the idea of suicide, and amongst them, in her jewel case, I found this scrap of paper, evidently addressed to your lordship, and which I preserved with a view of delivering over to you when you should question me as to the matter you left in my charge."

Saying which, the solicitor placed the scrap of paper he had found with Nell's trinkets in the earl's hands. Ilfracombe read the poor, pathetic little message over and over again, "Good-bye, my only love. I cannot live without you," and then without comment, having folded the paper and placed it in his pocket-book, he

rose trembling from the table and staggered towards the door.

"Sterndale!" he ejaculated in a faint voice, "I cannot speak with you about this now, some other time, perhaps, but for the present I must be alone. Go to the countess, there's a good fellow, and keep her from following me. Say I have had a sudden summons to the stables, that there is something wrong with one of the horses, and leave me to tell my own story when I return. I won't be long. Only give me a few minutes in which to overcome this fearful shock. You know I was fond of her, Sterndale, and I must feel her death a little. I never dreamt it would come to this—that death would part us—never, never."

And with his pocket handkerchief to his eyes, the earl rushed up to his own room.

Meanwhile Mr. Portland had been saying to the countess,—

"By George, Nora, I do think you are the very cleverest woman I know. I always did think so, you know, and now I'm sure of it. No one to see you this afternoon would have imagined we had ever met before."

"Well, naturally, I didn't intend them to think so. I determined on that as soon as Ilfracombe told me you were a friend of his. What is the good of telling every-

thing? It only leads to quarrels. So, as I am quite sure Ilfracombe has not told *me* everything that he has done before marriage, I determined he should have a *quid pro quo*. But, Jack, you must keep the secret now for both our sakes. You will let me have back my letters, won't you."

"Of course I will, that is if you are so hard-hearted as to take my only comfort from me. But where is the good of it? You don't want to read them over yourself, surely."

"Goose, as if I would. They are awful rubbish, from what I can remember. Only it has become dangerous now, you know, and I should never feel easy unless I had destroyed them."

"Won't my destroying them do as well?

"No, because you men are so careless, and something might happen to you during your steeplechases or hunting, and then they would be found, and the news would be all over the shop. You *will* give them back to me, Jack, won't you," in a pleading tone.

"Did I ever refuse you anything, Nora? You shall have the letters, or anything else you set your heart on, only continue to be nice to me as you were in Malta."

"Then give them to me," she said in an earnest voice.

"Why, you don't imagine I carry them about with me in my waistcoat pocket, do you? I take much more care of them than that. They are at my London diggings, safely locked away in my dispatch box."

"Oh, when shall you go back and fetch them?" exclaimed the countess.

"That is not very hospitable of you, Nora," said Mr. Portland, "when I have not yet spent a day at Thistlemere! No, no, you mustn't be quite so impatient as all that. You shall have the precious letters in good time, though why you cannot leave them where they have been for the last two years, beats me altogether."

"You know I asked for them back before you left Malta, and you wouldn't give them me," said Lady Ilfracombe, "and now it is much more important than it was then. I was a fool not to make my father insist on their return, but I was so dreadfully afraid that he would read them."

"Ah, that wouldn't have done, would it?" returned Mr. Portland carelessly. "You had better leave them with me, Nora. I'm their best custodian. The perusal of them gives me pleasure, whilst on others it might have a contrary effect, eh?"

"No, no, you have promised to return them to me and you must keep your word," her ladyship was re-

plying just as Mr. Sterndale entered the room, and said,—

"Lord Ilfracombe sends his apologies to you, my lady, but one of the horses requires his attention and he has strolled out to the stables, but he desired me to tell you that he will not be absent more than a few minutes."

CHAPTER XI.

For seven weeks Nell Llewellyn fluctuated between life and death before she was fully roused again to a sense of living and its cares and responsibilities. It was on a sunny afternoon, in the middle of October, that she first awoke to the consciousness that she was herself. But she was too weak to do more than be aware of it. The afternoon sun was glinting through the white blind of her bedroom window, and a little breeze caused it to flap gently against the latticed panes. Nell lay on her bed, as weak and unreasoning and incurious as a little child, and watched the tassel of the blind bobbing up and down, without questioning why she lay there, unable to move or think. An old woman named Betsy Hobbs, who came in sometimes to help in an emergency at the farmhouse, was seated by the window, with a large pair of knitting-needles in her hands, a ball of worsted at her feet, and her head sunk on her breast, enjoying a snooze after the labours of the day. Nell stared at her unfamiliar figure with the same sense of incapacity to understand her presence,

and the same sense of utter indifference to not understanding it. Her feeble sight roved over everything in the room with the same apathy. The coverlet on her bed was a coloured one, and she kept on counting the squares and wondering in a vague manner why one should be red and the next blue. One red, and the next blue—one red, and the next blue—she kept on mentally repeating to herself, until her eyes had travelled to the foot of the bed, over the footboard of which was thrown a pink knitted shawl, or kerchief, which her mother had bought for her just before she was taken ill, and which she had worn around her shoulders on the evening she had gone to hear Hugh Owen preach in the field. That little link between the past and the present recalled it all. In a moment she comprehended. She was no longer happy, innocent Nell Llewellyn, spending her young life at Panty-cuckoo Farm, but the disgraced and degraded daughter of the house, who had crept home, a living lie, to hide her shame and sorrow in her mother's bosom. The remembrance brought with it but one desire—one want—which expressed itself in a feeble cry of "Mother!" At least, it was what Nell intended for a cry; but her voice was so faint and weak, that Betsy Hobbs only roused from her nap with a feeling of curiosity if she *had* heard anything. She was accustomed to nursing the sick, however, and was a light sleeper, so she hobbled up to the bedside

and peered into her patient's face. Sure enough her eyes were open and there was reason in them.

"Praise the Lord, dearie," she ejaculated, "you're yourself agin at last!"

But Nell turned her face to the wall with the same cry of "Mother!"

"To be sure, dearie; and I'll fetch 'er in 'alf a minnit. She's only stepped down to the dairy to see 'ow things are goin' on, for business 'as been sadly neglected of late. Night and day—night and day—the pore dear's bin by your side longin' to 'ear your own voice agin, and she'll be overj'yed to find you in your senses. Come, drink a drop o' milk, do, and then I'll fetch 'er."

But Nell turned fractiously from the proffered cup and reiterated her cry for her mother. She was gaunt and emaciated to a degree. The cruel fever had wasted her rounded limbs, and dug deep furrows beneath her eyes, and turned her delicate complexion to yellow and brown. She looked like a woman of forty or fifty, instead of a girl of three-and-twenty. As the old woman ambled out of the room, Nell raised her thin hands and gazed at the white nails and bony knuckles with amazement. Where had she been? What had happened to her, to alter her like that? Her questions were answered by the entrance of Mrs. Llewellyn.

"Oh, my dear lass—my own poor lamb!" she ex-

claimed, as she came hurriedly to the bedside, and folded her daughter in her arms. "Praise the Lord that you have taken a turn at last! I've been watching for this days and days, till I began to fear it might never be. You've been main ill, my girl, and all the house nursing you through it. Father's lying down on his bed. He hasn't had his coat off for three nights. But you're better, my lass, you're better, thank God for that!"

"How long have I been ill?" asked Nell in a faint voice.

"Better than six weeks—going on for seven," replied her mother; "and it's been an anxious time for all of us. I thought poor Hetty would have cried herself sick last week, when Dr. Cowell told us we musn't build our hopes too much on keeping you here. I think he will be as surprised as anyone when he hears the good news. Oh, my lass, it would have been a sore day for more than one of us if we had lost you!"

"I may go yet, mother," said Nell, looking at her skeleton hands; "there's not much of me left, I'm thinking."

"Oh, no you won't, my dear, not this time, thank God. I know what these fevers are. I've seen too many of them. When they've burnt themselves out, they're over. And you're as cool as a cucumber now. You

feel terrible weak, I know, but good feeding and care will soon set you up again."

"What a trouble I must have been to you," sighed Nell wearily; "and so unworthy of it too. Mother, why didn't you let me die, and make an end of it? Life is not worth living at any time, and I've seen the best of mine."

"Nonsense, my girl, you talk like that because you're so weak, that's all. You'll feel quite different in another day or so. Here, just let me give you a few spoonfuls of this beef-tea. I made it myself, so I won't take a refusal. There's a good maid, and now you must shut your eyes and go to sleep again."

"Don't leave me," murmured Nell, as she lay with her hand clasped in her mother's. "Talk to me, mother. Tell me you are really glad that I am better, and I will try to live for your sake."

"Glad, child. Why, what are you thinking of? Glad to get my own lass back from the grave, as you may say? I should be a nice mother if I weren't. Don't you know by this time that you've been my hope and pride ever since you was born? Why, I've been praying night and day to the Lord to spare you for weeks past. Aye, and not only me; all Usk has been asking the same thing, and there's been one in particular as has wearied heaven with prayers for your recovery, if ever man did."

"One in particular?" echoed the sick girl faintly curious. "Who was that, mother?"

"Why, that young saint on earth, Hugh Owen, to be sure. I never saw a man so unhappy as he's been about you. He looks ten years older since you were taken ill. Do you know, Nell, that he's been here every minute he could spare from his work, kneeling by your bedside whilst you were raving in delirium, praying with all his heart and soul, that God would spare your precious life to us a little longer. Hugh Owen has been your tenderest nurse. I've seen him sit here, without saying a word for hours together, only holding you in his arms when you got a bit violent, and coaxing you by every means in his power to take a drop of wine or a spoonful of jelly. I do believe that you owe your life in a great measure to Hugh's care (and so I've told father that if you lived, it would be), for though we all tried our best, no one has had so much influence over you as him, or been able to make you take nourishment like he could."

"Did he hear me talk?" asked Nell fearfully.

"Hear you talk, child; well, pretty nearly all Usk heard you talk, you used to scream so loud sometimes. But it was all nonsense. No one could understand it, so you needn't be afraid you told any of your little secrets. I couldn't make head nor tail of what you said, nor Hugh either. But his presence seemed to

comfort you, so I let the poor lad have his way. He was nearly broken-hearted when he left the farm last night, you were so terribly weak and low. I expect he'll nearly go out of his mind when he hears the news I shall have to tell him this evening. He'll offer up a grand prayer of thanksgiving before he goes to his bed to-night."

But at this juncture, seeing that Nell's weary eyes had closed again, Mrs. Llewellyn covered her carefully with the bedclothes, and went to communicate the fact of her improvement to the farmer. As the husband and wife were sitting at their evening meal, Hugh Owen, as usual, walked in. His face was very pale, and his expression careworn. His first anxious inquiry was naturally for Nell. When he heard the great improvement that had taken place in her, and that Doctor Cowell had said at his last visit that she was now on the road to recovery, his pallid cheeks glowed with excitement.

"God Almighty be thanked for all His goodness!" he said solemnly, and then added rapidly,—"May I see her, Mrs. Llewellyn? Just for one moment. I will not speak to her, if you do not think it desirable, but to see her once more sensible and in her right mind would make me so happy. I shall hardly be able to believe the joyful news is true otherwise."

The mother looked doubtful.

"Well, I don't quite know how Nell would take it, my lad. You've been main good to her, I know; but it wouldn't do to upset her now, and you would be the last to wish it."

"Upset her! Oh, no; but I have sat by her so often during her illness."

"Aye, when she wasn't aware of your presence; that makes all the difference. But," noting the look of disappointment in the young man's face, she added, "I'll just step up and see how matters are now; and if Nell's sleeping you shall have a peep at her, in return for all your goodness."

The young man thanked her, and in a few minutes she came back to say that her daughter was fast asleep, and, if Hugh would follow her, he should see so for himself. He rose at once, his face radiant with joy, and crept on tip-toe up the stairs and into the familiar bedroom. There lay Nell, prostrate in the sleep of exhaustion—her hands folded together on the coverlet, her head well back on her pillow, her mouth slightly parted, her breathing as regular and calm as that of an infant. At the sight Hugh's eyes filled with tears.

"Doesn't she look as if she were praying—thanking God for His goodness to her?" he whispered to Mrs. Llewellyn. "Oh, let us pray too. We can never thank Him enough for all He has done for us."

And he fell on his knees by the bedside, Mrs. Llewellyn following his example.

"Oh, Father, God, Protector, Friend," said the young man, with tears running down his worn cheeks, "what can we render to Thee for all Thou art to us, for all Thou doest for us? We have cried to Thee in our distress, and Thou hast heard our cry. We wept in our abject fear of loss, and Thou hast dried our tears. Thou hast sent Thy messenger angels, with healing in their wings, to succour this dear child of Thine—this dear companion of ours—and give her and us alike time to do something to prove the sense of gratitude we have for Thy great love to us. Oh, Father, make us more grateful, more thankful, more resolved to live the lives which Thou hast given us, to Thee, more careful of the beautiful, earthly love with which Thou hast brightened and made happy these lives. Amen."

No one could mistake the earnestness and fervour and genuineness of this address, which Hugh delivered as simply as if he had been speaking to his earthly father in his earthly home. Mrs. Llewellyn could not restrain mingling her tears with his. She told the farmer afterwards that Hugh's way of praying made her feel as if the Almighty were standing just beside them where they knelt. Softly as the young minister had preferred his petition, it seemed to have reached the sleeper's ear, even through her dreams, for as his "Amen"

fell on the air, Nell opened her eyes and said very softly,—

"Thank you, Hugh."

The sound of her voice, and the assurance that his presence had not disturbed her, so moved his sensitive disposition that he sprung forward, and, sinking again upon his knees by her side, raised her thin hand to his lips and kissed it several times in succession, whilst his dark eyes glowed with feeling.

"Thank you," again sighed Nell. "Good-night."

"Yes, yes, my lad, it must be good-night, for you mustn't stay here!" exclaimed Mrs. Llewellyn, who was fearful of the effects of any agitation on her invalid. "You've had your wish and seen Nell, and you've prayed a beautiful prayer, and now you must come back to the parlour with me and have a bit of supper. Go down to the kitchen, Betsy," she continued to the old nurse, "and get our Nell another drop of beef-tea, and I'll be up to see after her as soon as the table's cleared. Bless her heart! if she isn't off again. She'll want all the sleep she can get now, to make up for the sore time she's passed through. Come, Hugh."

But the young minister refused all her offers of hospitality. He felt as if food would choke him just then. He wanted to be alone to think of his great and unexpected joy—to thank the Giver of it over and over again. He walked home through the crisp October

evening, wandering far afield, in order to commune with his own thoughts, and enlarging the prayer of thankfulness, with which his heart was bursting, by another petition, that God, who had given this woman back to him and her friends, would give her to him also and altogether as his wife.

He did not see Nell again during the period of convalescence that she spent in her own room. But not one day passed without his presence at the farm and his thoughts of her being brought to her notice by some little offering from his hands. One day it would be a bunch of glowing chrysanthemums, from the deepest bronze to the palest pink and purest white. The next, he brought a basket of fruit—a cluster of hothouse grapes—to get which he had walked for miles, or a bunch of bananas, or anything which was considered a dainty in Usk. Once he sent her a few verses of a hymn, neatly copied out on fair paper; but these Nell put on one side with a smile which savoured of contempt. She was now fairly on the road for recovery; and even Hetty, who had been going backwards and forwards every day, began to find the walk from Dale Farm was rather long, and that her mother-in-law needed a little more of her company. The services of the doctor and old Betsy Hobbs were dispensed with, and Mrs. Llewellyn found there was no longer any necessity for her to leave all the churning and

baking to her farm maids, but that she could devote the usual time to them herself. It was an accredited fact that Nell had been snatched from the jaws of death, and that her relatives need have no more fears on her account. Still Hugh Owen continued to pay her his daily attentions, till she, like women courted by men for whom they have no fancy, began to weary of seeing the flowers and fruit and books coming in every afternoon, and to cast them somewhat contemptuously aside. It was a grand day at Panty-cuckoo Farm when she first came down the stairs, supported by her father and mother—very shaky and weak, but really well again, and saying good-bye to bed in the daytime for good and all. Mrs. Llewellyn was a proud and happy woman when she saw her daughter installed on the solitary sofa which the house could boast of, swathed round in shawls and blankets, and a very ghost of her former self, but yet alive, and only needing time to make her strong again.

"Well, my dear lass," she said, as she helped Nell to her cup of tea, "I never thought at one time to see you on that sofa again, nor downstairs at all, except it was in your coffin. You've got a lot to be thankful for, Nell; it's not many constitutions that could have weathered such an illness."

Nell sipped the tea she held in her hand, and wondered what was the use of coming back to a world

that didn't want her, and which she didn't want. But she was still too weak to argue, even if she would have argued such a subject with her mother. As the meal was in the course of progress a gentle tap sounded on the outer door.

"Now, I'll bet that's Hugh Owen, dear lad!" exclaimed Mrs. Llewellyn briskly, as she rose to answer it. "He'll be main pleased and surprised to see our Nell downstairs. He's been so curious to hear when the doctor would let her get up, and I wouldn't tell him, just to keep him a bit in suspense."

She opened the door as she spoke, calling out,—

"How are ye, Hugh, my lad? Come in, do. We've got company to tea to-night, and you're heartily welcome."

But Hugh shrunk back.

"I won't disturb you if you've company, Mrs. Llewellyn," he said. "I only stepped over to hear how your daughter is this evening, and to ask her acceptance of these," and he shyly held out a bouquet of hot-house flowers.

"Eh, Hugh, but they're very beautiful. Wherever did you get them?" said Mrs. Llewellyn.

"I've a friend in the florist way up by Pontypool," he answered, "and I thought Nell might like them to make her room gay."

"To be sure she will, and give you many thanks in return. Come in and give them her yourself."

"Oh, may I?" said Hugh, as he walked gladly over the threshold and saw Nell lying on the couch and holding out an attenuated hand to him.

She looked thinner even than when she had been confined to bed. People do, as a rule, when they first come downstairs. Her cheeks were sunken and white as death itself, and her eyes seemed preternaturally large and staring. But it was Nell, and Hugh Owen's face grew scarlet at the mere sight of her.

"Oh, Nell!" he exclaimed, as he advanced quickly to grasp her outstretched hand, "this *is* a joyful surprise to see you downstairs again. Your mother had not prepared me for it. Are you sure you feel none the worse for the exertion—that it will not do you any harm?"

Nell was about to reply, but Mrs. Llewellyn anticipated her.

"Now, my lad!" she exclaimed, rather tartly, "don't you make a fool of yourself. You don't suppose, do you, that I would let my lass injure her health after all the trouble and anxiety we've had on her account, by letting her do anything rash? Don't you make any mistake about it, Hugh. What Nell's mother don't foresee for her, no one else will, let alone a stripling like yourself."

"Oh, Mrs. Llewellyn!" exclaimed the young man, turning all kinds of colours, "I am sure you must know —you cannot think that I would presume—who knows better than I, how you have nursed and watched over her? Only I—I—the natural anxiety, you know—"

"Oh, yes, my lad, I know all about it. You needn't stammer in that fashion, nor take the trouble to explain, and I've no call to find fault with you either, for you've been the kindest friend poor Nell has had in her sickness, and the most thoughtful, not excepting her own sister. But don't fear but what she's well looked after, though I hope the day's not far distant now when she'll look after herself."

"And so do I," said young Owen. "You're looking bravely, Nell, considering what you've gone through. It's been a sore time with you. Please God it may be the last."

"Mother tells me you've been very good to me through it all, Hugh," replied Nell, in a low voice, "and prayed for my recovery scores of times. You meant it kindly, I know, though perhaps whilst you were about it, it would have been better to have asked the Lord to let me go."

Mrs. Llewellyn, seeing Nell was in good hands, had wandered away after some of her household arrangements, and left them by themselves.

"No, Nell, no; not whilst He has work for you to do here, and permits you to remain. Besides, think what a grief it would have been to your father and mother and sister—and to me, if you had died. We could not have easily filled your place, Nell. You musn't be sorry because you have been spared to make us happy. And why should you want to go so soon? You are young and beautiful—you don't mind an old friend like me telling you that, do you?—and have all your life before you. It is unnatural that you should be loath to live. It can only be your extreme weakness that makes you say so."

"If you knew me better, Hugh, you would not talk like that. My life is past—not to come—and there seems nothing (that I can see) for me to do. I don't want to look back, and the future is a blank—a dark, horrible uncertainty, in which I can discern no good in living. I shall help mother in the farmhouse work, of course, now I have come home, but it will not be any pleasure to me. It is so different from what I have been accustomed to, and when all's said and done a dairymaid would do it far better than I. I have grown beyond it, in fact (though you mustn't tell mother I said so for all the world), and so—and so—I think you are my friend, Hugh, and I tell you the truth—I would have much rather died."

The young man looked distressed. He guessed

there was more behind this statement than Nell would confess. But he replied to her appeal energetically.

"Your friend, Nell. You may do more than *think* it. You may regard it as an undoubted fact. I only wish I could, or I dared make you understand how much I am your friend. And as for there being no work for you to do, except household drudgery, Oh! if you will listen to me, I can tell you of glorious work that lies close to your hand—work that would bring you both peace and happiness. Will you let me show it you, dear Nell? Will you listen to me whilst I point it out to you?"

"Another time, Hugh. Not just now, thank you, for my brain is still too weak to understand half I hear. When I am stronger, and able to take an interest in things again, you shall talk to me as much as you like, for I am very grateful to you for all your goodness to me, and shall be glad to return it in any way I can."

So Hugh left her with a heart brimming over with content, and a great hope springing up in it for the future.

CHAPTER XII.

SUCH of the villagers of Usk who met Hugh Owen during the few days that succeeded this interview spoke to each other with surprise of the alteration that had taken place in his demeanour. The sober, grave, young minister, who had seldom smiled, and usually appeared too wrapped in his own thoughts to take much part in what went on before him, was now to be seen with a beaming countenance and an animated welcome for all whom he met.

"Why, farmer," quoth one worthy to Mr. Owen, "but what's come to yon lad of yourn, the minister? Is he going to be elected an elder, or is he thinking of getting spliced?"

"Spliced!" roared the farmer, who, notwithstanding his pride in his learning and attainments, cherished rather a mean opinion of his eldest son as a man. "*Spliced!* the Lord save us, no! Where would Hugh get the courage to ask a lass to have him? He can't so much as look them in the face; and when his mother or Hetty brings one of the neighbours' girls in for a bit of a talk, he sneaks out at the back door with his

tail between his legs, for all the world like a kicked cur. Married! Hugh will never be married. He wouldn't know what to do with a wife if he'd got one, not he. He's a minister, is Hugh—just that and nothing more. What makes you ask such a thing, Ben?"

"Why because I met him near Thomson's patch this afternoon, with his mouth one grin, and talking to himself as if he was preaching. 'Why minister,' I says, 'are you making up your next sermon?' and he says, 'No, Ben,' he says, 'I'm trying over a thanksgiving service for myself.' And he smiled as if someone had left him a fortune."

"And yesterday," interposed a woman, "when my little Nan ran across the road and fell down, and whimpered a bit, as children will, Hugh he was after her in a minute, and picked her up, and there he *did* kiss her as I never see. Nan, she didn't know what to make of it, and stopped crying from sheer surprise, and when I called out, 'That's right, minister, nothing like getting your hand in for nursing,' he reddened, Lor'! just like my turkey cock when the lads throw stones at him."

"Well, my woman, you needn't think he's going to nurse any of his own for all that. Hugh is too much of a scholar to bear the noise of children in the house. If Hetty ever gets any little ones I expect he'll find

another place for himself. He said the other night that the old farm would never seem like the same again if there was babies in it."

"He's up a deal at Panty-cuckoo, I hear," said the first speaker.

"Oh, aye. That's all in his own line," replied the farmer. "The poor lass up there has been mortal bad —nearly dead, by my missus's account—and Hugh's been praying with her and for her, and such like. And his prayers have been heard, it seems, for my daughter-in-law says her sister is downstairs again, and in a fair way to mend. I expect she brought the fever from London town with her. We're not used to have such fads in Usk. A young lass stricken down like an old woman. 'Twas an ugly sight, and I'm main glad, for the Llewellyns' sake, as she's been spared. 'Twould have been a sad coming-home else."

"That it would," said his friend Ben. "And I expect it was thinking over the prayers he has put up for her as made the minister so smiling this afternoon. Well, he have cause to be proud, and he do pray beautiful, to be sure. My old woman say he bawl them so loud, that if the Lord can't hear *him* it's no manner of use any of us trying for ourselves. Well, morning to ye, farmer," and off went Ben on his own business.

Hugh Owen would not have been over-pleased could he have heard them discussing his private feelings after this fashion; but, luckily for him, he did not hear them. It is lucky for all of us when we do not hear what our neighbours say of us behind our backs. We should not have an acquaintance left in the world if we did. But the young minister went on his way, little dreaming that anyone guessed the sweet, sacred hope which he was cherishing in his heart of hearts, and which he only waited for Nell's complete convalescence to confide to her. The time for doing so arrived (for him) only too soon, and often afterwards he wished he had been content to nurse his love for her in secret.

It was one day when she was downstairs again, looking so much older since her illness that people who had only known her in London would hardly have recognised her, that Hugh asked Nell if she would grant him an hour's conversation. Even then she did not think the request was made for more than friendship, for she had spoken to Hugh Owen of her desire to train herself for better things than farm work, that she might be able, perhaps, to keep a comfortable home for her parents when they were past labour. This appeared to Nell the only ambition that could give her any interest in life again—the idea that she would repay in some measure her father's and mother's

great love for her. Hugh might have thought of something, or heard of something, so she granted him the interview he asked for gladly, and received him with a kind smile and an outstretched hand, which he grasped eagerly and detained long.

"You are quite well again now, Nell," he said, as he looked into her face, which was still so beautiful, though pale and worn.

"Yes, quite well, Hugh, thank you," she replied. "I walked across the Park this morning to see Sir Archibald's old housekeeper, Mrs. Hody, and had quite a long chat with her. The family is not coming down for Christmas this year, she tells me, but have put it off till the cub-hunting begins, and then the Hall will be full. She gave me a clutch of golden pheasants' eggs. I am going to set them under one of our hens. Don't you like golden pheasants, Hugh? I think they are such lovely creatures."

"I like and admire all God's creatures, Nell, and cannot understand anyone doing otherwise. I well remember your love for animals as a child, and how you smacked my face once for putting your kitten up on the roof of the stable, where she couldn't get down."

"Did I? That was very rude. But I'm afraid, from what I can remember, that I always treated you rather badly, poor Hugh, and encroached upon your kindness

to me. You have always been kind to me, and lately most of all. Mother believes I owe my life to you."

"No, no, Nell, you owe it to the dear God, Who would not see us all plunged into despair by your loss —*I* most of all. But if you really think you owe me ever so little, you can return it a hundredfold, if you will."

Nell turned towards him eagerly.

"Oh, Hugh, how? Tell me, and I will do it. Don't think I have so many friends that I can afford to undervalue your friendship. I have very few friends, Hugh—very, *very* few," said the girl, with a quivering lip.

"How can you repay me?" repeated the young man, musingly. "Is it possible you do not guess? Nell, do you know, have you ever thought why I lead such a lonely life, why I have not married like Will? My brother is five years younger than myself, and most of the lads in Usk are thinking of getting a wife as soon as they can make their pound or thirty shillings a week. I make four times that as a minister, Nell, and most girls would think me well able to keep them in comfort and respectability. Yet I have never given a thought to one of them—*why?*"

"Because you're a minister, I suppose," replied Nell, "and all your mind is set upon your chapel and sermons and the open-air preaching. Isn't that it?" with a shy

glance upwards to see how he took the suggestion. But Hugh only sighed and turned away.

"No, no; why should that be it? Because I'm a minister, and want to do all I can for God whilst I live, am I the less a man with less of a man's cravings for love and companionship? No, Nell, there is a reason for it, but a very different one from what you imagine. The reason I have never given a thought to marriage yet is because when I was a lanky, awkward lad, there was a little maid whom I used to call my sweetheart —who used to let me carry her over the boulders in the river, to go with her blackberrying, to walk beside her as she went to and came from church. Though, as we grew up, I was separated from that little maid, Nell, I never forgot her, and I never shall. No other will take her place with me."

"Oh, don't say that, Hugh, pray don't say that!" cried Nell, with visible agitation. "You mustn't! It is folly—worse than folly, for that little maid will never be yours again—never, never!"

She uttered the last words with so deep a sigh that it sounded almost like a requiem over her departed, innocent childhood. But Hugh would not accept it as such.

"But why, dear Nell?" he questioned. "We have met again, and we are both free. What objection can there be to our marriage, if *you* have none? I would

not hurry you. You should name your own time, only let us be engaged. I have told you that I can keep you in comfort, and if parting with your parents is an obstacle, I'll consent to anything you think best. Only don't send me away without hope. You will take all the spirit out of my life and work if you do. I think your people like me—I don't anticipate any trouble with them, but the word that is to make me happy must come from *your* lips, Nell—from yours alone!"

"It can never come from them," answered Nell sadly.

"Don't say that, my little sweetheart of olden days. Oh, Nell, if you only knew, if I could only make you understand how I have kept your image in my heart all these years, how your face has come between me and my duties, till I've had to drive it away by sheer force of will. When I found you had come back to Usk, I thought God had sent you expressly for me. Don't say now, after all my hopes and longings to meet you again—after you have come back from the grave to me, Nell—don't say, for God's sake, that it has been all in vain!"

He bowed his head upon his outstretched arm as he spoke, and Nell knew, though she could not see, that he was weeping.

"What can I say to you, Hugh," she began, after a pause. "I *do* love you for all your goodness to me,

but not in that way. I cannot be your wife. If you knew me as well as I know myself, you would never ask it, for I am not fit for it, Hugh. I am not worthy."

The young man raised his head in astonishment.

"Not worthy? What do you mean? *You,* who are as far above me as the stars in heaven. It is *I* who have no right to aspire to be your husband—a rough, country clod like me, only, only—I would love you with the best, Nell, if I could but make you believe it."

"I *do* believe it, Hugh, and I am sorry it should be so, because my love for you is so different from yours. I regard you as a dear friend. I have no other love to give you."

"You care for some other man," said Hugh, with the quick jealousy of lovers. "You are engaged to be married. Oh, why did you not tell me so before? Why have you let me go on seeing you—talking with you and longing for you, without giving me one hint that you had bound yourself to marry another man? It was cruel of you, Nell—very, very cruel. You might have had more mercy on an unfortunate fellow who has loved you all his life."

Nell shook her head.

"But I'm not bound to marry another man; I shall never marry," she said in a low voice.

"Then, why are you so hard on me? Tell me the

reason, Nell. There *must* be a reason for your refusal. You owe me so much for the pain you've made me suffer."

"Oh, *how* can I tell you? What good would it do you to hear?" she exclaimed passionately. "Cannot you understand that there may be a hundred things in a girl's life that make her feel indisposed to marry the first man who asks her?"

"Perhaps so," he said mournfully; "I know so little of girls or their feelings. But I think you might give me a better reason for your refusal, than that you are determined not to marry."

"Can I trust you with the story of my life?" she asked. "Oh, yes, I'm sure I can. You are good and faithful, and you would never betray my confidence to father, or mother, or Hetty, or disgrace me in the eyes of the world."

Hugh Owen grew pale at the idea, but he answered,—

"Disgrace you? How can you think it for a moment? I would sooner disgrace myself. But how could I do it, Nell? What can you have ever done to make you speak like that?"

"I've done what the worst woman you've ever met has done. Hugh, you have forced the truth from me. Don't blame me if it hurts you. I am not a good girl, like Hetty, or Sarah Kingston, or Rachel Grove. I'm

not fit to speak to any one of them. I have no right to be at Panty-cuckoo Farm. If father knew all, perhaps he'd turn me out again. I—I—have *fallen,* Hugh! and now you know the worst!"

The worst seemed very bad for him to know. As the terrible confession left her, he turned his dark, thoughtful face aside, and bit his lips till the blood came, but he did not say a word. Nell had told him the bitter truth almost defiantly, but the utter silence by which it was succeeded did not please her. What right had this man, who had worried her into saying what she never said to any other creature, to sit there and upbraid her by his silence? She felt as if she wanted to shake him.

"Speak, speak!" she cried at last, impatiently. "Say what you like; call me all the bad names you have ever heard applied in such cases, but say something, for goodness' sake. Have you never heard of such a thing before? Have none of the girls in Usk ever made a false step in their lives? Don't sit there as if the news had turned you to stone, or you will drive me mad!"

Then he raised his white, strained face, and confronted her,—

"My poor, dear girl!" he said, "who am I, that I should condemn you? I am far too conscious of my own besetting sins. But how did this awful misfortune

happen? Who was the man? Has he deserted you? Won't you tell me, Nell?"

"It happened soon after I went to London," she answered, in a more subdued voice. "I was very young at the time, you know, Hugh, and very ignorant of the world and the world's ways. He—he—was a gentleman, and I loved him, and he persuaded me. That is the whole story, but it has broken my heart."

"But where is this 'gentleman' now? Cannot he be induced to make you reparation?" asked Hugh, with set teeth.

"Reparation! What reparation can he make? Do you mean marriage? What gentleman would marry a poor girl like me—a common farmer's daughter? And if it were likely, do you suppose that I would stoop to become the wife of a man who did not *want* to marry me—who did so on compulsion? You don't know me, Hugh."

"But, Nell, my dear Nell, do you mean to tell me that this inhuman brute seduced you, and then deserted you? What have you been doing since, Nell? Where have you been living? I thought you came here from service at the Earl of Ilfracombe's?"

"So I did."

"And you were with him for three years?"

"I was," replied Nell, who felt as if her secret were being drawn from her, bit by bit.

"Then you had a shelter and a home. Oh, Nell, do you mean to tell me that you did this thing of your own free will, knowing that it could not last, nor end lawfully? When you had a refuge and an honourable service, did you still consent to live in concubinage with this gentleman—knowing he only kept you as a toy which he could get rid of whenever the whim suited him?"

"I did!" she cried defiantly, "if you will have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—there it is. I loved him, and I lived with him of my free consent. It was my heaven to live with him. I never regretted it. I only regretted when it came to an end."

"Oh, Nell," he said, "I thought higher of you than that."

His evident misery touched her.

"Hugh, how can I make you understand?" she cried. "I believed it was for ever. I knew we could never be married, because he was so much above me; but I thought—he told me—that we should never part. I considered myself his wife, I did indeed; and when I was undeceived it nearly killed me."

And, breaking down for the first time, Nell burst into tears.

"There, there, don't cry," said Hugh, wearily. "Remember, your mother might come in at any moment,

and ask the reason of your tears. Try and restrain yourself. Your sad secret is safe with me, rely on that. Only—only let us consider, is there really no remedy for your trouble?"

"How can there be? He is married; that is why I am here. For three years I was the happiest woman under the sun. He is a rich man, and he gave me more than I ever desired; not that I cared for anything in comparison with his love. Ah, if he had only left me that, I would have begged in the streets by his side and been happy. But it all came to an end. He had gone away for a little while, and I had not the least idea that he was not coming back again. I was only longing and hoping for his return; and then one day his lawyer called to tell me that my darling—I mean that he was going to marry some lady, and I could be nothing ever to him again. Hugh, it drove me mad. I didn't know what I was doing. I rushed out of the house and threw myself into the river."

"Merciful God!" exclaimed the young man, losing all control over himself.

"I did. Father and mother think I left service in a regular way; but they don't know in London where I'm gone. They never saw me again. I daresay they think I'm drowned. Was it very wicked, Hugh? I did so long to die. Isn't it funny that, first, I should have thrown myself into the water and been picked out again,

and then had this bad illness, and still I can't die? Why won't God let me end it all?"

"Because He designs you for better things, my poor Nell," said her companion.

"I don't think so. Better things are not in my way. I believe I shall die a violent death after all. I remember some time ago—ah! it was the races *he* took me to—a gipsy told my fortune, and she said the same thing, that I should come to a violent end. It little matters to me, so long as it gives me forgetfulness and rest."

"You mustn't talk like that," said Hugh, reprovingly. "We must all die in God's time, and it is our duty to wait for it. But do you mean to say that this man has cast you off without a thought, Nell?"

"Oh, no! he offered, or his lawyer did, to settle money on me, but I would not take it. What did I want with money without *him?*"

"You did right to refuse it. Money coming from such a source could have brought no blessing with it. But surely you do not lament the loss of this scoundrel, who, not content with betraying you, has left you in this heartless manner for another woman?"

But no true woman ever let another man abuse her lover, however guilty he might be, without resenting it. Least of all women was Nell Llewellyn likely to stand such a thing.

"How *dare* you call him by such a name?" she cried angrily. "Whatever he may have done, it is not *your* place to resent it. I am nothing to *you*. He is not a scoundrel. There never was a more honourable, kind-hearted, generous creature born. He would never have deserted me if it had not been for his lawyer, who was always dinning into his ears that with such a property it was his duty to marry. And the woman, too, whom he has married—she inveigled him into it. I know she did. Oh, Hugh, if I could only kill her how happy I should be. If I could be in the same room with her for five minutes, with a knife in my hand, and stab her with it to the very heart, and see her die—die—with pain and anguish as she has made my heart die, I think I should be happy."

"Nell, you shock and terrify me!" exclaimed the young man. "Do you know what you are saying? Do you know that in harbouring such feelings you are as guilty as if you had committed the crime itself? What has this poor lady done to injure you that you should cherish such animosity against her?"

"*What has she done?*" echoed Nell fiercely. "Why she has taken my lover—the man whom I adored—from me. Torn him from my very arms. She has destroyed my happiness—my life. Made the world a howling wilderness. Left my heart bare, and striped, and empty. And I would make her die a thousand

deaths for it if I could. I would tear her false heart from her body and throw it to the dogs to eat."

Nell's eyes were flashing. Her head was thrown back defiantly in the air as she spoke; her teeth were clenched; she looked like a beautiful, bloodthirsty tigress panting to fasten on her prey. But Hugh Owen saw no beauty in her attitudes or expression. He rose hastily from his chair, and moved towards the door. His action arrested her attention.

"Stop," she cried. "Where are you going? Why do you leave me alone?"

"Because I cannot bear to listen to you whilst you blaspheme like that, Nell. Because it is too dreadful to me to hear you railing against the wisdom of God, who has seen fit to bring you to a sense of the life you were leading, by wresting it from your grasp. You have called me your friend. So I am; but it is not the act of a friend to encourage you in such vindictive feelings. I could remain your friend though I knew you guilty of every weakness common to human nature, but I dare not take the hand of a woman who deliberately desires the death of a fellow creature. Depend on it, Nell, that this unfortunate lady, who has married the man who behaved so basely to you, will have enough trouble without you wishing her more. Were it justifiable to harbour the thought of vengeance on any one, yours might, with more propriety, be directed

towards him who has probably deceived his wife as much as he deceived you!"

"If that is the spirit in which you receive my confidence," said Nell hotly, "I wish I had never confided in you. Perhaps the next thing you will consider it right to do will be to proclaim my antecedents to the people of Usk. Make them the subject of your next sermon maybe! I am sure they would form a most edifying discourse on the wickedness of the world, (and London world in particular), especially when the victim is close at hand to be trotted out in evidence of the truth of what you say."

Hugh raised his dark, melancholy eyes to her reproachfully.

"Have I deserved that of you, Nell?" he asked.

"I don't care whether you have or not. I see very plainly that I have made a fool of myself. There was no occasion for me to tell you anything; but I fancied I should have your sympathy, and blurted it out, and my reward is to be accused of blasphemy. It is my own fault; but now that you have wrung my secret from me, for pity's sake keep it."

"Oh, Nell, how can you so distrust me? Your secret is as sacred with me as if you were in your grave. What a brute you must think me to imagine otherwise."

"I don't know," she answered wearily. "I have no faith in anybody or anything now. Why should you

behave better to me than the rest of the world has done? No, don't touch me," as he approached her, holding out his hand. "Your reproaches have turned all my milk of human kindness into gall. Go away; there's a good man, and leave me to myself. It is useless to suppose you could understand my feelings or my heart. You must have gone through the mill as I have before you do."

"At least, Nell, you will let me remain your friend," he said in a voice of pain.

"No, no, I want no friends—nothing. Leave me with my memories. You cannot understand them; but they are all that remain to me now. Go on serving God; devoting all your time and your energies to Him, and wait till He gives you a blow in the face, like mine, and see what you think of His loving-kindness then. It'll come some day; for heaven doesn't appear to spare the white sheep any more than the black ones. We all get it sooner or later. When you get yours you may think you were a little hard on me."

"I think I have got it already," murmured poor Hugh, half to himself. "Good-bye, Nell."

"Oh, go, do," she cried impetuously, "and never come here again. After what you have said to-day your presence can only be an extra pain to me, and I have enough of that already. Go on with your praying and preaching, and don't think of me. I sha'n't come

to hear any more of it. It does me no good, and it might do me harm. It might make my hand unsteady," she continued, with a significant glance, "when the time comes, *and it has that knife in it!*"

She laughed mockingly in his face as she delivered this parting shot, and Hugh Owen, with a deep sob in his throat, turned on his heel, and walked quickly away from Panty-cuckoo Farm.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE Countess of Ilfracombe had had no desire to meet Mr. Portland again; in fact, she would have declined the honour, had she not been afraid of exciting the suspicions of the earl; and she had not been under the same roof with him for more than a few days, before she was heartily sorry that she had not done so. Nora was a flirt, there was no question of that. She could keep a dozen men at her feet at the same time, and let each of them imagine he was the favoured individual. But she was not a fool. She had a countess's coronet on her head, and she had no intention of soiling or risking the treasure she had won. Mr. Jack Portland was, as the reader will have guessed, the same admirer of whom Nora had spoken to Ilfracombe before their marriage, as having hair of the "goldenest golden" hue, and who was the only man for

whose loss she had ever shed a tear. The earl had been a little jealous at the time, but he had forgotten the circumstance long ago. When the countess heard she was destined to meet her old flame again, and as the intimate friend of her husband, she had felt rather afraid lest her heart should ache a little from the encounter. But the first glance at him had dispelled this idea. Two years is not a long time in reality, but it is far too long to indulge in continual dissipation with impunity. It had wrought havoc with the charms of Mr. Jack Portland. His manly figure had begun to show signs of *embonpoint*. His complexion was very florid, and there were dropsical-looking bags under his bloodshot eyes, and sundry rolls of flesh rising above the back of his collar, which are not very attractive in the eyes of ladies. His "goldenest golden" hair had commenced to thin on the top, and his heated breath was too often tainted with the fumes of alcohol. The habits he had indulged in had destroyed the little modesty Mr. Portland had ever possessed, and he was so presuming in his words and looks, that Nora had been on the point, more than once since he had come down to Thistlemere, of telling him to hold his tongue or leave the house. But then, there were those unfortunate letters of hers, which he retained, and the importance of the contents of which perhaps she exaggerated. The fact is, that in the days when Mr.

Portland came to Malta to stay with the Lovelesses, he and Nora had made very fierce love to each other. There was no denying that, and the young lady herself had never pretended to be a model of all the domestic virtues. Her father had been very angry with her, and threatened to send her to England to a boarding-school. But the mischief had been done by the time Sir Richard discovered it. People generally lock the door after the steed has been stolen. Not that it had gone quite so far with Miss Nora Abinger as that; but a great deal of folly had passed between her and handsome Jack Portland, a good many secret meetings had taken place, and many letters written. Oh, those written protestations of eternal fidelity; those allusions to the past; those hopes for the future; how much mischief have they not done in this world. We talk of women's tongues; they might chatter to all eternity, and not bring one half the trouble in their train as their too ready pens create. Mr. Portland, not being approved of by the admiral, had found his visits to the house not so welcome as they might have been, and so the lovers resorted to writing as a vent for their feelings, and perhaps wrote more than they really felt—certainly more than they cared to think about or look back upon. Nora positively shivered when she thought what might, or might not be, in those letters which Mr. Portland had promised to deliver up to her as soon as he returned

to town. Meanwhile, she was on tenderhooks and afraid to a degree of offending the man who held such a sword of Damocles over her head, and presumed on his power, to treat her exactly as he chose, with coldness or familiarity. But if she attempted to resent his conduct, Mr. Portland could always give her a quiet hint on the sly, that she had better be very polite to him. So her life on first coming to her husband's home was not one of roses. She could remember the time when she had believed she loved Jack Portland, but she wondered at herself for having done so now. Perhaps it was entirely the alteration which had taken place in himself, but more likely that her taste had refined and become more exclusive with the passing years. At anyrate, his present conduct towards her, in its quiet insolence and presumption, made her loathe and hate him. She wondered sometimes that her husband did not perceive the aversion she had for his chosen friend, but Ilfracombe had been very subdued and melancholy since the day of their arrival. As Nora was so new to English society, and could not be presented at Court till the following spring, they had decided to pass their first Christmas very quietly, the Dowager Lady Ilfracombe, and the earl's two sisters, Lady Laura and Lady Blanche Devenish, being, with the exception of the obnoxious Jack Portland, the only guests at Thistlemere. The Ladies Devenish were not disposed to make her

life any easier than it needed to be to the youthful countess. In the first place, they were both considerably older than their brother, and resented Nora's twenty years and her vicacity and independence as an affront to themselves. She ought to have been humbler in their opinion, and more alive to the honour that had been accorded her. To hear her talking to the earl on terms of the most perfect familiarity, and just as if he had been a commoner, like her own people, offended them. And then they considered that Ilfracombe should have married into the aristocracy, and chosen a woman as high born as himself. So they "held their heads high" (as the servants would have said) in consequence, and elevated their eyebrows at Nora's repartees, when she was conversing with gentlemen, and frowned at her boldness in giving her opinion, especially if it happened to clash with their own. The Dowager Countess did not agree with her daughters. She thought Nora a very clever, smart and fashionable woman, and quite capable of filling the position to which her son had raised her, and supporting her title with dignity.

"Well, I don't agree with you, mamma," said Lady Blanche. "I consider she is far too forward in her manners with gentlemen. I'm sure the way in which Mr. Portland leans over her when she is singing is quite disgusting. I wonder Ilfracombe does not take some notice of it. And what could be more undignified than

her jumping up last evening to show Lord Babbage what she calls the "Boston lurch?" Such a name too. I think some of her expressions are most vulgar. I heard her tell Ilfracombe that some place they went to together was 'confoundedly slow.' Fancy, a lady swearing! If those are to be the manners of the new aristocracy, commend me to the old."

"Well, my dear," said her easy-going mother, "you know that times are altered from what they were. Now that so many of our noblemen are marrying American heiresses for money, you must expect to see a difference. Look at the Duke of Mussleton and Lord Tottenham! One married a music-hall singer, and the other, somebody a great deal worse! Young men will have their own way in these days. We must be thankful that Ilfracombe has chosen a nice, lady-like, intelligent girl for his wife. For my part, I like Nora, and think she will make him very happy. And," lowering her voice, "you know, my dear girls, that, considering the dreadful life he led before, and the *awful* creature he introduced into his house, we really should be very thankful he has married at all. Mr. Sterndale was afraid, at one time, that nothing would break that business off. But I feel sure Ilfracombe has forgotten all about it. He seems quite devoted to his wife."

"Do you really think so, mamma?" asked Lady Laura. "I think you are very short-sighted. Blanche

and I have often said we were afraid he doesn't care a pin for her. Just see how melancholy and low-spirited he seems. He goes about with a face like a hatchet. I asked Nora yesterday what on earth was the matter with him—if he were ill—and she replied she was sure she didn't know. Such an indifferent answer, it struck me, for a young wife. But really one does not know what to make of the girls now-a-days. They are quite different from what they were a few years ago. I am sure of one thing, that Nora has no sense of the responsibility of marrying into the aristocracy. I heard her say once that she would just as soon Ilfracombe had been a tradesman!"

"Oh, that must have been meant for impertinence!" exclaimed Lady Blanche.

"What did she marry him for, then? I am sure she can't love him. She has told me she was engaged to six men at one time. Really, mamma, her conversation at times is not fit for Laura and me to listen to."

"Now you're going a great deal too far," said the old countess, "and I won't let you speak of Nora in that way. Remember, if you please, that she is the head of the family, and that some day you may both be dependent on her for a chaperon."

This prospect silenced the Ladies Devenish for a time at least, and the subject of the young Countess of Ilfracombe was dropped by mutual consent. But their

remarks on their brother's low spirits attracted Nora's attention to her husband, when she soon perceived that they were right. Ilfracombe was certainly depressed. He seldom joined in the general conversation, and when he did his voice was low and grave. The earl was not a brilliant talker, as has been said before, but he had always been able to hold his own when alone with his wife, and used to relate every little incident that had occurred during the day to her as soon as they found themselves shut in from the eyes of the world. But he had dropped even this. Once or twice she had rallied him on his low spirits, and had made him still graver in consequence. But when others began to notice his moodiness, and make unkind remarks on it, Nora thought it was time, for her own sake, to try and find out the cause. It was after a long evening spent in his company, during which Ilfracombe had let Jack Portland and two or three other guests do all the talking, that his wife attacked him on the subject. Seizing hold of his arm as he was about to pass from her bedroom to his dressing-room, she swung him round and pulled him down upon the sofa by her side.

"Not yet, Ilfracombe," she said archly. "I want to speak to you first. You haven't said a word to me the whole evening."

"Haven't I, my darling?" he replied, slipping his arm round her slender waist. "It's only because all

these confounded women never give one time to put in a syllable. I wish you and I were alone, Nora. I should be so much happier."

"Should you, Ilfracombe?" she asked, a little fearfully. "Why?"

She was so afraid lest he should get jealous of Mr. Portland's intimacy with her before she had the power to promise him she would never speak to the man again. But Mr. Portland was the last person in Lord Ilfracombe's mind. All he was thinking of was the disastrous fate of Nell Llewellyn, and wishing he had had the courage to tell his wife about it before he married her.

"Because, if we were alone together day after day, we should get to know each others' hearts and minds better than we do now, and I should feel more courage to speak to you of several little things that annoy me."

"Things about *me,* you mean," she said in her confident manner, though not without a qualm.

"Things about *you,* my angel?" exclaimed her enamoured husband, with genuine surprise. "What is there about you that could possibly annoy me? Why, I think you perfection—you know I do—and would not have you altered in any particular for all the world."

"Then why are you so depressed, Ilfracombe?" said Nora. "It is not only I who have noticed it. Everybody, including your mother and sister, say the same, and it is not very complimentary to *me,* you know,

considering we have only been married five months, is it?"

Lord Ilfracombe grew scarlet. The moment had come, he saw, for an explanation, and how could he make it? He feared the girl beside him would shrink from him with horror if she heard the truth. And yet he was a man of honour, according to a man's idea of honour, and could not find it in his heart to stoop to subterfuge. If he told Nora anything, he must tell her all.

"Dearest," he said, laying his fair head down on her shoulder, "I confess I have felt rather miserable lately, but it has nothing to do with you. It concerns only my self and my past life. I have heard a very sad story since we came home, Nora. I wonder if I dare tell it to you?"

"Why should you not, Ilfracombe? Perhaps I can guess a good part of it before you begin."

"Oh, no, no, you cannot. I would rather not think you should. And yet you are a little woman of the world although you have been so long cooped up (as you used to tell me) in Malta. Your father told me, when I proposed for you, that I must be entirely frank and open with you, for that girls now-a-days were not like the girls of romance, but were wide awake to most things that go on in the world, and resented being kept in the dark where their affections were concerned."

"I think my father was right," was all that Nora replied.

"And yet—and yet—how *can* I tell you? What will you think of me? Nora, I have been trying so hard to keep it to myself, lest you should shrink from me, when you hear the truth; and yet, we are husband and wife, and should have no secrets from each other. I should be wretched, I know, if I thought *you* had ever deceived *me*. I would rather suffer any mortification than know that, and so perhaps you, too, would rather I were quite honest with you, although I have put it off so long. Would you, my dearest?" he asked, turning his handsome face up to hers. Nora stooped and kissed him. It was a genuine kiss. She had not been accustomed to bestow them spontaneously on her husband, but she knew what was coming, and she felt, for the first time, how much better Ilfracombe was than herself.

"Yes, Ilfracombe," she answered gravely, "trust me. I am, as you say, a woman of the world, and can overlook a great deal."

"That kiss has emboldened me," said the earl, "and I feel I owe it to you to explain the reason of my melancholy. Nora, I have been no better than other young men—"

"I never supposed you were," interposed his wife.

"Ah, wait till you hear all. Some years before I

met you, I took a fancy to a girl, and she—lived in my house. You understand?"

Lady Ilfracombe nodded.

"Most men knew of this, and your father made it a condition of our marriage that the whole thing was put an end to. Of course it was what I only intended to do; but I knew it was my duty to make some provision for the young woman, so directed Mr. Sterndale to tell her of my intended marriage, and settle a certain sum of money on her. I returned to England, so happy in you, my darling, as you well know, and looking forward to spending such a merry Christmas with you, for the first time in our own home, when I was met with the news that—that—"

"That—*what*, Ilfracombe? Don't be afraid of shocking me. Is she coming to Thistlemere to throw some vitriol in my face?"

"Oh, no, my darling, don't speak like that. Poor Nell never would have injured you or anyone, and it is out of her power to do so now. She is dead, Nora—dead by her own hand. When she heard the news she went and threw herself into the river. Can you wonder if I feel miserable and self-reproachful when I remember that I have caused that poor girl's death? that my great happiness has been built up on her despair? Oh, what did the foolish child see in me to drive her to so rash

an act for my sake? I feel as if her dead face would haunt me to the end of my life."

And the earl covered his face with his hands. Nora also felt very much shocked. Death seems a terrible thing to the young and careless. It takes sorrow and disappointment and bodily pain to make us welcome it as a release from all evil.

"Oh, Ilfracombe," she whispered, "I am so sorry for you. Death is an awful thing. But I cannot see it was *your* fault. You meant to be good and kind. She expected too much, surely? She must have known that some day you would marry, and it would come to an end?"

"That is just what Sterndale said!" exclaimed the earl joyfully; "and you say the same. You do not spurn me from you, my own darling, because of the vileness of my former life? Oh, Nora, you are a woman in a thousand. I have been dreading lest you should find this disgraceful story out, or hear it from some kind friend. But now my mind will be at perfect rest. You know the worst, my dearest. There is nothing more for me to tell. We two are one for evermore," and he kissed her rapturously as he concluded.

Nora shuddered under her husband's caresses, although they had never been so little disagreeable to her as now. How she wished she could echo his words, and say that she, too, had nothing more to reveal. But

those terrible letters; what did they contain? what had she said in them, or not said, to rise up at any moment and spoil her life? She had never been so near honouring Ilfracombe as at that moment—never so near despising herself. But she answered very quietly,—

"My dear boy, you have told me nothing new. Do you remember a letter that you received at the hotel a few days after we were married, Ilfracombe? You left it in the sitting-room, and were terribly upset because you could not find it, until the waiter said he had destroyed one which he picked up. He didn't destroy your letter. It was *I* who picked it up, and I have it still."

"And you read it?" said the earl, with such genuine dismay, that it completely restored Nora's native assurance.

"Now, what on earth do you suppose that a woman would do with a letter of her husband's that she had the good fortune to pick up?" she cried, "especially a letter from a young woman who addressed him in the most familiar terms? Why, of course, I read it, you simpleton, as I shall read any others which you are careless enough to leave on the floor. Seriously, Ilfracombe, I have known your great secret from the beginning; and, well, let us say no more about it. I would rather not venture an opinion on the subject. It's over and done with, and, though I'm awfully grieved the

poor woman came to so tragic an end, you cannot expect me, as your wife, to say that I'm sorry she's out of the way. I think it is awfully good of you to have told me of it, Ilfracombe. Your confidence makes me feel small, because I know I haven't told you everything that *I've* ever done; but then, you see," added Nora, with one of her most winning expressions of naughtiness, "I've done such lots, I can't remember the half of it. It will come to the surface by degrees, I daresay; and if we live to celebrate our golden wedding, you may have heard all."

But Ilfracombe would not let her finish her sentence. He threw his arms around her, and embraced her passionately, saying,—

"You're the best and dearest and sweetest wife a man ever had, and I don't care what you've done, and I don't want to hear a word about it; only love me a little in return for my great love for you."

But Lady Ilfracombe knew the sex too well not to be aware that, if he had imagined there was anything to tell, he would not have rested till he had heard it; and, as she lay down to sleep that night, all her former love of intrigue and artifice seemed to have deserted her, and she wished from the bottom of her heart that she could imitate the moral courage of her husband, and 'leave the future nothing to reveal.'"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE Dowager Countess of Ilfracombe was an amiable old lady, but she was also very fond and proud of her son, and anxious to preserve his interests. His long friendship with Miss Llewellyn had been a great sorrow to her, and she was rejoiced when she heard that he had made a respectable marriage. But the remarks of her daughter on Nora's behaviour had made her a little more observant, and for the next few days she watched the young countess narrowly. The consequence of which was that she determined to have a private talk with the girl, and the first time she found her alone she proceeded to the attack.

She was a sweet old lady this dowager countess, like her son in many ways, with soft grey curls each side her face, and mild blue eyes and delicately-chiselled features. She drew her chair close to that on which her daughter-in-law sat, carelessly turning over the latest magazines, and laid her withered arm on the girl's slim, white one—

"Reading, my dear," she commenced pleasantly. "Is there anything particularly good in the Christmas numbers this year?"

"Not much," replied Nora, laying the magazine down. "The stories are all on the same old lines. I wish they would invent something new. I think it is so silly to imagine that Christmas tales must all take place in the snow, or be mixed up with a ghost. Isn't it?"

"Very silly," acquiesced the old lady; "but as long as there are fools found to read them there will be fools left to write them. But where is Ilfracombe this afternoon? Has he left you all alone to the mercy of the Christmas numbers?"

Nora laughed.

"It is my own fault," she said. "He wanted me to go out driving with him; but I thought it was too cold. So I think he and Mr. Portland have walked over to Critington to play billiards with Lord Babbage."

"Ah, I thought dear Ilfracombe had not forgotten his little wife," said the dowager in a patronising tone of voice, which Nora immediately resented. "He is too good and amiable for that. I am sure that you find him most kind in everything. Don't you, dear?"

The young countess shrugged her shoulders.

"So, so; much the same as other young men," she answered, and then perceiving the look of astonishment on her mother-in-law's face, she added, apologetically, —"You see, Lady Ilfracombe, that I'm not a gusher, and I've known so many men I've learned to pretty well estimate the value of them."

"Perhaps, my dear, though I cannot say I think the knowledge an enviable one for a young lady. But you do not rank your husband with other men, surely? He loves you dearly—anyone could see that—and you must have a good deal of influence over him."

"Yes, I fancy I've got the length of his feet," replied Nora.

"My dear son is almost all that a son and a husband should be," continued the fond mother. "He has no vices, but he has some weaknesses, and one is, being too easily influenced by his friends, and all his friends are not such as I should choose for him. I may be wrong, but I distrust that Mr. Portland with whom Ilfracombe is so intimate. More than that, I dislike him."

"So do I," said Nora shortly.

A look of satisfaction came into her companion's face.

"Do you really, Nora? I am so glad to hear you say so, for I fancied that he was a great friend of yours."

"What, Mr. Portland? Oh, Lady Ilfracombe, how mistaken you are. If I had my will I would never ask him to Thistlemere again. But you won't tell *him* so, will you?" she said, looking fearfully round.

"My dear girl, what are you thinking of? As if it were likely. But, Nora, now you have told me so, I must tell you what is in my mind. Mr. Portland has,

in my opinion, been Ilfracombe's worst enemy for years. Not wilfully so, of course; but he is a man who almost *lives* upon the turf, and is always betting and gambling. He has no settled income, or a very small one. He is, in fact, an adventurer, though our dear Ilfracombe would be angry if he heard me say so. I am sure this Mr. Portland borrows large sums of him. My brother, General Brewster, warned me of it long ago. He has also encouraged Ilfracombe in many things which I cannot speak to you about, but which a word from Mr. Portland would have made him see the folly of. But he has been his evil genius. You must be his good genius, and rid Ilfracombe of him."

The old lady smiled very kindly at Nora as she said this. She was so relieved to find that she did not stick up for the *vaurien* Jack Portland as she had feared she might do.

"I? Lady Ilfracombe!" exclaimed the young countess, with somewhat of a scared look; "but what could I do? Mr. Portland is my husband's friend, not mine. I don't think Ilfracombe would hear a word against him."

"I think he would be the first to listen and approve, my dear, were you to complain to him of the offensive familiarity with which Mr. Portland treats you. I don't think it is either respectful to your rank or yourself. Several people have noticed it. To see that dissipated-looking man hanging over you, as he often

does, at the piano or the sofa, with his red face close to yours, sometimes almost whispering in your ear before other people, is most indecent. Ilfracombe should put a stop to it, and the proper person to draw his attention to it is yourself."

"I hate it! I detest it!" cried Nora, her face flushing with annoyance and the knowledge that she had put it out of her power to resent such conduct, as she ought to do. "I think Mr. Portland is vulgar and presuming to a degree; but if it is Ilfracombe's pleasure to have him here, he would surely not like me the better for making mischief between them."

"I should not call it 'making mischief,'" replied the dowager. "I should say it was what was due to your position as Ilfracombe's wife. However, my dear, perhaps you know best. Only, pray promise me to discourage that odious man as much as possible. I shall have to speak to him some day myself, if you don't."

"Indeed, indeed, I will, Lady Ilfracombe. I will come and sit close by you every day after dinner if you will let me, and then he will hardly have the presumption, I should think, to thrust himself between us."

"My dear, I should not like to put a limit to Mr. Portland's presumption. He is one of the most offensive men I have ever met. However, if you dislike him as much as I do, there is no harm done, and I should think, judging from your courageous and independent

manner, that you are quite capable of keeping him at a distance, if you choose."

"I hope so," laughed Nora uneasily. "Don't have any fears for me, dear Lady Ilfracombe. My only wish in this particular is not to annoy my husband by offending his great friend, whom he has commended over and over again to my hospitality; but, if matters go too far, he shall hear of it, I promise you."

The dowager kissed her daughter-in-law, and felt perfectly satisfied with the way in which she had received her advice, telling the Ladies Devenish afterwards that they had taken an utterly wrong view of the young countess's conduct, and she only wished every young married woman were as well able to take care of herself and her husband's honour. The Ladies Devenish shrugged their ancient shoulders as soon as her back was turned, and told each other that "mother's geese were always swans, and, of course, anyone whom Ilfracombe had married, could do no wrong in her eyes." But they ceased making remarks on Nora for the future all the same.

Meanwhile the young countess did all she could, without being positively rude, to discourage Jack Portland's intimacy with her. She kept as close as she could to her mother and sisters-in-law, and took every precaution to prevent herself being left alone with him; but perceived, in a few days, that Mr. Portland had

guessed the cause of her avoidance, and was prepared to resent it. If he could not get an opportunity of speaking to her privately during the evening, he would stand on the hearthrug and gaze at her with his bloodshot eyes, till she was afraid that everybody in the room must guess the secret between them. One afternoon, as they were seated round the luncheon-table, he lolled over her and stared so fixedly into her face, that she felt as if she must rebuke his conduct openly. She saw the dowager put up her eyeglass to observe them, and the Ladies Devenish nudge each other to look her way; Ilfracombe, of all present, seemed to take no notice of Mr. Portland's behaviour. Nora writhed like a bird in the coils of a serpent. She did not know how to act. She could have slapped the insolent, heated face which was almost thrust in her own; she professed not to hear the words addressed to her in a lowered tone, but tried to treat them playfully, and told him to "speak up." But it was useless. She saw Jack Portland's bloated face grow darker and darker as she parried his attempts at familiarity, until she dreaded lest, in his anger at her repulsion, he should say something aloud that would lower her for ever in the eyes of her relations. Who can trust the tongue of a man who is a habitual drinker? At last Nora could stand it no longer, and, rising hastily, she asked the dowager to excuse her leaving the table, as she did

not feel well. Her plea was sufficient to make her husband follow her, but he could not get the truth out of her, even when alone.

"It's nothing," she told him when he pressed her to say if she were really ill; "but the room was warm, and I didn't want any more luncheon, and Mr. Portland bored me."

"*Jack bored you!*" exclaimed the earl in a voice of astonishment, as if such a thing could never be, "I never heard a woman say that before. Shall I speak to him about it, darling?"

But Nora's look of horror at the proposal was enough to answer the question.

"Speak to him, Ilfracombe? Oh, no, pray don't. What *would* he think of me? It would sound so horribly rude, and when he is a guest in the house too. Never mention it again, please. I wouldn't offend a friend of yours for the world."

"Thanks. Yes, I'm afraid dear old Jack might feel a little sore if I were to tell him he bored you. But it musn't be allowed to occur again, Nora. I'll take him out of the house more than I have done. He won't worry you this afternoon, for we're going to ride over to the Castle together and pay old Nettleton a visit. I want to get a brace of his pointers if he will part with them. We mean to be home to dinner; but if we're a little late, don't wait for us."

"Very well," said Nora brightly.

She was glad to think she would be relieved from her *bête noir* for the afternoon at all events.

The earl stooped and kissed her, and ran downstairs. Nora would have liked to return that kiss, but as she was about to do it, she suddenly felt shy and drew back again. Women are so generally accredited with changing their minds, that when they do so, they don't like to confess the truth. But she waved her hand gaily as Lord Ilfracombe left the room, and sent him off on his expedition happy and contented. The afternoon passed quietly away; nothing unusual occurred until the ladies had assembled in the drawing-room, preparatory to dinner being served.

"Ilfracombe particularly requested that we should not wait if he were late," said Nora to her mother-in-law; "so I think we had better not do so. I fancy he had some idea that Mr. Nettleton might press them to dine at the Castle—anyway that was what he said to me."

"I would give them ten minutes' grace, my dear," replied the dowager; "the roads are very bad to-day, and they may not reach home as soon as they anticipated. It is so uncomfortable to come in just as the soup has been removed. Besides, they must change their clothes before dining."

"Yes, you are right," replied Nora, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece, "it is a quarter to seven now.

I will ring and tell Warrender to put off dinner till half past. Shall I?"

"Yes, my dear, do," the old lady was saying, just as Warrender entered the room unceremoniously, and with an air of decided perturbation.

"What is the matter?" cried Nora hurriedly, for she saw at once he was the bearer of news. "What has occurred? Why do you look like that?"

"Oh, my lady!" exclaimed the servant, "nothing, I hope—your ladyship musn't be alarmed, but I thought it right you should hear that—that—"

"That — *what?* For God's sake, speak!" cried Nora impetuously. "It is folly to keep us in such suspense."

"Well, my lady, Johnson, he has just come up from the stables to say that the Black Prince—his lordship's horse, you know, my lady—ran into the yard a few minutes back, without—without his lordship, my lady!"

"Thrown!" exclaimed Lady Laura shrilly.

"Without Lord Ilfracombe?" queried Lady Blanche; "but where, then, is Mr. Portland?"

"Oh, heavens, my poor son! He may be lying dead in the road at this moment," said the dowager, wringing her hands.

But Nora said nothing. She was standing in the centre of the room, motionless as though turned to stone. Presently she asked in a harsh voice,—

"Have they sent out to search along the roads?"

"No, my lady, they thought —" commenced Warrender.

"Thought? Thought? What is the good of thinking when they should act? Tell Johnson to go out at once and scour the road to the Castle, and let the carriage be got ready to follow him. His lordship may be unable to walk. Go at once; don't lose a moment. Stay, where is Johnson? I will give him the directions myself."

She flew down to the lower premises as she spoke, regardless that her dress was quite unsuited to cold corridors and stone passages. She was very white, but perfecty calm and collected as she gave her orders, whilst Lady Laura was shrieking in hysterics in the drawing-room, and Lady Blanche had her hands full in trying to prevent the dowager fainting under the dreadful suspense. As soon as Nora was satisfied that assistance had been dispatched in case of need, she went slowly up to her own room, with her hand tightly pressed against her heart. She could not realise what might be taking place, or might have taken place. She had only one fear, one dread, Ilfracombe and she might be parted before she had had time to tell him that she loved him. She kept both hands and teeth clenched to prevent her crying out, and making her cowardice patent to all around, whilst her cold lips went on

murmuring, "Oh, God, save him! oh, God, save him!" without any idea of the meaning of what she said.

She had stood thus, not having the heart or the sense to sit down, for perhaps half an hour, when she heard a shout from the hall—a shout of laughter, and then her husband's voice exclaiming,—

"So sorry to have given you such a scare. Not my fault I assure you. We came on as quick as we could. No, I'm not hurt. Was Nora frightened? Where is she? I must go to her. Down in a minute. Tell you all about it then," and his feet came flying two steps at a time up the stairs to her side.

She stood with clasped hands expecting him, all the blood in her body mantling in her face.

"Oh, Ilfracombe," was all she could say as he entered the room.

"My darling, I am so sorry that brute frightened you all so by coming home without me. Jack and I were within a mile of home when Black Prince shied suddenly at something and threw me clean over his head. We tried our best to catch him, but he bolted to his stables, and I had to walk back."

"And you are not hurt?" she asked tremblingly; "not at all?"

"Not at all," he echoed, "only splashed from head to foot with mud, and feeling very much as if I would like to have a warm bath before dinner. But, love,

you are shaking all over. Has it really upset you like this?"

Nora drew back a little, ashamed of having displayed so much feeling.

"It was rather alarming," she answered, with a slight laugh. "We—we—might—never have seen you again."

"And you would have grieved for me?" said the earl, pressing her to his heart. "Oh, my dearest, you make me feel so happy."

A sudden impulse, which she could not resist, seized Nora. She threw her slender arms round Ilfracombe and laid her cheek against his. It was the first evidence of deep feeling which she had ever given him. But a moment afterwards she seemed ashamed of it.

"There is no doubt you gave us a start, dear old boy," she said, smiling, "but it is over now, and I'll run down and send Wilkins up to get your bath ready. You'll have heaps of time. I had already postponed dinner to half-past seven. Make as much haste as you can though."

"One more kiss, darling, before you go," cried the earl.

"No such thing! We mustn't waste any more time in fooling or the fish will be in rags. I will go down and see that Lady Ilfracombe has a glass of wine. The poor old lady has been crying fit to make herself ill." And in another second she had left him to himself.

She found the drawing-room people in solemn conclave; the Ladies Devenish rather inclined to be offended at being disappointed of a sensation, and the dowager telling Mr. Portland of the terrible scare they had experienced, and how she thought poor dear Nora would go mad when the news of the riderless horse's arrival was announced to her.

"I am sure I thought her mind was going, Mr. Portland," she was saying as Nora entered. "She stood as if she had been turned to marble, and when she rushed from the room I thought she was going to fly out into the night air just as she was after him."

"Of course it would have been an awful thing for Lady Ilfracombe to have lost her position so soon after attaining it," replied Mr. Portland politely.

"And her husband," returned the old lady sympathetically.

It was at this juncture that Nora appeared. She was still pale from the fright she had experienced, and had lost much of her usual jolly, off-hand manner.

"Ilfracombe will be down directly," she said, addressing her mother-in-law; "he is going to have a bath before dinner, as, though he has broken no bones, he has a considerable number of bruises from the fall."

"Of course, poor, dear boy," acquiesced the dowager. "Oh, my dear, what a mercy it is no worse. He might

have been killed from such a sudden fall. I shall never feel easy when he is on horseback again."

"Never is a long time," replied Nora, smiling; "but won't you and Blanche and Laura take a glass of wine before dinner? I am sure you must need it after the shock you have had."

The wine was rung for, and when Warrender appeared with it, and Nora refused to have any, Mr. Portland took the opportunity of observing sarcastically,—

"Surely *you* must require some yourself, Lady Ilfracombe? I have just been listening to an account of the terrible emotion you displayed at the supposition of Ilfracombe's danger."

The butler poured out a glass and handed it to his young mistress without a word. He had seen her excitement and interpreted it aright, but he did not understand why this gentleman should mention it as though it were something to be surprised at.

The young countess took the wine silently and drank it. Portland again addressed her.

"It must have been an awful moment for you when Black Prince's arrival was announced. Did you really think Ilfracombe was killed? It would have been a great misfortune for you if it had been so. The title would have gone, I believe, to a distant cousin, and the whole object of his marriage frustrated. And you would

have sunk at once from the queen regnant to a mere dowager. Aren't you glad he is all right?"

This was said *sotto voce,* so as to be inaudible to the rest of the party.

"I do not see that it signifies to you, what I feel, or do not feel," said Nora, with her most indifferent air, as she turned from Jack Portland to address some commonplace to her mother-in-law.

"By Jove, though, but I'll make it signify!" he muttered to himself, as he saw the Ladies Devenish secretly amused at the evident snub he had received. The earl now joined the assembly. He was in high spirits, and disposed to make light of everything that had occurred. The evening passed pleasantly, though Nora was rather hysterically gay; but towards the close of it, when the other ladies had retired, and she was about to follow their example, her husband was told that his steward wished to speak to him.

"Don't go yet, Nora," he called out, on leaving the room, "wait till I come back. I want to tell you something before Jack and I go to the smoking-room. Keep her amused, Jack, till I return."

It was Jack Portland's opportunity, and he seized it.

"What an actress you are," he commenced, as soon as they were alone. "You would have made your fortune on the stage."

"I don't understand you," she said. "In what have I acted a part to-night?"

"Why, in your well counterfeited dismay at the idea of danger to Ilfracombe, of course. When the old lady was telling me about it, I thought I should have split. *You*—turned to stone with apprehension. *You*—the coldest woman in Christendom! who have no more feeling than a piece of marble! It is ridiculous. You know it was all put on."

"Why shouldn't I feel uneasy if he is in danger? He is my husband. You cannot deny that."

"Your husband, yes. And what did you marry him for? His title and his money! You cannot deny that. Two years ago you were, or fancied yourself, desperately in love with another man—modesty forbids me to mention him by name—but you chucked him over; why? Because he hadn't as much money as you expected to sell yourself for!"

"It isn't true," she answered hotly. "You know that it was my father who separated us and forbade your coming to the house again. Else, perhaps, there is no knowing I might have been your wife at the present moment. But as for being, as you express it, 'desperately in love,' you know that is untrue—that it is not in my nature—that I am not one of your gushing, spooney girls, who are ready to jump down the throat of the first man who looks at them, and never was."

"Well, I wouldn't be too sure of that," said Mr. Portland. "Certain little epistles in my possession tell a different tale. Most of them are 'spooney' enough in all conscience. At least, if you do not call them so, I should like to see the ones you do!"

"You have not returned those letters to me yet," she answered quickly. "I trust to your honour to do so, without reading them again."

"Why should I read them again, *ma chère,* when they no longer interest me? I know you women like to think you can chuck your victims over, and still keep them writhing at your feet; but I am not one of that sort. Once repulsed is enough for me. Your ladyship need never fear that I shall ever trouble you again. But don't say you never were one of the 'gushing, spooney girls,' or you may tempt me to make you retract your words. Perhaps you have quite forgotten what you wrote in those letters?" he demanded meaningly.

"Yes, quite," she answered, though with a sickening faint remembrance of a great deal of folly; "but what does it matter? It is over now on both sides, and we can remain good friends all the same. But I wish you would not make your intimacy with me quite so apparent before other people. It has been noticed by more than one person, and it places me in an un-

pleasant position. And if it is pointed out to Ilfracombe it might lead to something disagreeable."

"How?" said her companion.

"How? Why, by making a quarrel between my husband and myself, of course," replied Nora querulously.

"And would you care about that? He couldn't take your coronet from you for such a trifle, you know. Even those letters of yours—were they to come to light, he might rub rusty over them, but he couldn't do anything. When a man marries a woman, he has to ignore all ante-nuptial indiscretions. He would make a jolly row, naturally, and you would have a hot time of it. But you are the Countess of Ilfracombe fast enough, and the Lord Chancellor himself couldn't unmake you so."

"I know that," said Nora. "I don't need you to tell me so. And there is no chance of Ilfracombe seeing the letters either. If you keep your word to me (as I conclude you will), I shall destroy them as soon as they are in my possession. I wish you would send for your dispatch-box, and give them to me at once. I should feel so much more comfortable."

"Why in such a hurry?" said Mr. Portland. "I am going home next week, and then you shall have them by registered post, honour bright. Won't that satisfy you?"

"Oh, yes, of course. And Mr. Portland," added

Nora rather nervously, "we agreed just now that it was all over, so you won't mind my saying you think I care only for Ilfracombe's title and fortune, and I daresay you are justified in thinking so—but—but it is not only that. He—he is so good to me, that I can't help caring—I mean, it would be very ungrateful of me not to care, just a little."

But here the young countess's blushing, stammering confession was interrupted by her husband's return.

"Oh, here *is* Ilfracombe!" she exclaimed, suddenly breaking off, and advancing to meet him, whilst Jack Portland thought to himself; "so the wind's in that quarter now, is it? All the better for me; but I'm afraid her ladyship has sealed the fate of that interesting little packet. If love is to be brought into the bargain, those letters will become too valuable to me to part with. Why, I shall be able to turn and twist her, through their means, at my will."

CHAPTER XV.

THE time was altered at Panty-cuckoo Farm. Christmas had come and gone—rather a melancholy Christmas. The weather had been raw and chill; Mrs. Llewellyn had been laid up with sciatica; and the farmer had appeared depressed and out of spirits. Hugh Owen had left off coming to the farm altogether, at which Nell was not surprised, though her mother grumbled, and her father said that with some people out of sight seemed out of mind. But with the advent of spring things grew better. Is it not always the way with spring? Its bright, hopeful surroundings seem to make one ashamed of murmuring over one's own troubles. The bursting buds; the rivulets released from the icy grip of winter; the callow birds; the balmy life-giving air; all speak of renewed action and strength, after the numbing effects of winter. One grows young again with spring. The buoyancy of the atmosphere, and all the glad sights and sounds that salute one's eyes and ears, seem to fill one with new feelings—new ideas—new hopes. Even Nell succumbed to the delights of the season, and felt sorry to think she had driven her kindest friend from her side. She had

tried several times to see Hugh Owen, and make up her quarrel with him, but he always managed to avoid meeting her. There was a baby at Dale Farm now, over which Hetty and her mother-in-law were crooning half the day, with which, of course, old Mrs. Llewellyn was delighted, but which Nell never saw without a sigh. She thought that when Hugh christened her little nephew, she would at least secure a word or two with him in private, but it was not so. He never turned his eyes her way during the ceremony, and pleaded other duties as an excuse for not being present at the substantial feast which was spread for them afterwards at Dale Farm.

"I can't think what's come of Hugh lately," said his mother. "He was never what you might call very sociable-like, but now it's a wonder ever to get a word out of him. He seems to spend his life praying people out of the world, and I'm sure it don't make him more cheerful at home."

"There, missus, let the lad alone, do!" exclaimed her husband. "You know'd from the first that he was good for nothing but the ministry. He's got no heart, nor stomach, nor liver, nor nothing, hasn't Hugh; he's just a minister and nothing else. He's been as silent and as sulky as a bear for the last three months, but I take no notice of it. Let him go on his own way, say I, and thank the Lord, 'tain't mine."

"We'll, I suppose we've offended him, though I'm sure I can't tell how," interposed Mrs. Llewellyn, "for he's not been near us for ever so long. When our Nell was ill, he was at the farm every day, praying most beautiful, and bringing her books and flowers, and such-like; but I don't believe we've seen him, not to speak of, since Christmas, have we, Nell?"

"I don't think we have, mother," replied Nell consciously.

"Oh, that's plain enough," said Farmer Owen. "You ain't dying any longer, my lass, or you'd have Master Hugh at your bedside often enough. He don't care for lasses with rosy cheeks, and who can eat a good dinner, and use their legs. They've no interest for a minister. You shouldn't have got well, if you wanted to keep Hugh by your side."

"Well, for my part, I wish she was better than she is, if we never saw Hugh again for it, begging your pardons, neighbours. But Nell ain't half satisfactory. Dr. Cowell, he says it's only the weakness after the fever, but she's a long time coming round, to my mind. She eats pretty well, but she hasn't got any life in her, nor she can't seem to take any interest in anything. Her memory too is something dreadful. She's always dreaming when she ought to be doing. We must see if we can't send her to Swansea this summer for the benefit of the sea air."

Nell coloured faintly as she replied,—

"Now, mother, I wish you'd talk of something more interesting than me. I'm right enough. And we're all talking of ourselves, and forgetting the little man's health. Who'll propose the toast? Shall I? Here's to the very good health of Griffith William Owen, and may he live a long life and a happy one!"

And in the chatter and congratulations that followed the toast, Nell and Hugh were both happily forgotten. All the same, she wished he had not taken her communication so much to heart, and was dreadfully afraid lest his evident avoidance of Panty-cuckoo Farm should end by directing some sort of suspicion towards herself. It was about this time that Nell perceived that there was something decidedly wrong with her father. Not in health, but in mind. He seemed to regard everything in its worst light, and to have some objection to make to whatever might be said to him. If her mother remarked how comfortable and happy Hetty was in her new home, Mr. Llewellyn would observe,—

"Ay, ay, it's just as well she's feathered her nest before troubles come," or if Nell said she felt stronger and better for the fine wealther, it would be, "Well, I don't know as it's a thing to crow over. Many a person's happier dead than alive."

Al last one morning she came down to breakfast

to find him in a brown study over a lawyer's letter, which had reached him in a long, blue envelope. The postman was a rare visitor at Panty-cuckoo Farm. The Llewellyns had not many relatives, and were not a writing family, if they had had them. Everything went on too simply with them to require much correspondence. Above all, a lawyer's letter was a rarity.

"Had bad news, father?" inquired Nell, as she met him.

"Ah, my lass, as bad as it could well be. Sir Archibald Bowmant's going to raise the rent of the old farm again, and I don't know how it's to be made to pay it. Times have been awful bad the last year or two, Nell. Of course, the mother didn't say nothing to you up in London town about it. Where was the use? You was well provided for in a rare good and respectable situation; we knew you was safe, and didn't want to worry you with our troubles. But since Sir Archibald's married this new lady he's been an altered man. He used to think a deal of his tenants in the old times, and I don't say he's a bad landlord now, but she runs him into a lot of money, I hear, and then the land has to pay for it. Here's a notice from the solicitor, to say the rents will all be raised again after next summer. It's deuced hard on a man like me. I've spent more than I knew where to put my hand on, this autumn, draining and manuring, and now I shall

have to pay all I hoped to make by it on the rent. But it can't go on for ever. The worm will turn some day, and I shall chuck up the farm and emigrate."

"Oh, father, don't talk like that!" cried his wife. "What would you and I do emigrating at our age? 'Tisn't as if we were young and strong. We should die before we had crossed the sea. We'll get on right enough, now I've got Nell to help me with the dairy, and that must keep us going till you're straight again."

"You're a good wife, Mary," said the farmer, "but you're a fool for all that. Will the dairy keep the men and horses, and pay for the subsoil dressings and the fish-manure and the losses which every year brings with it? You women don't understand the number of expenses keeping up a large farm like this entails. I've only just done it for years past, and if the rents are to be raised, why, I *can't* do it, and that's all."

"But you won't decide in a hurry, father?" said Nell.

"No, lass, no. But it's very discouraging. It takes the heart out of a man for work, or anything. Sometimes I wish I had emigrated when I was a young man. There, out in Canada, the Government gives a man one hundred and fifty acres of land free, and, if he's got a little money of his own and a little gumption, he can

make a living for his family, and have something to leave behind him when he dies."

"Well, well," said his daughter soothingly, "if the worst comes to the worst, father, I will go out to Canada with mother and you, and we'll see if we can't manage to keep ourselves alive somehow."

She put her hand on the old man's grey head as she spoke, and he got hold of it and drew it down with his own.

"What a soft, white hand it is!" he said admiringly. "You're a good, kind lass, Nell, but I doubt if you could do much work with such fingers as these. Where did you get them from? Who'd think you'd done hard work in your lifetime? They look like a lady's, so smooth and soft. You must have had a fine easy place of it up at Lord Ilfracombe's, Nell. It was a pity you ever left it. You won't get such another in a hurry."

"No, father, I know that," she answered sadly.

"And you think you were foolish to chuck it, my girl? You fret a bit over it sometimes, eh, Nell?"

"Sometimes, father," she said in a low voice.

"Ah, my lass, you see we never know what's best for us. I was main glad to see ye home, so was mother; but if times get worse than they are, I shall be sorry ye ever came."

"Then I'll go to service again," she answered quickly. "Don't be afraid I'll ever be a burden on you, dear

father. I am capable of filling many situations—a nurse's, for instance. If, as you say, times get worse, I'll practise on little Griffith, and advertise for a place in the nursery."

She spoke in jest, but Mr. Llewellyn took her words in earnest.

"Ay, my lass, and you'd get it too. The earl would give you a grand character, I'm bound to say. Wouldn't he, now? Three years is a good time to stay in one place."

"Yes, yes, of course," said Nell hastily, as she remembered the circumstances under which she had left Grosvenor Square, and hurried away for fear her father should take it in his head to question her about it.

Poor Nell! Her absent lord was never absent from her heart or thoughts; but she dared not indulge herself in too much reminiscence lest she should break down under it. Whilst Lord Ilfracombe was growing happier day by day in the increasing affection of his wife, the unfortunate woman whom he believed to be buried beneath the bosom of the river was wearing her heart out for news of him, and wondering often how she could possibly contrive to get sight or speech with him without attracting the attention of her friends. By day she had little leisure to indulge in dreaming; but

as soon as night fell, and she found herself in solitude and silence on her bed, the ghost of her happy, reckless past would walk out of its sanctuary to confront her, and she would lie awake half the night, pondering on Ilfracombe's appearance, and recalling his tenderest moments and sayings and doings, till she had worked herself up into a state of despair. She had persuaded herself that her separation from her lover was no fault of his, but the combined work of Mr. Sterndale and the woman he had married, and that if Ilfracombe saw her again all his first admiration and affection would be rekindled.

Nell did not stop to consider how bitterly unfair this would be to his young wife. She hated the very thought of Nora, and would have injured her in any possible way. Lord Ilfracombe was hers—hers alone—that was the way she argued—and his wife had robbed her of him, and must take the consequences, whatever they might be. Her love for him was so deep, so passionate, so overwhelming, he could not resist nor stand against it. Had she only refused to let him leave England, his marriage would never have taken place. It had been a cheat, a robbery, a fraud, and such things never thrive. If they only met—if she could only meet him—he and his wife would both have to acknowledge the truth of what she said.

Meanwhile, however, she could gain no news of the

Earl of Ilfracombe, her own act of supposed suicide having put the possibility of hearing of him out of her reach. She could not come in contact with him again without her former position in his household being made known. For this reason, as long as she remained with her parents, Nell saw no chance of seeing him. And it was only at times that she desired it. At others, she felt as if the sight of her perfidious lover would kill her—as if she would run miles the other way sooner than encounter him; and these were the despairing moments, when she wept till she was nearly blind, and made her mother rather impatient, because she would not confess what ailed her, nor say what she wanted. The poor girl was passing through the gates of hell, through which most of us have to pass during our lifetime, in which whoever enters must leave Hope behind, for the portals are so dark and gloomy that Hope could not exist there. Some women will get over a disappointment like this in a reasonable time; some never get over it at all; and Nell Llewellyn was one of the latter. Her very soul had entered into her love for Lord Ilfracombe, and she could not disentangle it. It had not been an ordinary love with which she had regarded him, but an ardent worship—such worship as a devotee renders to the God of his religion. I do not say that such women never love again, but they never forget the first love, which is ready to revive at the first

opportunity, and which lives with them all through the exercise of the second, glorifying it, as it were, by the halo thrown over it from the past.

Nell was still in a state of hopeless collapse. She had not got over the news of Ilfracombe's marriage in the slightest degree. She was perfectly aware that he had shut the gates af Paradise between them for evermore; yet she often experienced this feverish anxiety to learn from his own lips in what light he regarded their separation.

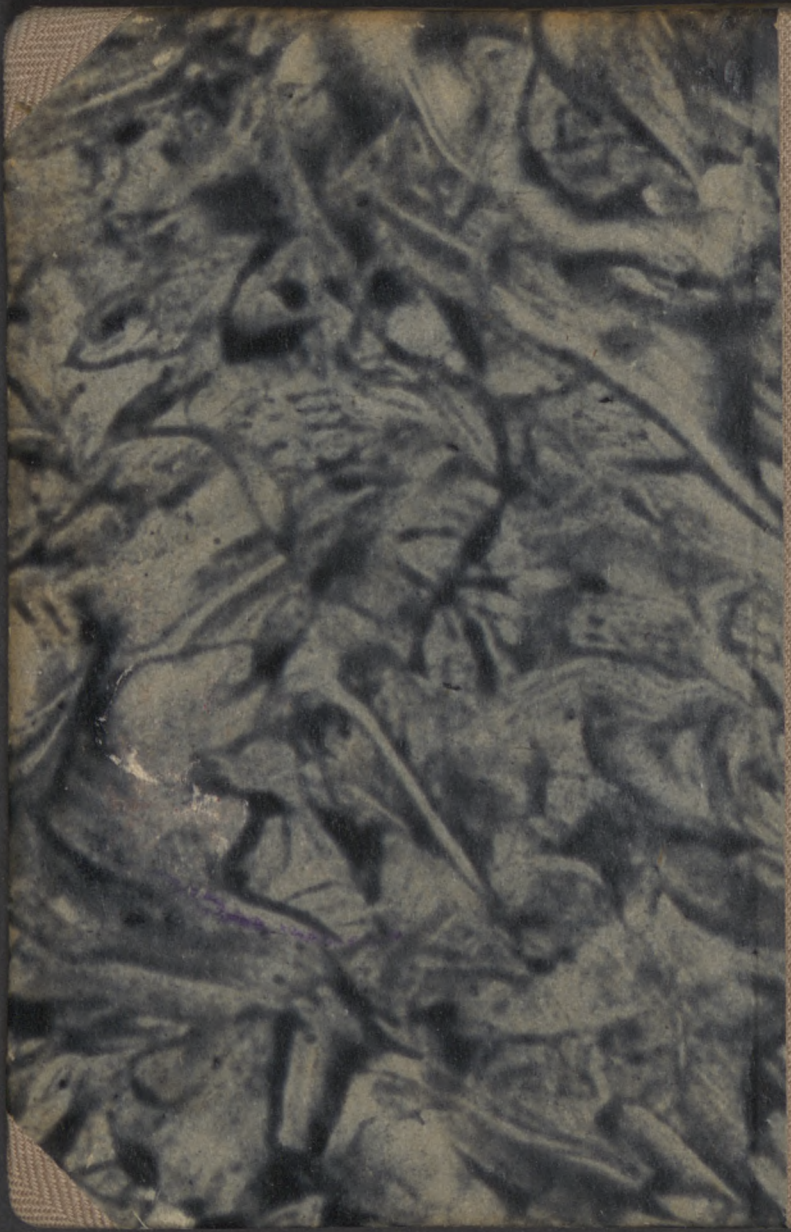
Meanwhile her conscience occasionally accused her of not having behaved as kindly as she might to Hugh Owen—sometimes gave her a sickening qualm also, as she remembered she had parted with her cherished secret to a man who had apparently quarrelled with her ever since. He had assured her it was safe with him, but Nell felt that he despised her for the confession she had made, and might not his contempt lead him to forget his promise? She wanted further assurance that he would be faithful and true.

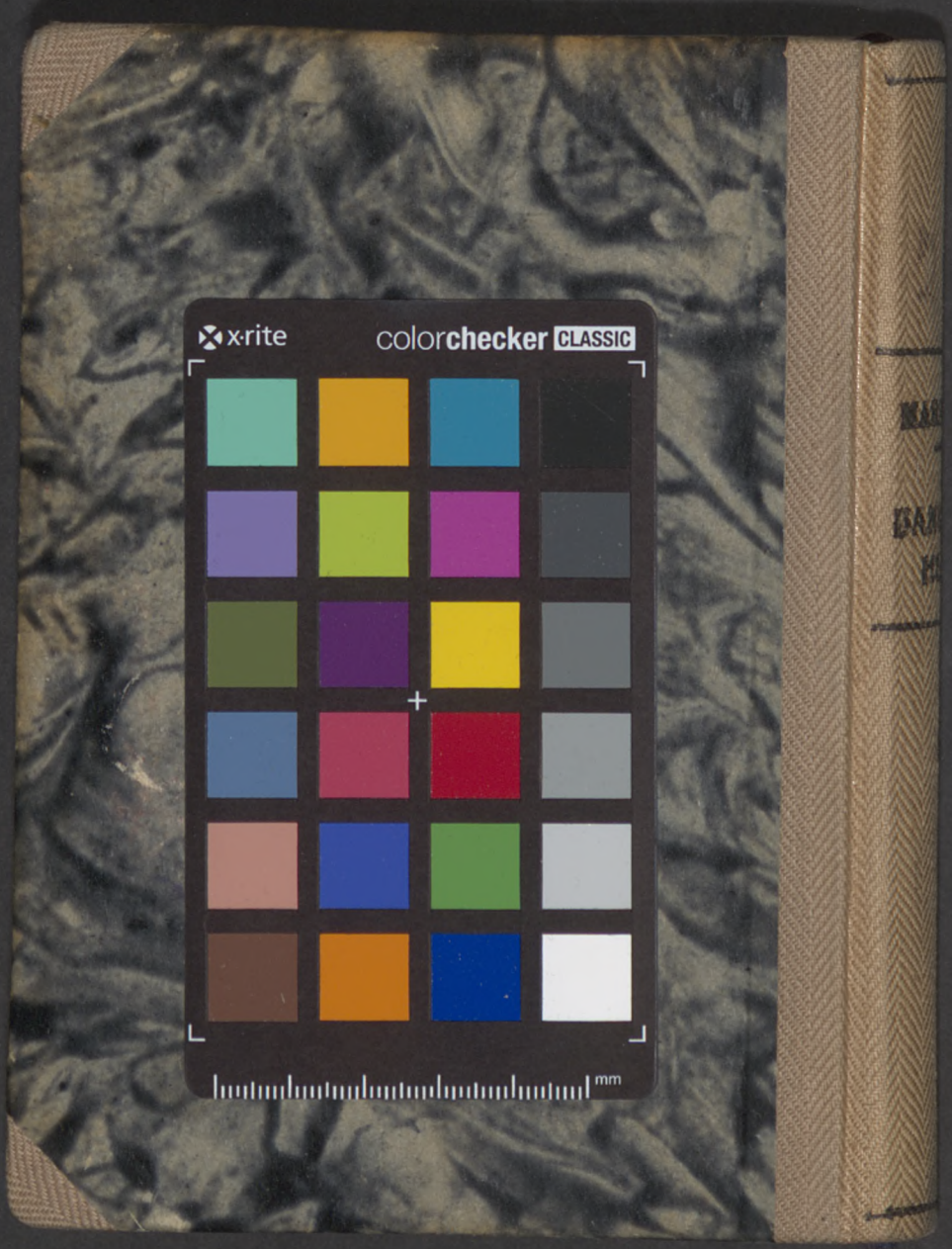
She went over to the Dale Farm far oftener than she had been wont to do (which Hetty accepted entirely as a compliment to her baby), in the hope of encountering him; but he always managed to slink away before she reached the house, or to have some excuse for leaving directly afterwards.

One afternoon, towards the end of May, however, as she distinctly saw him hurrying off through the fields at the back, with a book in his hand, Nell waited till he was well out of sight, and then, altering her course, turned also and followed him up.

END OF VOL. I.

PRINTING OFFICE OF THE PUBLISHER.




x-rite
colorchecker CLASSIC
mm