

One of Our Conquerors — Volume 5



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ONE OF OUR CONQUERORS

By George Meredith

1897

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CHAPTER XXXVI

NESTA AND HER FATHER

The day of Nesta's return was one of a number of late when Victor was robbed of his walk Westward by Lady Grace Halley, who seduced his politeness with her various forms of blandishment to take a seat in her carriage; and she was a practical speaker upon her quarter of the world when she had him there. Perhaps she was right in saying—though she had no right to say—that he and she together might have the world under their feet. It was one of those irritating suggestions which expedite us up to a bald ceiling, only to make us feel the gas-bladder's tight extension upon emptiness: It moved him to examine the poor value of his aim, by tying him to the contemptible means: One estimate involved the other, whichever came first. Somewhere he had an idea, that would lift and cleanse all degradations. But it did seem as if he were not enjoying: things pleasant enough in the passage of them were barren, if not prickly, in the retrospect.

He sprang out at the head of the park, for a tramp round it, in the gloom of the girdle of lights, to recover his deadened relish of the thin phantasmal strife to win an intangible prize. His dulled physical system asked, as with the sensations of a man at the start from sleep in the hurrying grip of steam, what on earth he wanted to get, and what was the substance of his gains: what! if other than a precipitous intimacy, a deep crumbling over deeper, with a little woman amusing him in remarks of a whimsical nudity; hardly more. Nay, not more! he said; and at the end of twenty paces, he saw much more; the campaign gathered a circling suggestive brilliancy, like the lamps about the winter park; the Society, lured with glitter, hooked by greed, composed a ravishing picture; the little woman was esteemed as a serviceable lieutenant; and her hand was a small soft one, agreeable to fondle—and avo! But so it is in war: we must pay for our allies. What if it had been, that he and she together, with their united powers ... ? He dashed the silly vision aside, as vainer than one of the bubble-empires blown by boys; and it broke, showing no heart in it. His heart was Nataly's.

Let Colney hint his worst; Nataly bore the strain, always did bear any strain coming in the round of her duties: and if she would but walk, or if she danced at parties, she would scatter the fits of despondency besetting the phlegmatic, like this day's breeze the morning fog; or as he did with two minutes of the stretch of legs.

Full of the grandeur of that black pit of the benighted London, with its ocean-voice of the heart at beat along the lighted outer ring, Victor entered at his old door of the two houses he had knocked into one: a surprise for Fredi!—and heard that his girl had arrived in the morning.

'And could no more endure her absence from her Mammy O!' The songful satirical line spouted in him, to be flung at his girl, as he ran upstairs to the boudoir off the drawing-room.

He peeped in. It was dark. Sensible of presences, he gradually discerned a thick blot along the couch to the right of the door, and he drew near. Two were lying folded together; mother and daughter. He bent over them. His hand was taken and pressed by Fredi's; she spoke; she said tenderly: 'Father.' Neither of the two made a movement. He heard the shivering rise of a sob, that fell. The dry sob going to the waste breath was Nataly's. His girl did not speak again.

He left them. He had no thought until he stood in his dressing-room, when he said 'Good!' For those

two must have been lying folded together during the greater part of the day: and it meant, that the mother's heart had opened; the girl knew. Her tone: 'Father,' sweet, was heavy, too, with the darkness it came out of.

So she knew. Good. He clasped them both in his heart; tempering his pity of those dear ones with the thought, that they were of the sex which finds enjoyment in a day of the mutual tear; and envying them; he strained at a richness appearing in the sobs of their close union.

All of his girl's loving soul flew to her mother; and naturally: She would not be harsh on her father. She would say he loved! And true: he did love, he does love; loves no woman but the dear mother.

He flicked a short wring of the hand having taken pressure from an alien woman's before Fredi pressed it, and absolved himself in the act; thinking, How little does a woman know how true we can be to her when we smell at a flower here and there!—There they are, stationary; women the flowers, we the bee; and we are faithful in our seeming volatility; faithful to the hive!—And if women are to be stationary, the reasoning is not so bad. Funny, however, if they here and there imitatively spread a wing, and treat men in that way? It is a breach of the convention; we pay them our homage, that they may serve as flowers, not to be volatile tempters. Nataly never had been one of the sort: Lady Grace was. No necessity existed for compelling the world to bow to Lady Grace, while on behalf of his Nataly he had to ... Victor closed the curtain over a gulf-revealed by an invocation of Nature, and showing the tremendous force he partook of so largely, in her motive elements of the devourer. Horrid to behold, when we need a gracious presentation of the circumstances. She is a splendid power for as long as we confine her between the banks: but she has a passion to discover cracks; and if we give her headway, she will find one, and drive at it, and be through, uproarious in her primitive licentiousness, unless we labour body and soul like Dutchmen at the dam. Here she was, and not desired, almost detested! Nature detested! It had come about through the battle for Nataly; chiefly through Mrs. Burman's tenacious hold of the filmy thread she took for life and was enabled to use as a means for the perversion besides bar to the happiness of creatures really living. We may well marvel at the Fates, and tell them they are not moral agents!

Victor's reflections came across Colney Durance, who tripped and stopped them.

Dressed with his customary celerity, he waited for Nesta, to show her the lighted grand double drawing-room: a further proof of how Fortune favoured him: she was to be told, how he one day expressed a wish for greater space, and was informed on the next, that the neighbour house was being vacated, and the day following he was in treaty for the purchase of it; returning from Tyrol, he found his place habitable.

Nesta came. Her short look at him was fond, her voice not faltering; she laid her hand under his arm and walked round the spacious room, praising the general design, admiring the porcelain, the ferns, friezes, hangings, and the grand piano, the ebony inlaid music-stands, the firegrates and plaques, the ottomans, the tone of neutral colour that, as in sound, muted splendour. He told her it was a reception night, with music: and added: 'I miss my ... seen anybody lately?'

'Mr. Sowerby?' said she. 'He was to have escorted me back. He may have overslept himself.'

She spoke it plainly; when speaking of the dear good ladies, she set a gentle humour at play, and comforted him, as she intended, with a souvenir of her lively spirit, wanting only in the manner of

gaiety.

He allowed, that she could not be quite gay.

More deeply touched the next minute, he felt in her voice, in her look, in her phrasing of speech, an older, much older daughter than the Fredi whom he had conducted to Moorsedge. 'Kiss me,' he said.

She turned to him full-front, and kissed his right cheek and left, and his forehead, saying: 'My love! my papa! my own dear dada!' all the words of her girlhood in her new sedateness; and smiling: like the moral crepuscular of a sunlighted day down a not totally inanimate Sunday London street.

He strained her to his breast. 'Mama soon be here?'

'Soon.'

That was well. And possibly at the present moment applying, with her cunning hand, the cosmetics and powders he could excuse for a concealment of the traces of grief.

Satisfied in being a superficial observer, he did not spy to see more than the world would when Nataly entered the dining-room at the quiet family dinner. She performed her part for his comfort, though not prattling; and he missed his Fredi's delicious warble of the prattle running rill-like over our daily humdrum. Simeon Fenellan would have helped. Then suddenly came enlivenment: a recollection of news in the morning's paper. 'No harm before Fredi, my dear. She's a young woman now. And no harm, so to speak—at least, not against the Sanfredini. She has donned her name again, and a villa on Como, leaving her 'duque'; —paragraph from a Milanese musical Journal; no particulars. Now, mark me, we shall have her at Lakelands in the Summer. If only we could have her now!'

'It would be a pleasure,' said Nataly. Her heart had a blow in the thought, that a lady of this kind would create the pleasure by not bringing criticism.

'The godmother?' he glistened upon Nesta.

She gave him low half-notes of the little blue butterfly's imitation of the superb contralto; and her hand and head at turn to hint the theatrical operatic attitude.

'Delicious!' he cried, his eyelids were bedewed at the vision of the three of them planted in the past; and here again, out of the dark wood, where something had required to be said, and had been said; and all was happily over, owing to the goodness and sweetness of the two dear innocents;—whom heaven bless! Jealousy of their naturally closer heart-at-heart, had not a whisper for him; part of their goodness and sweetness was felt to be in the not excluding him.

Nesta engaged to sing one of the 'old duets with her mother. She saw her mother's breast lift in a mechanical effort to try imaginary notes, as if doubtful of her capacity, more at home in the dumb deep sigh they fell to. Her mother's heroism made her a sacred woman to the thoughts of the girl, overcoming wonderment at the extreme submissiveness.

She put a screw on her mind to perceive the rational object there might be for causing her mother to go through tortures in receiving and visiting; and she was arrested by the louder question, whether she could think such a man as her father irrational.

People with resounding names, waves of a steady stream, were announced by Arlington, just as in the days, that seemed remote, before she went to Moorsedge; only they were more numerous, and some of the titles had ascended a stage. There were great lords, there were many great ladies; and Lady Grace Halley shuffling amid them, like a silken shimmer in voluminous robes.

They crowded about their host where he stood. 'He, is their Law!' Colney said, speaking unintelligibly, in the absence of the Simeon Fenellan regretted so loudly by Mr. Beaves Urmsing. They had an air of worshipping, and he of swimming.

There were also City magnates, and Lakelands' neighbours: the gentleman representing Pride of Port, Sir Abraham Quatley; and Colonel Corfe; Sir Rodwell and Lady Blachington; Mrs. Fanning; Mr. Caddis. Few young men and maids were seen. Dr. John Cormyn came without his wife, not mentioning her. Mrs. Peter Yatt touched the notes for voices at the piano. Priscilla Graves was a vacancy, and likewise the Rev. Septimus Barmby. Peridon and Catkin, and Mr. Pempton took their usual places. There was no fluting. A famous Canadian lady was the principal singer. A Galician violinist, zig-zagging extreme extensions and contractions of his corporeal frame in execution, and described by Colney as 'Paganini on wall,' failed to supplant Durandarte in Nesta's memory. She was asked by Lady Grace for the latest of Dudley. Sir Abraham Quatley named him with handsome emphasis. Great dames caressed her; openly approved; shadowed the future place among them.

Victor alluded at night to Mrs. John Cormyn's absence. He said: 'A homoeopathic doctor's wife!' nothing more; and by that little, he prepared Nesta for her mother's explanation. The great London people, ignorant or not, were caught by the strong tide he created, and carried on it. But there was a bruiting of the secret among their set; and the one to fall away from her, Nataly marvellingly named Mrs. John Cormyn; whose marriage was of her making. She did not disapprove Priscilla's behaviour. Priscilla had come to her and, protesting affection, had openly stated, that she required time and retirement to recover her proper feelings. Nataly smiled a melancholy criticism of an inconsequent or capricious woman, in relating to Nesta certain observations Priscilla had dropped upon poor faithful Mr. Pempton, because of his concealment from her of his knowledge of things for this faithful gentleman had been one of the few not ignorant. The rumour was traceable to the City.

'Mother, we walk on planks,' Nesta said.

Nataly answered: 'You will grow used to it.'

Her mother's habitual serenity in martyrdom was deceiving. Nesta had a transient suspicion, that she had grown, from use, to like the whirl of company, for oblivion in the excitement; and as her remembrance of her own station among the crowding people was a hot flush, the difference of their feelings chilled her.

Nataly said: 'It is tomorrow night again; we do not rest.' She smiled; and at once the girl read woman's armour on the dear face, and asked herself, Could I be so brave? The question following was a speechless wave, that surged at her father. She tried to fathom the scheme he entertained. The attempt obscured her conception of the man he was. She could not grasp him, being too young for knowing, that young heads cannot obtain a critical hold upon one whom they see grandly succeeding it is the sun's brilliance to their eyes.

Mother and daughter slept together that night, and their embrace was their world.

Nesta delighted her father the next day by walking beside him into the, City, as far as the end of the Embankment, where the carriage was in waiting with her maid to bring her back; and at his mere ejaculation of a wish, the hardy girl drove down in the afternoon for the walk home with him. Lady Grace Halley was at the office. 'I'm an incorrigible Stock Exchange gambler,' she said.

'Only,' Victor bade her beware, 'Mines are undulating in movement, and their heights are a preparation for their going down.'

She said she 'liked a swing.'

Nesta looked at them in turn.

The day after and the day after, Lady Grace was present. She made play with Dudley's name.

This coming into the City daily of a girl, for the sake of walking back in winter weather with her father, struck her as ambiguous: either a jealous foolish mother's device, or that of a weak man beating about for protection. But the woman of the positive world soon read to the contrary; helped a little by the man, no doubt. She read rather too much to the contrary, and took the pedestrian girl for perfect simplicity in her tastes, when Nesta had so far grown watchful as to feel relieved by the lady's departure. Her mother, without sympathy for the lady, was too great of soul for jealousy. Victor had his Nataly before him at a hint from Lady Grace: and he went somewhat further than the exact degree when affirming, that Nataly could not scheme, and was incapable of suspecting.—Nataly could perceive things with a certain accuracy: she would not stoop to a meanness. 'Plot? Nataly?' said he, and shrugged. In fact, the void of plot, drama, shuffle of excitement, reflected upon Nataly. He might have seen as tragic as ever dripped on Stage, had he looked.

But the walk Westward with his girl, together with pride in a daughter who clove her way through all weathers, won his heart to exultation. He told her: 'Freda does her dada so much good'; not telling her in what, or opening any passage to the mystery of the man he was. She was trying to be a student of life, with her eyes down upon hard earth, despite of her winged young head; she would have compassed him better had he dilated in sublime fashion; but he baffled her perusal of a man of power by the simpleness of his enjoyment of small things coming in his way;—the lighted shops, the crowd, emergence from the crowd, or the meeting near midwinter of a soft warm wind along the Embankment, and dark Thames magnificently coroneted over his grimy flow. There is no grasping of one who quickens us.

His flattery of his girl, too, restored her broken feeling of personal value; it permeated her nourishingly from the natural breath of him that it was.

At times he touched deep in humaneness; and he set her heart leaping on the flash of a thought to lay it bare, with the secret it held, for his help. That was a dream. She could more easily have uttered the words to Captain Dartrey, after her remembered abashing holy tremour of the vision of doing it and casting herself on noblest man's compassionateness; and her imagined thousand emotions;—a rolling music within her, a wreath of cloudglory in her sky;—which had, as with virgins it may be, plighted her body to him for sheer urgency of soul; drawn her by a single unwitting-to-brain, conscious-in-blood, shy curl outward of the sheathing leaf to the flowering of woman to him; even to the shore of

that strange sea, where the maid stands choosing this one man for her destiny, as in a trance. So are these young ones unfolded, shade by shade; and a shade is all the difference with them; they can teach the poet to marvel at the immensity of vitality in 'the shadow of a shade.'

Her father shut the glimpse of a possible speaking to him of Mrs. Marsett, with a renewal of his eulogistic allusions to Dudley Sowerby: the 'perfect gentleman, good citizen'; prospective heir to an earldom besides. She bowed to Dudley's merits; she read off the honorific pedimental letters of a handsome statue, for a sign to herself that she passed it.

She was unjust, as Victor could feel, though he did not know how coldly unjust. For among the exorbitant requisitions upon their fellow-creatures made by the young, is the demand, that they be definite: no mercy is in them for the transitional. And Dudley—and it was under her influence, and painfully, not ignobly—was in process of development: interesting to philosophers, if not to maidens.

Victor accused her of paying too much heed to Colney Durance's epigrams upon their friends. He quite joined with his English world in its opinion, that epigrams are poor squibs when they do not come out of great guns. Epigrams fired at a venerable nation, are surely the poorest of popgun paper pellets. The English kick at the insolence, when they are not in the mood for pelleting themselves, or when the armed Foreigner is overshadowing and braceing. Colney's pretentious and laboured Satiric Prose Epic of 'THE RIVAL TONGUES,' particularly offended him, as being a clever aim at no hitting; and sustained him, inasmuch as it was an acid friend's collapse. How could Colney expect his English to tolerate such a spiteful diatribe! The suicide of Dr. Bouthoin at San Francisco was the finishing stroke to the chances of success of the Serial;—although we are promised splendid evolutions on the part of Mr. Semhians; who, after brilliant achievements with bat and ball, abandons those weapons of Old England's modern renown, for a determined wrestle with our English pronunciation of words, and rescue of the spelling of them from the printer. His headache over the present treatment of the verb 'To bid,' was a quaint beginning for one who had soon to plead before Japanese, and who acknowledged now 'in contrition of spirit,' that in formerly opposing the scheme for an Academy, he helped to the handing of our noble language to the rapid reporter of news for an apathetic public. Further, he discovered in astonishment the subordination of all literary Americans to the decrees of their literary authorities; marking a Transatlantic point of departure, and contrasting ominously with the unruly Islanders 'grunting the higgledy-piggledy of their various ways, in all the porker's gut-gamut at the rush to the trough.' After a week's privation of bat and ball, he is, lighted or not, a gas-jet of satire upon his countrymen. As for the 'pathetic sublimity of the Funeral of Dr. Bouthoin,' Victor inveighed against an impious irony in the over dose of the pathos; and the same might be suspected in Britannia's elegy upon him, a strain of hot eulogy throughout. Mr. Semhians, all but treasonably, calls it, Papboat and Brandy:—'our English literary diet of the day': stimulating and not nourishing. Britannia's mournful anticipation, that 'The shroud enwinding this my son is mine!'—should the modern generation depart from the track of him who proved himself the giant in mainly supporting her glory—was, no doubt, a high pitch of the note of Conservatism. But considering, that Dr. Bouthoin 'committed suicide under a depression of mind produced by a surfeit of unaccustomed dishes, upon a physical system inspired by the traditions of exercise, and no longer relieved by the practice'—to translate from Dr. Gannius: we are again at war with the writer's reverential tone, and we know not what to think: except, that Mr. Durance was a Saturday meat market's butcher in the Satiric Art.

Nesta found it pleasanter to see him than to hear of his work: which, to her present feeling, was

inhuman. As little as our native public, had she then any sympathy for the working in the idea: she wanted throbs, visible aims, the Christian incarnate; she would have preferred the tale of slaughter—periodically invading all English classes as a flush from the undrained lower, Vikings all—to frigid sterile Satire. And truly it is not a fruit-bearing rod. Colney had to stand on the defence of it against the damsel's charges. He thought the use of the rod, while expressing profound regret at a difference of opinion between him and those noble heathens, beneficial for boys; but in relation to their seniors, and particularly for old gentlemen, he thought that the sharpest rod to cut the skin was the sole saving of them. Insensibility to Satire, he likened to the hard-mouthed horse; which is doomed to the worser thing in consequence. And consequently upon the lack of it, and of training to appreciate it, he described his country's male venerables as being distinguishable from annuitant spinsters only in presenting themselves forked.

'He is unsuccessful and embittered, Victor said to Nesta. 'Colney will find in the end, that he has lost his game and soured himself by never making concessions. Here's this absurd Serial—it fails, of course; and then he has to say, it's because he won't tickle his English, won't enter into a "frowzy complicity" with their tastes.'

'But—I think of Skepsey honest creatures respect Mr. Durance, and he is always ready to help them,' said Nesta.

'If he can patronize.'

'Does he patronize me, dada?'

'You are one of his exceptions. Marry a title and live in state—and then hear him! I am successful, and the result of it is, that he won't acknowledge wisdom in anything I say or do; he will hardly acknowledge the success. It is "a dirty road to success," he says. So that, if successful, I must have rolled myself in mire. I compelled him to admit he was wrong about your being received at Moorsedge: a bit of a triumph!'

Nesta's walks with her father were no loss of her to Nataly; the girl came back to her bearing so fresh and so full a heart; and her father was ever prouder of her: he presented new features of her in his quotations of her sayings, thoughtful sayings. 'I declare she helps one to think,' he said. 'It 's not precocity; it 's healthy inquiry. She brings me nearer ideas of my own, not yet examined, than any one else does. I say, what a wife for a man!'

'She takes my place beside you, dear, now I am not quite strong,' said Nataly. 'You have not seen ...?'

'Dudley Sowerby? He's at Cronidge, I believe. His elder brother's in a bad way. Bad business, this looking to a death.'

Nataly eyes revealed a similar gulf.

Let it be cast on Society, then! A Society opposing Nature forces us to these murderous looks upon impediments. But what of a Society in the dance with Nature? Victor did not approve of that. He began, under the influence of Nesta's companionship, to see the Goddess Nature there is in a chastened nature. And this view shook the curtain covering his lost Idea. He felt sure he should grasp it soon and enter into its daylight: a muffled voice within him said, that he was kept waiting to do so

by the inexplicable tardiness of a certain one to rise ascending to her spiritual roost. She was now harmless to strike: Themison, Carling, Jarniman, even the Rev. Groseman Buttermore, had been won to the cause of humanity. Her ascent, considering her inability to do further harm below, was most mysteriously delayed. Owing to it, in a manner almost as mysterious, he was kept crossing a bridge having a slippery bit on it. Thanks to his gallant Fredi, he had found his feet again. But there was a bruise where, to his honour, he felt tenderest. And Fredi away, he might be down again—for no love of a slippery bit, proved slippery, one might guess, by a predecessor or two. Ta-ta-ta-to and mum! Still, in justice to the little woman, she had been serviceable.

She would be still more so, if a member of Parliament now on his back here we are with the murder-eye again!

Nesta's never speaking of Lakelands clouded him a little, as an intimation of her bent of mind.

'And does my girl come to her dada to-day?' he said, on the fifth morning since her return; prepared with a villanous resignation to hear, that this day she abstained, though he had the wish for her coming.

'Why, don't you know,' said she, 'we all meet to have tea in Mr. Durance's chambers; and I walk back with you, and there we are joined by mama; and we are to have a feast of literary celebrities.'

'Colney's selection of them! And Simeon Fenellan, I hope. Perhaps Dartrey. Perhaps ... eh?'

She reddened. So Dudley Sowerby's unspoken name could bring the blush to her cheeks. Dudley had his excuses in his brother's condition. His father's health, too, was—but this was Dudley calculating. Where there are coronets, calculations of this sort must needs occur; just as where there are complications. Odd, one fancies it, that we walking along the pavement of civilized life, should be perpetually summoning Orcus to our aid, for the sake of getting a clear course.

'And supposing a fog, my dearie?' he said.

'The daughter in search of her father carries a lamp to light her to him through densest fogs as well as over deserts,' *etc.* She declaimed a long sentence, to set the ripple running in his features; and when he left the room for a last word with Armandine, she flung arms round her mother's neck, murmuring: 'Mother! mother!' a cry equal to 'I am sure I do right,' and understood so by Nataly approving it; she too on the line of her instinct, without an object in sight.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE MOTHER-THE DAUGHTER

Taking Nesta's hand, on her entry into his chambers with her father, Colney Durance bowed over it and kissed it. The unusual performance had a meaning; she felt she was praised. It might be because she made herself her father's companion. 'I can't persuade him to put on a great-coat,' she said. 'You would defeat his aim at the particular waistcoat of his ambition,' said Colney, goaded to speak, not anxious to be heard.

He kept her beside him, leading her about for introductions to multiform celebrities of both sexes; among them the gentleman editing the Magazine which gave out serially THE RIVAL TONGUES: and there was talk of a dragon-throated public's queer appetite in Letters. The pained Editor deferentially smiled at her cheerful mention of Delphica. 'In, book form, perhaps!' he remarked, with plaintive resignation; adding: 'You read it?' And a lady exclaimed: 'We all read it!'

But we are the elect, who see signification and catch flavour; and we are reminded of an insatiable monster how sometimes capricious is his gorge. 'He may happen to be in the humour for a shaking!' Colney's poor consolation it was to say of the prospects of his published book: for the funny monster has been known to like a shaking.

'He takes it kinder tickled,' said Fenellan, joining the group and grasping Nesta's hand with a warmth that thrilled her and set her guessing. 'A taste of his favourite Cayenne lollypop, Colney; it fetches the tear he loves to shed, or it gives him digestive heat in the bag of his literary receptacle-fearfully relaxed and enormous! And no wonder; his is to lie him down on notion of the attitude for reading, his back; and he has in a jiffy the funnel of the Libraries inserted into his mouth, and he feels the publishers pouring their gallons through it unlimitedly; never crying out, which he can't; only swelling, which he's obliged to do, with a non-nutritious inflation; and that's his intellectual enjoyment; bearing a likeness to the horrible old torture of the baillir d'eau; and he's doomed to perish in the worst book-form of dropsy. You, my dear Colney, have offended his police or excise, who stand by the funnel, in touch with his palate, to make sure that nothing above proof is poured in; and there's your misfortune. He's not half a bad fellow, you find when you haven't got to serve him.'

'Superior to his official parasites, one supposes!' Colney murmured.

The celebrities were unaffectedly interested in a literary failure having certain merits; they discussed it, to compliment the crownless author; and the fervider they, the more was he endowed to read the meanness prompting the generosity. Publication of a book, is the philosopher's lantern upon one's fellows.

Colney was caught away from his private manufactory of acids by hearing Simeon Fenellan relate to Victor some of the recent occurrences at Brighton. Simeon's tone was unsatisfying; Colney would have the word; he was like steel on the grindstone for such a theme of our national grotesque-sublime.

'That Demerara Supple-jack, Victor! Don't listen to Simeon; he's a man of lean narrative, fit to chronicle political party wrangles and such like crop of carcase prose: this is epical. In DRINK we have Old England's organic Epic; Greeks and Trojans; Parliamentary Olympus, ennobled brewers,

nasal fanatics, all the machinery to hand. Keep a straight eye on the primary motives of man, you'll own the English produce the material for proud verse; they're alive there! Dartrey's Demerara makes a pretty episode of the battle. I haven't seen it—if it's possible to look on it: but I hear it is flexible, of a vulgar appearance in repose, Jove's lightning at one time, the thong of AEacus at another. Observe Dartrey marching off to the Station, for the purpose of laying his miraculous weapon across the shoulders of a son of Mars, who had offended. But we have his name, my dear Victor! His name, Simeon?—Worrell; a Major Worrell: his offence being probably, that he obtained military instruction in the Service, and left it at his convenience, for our poor patch and tatter British Army to take in his place another young student, who'll grow up to do similarly. And Dartrey, we assume, is off to stop that system. You behold Sir Dartrey twirling the weapon in preparatory fashion; because he is determined we shall have an army of trained officers instead of infant amateurs heading heroic louts. Not a thought of Beer in Dartrey!—always unpatriotic, you 'll say. Plato entreats his absent mistress to fix eyes on a star: eyes on Beer for the uniting of you English! I tell you no poetic fiction. Seeing him on his way, thus terribly armed, and knowing his intent, Venus, to shield a former favourite servant of Mars, conjured the most diverting of interventions, in the shape of a young woman in a poke-bonnet, and Skepsey, her squire, marching with a dozen or so, informing bedevilled mankind of the hideousness of our hymnification when it is not under secluding sanction of the Edifice, and challenging criticism; and that was hard by, and real English, in the form of bludgeons, wielded by a battalion of the national idol Bungay Beervat's boys; and they fell upon the hymners. Here you fill in with pastoral similes. They struck the maid adored by Skepsey. And that was the blow which slew them! Our little man drove into the press with a pair of fists able to do their work. A valiant skiff upon a sea of enemies, he was having it on the nob, and suddenly the Demerara lightened. It flailed to thresh. Enough. to say, brains would have come. The Bungays made a show of fight. No lack of blood in them, to stock a raw shilling's worth or gush before Achilles rageing. You perceive the picture, you can almost sing the ballad. We want only a few names of the fallen. It was the carving of a maitre chef, according to Skepsey: right-left-and point, with supreme precision: they fell, accurately sliced from the joint. Having done with them, Dartrey tossed the Demerara to Skepsey, and washed his hands of battle; and he let his major go unscathed. Phlebotomy sufficient for the day!

Nesta's ears hummed with the name of Major Worrell.

'Skepsey did come back to London with a rather damaged frontispiece,' Victor said. 'He can't have joined those people?'

'They may suit one of your militant peacemakers,' interposed Fenellan. 'The most placable creatures alive, and the surest for getting-up a shindy.'

'Suit him! They're the scandal of our streets.' Victor was pricked with a jealousy of them for beguiling him of his trusty servant.

'Look at your country, see where it shows its vitality,' said Colney. 'You don't see elsewhere any vein in movement-movement,' he harped on the word Victor constantly employed to express the thing he wanted to see. 'Think of that, when the procession sets your teeth on edge. They're honest foes of vice, and they move:—in England! Pulpit-preaching has no effect. For gross maladies, gross remedies. You may judge of what you are by the quality of the cure. Puritanism, I won't attempt to paint—it would barely be decent; but compare it with the spectacle of English frivolity, and you'll admit it to be the best show you make. It may still be the saving of you—on the level of the orderly ox: I 've not

observed that it aims at higher. And talking of the pulpit, Barmby is off to the East, has accepted a Shoreditch curacy, Skepsey tells me.'

'So there's the reason for our not seeing him!' Victor turned to Nesta.

'Papa, you won't be angry with Skepsey if he has joined those people,' said Nesta. 'I'm sure he thinks of serving his country, Mr. Durance.'

Colney smiled on her. 'And you too?'

'If women knew how!'

'They're hitting on more ways at present than the men—in England.'

'But, Mr. Durance, it speaks well for England when they're allowed the chance here.'

'Good!' Fenellan exclaimed. 'And that upsets his placement of the modern national genders: Germany masculine, France feminine, Old England what remains.'

Victor ruffled and reddened on his shout of 'Neuter?'

Their circle widened. Nesta knew she was on promotion, by her being led about and introduced to ladies. They were encouraging with her. One of them, a Mrs. Marina Floyer, had recently raised a standard of feminine insurrection. She said: 'I hear your praises from Mr. Durance. He rarely praises. You have shown capacity to meditate on the condition of women, he says.'

Nesta drew a shorter breath, with a hope at heart. She speculated in the dark, as to whether her aim to serve and help was not so friendless. And did Mr. Durance approve? But surely she stood in a glorious England if there were men and women to welcome a girl to their councils. Oh! that is the broad free England where gentlemen and gentlewomen accept of the meanest aid to cleanse the land of its iniquities, and do not suffer shame to smite a young face for touching upon horrors with a pure design.

She cried in her bosom: I feel! She had no other expression for that which is as near as great natures may come to the conceiving of the celestial spirit from an emissary angel; and she trembled, the fire ran through her. It seemed to her, that she would be called to help or that certainly they were nearing to an effacement of the woofullest of evils; and if not helping, it would still be a blessedness for her to kneel thanking heaven.

Society was being attacked and defended. She could but studiously listen. Her father was listening. The assailant was a lady; and she had a hearing, although she treated Society as a discrowned monarch on trial for an offence against a more precious: viz., the individual cramped by brutish laws: the individual with the ideas of our time, righteously claiming expansion out of the clutches of a narrow old-world disciplinarian—that giant hypocrite! She flung the gauntlet at externally venerable Institutions; and she had a hearing, where horrifaction, execration, the foul Furies of Conservatism would in a shortly antecedent day have been hissing and snakily lashing, hounding her to expulsion. Mrs. Marina Floyer gravely seconded her. Colney did the same. Victor turned sharp on him. 'Yes,' Colney said; 'we unfold the standard of extremes in this country, to get a single step taken: that's how we move: we threaten death to get footway. Now, mark: Society's errors will be admitted.'

A gentleman spoke. He began by admitting Society's errors. Nevertheless, it so distinctly exists for the common good, that we may say of Society in relation to the individual, it is the body to the soul. We may wash, trim, purify, but we must not maim it. The assertion of our individuality in opposition to the Government of Society—this existing Society—is a toss of the cap for the erasure of our civilization, et caetera.

Platitudes can be of intense interest if they approach our case.—But, if you please, we ask permission to wash, trim, purify, and we do not get it.—But you have it! Because we take it at our peril; and you, who are too cowardly to grant or withhold, call-up the revolutionary from the pits by your slackness:—etc. There was a pretty hot debate. Both assailant and defendant, to Victor's thinking, spoke well, and each the right thing and he could have made use of both, but he could answer neither. He beat about for the cause of this deficiency, and discovered it in his position. Mentally, he was on the side of Society. Yet he was annoyed to find the attack was so easily answerable when the defence unfolded. But it was absurd to expect it would not be. And in fact, a position secretly rebellious is equal to water on the brain for stultifying us.

Before the controversy was over, a note in Nataly's handwriting called him home. She wrote: 'Make my excuses. C. D. will give Nesta and some lady dinner. A visitor here. Come alone, and without delay. Quite well, robust. Impatient to consult with you, nothing else.'

Nesta was happy to stay; and Victor set forth.

The visitor? plainly Dudley. Nataly's trusting the girl to the chance of some lady being present, was unlike her. Dudley might be tugging at the cord; and the recent conversation upon Society, rendered one of its gilt pillars particularly estimable.—A person in the debate had declared this modern protest on behalf of individualism to represent Society's Criminal Trial. And it is likely to be a long one. And good for the world, that we see such a Trial!—Well said or not, undoubtedly Society is an old criminal: not much more advanced than the state of spiritual worship where bloody sacrifice was offered to a hungry Lord. But it has a case for pleading. We may liken it, as we have it now, to the bumping lumberer's raft; suitable along torrent waters until we come to smoother. Are we not on waters of a certain smoothness at the reflecting level?— enough to justify demands for a vessel of finer design. If Society is to subsist, it must have the human with the logical argument against the cry of the free-flags, instead of presenting a block's obtuseness. That, you need not hesitate to believe, will be rolled downward and disintegrated, sooner than later. A Society based on the logical concrete of humane considerateness:—a Society prohibiting to Mrs. Burman her wielding of a life-long rod ...

The personal element again to confuse inquiry!—And Skepsey and Barmby both of them bent on doing work without inquiry of any sort! They were enviable: they were good fellows. Victor clung to the theme because it hinted of next door to his lost Idea. He rubbed the back of his head, fancying a throb there. Are civilized creatures incapable of abstract thought when their social position is dubious? For if so, we never can be quit of those we forsake.—Apparently Mrs. Burman's unfathomed power lay in her compelling him to summon the devilish in himself and play upon the impish in Society, that he might overcome her.

Victor's house-door stopped this current.

Nataly took his embrace.

‘Nothing wrong?’ he said, and saw the something. It was a favourable moment to tell her what she might not at another time regard as a small affair. ‘News in the City to-day of that South London borough being vacated. Quatley urges me. A death again! I saw Pempton, too. Will you credit me when I tell you he carries his infatuation so far, that he has been investing in Japanese and Chinese Loans, because they are less meat-eaters than others, and vegetarians are more stable, and outlast us all!—Dudley the visitor?’ ‘Mr. Sowerby has been here,’ she said, in a shaking low voice.

Victor held her hand and felt a squeeze more nervous than affectionate.

‘To consult with me,’ she added. ‘My maid will go at ten to bring Nesta; Mr. Durance I can count on, to see her safe home. Ah!’ she wailed.

Victor nodded, saying: ‘I guess. And, my love, you will receive Mrs. John Cormyn tomorrow morning. I can’t endure gaps. Gaps in our circle must never be. Do I guess?—I spoke to Colney about bringing her home.’

Nataly sighed: ‘Ah! make what provision we will! Evil—Mr. Sowerby has had a great deal to bear.’

‘A worldling may think so.’

Her breast heaved, and the wave burst: but her restraining of tears froze her speech.

‘Victor! Our Nesta! Mr. Sowerby is unable to explain. And how the Miss Duvidneys! ... At that Brighton!’—The voice he heard was not his darling’s deep rich note, it had dropped to toneless hoarseness: ‘She has been permitted to make acquaintance—she has been seen riding with—she has called upon—Oh! it is one of those abandoned women. In her house! Our girl! Our Nesta! She was insulted by a man in the woman’s house. She is talked of over Brighton. The mother!—the daughter! And grant me this—that never was girl more carefully ... never till she was taken from me. Oh! do not forget. You will defend me? You will say, that her mother did with all her soul strive ... It is not a rumour. Mr. Sowerby has had it confirmed.’ A sob caught her voice.

Victor’s hands caressed to console: ‘Dudley does not propose to . . .?’

‘Nesta must promise ... But how it happened? How! An acquaintance with—contact with!—Oh! cruel!’ Each time she ceased speaking, the wrinkles of a shiver went over her, and the tone was of tears coming, but she locked them in.

‘An accident!’ said Victor; ‘some misunderstanding—there can’t be harm. Of course, she promises—hasn’t to promise. How could a girl distinguish! He does not cast blame on her?’

‘Dear, if you would go down to Dartrey tomorrow. He knows—it is over the Clubs there; he will tell you, before a word to Nesta. Innocent, yes! Mr. Sowerby has not to be assured of that. Ignorant of the character of the dreadful woman? Ah, if I could ever in anything think her ignorant! She frightens me. Mr. Sowerby is indulgent. He does me justice. My duty to her—I must defend myself—has been my first thought. I said in my prayers—she at least! ... We have to see the more than common reasons why she, of all girls, should—he did not hint it, he was delicate: her name must not be public.’

‘Yes, yes, Dudley is without parallel as a gentleman,’ said Victor. ‘It does not suit me to hear the word

“indulgent.” My dear, if you were down there, you would discover that the talk was the talk of two or three men seeing our girl ride by—and she did ride with a troop: why, we’ve watched them along the parade, often. Clear as day how it happened! I’ll go down early tomorrow.’

He fancied Nataly was appeased. And even out of this annoyance, there was the gain of her being won to favour Dudley’s hitherto but tolerated suit.

Nataly also had the fancy, that the calm following on her anguish, was a moderation of it. She was kept strung to confide in her girl by the recent indebtedness to her for words heavenly in the strengthening comfort they gave. But no sooner was she alone than her torturing perplexities and her abasement of the hours previous to Victor’s coming returned.

For a girl of Nesta’s head could not be deceived; she had come home with a woman’s intelligence of the world, hard knowledge of it—a knowledge drawn from foul wells, the unhappy mother imagined: she dreaded to probe to the depth of it. She had in her wounded breast the world’s idea, that corruption must come of the contact with impurity.

Nataly renewed her cry of despair: ‘The mother!—the daughter!’—her sole revelation of the heart’s hollows in her stammered speaking to Victor.

She thanked heaven for the loneliness of her bed, where she could repeat: ‘The mother!—the daughter!’ hearing the world’s words:—the daughter excused, by reason of her having such a mother; the mother unpitied for the bruited of her brazen daughter’s name: but both alike consigned to the corners of the world’s dust-heaps. She cried out, that her pride was broken. Her pride, her last support of life, had gone to pieces. The tears she restrained in Victor’s presence, were called on to come now, and she had none. It might be, that she had not strength for weeping. She was very weak. Rising from bed to lock her door against Nesta’s entry to the room on her return at night, she could hardly stand: a chill and a clouding overcame her. The quitted bed seemed the haven of a drifted wreck to reach.

Victor tried the handle of a locked door in the dark of the early winter morning. ‘The mother!—the daughter!’ had swung a pendulum for some time during the night in him, too. He would rather have been subjected to the spectacle of tears than have heard that toneless voice, as it were the dry torrent-bed rolling blocks instead of melodious, if afflicting, waters.

He told Nesta not to disturb her mother, and murmured of a headache: ‘Though, upon my word, the best cure for mama would be a look into Fredi’s eyes!’ he said, embracing his girl, quite believing in her, just a little afraid of her.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

NATALY, NESTA, AND DARTREY FENELLAN

Pleasant things, that come to us too late for our savour of the sweetness in them, toll ominously of life on the last walk to its end. Yesterday, before Dudley Sowerby's visit, Nataly would have been stirred where the tears we shed for happiness or repress at a flattery dwell when seeing her friend Mrs. John Cormyn enter her boudoir and hearing her speak repentantly, most tenderly. Mrs. John said: 'You will believe I have suffered, dear; I am half my weight, I do think': and she did not set the smile of responsive humour moving; although these two ladies had a key of laughter between them. Nataly took her kiss; held her hand, and at the parting kissed her. She would rather have seen her friend than not: so far she differed from a corpse; but she was near the likeness to the dead in the insensibility to any change of light shining on one who best loved darkness and silence. She cried to herself wilfully, that her pride was broken: as women do when they spurn at the wounding of a dignity they cannot protect and die to see bleeding; for in it they live.

The cry came of her pride unbroken, sore bruised, and after a certain space for recovery combative. She said:

Any expiation I could offer where I did injury, I would not refuse; I would humble myself and bless heaven for being able to pay my debt—what I can of it. All I contend against is, injustice. And she sank into sensational protests of her anxious care of her daughter, too proud to phrase them.

Her one great affliction, the scourging affliction of her utter loneliness;—an outcast from her family; daily, and she knew not how, more shut away from the man she loved; now shut away from her girl;—seemed under the hand of the angel of God. The abandonment of her by friends, was merely the light to show it.

Midday's post brought her a letter from Priscilla Graves, entreating to be allowed to call on her next day.—We are not so easily cast off! Nataly said, bitterly, in relation to the lady whose offending had not been so great. She wrote: 'Come, if sure that you sincerely wish to.'

Having fasted, she ate at lunch in her dressing-room, with some taste of the food, haunted by an accusation of gluttony because of her eating at all, and a vile confession, that she was enabled to eat, owing to the receipt of Priscilla's empty letter: for her soul's desire was to be doing a deed of expiation, and the macerated flesh seemed her assurance to herself of the courage to make amends.—I must have some strength, she said wearily, in apology for the morsel consumed.

Nesta's being in the house with her, became an excessive irritation. Doubts of the girl's possible honesty to speak a reptile truth under question; amazement at her boldness to speak it; hatred of, the mouth that could: and loathing of the words, the theme; and abomination of herself for conjuring fictitious images to rouse real emotions; all ran counterthreads, that produced a mad pattern in the mind, affrighting to reason: and then, for its preservation, reason took a superrational leap, and ascribed the terrible injustice of this last cruel stroke to the divine scourge, recognized divine by the selection of the mortal spot for chastisement. She clasped her breast, and said: It is mortal. And that calmed her.

She said, smiling: I never felt my sin until this blow came! Therefore the blow was proved divine. Ought it not to be welcomed?—and she appearing no better than one of those, the leprous of the sex! And brought to acknowledgement of the likeness by her daughter!

Nataly drank the poison distilled from her exclamations and was ice. She had denied herself to Nesta's redoubled petition. Nesta knocking at the door a third time and calling, tore the mother two ways: to have her girl on her breast or snap their union in a word with an edge. She heard the voice of Dartrey Fenellan.

He was admitted. 'No, dear,' she said to Nesta; and Nesta's, 'My own mother,' consentingly said, in tender resignation, as she retired, sprang a stinging tear to the mother's eyelids.

Dartrey looked at the door closing on the girl.

'Is it a very low woman?' Nataly asked him in a Church whisper, with a face abashed.

'It is not,' said he, quick to meet any abruptness.

'She must be cunning.'

'In the ordinary way. We say it of Puss before the hounds.'

'To deceive a girl like Nesta!'

'She has done no harm.'

'Dartrey, you speak to a mother. You have seen the woman? She is? —ah!'

'She is womanly, womanly.'

'Quite one of those ... ?'

'My dear soul! You can't shake them off in that way. She is one of us. If we have the class, we can't escape from it. They are not to bear all the burden because they exist. We are the bigger debtors. I tell you she is womanly.'

'It sounds like horrid cynicism.'

'Friends of mine would abuse it for the reverse.'

'Do not make me hate your chivalry. This woman is a rod on my back. Provided only she has not dropped venom into Nesta's mind!'

'Don't fear!'

'Can you tell me you think she has done no harm to my girl?'

'To Nesta herself?—not any: not to a girl like your girl.'

‘To my girl’s name? Speak at once. But I know she has. She induced Nesta to go to her house. My girl was insulted in this woman’s house.’

Dartrey’s forehead ridged with his old fury and a gust of present contempt. ‘I can tell you this, that the fellow who would think harm of it, knowing the facts ‘s not worthy of touching the tips of the fingers of your girl.’

‘She is talked of!’

‘A good-looking girl out riding with a handsome woman on a parade of idlers!’

‘The woman is notorious.’ Nataly said it shivering.

He shook his head. ‘Not true.’

‘She has an air of a lady?’

‘She sits a horse well.’

‘Would she to any extent deceive me—impose on me here?’

‘No.’

‘Ah!’ Nataly moaned... .

‘But what?’ said Dartrey. ‘There was no pretence. Her style is not worse than that of some we have seen. There was no effort to deceive. The woman’s plain for you and me to read, she has few of the arts; one or two tricks, if you like: and these were not needed for use. There are women who have them, and have not been driven or let slip into the wilderness.’

‘Yes; I know!—those ideas of yours!’ Nataly had once admired him for his knightliness toward the weakest women and the women underfoot. ‘You have spoken to this woman? She boasted of acquaintance with Nesta?’

‘She thanked God for having met her.’

‘Is it one of the hysterical creatures?’

Mrs. Marsett appeared fronting Dartrey.

He laughed to himself. ‘A clever question. There is a leaning to excitement of manner at times. It ‘s not hysteria. Allow for her position.’

Nataly took the unintended blow, and bowed to it; and still more harshly said: ‘What rank of life does the woman come from?’

‘The class educated for a skittish career by your popular Stage and your Book-stalls. I am not precise?’

‘Leave Mr. Durance. Is she in any degree commonly well bred? ... behaviour, talk-her English.’

‘I trench on Mr. Durance in replying. Her English is passable. You may hear ...’

‘Everywhere, of course! And this woman of slipshod English and excited manners imposed upon Nesta!’

‘It would not be my opinion.’

‘Did not impose on her!’

‘Not many would impose on Nesta Radnor for long.’

‘Think what that says, Dartrey!’

‘You have had a detestable version of the story.’

‘Because an excited creature thanks God to you for having met her!’

‘She may. She’s a better woman for having met her. Don’t suppose we’re for supernatural conversions. The woman makes no show of that. But she has found a good soul among her sex—her better self in youth, as one guesses; and she is grateful—feels farther from exile in consequence. She has found a lady to take her by the hand!—not a common case. She can never go to the utterly bad after knowing Nesta. I forget if she says it; I say it. You have heard the story from one of your conventional gentlemen.’

‘A true gentleman. I have reason to thank him. He has not your ideas on these matters, Dartrey. He is very sensitive ... on Nesta’s behalf.’

‘With reference to marriage. I’ll own I prefer another kind of gentleman. I ‘ve had my experience of that kind of gentleman. Many of the kind have added their spot to the outcasts abominated for uncleanness—in holy unction. Many?—I won’t say all; but men who consent to hear black words pitched at them, and help to set good women facing away from them, are pious dolts or rascal dogs of hypocrites. They, if you’ll let me quote Colney Durance to you to-day—and how is it he is not in favour?—they are tempting the Lord to turn the pillars of Society into pillars of salt. Down comes the house. And priests can rest in sight of it!—They ought to be dead against the sanctimony that believes it excommunicates when it curses. The relationship is not dissolved so cheaply, though our Society affects to think it is. Barmby’s off to the East End of this London, Victor informs me:—good fellow! And there he’ll be groaning over our vicious nature. Nature is not more responsible for vice than she is for inhumanity. Both bad, but the latter’s the worse of the two.’

Nataly interposed: ‘I see the contrast, and see whom it’s to strike.’

Dartrey sent a thought after his meaning. ‘Hardly that. Let it stand. He ‘s only one with the world: but he shares the criminal infamy for crushing hope out of its frailest victims. They’re that—no sentiment. What a world, too, look behind it!—brutal because brutish. The world may go hang: we expect more of your gentleman. To hear of Nesta down there, and doubt that she was about good work; and come complaining! He had the privilege of speaking to her, remonstrating, if he wished. There are men who think—men!—the plucking of sinners out of the mire a dirty business. They depute it to

certain officials. And your women—it's the taste of the world to have them educated so, that they can as little take the humane as the enlightened view. Except, by the way, sometimes, in secret;—they have a sisterly breast. In secret, they do occasionally think as they feel. In public, the brass mask of the Idol they call Propriety commands or supplies their feelings and thoughts. I won't repeat my reasons for educating them differently. At present we have but half the woman to go through life with—and thank you.'

Dartrey stopped. 'Don't be disturbed,' he added. 'There's no ground for alarm. Not of any sort.'

Nataly said: 'What name?'

'Her name is Mrs. Marsett.'

'The name is ... ?'

'Captain Marsett: will be Sir Edward. He came back from the Continent yesterday.'

A fit of shuddering seized Nataly. It grew in violence, and speaking out of it, with a pause of sickly empty chatter of the jaws, she said: 'Always that name?'

'Before the maiden name? May have been or not.'

'Not, you say?'

'I don't accurately know.'

Dartrey sprang to his legs. 'My dear soul! dear friend—one of the best! if we go on fencing in the dark, there'll be wounds. Your way of taking this affair disappointed me. Now I understand. It's the disease of a trouble, to fly at comparisons. No real one exists. I wished to protect the woman from a happier sister's judgement, to save you from alarm concerning Nesta:—quite groundless, if you'll believe me. Come, there's plenty of benevolent writing abroad on these topics now: facts are more looked at, and a good woman may join us in taking them without the horrors and loathings of angels rather too much given to claim distinction from the luckless. A girl who's unprotected may go through adventures before she fixes, and be a creature of honest intentions. Better if protected, we all agree. Better also if the world did not favour the girl's multitude of enemies. Your system of not dealing with facts openly is everyway favourable to them. I am glad to say, Victor recognizes what corruption that spread of wealth is accountable for. And now I must go and have a talk with the—what a change from the blue butterfly! Eaglet, I ought to have said. I dine with you, for Victor may bring news.'

'Would anything down there be news to you, Dartrey?'

'He makes it wherever he steps.'

'He would reproach me for not detaining you. Tell Nesta I have to lie down after talking. She has a child's confidence in you.'

A man of middle age! he said to himself. It is the particular ejaculation which tames the senior whose heart is for a dash of holiday. He resolved, that the mother might trust to the discretion of a man of his age; and he went down to Nesta, grave with the weight his count of years should give him. Seeing her,

the light of what he now knew of her was an ennobling equal to celestial. For this fair girl was one of the active souls of the world—his dream to discover in woman's form. She, the little Nesta, the tall pure-eyed girl before him, was, young though she was, already in the fight with evil: a volunteer of the army of the simply Christian. The worse for it? Sowerby would think so. She was not of the order of young women who, in sheer ignorance or in voluntary, consent to the peace with evil, and are kept externally safe from the smirch of evil, and are the ornaments of their country, glory of a country prizing ornaments higher than qualities.

Dartrey could have been momentarily incredulous of things revealed by Mrs. Marsett—not incredulous of the girl's heroism: that capacity he caught and gauged in her shape of head, cut of mouth, and the measurements he was accustomed to make at a glance:—but her beauty, or the form of beauty which was hers, argued against her having set foot of thought in our fens. Here and far there we meet a young saint vowed to service along by those dismal swamps: and saintly she looks; not of this earth. Nesta was of the blooming earth. Where do we meet girl or woman comparable to garden-flowers, who can dare to touch to lift the spotted of her sex? He was puzzled by Nesta's unlikeness in deeds and in aspect. He remembered her eyes, on the day when he and Colonel Sudley beheld her; presently he was at quiet grapple with her mind. His doubts cleared off. Then the question came, How could a girl of heroical character be attached to the man Sowerby? That entirely passed belief.

And was it possible his wishes beguiled his hearing? Her tones were singularly vibrating.

They talked for a while before, drawing a deep breath, she said: 'I fancy I am in disgrace with my mother.'

'You have a suspicion why?' said he.

'I have.'

She would have told him why: the words were at her lips. Previous to her emotion on the journey home, the words would have come out. They were arrested by the thunder of the knowledge, that the nobleness in him drawing her to be able to speak of scarlet matter, was personally worshipped.

He attributed the full rose upon her cheeks to the forbidding subject.

To spare pain, he said: 'No misunderstanding with the dear mother will last the day through. Can I help?'

'Oh, Captain Dartrey!'

'Drop the captain. Dartrey will do.'

'How could I!'

'You're not wanting in courage, Nesta.'

'Hardly for that!'

'By-and-by, then.'

‘Though I could not say Mr. Fenellan.’

‘You see; Dartrey, it must be.’

‘If I could!’

‘But the fellow is not a captain: and he is a friend, an old friend, very old friend: he’ll be tipped with grey in a year or two.’

‘I might be bolder then.’

‘Imagine it now. There is no disloyalty in your calling your friends by their names.’

Her nature rang to the implication. ‘I am not bound.’ Dartrey hung fast, speculating on her visibly: ‘I heard you were?’

‘No. I must be free.’

‘It is not an engagement?’

‘Will you laugh?—I have never quite known. My father desired it: and my desire is to please him. I think I am vain enough to think I read through blinds and shutters. The engagement—what there was—has been, to my reading, broken more than once. I have not considered it, to settle my thoughts on it, until lately: and now I may suspect it to be broken. I have given cause—if it is known. There is no blame elsewhere. I am not unhappy, Captain Dartrey.’

‘Captain by courtesy. Very well. Tell me how Nesta judges the engagement to be broken?’

She was mentally phrasing before she said: ‘Absence.’

‘He was here yesterday.’

All that the visit embraced was in her expressive look, as of sight drawing inward, like our breath in a spell of wonderment. ‘Then I understand; it enlightens me.’

My own mother!—my poor mother! he should have come to me. I was the guilty person, not she; and she is the sufferer. That, if in life were direct retribution! but the very meaning of having a heart, is to suffer through others or for them.’

‘You have soon seen that, dear girl,’ said Dartrey.

‘So, my own mother, and loving me as she does, blames me!’ Nesta sighed; she took a sharp breath. ‘You? do you blame me too?’

He pressed her hand, enamoured of her instantaneous divination and heavenly candour.

But he was admonished, that to speak high approval would not be honourable advantage taken of the rival condemning; and he said: ‘Blame? Some think it is not always the right thing to do the right thing. I’ve made mistakes, with no bad design. A good mother’s view is not often wrong.’

‘You pressed my hand,’ she murmured.

That certainly had said more.

‘Glad to again,’ he responded. It was uttered airily and was meant to be as lightly done.

Nesta did not draw back her hand. ‘I feel strong when you press it.’ Her voice wavered, and as when we hear a flask sing thin at the filling, ceased upon evidence of a heart surcharged. How was he to relax the pressure!—he had to give her the strength she craved: and he vowed it should be but for half a minute, half a minute longer.

Her tears fell; she eyed him steadily; she had the look of sunlight in shower.

‘Oldish men are the best friends for you, I suppose,’ he said; and her gaze turned elusive phrases to vapour.

He was compelled to see the fiery core of the raincloud lighting it for a revealment, that allowed as little as it retained of a shadow of obscurity.

The sight was keener than touch and the run of blood with blood to quicken slumbering seeds of passion.

But here is the place of broken ground and tangle, which calls to honourable men, not bent on sport, to be wary to guard the gunlock. He stopped the word at his mouth. It was not in him to stop or moderate the force of his eyes. She met them with the slender unbendingness that was her own; a feminine of inspirited manhood. There was no soft expression, only the direct shot of light, on both sides; conveying as much as is borne from sun to earth, from earth to sun. And when such an exchange has come between the two, they are past plighting, they are the wedded one.

Nesta felt it, without asking whether she was loved. She was his. She had not a thought of the word of love or the being beloved. Showers of painful blissfulness went through her, as the tremours of a shocked frame, while she sat quietly, showing scarce a sign; and after he had let her hand go, she had the pressure on it. The quivering intense of the moment of his eyes and grasp was lord of her, lord of the day and of all days coming. That is how Love slays Death. Never did girl so give her soul.

She would have been the last to yield it unreservedly to a man untrusted for the character she worshipped. But she could have given it to Dartrey, despite his love of another, because it was her soul, without any of the cravings, except to bestow.

He perceived, that he had been carried on for the number of steps which are countless miles and do not permit the retreat across the desert behind; and he was in some amazement at himself, remindful of the different nature of our restraining power when we have a couple playing on it. Yet here was this girl, who called him up to the heights of young life again: and a brave girl; and she bled for the weak, had no shrinking from the women underfoot: for the reason, that she was a girl sovereignly pure, angelically tender. Was there a point of honour to hold him back?

Nataly entered the room. She kissed Nesta, and sat silent.

‘Mother, will you speak of me to him, if I go out?’ Nesta said.

‘We have spoken,’ her mother replied, vexed by the unmaidenly allusion to that theme.

She would have asked, How did you guess I knew of it?—but that the, Why should I speak of you to him? struck the louder note in her bosom: and then, What is there that this girl cannot guess!—filled the mother’s heart with apprehensive dread: and an inward cry, What things will she not set going, to have them discussed. And the appalling theme, sitting offensive though draped in their midst, was taken for a proof of the girl’s unblushingness. After standing as one woman against the world so long, Nataly was relieved to be on the side of a world now convictedly unjust to her in the confounding of her with the shameless. Her mind had taken the brand of that thought:—And Nesta had brought her to it:— And Dudley Sowerby, a generous representative of the world, had kindly, having the deputed power to do so, sustained her, only partially blaming Nesta, not casting them off; as the world, with which Nataly felt, under a sense of the protection calling up all her gratitude to young Dudley, would have approved his doing.

She was passing through a fit of the cowardice peculiar to the tediously strained, who are being more than commonly tried—persecuted, as they say when they are not supplicating their tyrannical Authority for aid. The world will continue to be indifferent to their view of it and behaviour toward it until it ceases to encourage the growth of hypocrites.

These are moments when the faces we are observing drop their charm, showing us our perversion internal, if we could but reflect, to see it. Very many thousand times above Dudley Sowerby, Nataly ranked Dartrey Fenellan; and still she looked at him, where he sat beside Nesta, ungenially, critical of the very features, jealously in the interests of Dudley; and recollecting, too, that she had once prayed for one exactly resembling Dartrey Fenellan to be her Nesta’s husband. But, as she would have said, that was before the indiscretion of her girl had shown her to require for her husband a man whose character and station guaranteed protection instead of inciting to rebellion. And Dartrey, the loved and prized, was often in the rebel ranks; he was dissatisfied with matters as they are; was restless for action, angry with a country denying it to him; he made enemies, he would surely bring down inquiries about Nesta’s head, and cause the forgotten or quiescent to be stirred; he would scarcely be the needed hand for such a quiver of the lightnings as Nesta was.

Dartrey read Nataly’s brows. This unwonted uncomeliness of hers was an indication to one or other of our dusky pits, not a revealing.

CHAPTER XXXIX

A CHAPTER IN THE SHADOW OF MRS. MARSETT

He read her more closely when Arlington brought in the brown paper envelope of the wires—to which the mate of Victor ought to have become accustomed. She took it; her eyelids closed, and her features were driven to whiteness. ‘Only these telegrams,’ she said, in apology.

‘Lakelands on fire?’ Dartrey murmured to Nesta; and she answered: ‘I should not be sorry.’

Nataly coldly asked her why she would not be sorry.

Dartrey interposed: ‘I’m sure she thinks Lakelands worries her mother.’

‘That ranks low among the worries,’ Nataly sighed, opening the envelope.

Nesta touched her arm: ‘Mother! even before Captain Dartrey, if you will let me!’—she turned to him: ‘before ...’ at the end of her breath she said: ‘Dartrey Fenellan. You shall see my whole heart, mother.’

Her mother looked from her at him.

‘Victor returns by the last train. He telegraphs, that he dines with—’ She handed the paper to Dartrey.

‘Marsett,’ he read aloud; and she flushed; she was angry with him for not knowing, that the name was a term of opprobrium flung at her.

‘It’s to tell you he has done what he thought good,’ said Dartrey. ‘In other words, as I interpret, he has completed his daughter’s work. So we won’t talk about it till he comes. You have no company this evening?’

‘Oh! there is a pause to-night! It’s nearly as unceasing as your brother Simeon’s old French lady in the ronde with her young bridegroom, till they danced her to pieces. I do get now and then an hour’s repose,’ Nataly added, with a vision springing up of the person to whom the story had applied.

‘My dear, you are a good girl to call me Dartrey,’ the owner of the name said to Nesta.

Nataly saw them both alert, in the terrible manner peculiar to both, for the directest of the bare statements. She could have protested, that her love of truth was on an equality with theirs; and certainly, that her regard for decency was livelier. Pass the deficiency in a man. But a girl who could speak, by allusion, of Mrs. Marsett—of the existence of a Mrs. Marsett—in the presence of a man: and he excusing, encouraging: and this girl her own girl;—it seemed to her, that the world reeled; she could hardly acknowledge the girl; save under the penitential admission of her sin’s having found her out.

She sent Nesta to her room when they went upstairs to dress, unable to endure her presence after seeing her show a placid satisfaction at Dartrey’s nod to the request for him to sleep in the house that night. It was not at all a gleam of pleasure, hardly an expression; it was a manner of saying, One drop

more in my cup of good fortune! an absurd and an offensive exhibition of silly optimism of the young, blind that they are!

For were it known, and surely the happening of it would be known, that Dudley Sowerby had shaken off the Nesta of no name, who was the abominable Mrs. Marsett's friend, a whirlwind with a trumpet would sweep them into the wilderness on a blast frightfuller than any ever heard.

Nataly had a fit of weeping for want of the girl's embrace, against whom her door was jealously locked. She hoped those two would talk much, madly if they liked, during dinner, that she might not be sensible, through any short silence, of the ardour animating them: especially glowing in Nesta, ready behind her quiet mask to come brazenly forth. But both of them were mercilessly ardent; and a sickness of the fear, that they might fall on her to capture her and hurry her along with them perforce of the allayed, once fatal, inflammable element in herself, shook the warmth from her limbs: causing her to say to herself aloud in a ragged hoarseness, very strangely: Every thought of mine now has a physical effect on me!

They had not been two minutes together when she descended to them. Yet she saw the girl's heart brimming, either with some word spoken to her or for joy of an unmaidenly confession. During dinner they talked, without distressful pauses. Whatever said, whatever done, was manifestly another drop in Nesta's foolish happy cup. Could it be all because Dartrey Fenellan countenanced her acquaintance with that woman? The mother had lost hold of her. The tortured mother had lost hold of herself.

Dartrey in the course of the evening, begged to hear the contralto; and Nataly, refusing, was astounded by the admission in her blank mind of the truth of man's list of charges against her sex, starting from their capriciousness for she could have sung in a crowded room, and she had now a desire for company, for stolid company or giddy, an ocean of it. This led to her thinking, that the world of serious money-getters, and feasts, and the dance, the luxurious displays, and the reverential Sunday service, will always ultimately prove itself right in opposition to critics and rebels, and to any one vainly trying to stand alone: and the thought annihilated her; for she was past the age of the beginning again, and no footing was left for an outsider not self-justified in being where she stood. She heard Dartrey's praise of Nesta's voice for tearing her mother's bosom with notes of intolerable sweetness; and it was haphazard irony, no doubt; we do not the less bleed for the accident of a shot.

At last, after midnight Victor arrived.

Nesta most impudently expected to be allowed to remain. 'Pray, go, dear,' her mother said. Victor kissed his Fredi. 'Some time tomorrow,' said he; and she forbore to beseech him.

He stared, though mildly, at sight of her taking Dartrey's hand for the good-night and deliberately putting her lips to it.

Was she a girl whose notion of rectifying one wrong thing done, was to do another? Nataly could merely observe. A voice pertaining to no one present, said in her ear:—Mothers have publicly slapped their daughter's faces for less than that!—It was the voice of her incapacity to cope with the girl. She watched Nesta's passage from the room, somewhat affected by the simple bearing for which she was reproaching her.

'And our poor darling has not seen a mountain this year!' Victor exclaimed, to have mentionable

grounds for pitying his girl. 'I promised Fredi she should never count a year without Highlands or Alps. You remember, mama?—down in the West Highlands. Fancy the dear bit of bundle, Dartrey!—we had laid her in her bed; she was about seven or eight; and there she lay wide awake. "What 's Fredi thinking of?"— "I'm thinking of the tops of the mountains at night, dada."—She could climb them now; she has the legs.'

Nataly said: 'You have some report to make. You dined with those people?'

'The Marsetts: yes:—well-suited couple enough. It's to happen before Winter ends—at once; before Christmas; positively before next Spring. Fredi's doing! He has to manage, arrange.—She's a good-looking woman, good height, well-rounded; well-behaved, too: she won't make a bad Lady Marsett. Every time that woman spoke of our girl, the tears jumped to her eyelids.'

'Come to me before you go to bed,' Nataly said, rising, her voice foundering; 'Good-night, Dartrey.'

She turned to the door; she could not trust herself to shake hands with composure. Not only was it a nauseous mixture she was forced to gulp from Victor, it burned like a poison.

'Really Fredi's doing—chiefly,' said Victor, as soon as Dartrey and he were alone, comfortably settled in the smoking-room. 'I played the man of pomp with Marsett—good heavy kind of creature: attached to the woman. She's the better horse, as far as brains go. Good enough Lady Marsett. I harped on Major Worrell: my daughter insulted. He knew of it—spoke of you properly. The man offered all apologies; he has told the Major he is no gentleman, not a fit associate for gentlemen:—quite so—and has cut him dead. Will marry her, as I said, make her as worthy as he can of the honour of my daughter's acquaintance. Rather comical grimace, when he vowed he'd fasten the tie. He doesn't like marriage. But, he can't give her up. And she's for patronizing the institution. But she is ready to say good-bye to him "rather than see the truest lady in the world insulted"—her words. And so he swallows his dose for health, and looks a trifle sourish. Antecedents, I suppose: has to stomach them. But if a man's fond of a woman—if he knows he saves her from slipping lower—and it's an awful world, for us to let a woman be under its wheels:—I say, a woman who has a man to lean on, unless she's as downright corrupt as two or three of the men we've known:—upon my word, Dartrey, I come round to some of your ideas on these matters. It's this girl of mine, this wee bit of girl in her little nightshirt with the frill, astonishes me most:—"thinking of the tops of the mountains at night!" She has positively done the whole of this work-main part. I smiled when I left the house, to have to own our little Fredi starting us all on the road. It seems, Marsett had sworn he would; amorous vow, you know; he never came nearer to doing it. I hope it's his better mind now; I do hope the man won't have cause to regret it. He speaks of Nesta—sort of rustic tone of awe. Mrs. Marsett has impressed him. He expects the title soon, will leave the army—the poor plucked British army, as you call it!—and lead the life of a country squire: hunting! Well, it's not only the army, it's over Great Britain, with this infernal wealth of ours!—and all for pleasure—eh?—or Paradise lost for a sugar plum! Eh, Dartrey? Upon my word, it appears to me, Esau's the Englishman, Jacob the German, of these times. I wonder old Colney hasn't said it. If we're not plucked, as your regiments are of the officers who have learnt their work, we're emasculated:—the nation's half made-up of the idle and the servants of the idle.'

'Ay, and your country squires and your manufacturers contrive to give the army a body of consumptive louts fit for nothing else than to take the shilling—and not worth it,' said Dartrey.

'Sounds like old Colney,' Victor remarked to himself. 'But, believe me, I'm ashamed of the number

of servants who wait on me. It wouldn't so much matter, as Skepsey says, if they were trained to arms and self-respect. That little fellow Skepsey's closer to the right notion, and the right practice, too, than any of us. With his Matilda Pridden! He has jumped out of himself to the proper idea of women, too. And there's a man who has been up three times before the magistrates, and is considered a disorderly subject—one among the best of English citizens, I declare! I never think of Skepsey without the most extraordinary, witless kind of envy—as if he were putting in action an idea I once had and never quite got hold of again. The match for him is Fredi. She threatens to be just as devoted, just as simple, as he. I positively doubt whether any of us could stop her, if she had set herself to do a thing she thought right.'

'I should not like to think our trying it possible,' said Dartrey.

'All very well, but it's a rock ahead. We shall have to alter our course, my friend. You know, I dined with that couple, after the private twenty minutes with Marsett: he formally propounded the invitation, as we were close on his hour, rather late: and I wanted to make the woman happy, besides putting a seal of cordiality on his good intentions—politic! And subsequently I heard from her, that—you'll think nothing of it!—Fredi promised to stand by her at the altar.'

Dartrey said, shrugging: 'She needn't do that.'

'So we may say. You're dealing with Nesta Victoria. Spare me a contest with that girl, I undertake to manage any man or woman living.'

'When the thing to be done is thought right by her.'

'But can we always trust her judgement, my dear Dartrey?'

'In this case, she would argue, that her resolution to keep her promise would bind or help to bind Marsett to fulfil his engagement.'

'Odd, her mother has turned dead round in favour of that fellow Dudley Sowerby! I don't complain; it suits; but one thinks—eh?—women!'

'Well, yes, one thinks or should think, that if you insist on having women rooted to the bed of the river, they'll veer with the tides, like water-weeds, and no wonder.'

'Your heterodoxy on that subject is a mania, Dartrey. We can't have women independent.'

'Then don't be exclaiming about their vagaries.'

Victor mused: 'It's wonderful: that little girl of mine!—good height now: but what a head she has! Oh, she'll listen to reason: only mark what I say:—with that quiet air of hers, the husband, if a young fellow, will imagine she's the most docile of wives in the world. And as to wife, I'm not of the contrary opinion. But qua individual female, supposing her to have laid fast hold of an idea of duty, it's he who'll have to turn the corner second, if they're to trot in the yoke together. Or it may be an idea of service to a friend—or to her sex! That Mrs. Marsett says she feels for—"bleeds" for her sex. The poor woman didn't show to advantage with me, because she was in a fever to please:—talks in jerks, hot phrases. She holds herself well. At the end of the dinner she behaved better. Odd, you can

teach women with hints and a lead. But Marsett 's Marsett to the end. Rather touching!—the poor fellow said: Deuce of a bad look-out for me if Judith doesn't have a child! First-rate sportsman, I hear. He should have thought of his family earlier. You know, Dartrey, the case is to be argued for the family as well. You won't listen. And for Society too! Off you go.'

A battery was opened on that wall of composite.

'Ah, well,' said Victor. 'But I may have to beg your help, as to the so-called promise to stand at the altar. I don't mention it upstairs.'

He went to Nataly's room.

She was considerably treated, and was aware of being dandled, that she might have sleep.

She consented to it, in a loathing of the topic.—Those women invade us—we cannot keep them out! was her inward cry: with a reverberation of the unfailing accompaniment: The world holds you for one of them!

Victor tasked her too much when his perpetual readiness to doat upon his girl for whatever she did, set him exalting Nesta's conduct. She thought: Was Nesta so sympathetic with her mother of late by reason of a moral insensibility to the offence?

This was her torture through the night of a labouring heart, that travelled to one dull shock, again and again repeated:—the apprehended sound, in fact, of Dudley Sowerby's knock at the street door. Or sometimes a footman handed her his letter, courteously phrased to withdraw from the alliance. Or else he came to a scene with Nesta, and her mother was dragged into it, and the intolerable subject steamed about her. The girl was visioned as deadly. She might be indifferent to the protection of Dudley's name. Robust, sanguine, Victor's child, she might—her mother listened to a devil's whisper—but no; Nesta's aim was at the heights; she was pure in mind as in body. No, but the world would bring the accusation; and the world would trace the cause: Heredity, it would say. Would it say falsely? Nataly harped on the interrogation until she felt her existence dissolving to a dark stain of the earth, and she found herself wondering at the breath she drew, doubting that another would follow, speculating on the cruel force which keeps us to the act of breathing.—Though I could draw wild blissful breath if I were galloping across the moors! her worn heart said to her youth: and out of ken of the world, I could regain a portion of my self-esteem. Nature thereat renewed her old sustainment with gentle murmurs, that were supported by Dr. Themison's account of the virtuous married lady who chafed at the yoke on behalf of her sex, and deemed the independent union the ideal. Nataly's brain had a short gallop over moorland. It brought her face to face with Victor's girl, and she dropped once more to her remorse in herself and her reproaches of Nesta. The girl had inherited from her father something of the cataract's force which won its way by catching or by mastering, uprooting, ruining!

In the morning she was heavily asleep. Victor left word with Nesta, that the dear mother was not to be disturbed. Consequently, when Dudley called to see Mrs. Victor Radnor, he was informed that Miss Radnor would receive him.

Their interview lasted an hour.

Dudley came to Victor in the City about luncheon time.

His perplexity of countenance was eloquent. He had, before seeing the young lady, digested an immense deal more, as it seemed to him, than any English gentleman should be asked to consume. She now referred him to her father, who had spent a day in Brighton, and would, she said, explain whatever there was to be explained. But she added, that if she was expected to abandon a friend, she could not. Dudley had argued with her upon the nature of friendship, the measurement of its various dues; he had lectured on the choice of friends, the impossibility for young ladies, necessarily inexperienced, to distinguish the right class of friends, the dangers they ran in selecting friends unwarranted by the stamp of honourable families.

‘And what did Fredi say to that?’ Victor inquired.

‘Miss Radnor said—I may be dense, I cannot comprehend—that the precepts were suitable for seminaries of Pharisees. When it is a question of a young lady associating with a notorious woman!’

‘Not notorious. You spoil your case if you “speak extremely,” as a friend says. I saw her yesterday. She worships “Miss Radnor.”’

Nesta will know when she is older; she will thank me,’ said Dudley hurriedly. ‘As it is at present, I may reckon, I hope, that the association ceases. Her name: I have to consider my family.’

‘Good anchorage! You must fight it out with the girl. And depend upon this—you’re not the poorer for being the husband of a girl of character; unless you try to bridle her. She belongs to her time. I don’t mind owning to you, she has given me a lead.—Fredi ‘ll be merry to-night. Here’s a letter I have from the Sanfredini, dated Milan, fresh this morning; invitation to bring the god-child to her villa on Como in May; desirous to embrace her. She wrote to the office. Not a word of her duque. She has pitched him to the winds. You may like to carry it off to Fredi and please her.’

‘I have business,’ Dudley replied.

‘Away to it, then!’ said Victor. ‘You stand by me?—we expect our South London borough to be open in January; early next year, at least; may be February. You have family interest there.’

‘Personally, I will do my best,’ Dudley said; and he escaped, feeling, with the universal censor’s angry spite, that the revolutions of the world had made one of the wealthiest of City men the head of a set of Bohemians. And there are eulogists of the modern time! And the man’s daughter was declared to belong to it! A visit in May to the Italian cantatrice separated from her husband, would render the maiden an accomplished flinger of caps over the windmills.

At home Victor discovered, that there was not much more than a truce between Nesta and Nataly. He had a medical hint from Dr. Themison, and he counselled his girl to humour her mother as far as could be: particularly in relation to Dudley, whom Nataly now, womanlike, after opposing, strongly favoured. How are we ever to get a clue to the labyrinthine convolutions and changeful motives of the sex! Dartrey’s theories were absurd. Did Nataly think them dangerous for a young woman? The guess hinted at a clue of some sort to the secret of her veering.

‘Mr. Sowerby left me with an adieu,’ said Nesta.

‘Mr. Sowerby! My dear, he is bound, bound in honour, bound at heart. You did not dismiss him?’

‘I repeated the word he used. I thought of mother. The blood leaves her cheeks at a disappointment now. She has taken to like him.’

‘Why, you like him!’

‘I could not vow.’

‘Tush.’

‘Ah, don’t press me, dada. But you will see, he has disengaged himself.’

He had done it, though not in formal speech. Slow digestion of his native antagonism to these Bohemians, to say nothing of his judicial condemnation of them, brought him painfully round to the writing of a letter to Nataly; cunningly addressed to the person on whom his instinct told him he had the strongest hold.

She schooled herself to discuss the detested matter forming Dudley’s grievance and her own with Nesta; and it was a woeful half-hour for them. But Nataly was not the weeper.

Another interview ensued between Nesta and her suitor. Dudley bore no resemblance to Mr. Barmby, who refused to take the word no from her, and had taken it, and had gone to do holy work, for which she revered him. Dudley took the word, leaving her to imagine freedom, until once more her mother or her father, inspired by him, came interceding, her mother actually supplicating. So that the reality of Dudley’s love rose to conception like a London dawn over Nesta; and how, honourably, decently, positively, to sever herself from it, grew to be an ill-visaged problem. She glanced in soul at Dartrey Fenellan for help; she had her wild thoughts. Having once called him Dartrey, the virginal barrier to thoughts was broken; and but for love of her father, for love and pity of her mother, she would have ventured the step to make the man who had her whole being in charge accept or reject her. Nothing else appeared in prospect. Her father and mother were urgently one to favour Dudley; and the sensitive gentleman presented himself to receive his wound and to depart with it. But always he returned. At last, as if under tuition, he refrained from provoking a wound; he stood there to win her upon any terms; and he was a handsome figure, acknowledged by the damsel to be increasing in good looks as more and more his pretensions became distasteful to her. The slight cast of sourness on his lower features had almost vanished, his nature seemed to have enlarged. He complimented her for her ‘generous benevolence,’ vaguely, yet with evident sincerity; he admitted, that the modern world is ‘attempting difficulties with at least commendable intentions’; and that the position of women demands improvement, consideration for them also. He said feelingly: ‘They have to bear extraordinary burdens!’ There he stopped.

The sharp intelligence fronting him understood, that this compassionate ejaculation was the point where she, too, must cry halt. He had, however—still under tuition, perhaps—withdrawn his voice from the pursuit of her; and so she in gratitude silenced her critical mind beneath a smooth conceit of her having led him two steps to a broader tolerance. Susceptible as she was, she did not influence him without being affected herself in other things than her vanity: his prudishness affected her. Only when her heart flamed did she disdain that real haven of refuge, with its visionary mount of superiority, offered by Society to its effect, in the habit of ignoring the sins it fosters under cloak;— not less than did the naked barbaric time, and far more to the vitiation of the soul. He fancied he was moulding her; therefore winning her. It followed, that he had the lover’s desire for assurance of exclusive possession;

and reflecting, that he had greatly pardoned, he grew exacting. He mentioned his objections to some of Mr. Dartrey Fenellan's ideas.

Nesta replied: 'I have this morning had two letters to make me happy.'

A provoking evasion. He would rather have seen antagonism bridle and stiffen her figure. 'Is one of them from that gentleman?'

'One is from my dear friend Louise de Seilles. She comes to me early next month.'

'The other?'

'The other is also from a friend.'

'A dear friend?'

'Not so dear. Her letter gives me happiness.'

'She writes—not from France: from ...? you tempt me to guess.'

'She writes to tell me, that Mr. Dartrey Fenellan has helped her in a way to make her eternally thankful.'

'The place she writes from is ... ?'

The drag of his lips betrayed his enlightenment insisted on doubting. He demanded assurance.

'It matters in no degree,' she said.

Dudley 'thought himself excusable for inquiring.'

She bowed gently.

The stings and scorpions and degrading itches of this nest of wealthy Bohemians enraged him.

'Are you—I beg to ask—are you still:—I can hardly think it—Nesta!— I surely have a claim to advise:—it cannot be with your mother's consent:—in communication, in correspondence with ... ?'

Again she bowed her head; saying: 'It is true.'

'With that person?'

He could not but look the withering disgust of the modern world in a conservative gentleman who has been lured to go with it a little way, only to be bitten. 'I decline to believe it,' he said with forcible sound.

'She is married,' was the rather shameless, exasperating answer.

'Married or not!' he cried, and murmured: 'I have borne—. These may be Mr. Dartrey Fenellan's ideas; they are not mine. I have—Something at least is due to me: Ask any lady:—there are

clergymen, I know, clergymen who are for uplifting—quite right, but not associating:—to call one of them a friend! Ask any lady, any! Your mother ...’

‘I beg you will not distress my mother,’ said Nesta.

‘I beg to know whether this correspondence is to continue?’ said Dudley.

‘All my life, if I do not feel dishonoured by it.’

‘You are.’ He added hastily: ‘Counsels of prudence—there is not a lady living who would tell you otherwise. At all events, in public opinion, if it were known—and it would certainly be known,—a lady, wife or spinster, would suffer—would not escape the—at least shadow of defilement from relationship, any degree of intimacy with ... hard words are wholesome in such a case: “touch pitch,” yes! My sense is coherent.’

‘Quite,’ said Nesta.

‘And you do not agree with me?’

‘I do not.’

‘Do you pretend to be as able to judge as I?’

‘In this instance, better.’

‘Then I retire. I cannot retain my place here. You may depend upon it, the world is not wrong when it forbids young ladies to have cognizance of women leading disorderly lives.’

‘Only the women, Mr. Sowerby?’

‘Men, too, of course.’

‘You do not exclude the men from Society.’

‘Oh! one reads that kind of argument in books.’

‘Oh! the worthy books, then. I would read them, if I could find them.’

‘They are banned by self-respecting readers.’

‘It grieves me to think differently.’

Dudley looked on this fair girl, as yet innocent girl; and contrasting her with the foulness of the subject she dared discuss, it seemed to him, that a world which did not puff at her and silence, if not extinguish, was in a state of liquefaction.

Remembering his renewed repentances his absence, he said: ‘I do hope you may come to see, that the views shared by your mother and me are not erroneous.’

‘But do not distress her,’ Nesta implored him. ‘She is not well. When she has grown stronger, her kind heart will move her to receive the lady, so that she may not be deprived of the society of good women. I shall hope she will not disapprove of me. I cannot forsake a friend.’

‘I beg to say good-bye,’ said Dudley.

She had seen a rigidity smite him as she spoke; and so little startling was it, that she might have fancied it expected, save for her knowing herself too serious to have played at wiles to gain her ends.

He ‘wished her prudent advisers.’

She thanked him. ‘In a few days, Louise de Seilles will be here.’

A Frenchwoman and Papist! was the interjection of his twist of brows.

Surely I must now be free? she thought when he had covered his farewell under a salutation regretful in frostiness.

A week later, she had the embrace of her Louise, and Armandine was made happy with a piece of Parisian riband.

Winter was rapidly in passage: changes were visible everywhere; Earth and House of Commons and the South London borough exhibited them; Mrs. Burman was the sole exception. To the stupefaction of physicians, in a manner to make a sane man ask whether she was not being retained as an instrument for one of the darker purposes of Providence—and where are we standing if we ask such things?—she held on to her thread of life.

February went by. And not a word from Themison; nor from Carling, nor from the Rev. Groseman Buttermore, nor from Jarniman. That is to say, the two former accepted invitations to grand dinners; the two latter acknowledged contributions to funds in which they were interested; but they had apparently grown to consider Mrs. Burman as an establishment, one of our fixtures. On the other hand, there was nothing to be feared from her. Lakelands feared nothing: the entry into Lakelands was decreed for the middle of April. Those good creatures enclosed the poor woman and nourished her on comfortable fiction. So the death of the member for the South London borough (fifteen years younger than the veteran in maladies) was not to be called premature, and could by no possibility lead to an exposure of the private history of the candidate for his vacant seat.

CHAPTER XL

AN EXPIATION

Nataly had fallen to be one of the solitary who have no companionship save with the wound they nurse, to chafe it rather than try at healing. So rational a mind as she had was not long in outliving mistaken impressions; she could distinguish her girl's feeling, and her aim; she could speak on the subject with Dartrey; and still her wound bled on. Louise de Seilles comforted her partly, through an exaltation of Nesta. Mademoiselle, however, by means of a change of tone and look when Dudley Sowerby and Dartrey Fenellan were the themes, showed a too pronounced preference of the more unstable one:—or rather, the man adventurous out of the world's highways, whose image, as husband of such a daughter as hers, smote the wounded mother with a chillness. Mademoiselle's occasional thrill of fervency in an allusion to Dartrey, might have tempted a suspicious woman to indulge suppositions, accounting for the young Frenchwoman's novel tenderness to England, of which Nesta proudly, very happily boasted. The suspicion proposed itself, and was rejected: for not even the fever of an insane body could influence Nataly's generous character, to let her moods divert and command her thoughts of persons.

Her thoughts were at this time singularly lucid upon everything about her; with the one exception of the reason why she had come to favour Dudley, and how it was she had been smitten by that woman at Brighton to see herself in her position altogether with the world's relentless, unexamining hard eyes. Bitterness added, of Mrs. Marsett: She is made an honest woman!—And there was a strain of the lower in Nataly, to reproach the girl for causing the reflection to be cast on the unwedded. Otherwise her mind was open; she was of aid to Victor in his confusion over some lost Idea he had often touched on latterly. And she was the one who sent him ahead at a trot under a light, by saying: 'You would found a new and more stable aristocracy of the contempt of luxury' when he talked of combatting the Jews with a superior weapon. That being, in fact, as Colney Durance had pointed out to him, the weapon of self-conquest used by them 'before they fell away to flesh-pottery.' Was it his Idea? He fancied an aching at the back of his head when he speculated. But his Idea had been surpassingly luminous, alive, a creation; and this came before him with the yellow skin of a Theory, bred, born of books. Though Nataly's mention of the aristocracy of self-denying discipline struck a Lucifer in his darkness.

Nesta likewise helped: but more in what she did than in what she said: she spoke intelligently enough to make him feel a certain increase of alarm, amounting to a cursory secret acknowledgement of it, both at her dealings with Dudley and with himself. She so quietly displaced the lady visiting him at the City offices. His girl's disregard of hostile weather, and her company, her talk, delighted him: still he remonstrated, at her coming daily. She came: nor was there an instigation on the part of her mother, clearly none: her mother asked him once whether he thought she met the dreadful Brighton woman. His Fredi drove constantly to walk back beside him Westward, as he loved to do whenever it was practicable; and exceeding the flattery of his possession of the gallant daughter, her conversation charmed him to forget a disappointment caused by the defeat and entire exclusion of the lady visiting him so complimentarily for his advice on stocks, shares, mines, et caetera. The lady resisted; she was vanquished, as the shades are displaced by simple apparition of daylight.

His Fredi was like the daylight to him; she was the very daylight to his mind, whatsoever their theme of converse for by stimulating that ready but vagrant mind to quit the leash of the powerful senses and

be a ethereally excursive, she gave him a new enjoyment; which led to reflections—a sounding of Nature, almost a question to her, on the verge of a doubt. Are we, in fact, harmonious with the Great Mother when we yield to the pressure of our natures for indulgence? Is she, when translated into us, solely the imperious appetite? Here was Fredi, his little Fredi—stately girl that she had grown, and grave, too, for all her fun and her sail on wings—lifting him to pleasures not followed by clamorous, and perfectly satisfactory, yet discomposingly violent, appeals to Nature. They could be vindicated. Or could they, when they would not bear a statement of the case? He could not imagine himself stating it namelessly to his closest friend—not to Simeon Fenellan. As for speaking to Dartrey, the notion took him with shivers:—Young Dudley would have seemed a more possible confidant:—and he represented the Puritan world.—And young Dudley was getting over Fredi’s infatuation for the woman she had rescued: he was beginning to fancy he saw a right enthusiasm in it;—in the abstract; if only the fair maid would drop an unseemly acquaintance. He had called at the office to say so. Victor stammered the plea for him.

‘Never, dear father,’ came the smooth answer: a shocking answer in contrast with the tones. Her English was as lucid as her eyes when she continued up to the shock she dealt: ‘Do not encourage a good man to waste his thoughts upon me. I have chosen my mate, and I may never marry him. I do not know whether he would marry me. He has my soul. I have no shame in saying I love him. It is to love goodness, greatness of heart. He is a respecter of women—of all women; not only the fortunate. He is the friend of the weaker everywhere. He has been proved in fire. He does not sentimentalize over poor women, as we know who scorns people for doing:—and that is better than hardness, meaning kindly. He is not one of the unwise advocates. He measures the forces against them. He reads their breasts. He likes me. He is with me in my plans. He has not said, has not shown, he loves me. It is too high a thought for me until I hear it.’

‘Has your soul!’ was all that Victor could reply, while the whole conception of Lakelands quaked under the crumbling structure.

Remonstrance, argument, a word for Dudley, swelled to his lips and sank in dumbness. Her seeming intuition—if it was not a perception—of the point where submission to the moods of his nature had weakened his character, and required her defence of him, struck Victor with a serious fear of his girl: and it was the more illuminatingly damnatory for being recognized as the sentiment which no father should feel. He tried to think she ought not to be so wise of the things of the world. An effort to imagine a reproof, showed him her spirit through her eyes: in her deeds too: she had already done work on the road:—Colney Durance, Dartrey Fenellan, anything but sentimentalists either of them, strongly backing her, upholding her. Victor could no longer so naturally name her Fredi.

He spoke it hastily, under plea of some humorous tenderness, when he ventured. When Dudley, calling on him in the City to discuss the candidature for the South London borough, named her Fredi, that he might regain a vantage of familiarity by imitating her father, it struck Victor as audacious. It jarred in his recollection, though the heir of the earldom spoke in the tone of a lover, was really at high pitch. He appeared to be appreciating her, to have suffered stings of pain; he offered himself; he made but one stipulation. Victor regretfully assured him, he feared he could do nothing. The thought of his entry into Lakelands, with Nesta Victoria refusing the foundation stone of the place, grew dim.

But he was now canvassing for the Borough, hearty at the new business as the braced swimmer on seas, which instantly he became, with an end in view to be gained.

Late one April night, expecting Nataly to have gone to bed, and Nesta to be waiting for him, he reached home, and found Nataly in her sitting-room alone. ‘Nesta was tired,’ she said: ‘we have had a scene; she refuses Mr. Sowerby; I am sick of pressing it; he is very much in earnest, painfully; she blames him for disturbing me; she will not see the right course:—a mother reads her daughter! If my girl has not guidance!— she means rightly, she is rash.’

Nataly could not utter all that her insaneness of feeling made her think with regard to Victor’s daughter—daughter also of the woman whom her hard conscience accused of inflammability. ‘Here is a note from Dr. Themison, dear.’

Victor seized it, perused, and drew the big breath.

‘From Themison,’ he said; he coughed.

‘Don’t think to deceive me,’ said she. ‘I have not read the contents, I know them.’

‘The invitation at last, for tomorrow, Sunday, four P.M. Odd, that next day at eight of the evening I shall be addressing our meeting in the Theatre. Simeon speaks. Beaves Urmsing insists on coming, Tory though he is. Those Tories are jollier fellows than—well, no wonder! There will be no surgical ... the poor woman is very low. A couple of days at the outside. Of course, I go.’

‘Hand me the note, dear.’

It had to be given up, out of the pocket.

‘But,’ said Victor, ‘the mention of you is merely formal.’

She needed sleep: she bowed her head.

Nataly was the first at the breakfast-table in the morning, a fair Sunday morning. She was going to Mrs. John Cormyn’s Church, and she asked Nesta to come with her.

She returned five minutes before the hour of lunch, having left Nesta with Mrs. John. Louise de Seilles undertook to bring Nesta home at the time she might choose. Fenellan, Mr. Pempton, Peridon and Catkin, lunched and chatted. Nataly chatted. At a quarter to three o’clock Victor’s carriage was at the door. He rose: he had to keep an appointment. Nataly said to him publicly: ‘I come too.’ He stared and nodded. In the carriage, he said: ‘I’m driving to the Gardens, for a stroll, to have a look at the beasts. Sort of relief. Poor crazy woman! However, it ‘s a comfort to her: so ... !’

‘I like to see them,’ said Nataly. ‘I shall see her. I have to do it.’

Up to the gate of the Gardens Victor was arguing to dissuade his dear soul from this very foolish, totally unnecessary, step. Alighting, he put the matter aside, for good angels to support his counsel at the final moment.

Bears, lions, tigers, eagles, monkeys: they suggested no more than he would have had from prints; they sprang no reflection, except, that the coming hour was a matter of indifference to them. They were about him, and exercised so far a distraction. He took very kindly to an old mother monkey, relinquishing her society at sight of Nataly’s heave of the bosom. Southward, across the park, the

dread house rose. He began quoting Colney Durance with relish while sarcastically confuting the cynic, who found much pasture in these Gardens. Over Southward, too, he would be addressing a popular assembly tomorrow evening. Between now and then there was a ditch to jump. He put on the sympathetic face of grief. 'After all, a caged wild beast hasn't so bad a life,' he said. —To be well fed while they live, and welcome death as a release from the maladies they develop in idleness, is the condition of wealthy people:— creatures of prey? horrible thought! yet allied to his Idea, it seemed. Yes, but these good caged beasts here set them an example, in not troubling relatives and friends when they come to the gasp! Mrs. Burman's invitation loomed as monstrous—a final act of her cruelty. His skin pricked with dew. He thought of Nataly beside him, jumping the ditch with him, as a relief—if she insisted on doing it. He hoped she would not, for the sake of her composure.

It was a ditch void of bottom. But it was a mere matter of an hour, less. The state of health of the invalid could bear only a few minutes. In any case, we are sure that the hour will pass. Our own arrive? Certainly.

'Capital place for children,' he exclaimed. And here startlingly before him in the clusters of boys and girls, was the difference between young ones and their elders feeling quite as young: the careless youngsters have not to go and sit in the room with a virulent old woman, and express penitence and what not, and hear words of pardon, after their holiday scamper and stare at the caged beasts.

Attention to the children precipitated him upon acquaintances, hitherto cleverly shunned. He nodded them off, after the brightest of greetings.

Such anodyne as he could squeeze from the incarcerated wild creatures, was exhausted. He fell to work at Nataly's 'aristocracy of the contempt of luxury'; signifying, that we the wealthy will not exist to pamper flesh, but we live for the promotion of brotherhood:—ay, and that our England must make some great moral stand, if she is not to fall to the rear and down. Unuttered, it caught the skirts of the Idea: it evaporated when spoken. Still, this theme was almost an exorcism of Mrs. Burman. He consulted his watch. 'Thirteen minutes to four. I must be punctual,' he said. Nataly stepped faster.

Seated in the carriage, he told her he had never felt the horror of that place before. 'Put me down at the corner of the terrace, dear: I won't drive to the door.'

'I come with you, Victor,' she replied.

After entreaties and reasons intermixed, to melt her resolve, he saw she was firm: and he asked himself, whether he might not be constitutionally better adapted to persuade than to dissuade. The question thumped. Having that house of drugs in view, he breathed more freely for the prospect of feeling his Nataly near him beneath the roof.

'You really insist, dear love?' he appealed to her: and her answer: 'It must be,' left no doubt: though he chose to say: 'Not because of standing by me?' And she said: 'For my peace, Victor.' They stepped to the pavement. The carriage was dismissed.

Seventeen houses of the terrace fronting the park led to the funereal one: and the bell was tolled in the breast of each of the couple advancing with an air of calmness to the inevitable black door.

Jarniman opened it. 'His mistress was prepared to see them.'—Not like one near death.—They were

met in the hall by the Rev. Groseman Buttermore. 'You will find a welcome,' was his reassurance to them: gently delivered, on the stoop of a large person. His whispered tones were more agreeably deadening than his words.

Mr. Buttermore ushered them upstairs.

'Can she bear it?' Victor said, and heard: 'Her wish ten minutes.'

'Soon over,' he murmured to Nataly, with a compassionate exclamation for the invalid.

They rounded the open door. They were in the drawing-room. It was furnished as in the old time, gold and white, looking new; all the same as of old, save for a division of silken hangings; and these were pale blue: the colour preferred by Victor for a bedroom. He glanced at the ceiling, to bathe in a blank space out of memory. Here she lived,—here she slept, behind the hangings. There was refreshingly that little difference in the arrangement of the room. The corner Northward was occupied by the grand piano; and Victor had an inquiry in him:—tuned? He sighed, expecting a sight to come through the hangings. Sensible that Nataly trembled, he perceived the Rev. Groseman Buttermore half across a heap of shawl-swathe on the sofa.

Mrs. Burman was present; seated. People may die seated; she had always disliked the extended posture; except for the night's rest, she used to say; imagining herself to be not inviting the bolt of sudden death, in her attitude when seated by day:—and often at night the poor woman had to sit up for the qualms of her dyspepsia!—But I 'm bound to think humanely, be Christian, be kind, benignant, he thought, and he fetched the spirit required, to behold her face emerge from a pale blue silk veiling; as it were, the inanimate wasted led up from the mould by morning.

Mr. Buttermore signalled to them to draw near.

Wasted though it was, the face of the wide orbits for sunken eyes was distinguishable as the one once known. If the world could see it and hear, that it called itself a man's wife! She looked burnt out.

Two chairs had been sent to front the sofa. Execution there! Victor thought, and he garrotted the unruly mind of a man really feeling devoutness in the presence of the shadow thrown by the dread Shade.

'Ten minutes,' Mr. Buttermore said low, after obligingly placing them on the chairs.

He went. They were alone with Mrs. Burman.

No voice came. They were unsure of being seen by the floating grey of eyes patient to gaze from their vast distance. Big drops fell from Nataly's. Victor heard the French timepiece on the mantel-shelf, where a familiar gilt Cupid swung for the seconds: his own purchase. The time of day on the clock was wrong; the Cupid swung.

Nataly's mouth was taking breath of anguish at moments. More than a minute of the terrible length of the period of torture must have gone: two, if not three.

A quaver sounded. 'You have come.' The voice was articulate, thinner than the telephonic, trans-Atlantic by deep-sea cable.

Victor answered: 'We have.'

Another minute must have gone in the silence. And when we get to five minutes we are on the descent, rapidly counting our way out of the house, into the fresh air, where we were half an hour back, among those happy beasts in the pleasant Gardens!

Mrs. Burman's eyelids shut. 'I said you would come.'

Victor started to the fire-screen. 'Your sight requires protection.'

She dozed. 'And Natalia Dreighton !' she next said.

They were certainly now on the five minutes. Now for the slide downward and outward! Nataly should never have been allowed to come.

'The white waistcoat!' struck his ears.

'Old customs with me, always!' he responded. 'The first of April, always. White is a favourite. Pale blue, too. But I fear—I hope you have not distressing nights? In my family we lay great stress on the nights we pass. My cousins, the Miss Duvidneys, go so far as to judge of the condition of health by the nightly record.'

'Your daughter was in their house.'

She knew everything!

'Very fond of my daughter—the ladies,' he remarked.

'I wish her well.'

'You are very kind.'

Mrs. Burman communed within or slept. 'Victor, Natalia, we will pray,' she said.

Her trembling hands crossed their fingers. Nataly slipped to her knees.

The two women mutely praying, pulled Victor into the devotional hush. It acted on him like the silent spell of service in a Church. He forgot his estimate of the minutes, he formed a prayer, he refused to hear the Cupid swinging, he droned a sound of sentences to deaden his ears. Ideas of eternity rolled in semblance of enormous clouds. Death was a black bird among them. The piano rang to Nataly's young voice and his. The gold and white of the chairs welcomed a youth suddenly enrolled among the wealthy by an enamoured old lady on his arm. Cupid tick-ticked.—Poor soul! poor woman! How little we mean to do harm when we do an injury! An incomprehensible world indeed at the bottom and at the top. We get on fairly at the centre. Yet it is there that we do the mischief making such a riddle of the bottom and the top. What is to be said! Prayer quiets one. Victor peered at Nataly fervently on her knees and Mrs. Burman bowed over her knotted fingers. The earnestness of both enforced an effort at a phrased prayer in him. Plungeing through a wave of the scent of Marechale, that was a tremendous memory to haul him backward and forward, he beheld his prayer dancing across the furniture; a

diminutive thin black figure, elvish, irreverent, appallingly unlike his proper emotion; and he brought his hands just to touch, and got to the edge of his chair, with split knees. At once the figure vanished. By merely looking at Nataly, he passed into her prayer. A look at Mrs. Burman made it personal, his own. He heard the cluck of a horrible sob coming from him. After a repetition of his short form of prayer deeply stressed, he thanked himself with the word 'sincere,' and a queer side-thought on our human susceptibility to the influence of posture. We are such creatures.

Nataly resumed her seat. Mrs. Burman had raised her head. She said: 'We are at peace.' She presently said, with effort: 'It cannot last with me. I die in nature's way. I would bear forgiveness with me, that I may have it above. I give it here, to you, to all. My soul is cleansed, I trust. Much was to say. My strength will not. Unto God, you both!'

The Rev. Groseman Buttermore was moving on slippered step to the back of the sofa. Nataly dropped before the unseeing, scarce breathing, lady for an instant. Victor murmured an adieu, grateful for being spared the ceremonial shake of hands. He turned away, then turned back, praying for power to speak, to say that he had found his heart, was grateful, would hold her in memory. He fell on a knee before her, and forgot he had done so when he had risen. They were conducted by the Rev. gentleman to the hall-door: he was not speechless. Jarniman uttered something.

That black door closed behind them.

CHAPTER XLI

THE NIGHT OF THE GREAT UNDELIVERED SPEECH

To a man issuing from a mortuary where a skull had voice, London may be restorative as air of Summer Alps. It is by contrast blooming life. Observe the fellowship of the houses shoulder to shoulder; and that straight ascending smoke of the preparation for dinner; and the good policeman yonder, blessedly idle on an orderly Sabbath evening; and the families of the minor people trotting homeward from the park to tea; here and again an amiable carriage of the superimposed people driving to pay visits; they are so social, friendly, inviting to him; they strip him of the shroud, sing of the sweet old world. He cannot but be moved to the extremity of the charitableness neighbouring on tears.

A stupefaction at the shock of the positive reminder, echo of the fact still shouting in his breast, that he had seen Mrs. Burman, and that the interview was over—the leaf turned and the book shut held Victor in a silence until his gratefulness to London City was borne down by the more human burst of gratitude to the dying woman, who had spared him, as much as she could, a scene of the convulsive pathetic, and had not called on him for any utterance of penitence. That worm-like thread of voice came up to him still from sexton-depths: it sounded a larger forgiveness without the word. He felt the sorrow of it all, as he told Nataly; at the same time bidding her smell ‘the marvellous oxygen of the park.’ He declared it to be quite equal to Lakelands.

She slightly pressed his arm for answer. Perhaps she did not feel so deeply? She was free of the horrid associations with the scent of Marechale. At any rate, she had comported herself admirably!

Victor fancied he must have shuddered when he passed by Jarniman at the door, who was almost now seeing his mistress’s ghost—would have the privilege tomorrow. He called a cab and drove to Mrs. John Cormyn’s, at Nataly’s request, for Nesta and mademoiselle: enjoying the Londonized odour of the cab. Nataly did not respond to his warm and continued eulogies of Mrs. Burman; she rather disappointed him. He talked of the gold and white furniture, he just alluded to the Cupid: reserving his mental comment, that the timepiece was all astray, the Cupid regular on the swing:—strange, touching, terrible, if really the silly gilt figure symbolized! ... And we are a silly figure to be sitting in a cab imagining such things!—When Nesta and mademoiselle were opposite, he had the pleasure to see Nataly take Nesta’s hand and hold it until they reached home. Those two talking together in the brief words of their deep feeling, had tones that were singularly alike: the mezzo-soprano filial to the divine maternal contralto. Those two dear ones mounted to Nataly’s room.

The two dear ones showed themselves heart in heart together once more; each looked the happier for it. Dartrey was among their dinner-guests, and Nataly took him to her little blue-room before she went to bed. He did not speak of their conversation to Victor, but counselled him to keep her from excitement. ‘My dear fellow, if you had seen her with Mrs. Burman!’ Victor said, and loudly praised her coolness. She was never below a situation, he affirmed.

He followed his own counsel to humour his Nataly. She began panting at a word about Mr. Barmby’s ready services. When, however, she related the state of affairs between Dartrey and Nesta, by the avowal of each of them to her, he said, embracing her: ‘Your wisdom shall guide us, my love,’ and almost extinguished a vexation by concealing it.

She sighed: 'If one could think, that a girl with Nesta's revolutionary ideas of the duties of women, and their powers, would be safe—or at all rightly guided by a man who is both one of the noblest and the wildest in the ideas he entertains!'

Victor sighed too. He saw the earldom, which was to dazzle the gossips, crack on the sky in a futile rocket-bouquet.

She was distressed; she moaned: 'My girl! my girl: I should wish to leave her with one who is more fixed—the old-fashioned husband. New ideas must come in politics, but in Society!—and for women! And the young having heads, are the most endangered. Nesta vows her life to it! Dartrey supports her!'

'See Colney,' said Victor. 'Odd, Colney does you good; some queer way he has. Though you don't care for his RIVAL TONGUES,—and the last number was funny, with Semhians on the Pacific, impressively addressing a farewell to his cricket-bat, before he whirls it away to Neptune—and the blue hand of his nation's protecting God observed to seize it!—Dead failure with the public, of course! However, he seems to seem wise with you. The poor old fellow gets his trouncing from the critics monthly. See Colney tomorrow, my love. Now go to sleep. We have got over the worst. I speak at my Meeting tomorrow and am a champagne-bottle of notes and points for them.'

His lost Idea drew close to him in sleep: or he thought so, when awaking to the conception of a people solidified, rich and poor, by the common pride of simple manhood. But it was not coloured, not a luminous globe: and the people were in drab, not a shining army on the march to meet the Future. It looked like a paragraph in a newspaper, upon which a Leading Article sits, dutifully arousing the fat worm of sarcastic humour under the ribs of cradled citizens, with an exposure of its excellent folly. He would not have it laughed at; still he could not admit it as more than a skirt of the robe of his Idea. For let none think him a mere City merchant, millionaire, boon-fellow, or music-loving man of the world. He had ideas to shoot across future Ages;—provide against the shrinkage of our Coal-beds; against, and for, if you like, the thickening, jumbling, threatening excess of population in these Islands, in Europe, America, all over our habitable sphere. Now that Mrs. Burman, on her way to bliss, was no longer the dungeon-cell for the man he would show himself to be, this name for successes, corporate nucleus of the enjoyments, this Victor Montgomery Radnor, intended impressing himself upon the world as a factory of ideas. Colney's insolent charge, that the English have no imagination—a doomed race, if it be true!—would be confuted. For our English require but the lighted leadership to come into cohesion, and step ranked, and chant harmoniously the song of their benevolent aim. And that astral head giving, as a commencement, example of the right use of riches, the nation is one, part of the riddle of the future solved.

Surely he had here the Idea? He had it so warmly, that his bath-water heated. Only the vision was wanted.

On London Bridge he had seen it—a great thing done to the flash of brilliant results. That was after a fall.

There had been a fall also of the scheme of Lakelands.

Come to us with no superstitious whispers of indications and significations in the fall!—But there had certainly been a moral fall, fully to the level of the physical, in the maintaining of that scheme of Lakelands, now ruined by his incomprehensible Nesta—who had saved him from falling further. His

bath-water chilled. He jumped out and rubbed furiously with his towels and flesh-brushes, chasing the Idea for simple warmth, to have Something inside him, to feel just that sustainment; with the cry: But no one can say I do not love my Nataly! And he tested it to prove it by his readiness to die for her: which is heroically easier than the devotedly living, and has a weight of evidence in our internal Courts for surpassing the latter tedious performance.

His Nesta had knocked Lakelands to pieces. Except for the making of money, the whole year of an erected Lakelands, notwithstanding uninterrupted successes, was a blank. Or rather we have to wish it were a blank. The scheme departs: payment for the enlisted servants of it is in prospect. A black agent, not willingly enlisted, yet pointing to proofs of service, refuses payment in ordinary coin; and we tell him we owe him nothing, that he is not a man of the world, has no understanding of Nature: and still the fellow thumps and alarums at a midnight door we are astonished to find we have in our daylight house. How is it? Would other men be so sensitive to him? Victor was appeased by the assurance of his possession of an exceptionally scrupulous conscience; and he settled the debate by thinking: 'After all, for a man like me, battling incessantly, a kind of Vesuvius, I must have—can't be starved, must be fed—though, pah! But I'm not to be questioned like other men.—But how about an aristocracy of the contempt of distinctions?—But there is no escaping distinctions! my aristocracy despises indulgence.—And indulges?—Say, an exceptional nature! Supposing a certain beloved woman to pronounce on the case?—She cannot: no woman can be a just judge of it.'—He cried: My love of her is testified by my having Barmby handy to right her to-day, tomorrow, the very instant the clock strikes the hour of my release!

Mention of the clock swung that silly guilt figure. Victor entered into it, condemned to swing, and be a thrall. His intensity of sensation launched him on an eternity of the swinging in ridiculous nakedness to the measure of time gone crazy. He had to correct a reproof of Mrs. Burman, as the cause of the nonsense. He ran down to breakfast, hoping he might hear of that clock stopped, and that sickening motion with it.

Another letter from the Sanfredini in Milan, warmly inviting to her villa over Como, acted on him at breakfast like the waving of a banner. 'We go,' Victor said to Nataly, and flattered-up a smile about her lips—too much a resurrection smile. There was talk of the Meeting at the theatre: Simeon Fenellan had spoken there in the cause of the deceased Member, was known, and was likely to have a good reception. Fun and enthusiasm might be expected.

'And my darling will hear her husband speak to-night,' he whispered as he was departing; and did a mischief, he had to fear, for a shadowy knot crossed Nataly's forehead, she seemed paler. He sent back Nesta and mademoiselle, in consequence, at the end of the Green Park.

Their dinner-hour was early; Simeon Fenellan, Colney Durance, and Mr. Peridon—pleasing to Nataly for his faithful siege of the French fortress—were the only guests. When they rose, Nataly drew Victor aside. He came dismayed to Nesta. She ran to her mother. 'Not hear papa speak? Oh, mother, mother! Then I stay with her. But can't she come? He is going to unfold ideas to us. There!'

'My naughty girl is not to poke her fun at orators,' Nataly said. 'No, dearest; it would agitate me to go. I'm better here. I shall be at peace when the night is over.'

'But you will be all alone here, dear mother.'

Nataly's eyes wandered to fall on Colney. He proposed to give her his company. She declined it. Nesta ventured another entreaty, either that she might be allowed to stay or have her mother with her at the Meeting.

'My love,' Nataly said, 'the thought of the Meeting—' She clasped at her breast; and she murmured: 'I shall be comforted by your being with him. There is no danger there. But I shall be happy, I shall be at peace when this night is over.'

Colney persuaded her to have him for companion. Mr. Peridon, who was to have driven with Nesta and mademoiselle, won admiration by proposing to stay for an hour and play some of Mrs. Radnor's favourite pieces. Nesta and Victor overbore Nataly's objections to the lover's generosity. So Mr. Peridon was left. Nesta came hurrying back from the step of the carriage to kiss her mother again, saying: 'Just one last kiss, my own! And she's not to look troubled. I shall remember everything to tell my own mother. It will soon be over.'

Her mother nodded; but the embrace was passionate.

Nesta called her father into the passage, bidding him prohibit any delivery to her mother of news at the door. 'She is easily startled now by trifles—you have noticed?'

Victor summoned his recollections and assured her he had noticed, as he believed he had 'The dear heart of her is fretting for the night to be over! And think! seven days, and she is in Lakelands. A fortnight, and we have our first Concert. Durandarte! Oh, the dear heart 'll be at peace when I tell her of a triumphant Meeting. Not a doubt of that, even though Colney turns the shadow of his back on us.'

'One critic the less for you!' said Nesta. Skepsey was to meet her carriage at the theatre.

Ten minutes later, Victor and Simeon Fenellan were proceeding thitherward on foot.

'I have my speech,' said Victor. 'You prepare the way for me, following our influential friend Dubbleson; Colewort winds up; any one else they shout for. We shall have a great evening. I suspect I shall find Themison or Jarniman when I get home. You don't believe in intimations? I've had crapy processions all day before my eyes. No wonder, after yesterday!'

'Dubbleson mustn't drawl it out too long,' said Fenellan.

'We 'll drop a hint. Where's Dartrey?'

'He'll come. He's in one of his black moods: not temper. He's got a notion he killed his wife by dragging her to Africa with him. She was not only ready to go, she was glad to go. She had a bit of the heroine in her and a certainty of tripping to the deuce if she was left to herself.'

'Tell Nataly that,' said Victor. 'And tell her about Dartrey. Harp on it. Once she was all for him and our girl. But it's a woman—though the dearest! I defy any one to hit on the cause of their changes. We must make the best of things, if we're for swimming. The task for me to-night will be, to keep from rolling out all I've got in my head. And I'm not revolutionary, I'm for stability. Only I do see, that the firm stepping-place asks for a long stride to be taken. One can't get the English to take a stride—unless it's for a foot behind them: bother old Colney! Too timid, or too scrupulous, down we go into

the mire. There!—But I want to say it! I want to save the existing order. I want, Christianity, instead of the Mammonism we ‘re threatened with. Great fortunes now are becoming the giants of old to stalk the land: or mediaeval Barons. Dispersion of wealth, is the secret. Nataly’s of that mind with me. A decent poverty! She’s rather wearying, wants a change. I’ve a steam-yacht in my eye, for next month on the Mediterranean. All our set. She likes quiet. I believe in my political recipe for it.’

He thumped on a method he had for preserving aristocracy—true aristocracy, amid a positively democratic flood of riches.

‘It appears to me, you’re on the road of Priscilla Graves and Pempton,’ observed Simeon. ‘Strike off Priscilla’s viands and friend Pempton’s couple of glasses, and there’s your aristocracy established; but with rather a dispersed recognition of itself.’

‘Upon my word, you talk like old Colney, except for a twang of your own,’ said Victor. ‘Colney sours at every fresh number of that Serial. The last, with Delphica detecting the plot of Falarique, is really not so bad. The four disguised members of the Comedie Francaise on board the vessel from San Francisco, to declaim and prove the superior merits of the Gallic tongue, jumped me to bravo the cleverness. And Bobinikine turning to the complexion of the remainder of cupboard dumplings discovered in an emigrant’s house-to-let! And Semhians—I forget what and Mytharete’s forefinger over the bridge of his nose, like a pensive vulture on the skull of a desert camel! But, I complain, there’s nothing to make the English love the author; and it’s wasted, he’s basted, and the book ‘ll have no sale. I hate satire.’

‘Rough soap for a thin skin, Victor. Does it hurt our people much?’

‘Not a bit; doesn’t touch them. But I want my friends to succeed!’

Their coming upon Westminster Bridge changed the theme. Victor wished the Houses of Parliament to catch the beams of sunset. He deferred to the suggestion, that the Hospital’s doing so seemed appropriate.

‘I’m always pleased to find a decent reason for what is,’ he said. Then he queried: ‘But what is, if we look at it, and while we look, Simeon? She may be going—or she’s gone already, poor woman! I shall have that scene of yesterday everlastingly before my eyes, like a drop-curtain. Only, you know, Simeon, they don’t feel the end, as we in health imagine. Colney would say, we have the spasms and they the peace. I ‘ve a mind to send up to Regent’s Park with inquiries. It would look respectful. God forgive me!—the poor woman perverts me at every turn. Though I will say, a certain horror of death I had—she whisked me out of it yesterday. I don’t feel it any longer. What are you jerking at?’

‘Only to remark, that if the thing’s done for us, we haven’t it so much on our sensations.’

‘More, if we’re sympathetic. But that compels us to be philosophic—or who could live! Poor woman!’

‘Waft her gently, Victor!’

‘Tush! Now for the South side of the Bridges; and I tell you, Simeon, what I can’t mention to-night: I mean to enliven these poor dear people on their forsaken South of the City. I ‘ve my scheme. Elected or not, I shall hardly be accused of bribery when I put down my first instalment.’

Fenellan went to work with that remark in his brain for the speech he was to deliver. He could not but reflect on the genial man's willingness and capacity to do deeds of benevolence, constantly thwarted by the position into which he had plunged himself.

They were received at the verge of the crowd outside the theatre-doors by Skepsey, who wriggled, tore and clove a way for them, where all were obedient, but the numbers lumped and clogged. When finally they reached the stage, they spied at Nesta's box, during the thunder of the rounds of applause, after shaking hands with Mr. Dubbleson, Sir Abraham Quatley, Dudley Sowerby, and others; and with Beaves Urmsing—a politician 'never of the opposite party to a deuce of a funny fellow!—go anywhere to hear hhm,' he vowed.

'Miss Radnor and Mademoiselle de Seilles arrived quite safely,' said Dudley, feasting on the box which contained them and no Dartrey Fenellan in it.

Nesta was wondering at Dartrey's absence. Not before Mr. Dubbleson, the chairman, the 'gentleman of local influence,' had animated the drowsed wits and respiratory organs of a packed audience by yielding place to Simeon, did Dartrey appear. Simeon's name was shouted, in proof of the happy explosion of his first anecdote, as Dartrey took seat behind Nesta. 'Half an hour with the dear mother,' he said.

Nesta's eyes thanked him. She pressed the hand of a demure young woman sitting close behind. Louise de Seilles. 'You know Matilda Pridden.'

Dartrey held his hand out. 'Has she forgiven me?'

Matilda bowed gravely, enfolding her affirmative in an outline of the no need for it, with perfect good breeding. Dartrey was moved to think Skepsey's choice of a woman to worship did him honour. He glanced at Louise. Her manner toward Matilda Pridden showed her sisterly with Nesta. He said: 'I left Mr. Peridon playing.—A little anxiety to hear that the great speech of the evening is done; it's nothing else. I'll run to her as soon as it's over.'

'Oh, good of you! And kind of Mr. Peridon!' She turned to Louise, who smiled at the simple art of the exclamation, assenting.

Victor below, on the stage platform, indicated the waving of a hand to them, and his delight at Simeon's ringing points: which were, to Dartrey's mind, vacuously clever and crafty. Dartrey despised effects of oratory, save when soldiers had to be hurled on a mark—or citizens nerved to stand for their country.

Nesta dived into her father's brilliancy of appreciation, a trifle pained by Dartrey's aristocratic air when he surveyed the herd of heads agape and another cheer rang round. He smiled with her, to be with her, at a hit here and there; he would not pretend an approval of this manner of winning electors to consider the country's interests and their own. One fellow in the crowded pit, affecting a familiarity with Simeon, that permitted the taking of liberties with the orator's Christian name, mildly amused him. He had no objection to hear 'Simmy' shouted, as Louise de Seilles observed. She was of his mind, in regard to the rough machinery of Freedom.

Skepsey entered the box.

‘We shall soon be serious, Miss Nesta,’ he said, after a look at Matilda Pridden.

There was a prolonged roaring—on the cheerful side.

‘And another word about security that your candidate will keep his promises,’ continued Simeon: ‘You have his word, my friends!’ And he told the story of the old Governor of Goa, who wanted money and summoned the usurers, and they wanted security; whereupon he laid his Hidalgo hand on a cataract of Kronos-beard across his breast, and pulled forth three white hairs, and presented them: ‘And as honourably to the usurious Jews as to the noble gentleman himself, that security was accepted!’

Emerging from hearty clamours, the illustrative orator fell upon the question of political specifics:—Mr. Victor Radnor trusted to English good sense too profoundly to be offering them positive cures, as they would hear the enemy say he did. Yet a bit of a cure may be offered, if we ‘re not for pushing it too far, in pursuit of the science of specifics, in the style of the foreign physician, probably Spanish, who had no practice, and wished for leisure to let him prosecute his anatomical and other investigations to discover his grand medical nostrum. So to get him fees meanwhile he advertised a cure for dyspepsia—the resource of starving doctors. And sure enough his patient came, showing the grand fat fellow we may be when we carry more of the deciduously mortal than of the scraggy vital upon our persons. Any one at a glance would have prescribed water-cresses to him: water-cresses exclusively to eat for a fortnight. And that the good physician did. Away went his patient, returning at the end of the fortnight, lean, and with the appetite of a Toledo blade for succulent slices. He vowed he was the man. Our estimable doctor eyed him, tapped at him, pinched his tender parts; and making him swear he was really the man, and had eaten nothing whatever but unadulterated water-cresses in the interval, seized on him in an ecstasy by the collar of his coat, pushed him into the surgery, knocked him over, killed him, cut him up, and enjoyed the felicity of exposing to view the very healthiest patient ever seen under dissecting hand, by favour of the fortunate discovery of the specific for him. All to further science!—to which, in spite of the petitions of all the scientific bodies of the civilized world, he fell a martyr on the scaffold, poor gentleman! But we know politics to be no such empirical science.

Simeon ingeniously interwove his analogy. He brought it home to Beaves Urmsing, whose laugh drove any tone of apology out of it. Yet the orator was asked: ‘Do you take politics for a joke, Simmy?’

He countered his questioner: ‘Just to liberate you from your moribund state, my friend.’ And he told the story of the wrecked sailor, found lying on the sands, flung up from the foundered ship of a Salvation captain, and how, that nothing could waken him, and there he lay fit for interment; until presently a something of a voice grew down into his ears; and it was his old chum Polly, whom he had tied to a board to give her a last chance in the surges; and Polly shaking the wet from her feathers, and shouting: ‘Polly tho dram dry!’—which struck on the nob of Jack’s memory, to revive all the liquorly tricks of the cabin under Salvationism, and he began heaving, and at last he shook in a lazy way, and then from sputter to sputter got his laugh loose; and he sat up, and cried; ‘That did it! Now to business!’ for he was hungry. ‘And when I catch the ring of this world’s laugh from you, my friend ...!’ Simeon’s application of the story was drowned.

After the outburst, they heard his friend again interruptingly: ‘You keep that tongue of yours from wagging, as it did when you got round the old widow woman for her money, Simmy!’

Victor leaned forward. Simeon towered. He bellowed

‘And you keep that tongue of yours from committing incest on a lie!’

It was like a lightning-flash in the theatre. The man went under. Simeon flowed. Conscience reproached him with the little he had done for Victor, and he had now his congenial opportunity.

Up in the box, the powers of the orator were not so cordially esteemed. To Matilda Pridden, his tales were barely decently the flesh and the devil smothering a holy occasion to penetrate and exhort. Dartrey sat rigid, as with the checked impatience for a leap. Nesta looked at Louise when some one was perceived on the stage bending to her father: It was Mr. Peridon; he never once raised his face. Apparently he was not intelligible or audible but the next moment Victor sprang erect. Dartrey quitted the box. Nesta beheld her father uttering hurried words to right and left. He passed from sight, Mr. Peridon with him; and Dartrey did not return.

Nesta felt her father’s absence as light gone: his eyes rayed light. Besides she had the anticipation of a speech from him, that would win Matilda Pridden. She fancied Simeon Fenellan to be rather under the spell of the hilarity he roused. A gentleman behind him spoke in his ear; and Simeon, instead of ceasing, resumed his flow. Matilda Pridden’s gaze on him and the people was painful to behold: Nesta saw her mind. She set herself to study a popular assembly. It could be serious to the call of better leadership, she believed. Her father had been telling her of late of a faith he had in the English, that they (or so her intelligence translated his remarks) had power to rise to spiritual ascendancy, and be once more the Islanders heading the world of a new epoch abjuring materialism—some such idea; very quickening to her, as it would be to this earnest young woman worshipped by Skepsey. Her father’s absence and the continued shouts of laughter, the insatiable thirst for fun, darkened her in her desire to have the soul of the good working sister refreshed. They had talked together; not much: enough for each to see at either’s breast the wells from the founts of life.

The box-door opened, Dartrey came in. He took her hand. She stood-up to his look. He said to Matilda Pridden: ‘Come with us; she will need you.’

‘Speak it,’ said Nesta.

He said to the other: ‘She has courage.’

‘I could trust to her,’ Matilda Pridden replied.

Nesta read his eyes. ‘Mother?’

His answer was in the pressure.

‘Ill?’

‘No longer.’

‘Oh! Dartrey.’ Matilda Pridden caught her fast.

‘I can walk, dear,’ Nesta said.

Dartrey mentioned her father.

She understood: 'I am thinking of him.'

The words of her mother: 'At peace when the night is over,' rang. Along the gassy passages of the back of the theatre, the sound coming from an applauding audience was as much a thunder as rage would have been. It was as void of human meaning as a sea.

CHAPTER XLII

THE LAST

In the still dark hour of that April morning, the Rev. Septimus Barmby was roused by Mr. Peridon, with a scribbled message from Victor, which he deciphered by candlelight held close to the sheet of paper, between short inquiries and communications, losing more and more the sense of it as his intelligence became aware of what dread blow had befallen the stricken man. He was bidden come to fulfil his promise instantly. He remembered the bearing of the promise. Mr. Peridon's hurried explanatory narrative made the request terrific, out of tragically lamentable. A semblance of obedience had to be put on, and the act of dressing aided it. Mr. Barmby prayed at heart for guidance further.

The two gentlemen drove Westward, speaking little; they had the dry sob in the throat.

‘Miss Radnor?’ Mr. Barmby asked.

‘She is shattered; she holds up; she would not break down.’

‘I can conceive her to possess high courage.’

‘She has her friend Mademoiselle de Seilles.’

Mr. Barmby remained humbly silent. Affectionate deep regrets moved him to say: ‘A loss irreparable. We have but one voice of sorrow. And how sudden! The dear lady had no suffering, I trust.’

‘She fell into the arms of Mr. Durance. She died in his arms. She was unconscious, he says. I left her straining for breath. She said “Victor”; she tried to smile:—I understood I was not to alarm him.’

‘And he too late!’

‘He was too late, by some minutes.’

‘At least I may comfort. Miss Radnor must be a blessing to him.’

‘They cannot meet. Her presence excites him.’

That radiant home of all hospitality seemed opening on from darker chambers to the deadly dark. The immorality in the moral situation could not be forgotten by one who was professionally a moralist. But an incorruptible beauty in the woman's character claimed to plead for her memory. Even the rigorous in defence of righteous laws are softened by a sinner's death to hear excuses, and may own a relationship, haply perceive the faint nimbus of the saint. Death among us proves us to be still not so far from the Nature saying at every avenue to the mind: ‘Earth makes all sweet.’

Mr. Durance had prophesied a wailful end ever to the carol of Optimists! Yet it is not the black view which is the right view. There is one between: the path adopted by Septimus Barmby:—if he could but induce his brethren to enter on it! The dreadful teaching of circumstances might help to the persuading of a fair young woman, under his direction ... having her hand disengaged. Mr. Barmby started

himself in the dream of his uninterred passion for the maiden: he chased it, seized it, hurled it hence, as a present sacrilege:—constantly, and at the pitch of our highest devotion to serve, are we assailed by the tempter! Is it, that the love of woman is our weakness? For if so, then would a celibate clergy have grant of immunity. But, alas, it is not so with them! We have to deplore the hearing of reports too credible. Again we are pushed to contemplate woman as the mysterious obstruction to the perfect purity of soul. Nor is there a refuge in asceticism. No more devilish nourisher of pride do we find than in pain voluntarily embraced. And strangely, at the time when our hearts are pledged to thoughts upon others, they are led by woman to glance revolving upon ourself, our vile self! Mr. Barmby clutched it by the neck.

Light now, as of a strong memory of day along the street, assisted him to forget himself at the sight of the inanimate houses of this London, all revealed in a quietness not less immobile than tombstones of an unending cemetery, with its last ghost laid. Did men but know it!—The habitual necessity to amass matter for the weekly sermon, set him noting his meditative exclamations, the noble army of platitudes under haloes, of good use to men: justifiably turned over in his mind for their good. He had to think, that this act of the justifying of the act reproached him with a lack of due emotion, in sympathy with agonized friends truly dear. Drawing near the hospitable house, his official and a cordial emotion united, as we see sorrowful crape-wreathed countenances. His heart struck heavily when the house was visible.

Could it be the very house? The look of it belied the tale inside. But that threw a ghostliness on the look.

Some one was pacing up and down. They greeted Dudley Sowerby. His ability to speak was tasked. They gathered, that mademoiselle and ‘a Miss Pridden’ were sitting with Nesta, and that their services in a crisis had been precious. At such times, one of them reflected, woman has indeed her place: when life’s battle waxes red. Her soul must be capable of mounting to the level of the man’s, then? It is a lesson!

Dudley said he was waiting for Dr. Themison to come forth. He could not tear himself from sight of the house.

The door opened to Dr. Themison departing, Colney Durance and Simeon Fenellan bare-headed. Colney showed a face with stains of the lashing of tears.

Dr. Themison gave his final counsels. ‘Her father must not see her. For him, it may have to be a specialist. We will hope the best. Mr. Dartrey Fenellan stays beside him:—good. As to the ceremony he calls for, a form of it might soothe:—any soothing possible! No music. I will return in a few hours.’

He went on foot.

Mr. Barmby begged advice from Colney and Simeon concerning the message he had received—the ceremony requiring his official presidency. Neither of them replied. They breathed the morning air, they gave out long-drawn sighs of relief, looking on the trees of the park.

A man came along the pavement, working slow legs hurriedly. Simeon ran down to him.

‘Humour, as much as you can,’ Colney said to Mr. Barmby. ‘Let him imagine.’

‘Miss Radnor?’

‘Not to speak of her.’

‘The daughter he so loves?’

Mr. Barmby’s tender inquisitiveness was unanswered. Were they inducing him to mollify a madman? But was it possible to associate the idea of madness with Mr. Radnor?

Simeon ran back. ‘Jarniman,’ he remarked. ‘It’s over!’

‘Now!’ Colney’s shoulders expressed the comment. ‘Well, now, Mr. Barmby, you can do the part desired. Come in. It’s morning!’ He stared at the sky.

All except Dudley passed in.

Mr. Barmby wanted more advice, his dilemma being acute. It was moderated, though not more than moderated, when he was informed of the death of Mrs. Burman Radnor; an event that occurred, according to Jarniman’s report, forty-five minutes after Skepsey had a second time called for information of it at the house in Regent’s Park—five hours and a half, as Colney made his calculation, after the death of Nataly. He was urged by some spur of senseless irony to verify the calculation and correct it in the minutes.

Dudley crossed the road. No sign of the awful interior was on any of the windows of the house either to deepen awe or relieve. They were blank as eyeballs of the mindless. He shivered. Death is our common cloak; but Calamity individualizes, to set the unwounded speculating whether indeed a stricken man, who has become the cause of woeful trouble, may not be pointing a moral. Pacing on the Park side of the house, he saw Skepsey drive up and leap out with a gentleman, Mr. Radnor’s lawyer. Could it be, that there was no Will written? Could a Will be executed now? The moral was more forcibly suggested. Dudley beheld this Mr. Victor Radnor successful up all the main steps, persuasive, popular, brightest of the elect of Fortune, felled to the ground within an hour, he and all his house! And if at once to pass beneath the ground, the blow would have seemed merciful for him. Or if, instead of chattering a mixture of the rational and the monstrous, he had been heard to rave like the utterly distraught. Recollection of some of the things he shouted, was an anguish: A notion came into the poor man, that he was the dead one of the two, and he cried out: ‘Cremation? No, Colney’s right, it robs us of our last laugh. I lie as I fall.’ He ‘had a confession for his Nataly, for her only, for no one else.’ He had ‘an Idea.’ His begging of Dudley to listen without any punctilio (putting a vulgar oath before it), was the sole piece of unreasonableness in the explanation of the idea: and that was not much wilder than the stuff Dudley had read from reports of Radical speeches. He told Dudley he thought him too young to be ‘best man to a widower about to be married,’ and that Barmby was ‘coming all haste to do the business, because of no time to spare.’

Dudley knew but the half, and he did not envy Dartrey Fenellan his task of watching over the wreck of a splendid intelligence, humouring and restraining. According to the rumours, Mr. Radnor had not shown the symptoms before the appearance of his daughter. For awhile he hung, and then fell, like an icicle. Nesta came with a cry for her father. He rose: Dartrey was by. Hugged fast in iron muscles, the

unhappy creature raved of his being a caged lion. These things Dudley had heard in the house.

There are scenes of life proper to the grave-cloth.

Nataly's dead body was her advocate with her family, with friends, with the world. Victor had more need of a covering shroud to keep calamity respected. Earth makes all sweet: and we, when the privilege is granted us, do well to treat the terribly stricken as if they had entered to the bosom of earth.

That night's infinite sadness was concentrated upon Nesta. She had need of her strength of mind and body.

The night went past as a year. The year followed it as a refreshing night. Slowly lifting her from our abysses, it was a good angel to the girl. Permission could not be given for her to see her father. She had a home in the modest home of Louise de Seilles on the borders of Dauphins; and with French hearts at their best in winningness around her, she learned again, as an art, the natural act of breathing calmly; she had by degrees a longing for the snow-heights. When her imagination could perch on them with love and pride, she began to recover the throb for a part in human action. It set her nature flowing to the mate she had chosen, who was her counsellor, her supporter, and her sword. She had awakened to new life, not to sink back upon a breast of love, though thoughts of the lover were as blows upon strung musical chords of her bosom. Her union with Dartrey was for the having an ally and the being an ally, in resolute vision of strife ahead, through the veiled dreams that bear the blush. This was behind a maidenly demureness. Are not young women hypocrites? Who shall fathom their guile! A girl with a pretty smile, a gentle manner, a liking for wild flowers up on the rocks; and graceful with resemblances to the swelling proportions of garden-fruits approved in young women by the connoisseur eye of man; distinctly designed to embrace the state of marriage, that she might (a girl of singularly lucid and receptive eyes) the better give battle to men touching matters which they howl at an eccentric matron for naming. So it was. And the yielding of her hand to Dartrey, would have appeared at that period of her revival, as among the baser compliances of the fleshly, if she had not seen in him, whom she owned for leader, her fellow soldier, warrior friend, hero, of her own heart's mould, but a greater.

She was on Como, at the villa of the Signora Giulia Sanfredini, when Dudley's letter reached her, with the supplicating offer of the share of his earldom. An English home meanwhile was proposed to her at the house of his mother the Countess. He knew that he did not write to a brilliant heiress. The generosity she had always felt that he possessed, he thus proved in figures. They are convincing and not melting. But she was moved to tears by his goodness in visiting her father, as well as by the hopeful news he sent. He wrote delicately, withholding the title of her father's place of abode. There were expectations of her father's perfect recovery; the signs were auspicious; he appeared to be restored to the 'likeness to himself' in the instances Dudley furnished:—his appointment with him for the flute-duet next day; and particularly his enthusiastic satisfaction with the largeness and easy excellent service of the residence 'in which he so happily found himself established.' He held it to be, 'on the whole, superior to Lakelands.' The smile and the tear rolled together in Nesta reading these words. And her father spoke repeatedly of longing to embrace his Fredi, of the joy her last letter had given him, of his intention to send an immediate answer: and he showed Dudley a pile of manuscript ready for the post. He talked of public affairs, was humorous over any extravagance or eccentricity in the views he took; notably when he alluded to his envy of little Skepsey. He said he really did envy;

and his daughter believed it and saw fair prospects in it.

Her grateful reply to the young earl conveyed all that was perforce ungentle, in the signature of the name of Nesta Victoria Fenellan:— a name he was to hear cited among the cushioned conservatives, and plead for as he best could under a pressure of disapprobation, and compelled esteem, and regrets.

The day following the report of her father's wish to see her, she and her husband started for England. On that day, Victor breathed his last. Dudley had seen the not hopeful but an ominous illumination of the stricken man; for whom came the peace his Nataly had in earth. Often did Nesta conjure up to vision the palpitating form of the beloved mother with her hand at her mortal wound in secret through long years of the wearing of the mask to keep her mate inspirited. Her gathered knowledge of things and her ruthless penetrativeness made it sometimes hard for her to be tolerant of a world, whose tolerance of the infinitely evil stamped blotches on its face and shrieked in stains across the skin beneath its gallant garb. That was only when she thought of it as the world condemning her mother. She had a husband able and ready, in return for corrections of his demon temper, to trim an ardent young woman's fanatical overflow of the sisterly sentiments; scholarly friends, too, for such restrainings from excess as the mind obtains in a lamp of History exhibiting man's original sprouts to growth and fitful continuation of them. Her first experience of the grief that is in pleasure, for those who have passed a season, was when the old Concert-set assembled round her. When she heard from the mouth of a living woman, that she had saved her from going under the world's waggon-wheels, and taught her to know what is actually meant by the good living of a shapely life, Nesta had the taste of a harvest happiness richer than her recollection of the bride's, though never was bride in fuller flower to her lord than she who brought the dower of an equal valiancy to Dartrey Fenellan. You are aware of the reasons, the many, why a courageous young woman requires of high heaven, far more than the commendably timid, a doughty husband. She had him; otherwise would that puzzled old world, which beheld her step out of the ranks to challenge it, and could not blast her personal reputation, have commissioned a paw to maul her character, perhaps instructing the gossips to murmur of her parentage. Nesta Victoria Fenellan had the husband who would have the world respectful to any brave woman. This one was his wife.

Daniel Skepsey rejoices in service to his new master, owing to the scientific opinion he can at any moment of the day apply for, as to the military defences of the country; instead of our attempting to arrest the enemy by vociferations of persistent prayer:—the sole point of difference between him and his Matilda; and it might have been fatal but that Nesta's intervention was persuasive. The two members of the Army first in the field to enrol and give rank according to the merits of either, to both sexes, were made one. Colney Durance (practically cynical when not fancifully, men said) stood by Skepsey at the altar. His published exercises in Satire produce a flush of the article in the Reviews of his books. Meat and wine in turn fence the Hymen beckoning Priscilla and Mr. Pempton. The forms of Religion more than the Channel's division of races keep Louise de Seilles and Mr. Peridon asunder: and in the uniting of them Colney is interested, because it would have so pleased the woman of the loyal heart no longer beating. He let Victor's end be his expiation and did not phrase blame of him. He considered the shallowness of the abstract Optimist exposed enough in Victor's history. He was reconciled to it when, looking on their child, he discerned, that for a cancelling of the errors chargeable to them, the father and mother had kept faith with Nature.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

An incomprehensible world indeed at the bottom and at the top Arrest the enemy by vociferations of persistent prayer Country prizing ornaments higher than qualities Death is our common cloak; but Calamity individualizes How little we mean to do harm when we do an injury Nation's half made-up of the idle and the servants of the idle No companionship save with the wound they nurse Not always the right thing to do the right thing The night went past as a year Universal censor's angry spite

[The End]

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