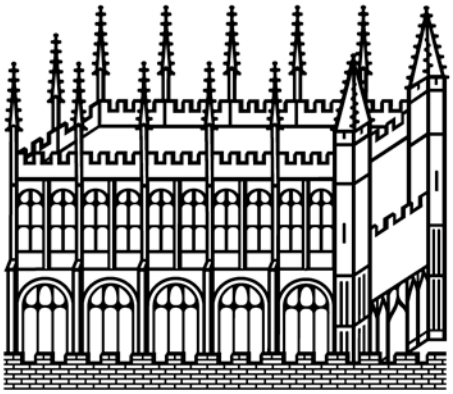

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HESTER'S HISTORY.

A Novel.

(REPRINTED FROM "ALL THE YEAR ROUND.")

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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HESTER'S HISTORY.

CHAPTER I.

LITTLE HESTER.

I WOULD begin by telling how it came that little Hester once lived in Fairyland and was banished; and in order to do so I would open this history in the midst of July sunshine, and all the summer glory of the gardens at Hampton Court. Not on a public holiday, that I may ask a reader to watch with me the city children casting bread to the swans, and stare over the heads of the crowd at the noble cartoons, and

Elizabeth's wan face and ruff. But because there are people who have their homes in the heart of this fairyland of history, who eat their daily bread and dream their nightly dreams under the palace roof. And because there are days when the birds make all the sound in the dreamy alleys, the flowers are sweet only for the bees, the swans doze undisturbed among the lilies, and the pictured company upon the walls in the show chambers have neither student nor admirer from sunrise till sunset; nothing moving amongst them but shadows and sunbeams throughout the long lonely day.

On such a day about eighty years ago, a lady was sitting at an open window looking out on the great court-yard, and a little girl was playing all by herself up and down the king's staircase, and in and out those long pictured chambers, where an old woman was going slowly from room to room, on her knees, scrubbing the boards. When tired of chasing the sunbeams up and down the

stair, "climbing the gold ladders" she called her game, this child would come and sit down in the middle of the floor, and, clasping her knees, talk up to the pictures, to Mary and Darnley and the rest, asking them why they looked so grave, and staid up there, so silent, on the prim walls; assuring them that they should find the world outside very delightful with flowers and trees, if they would only step forth and try it. These painted people were so real and familiar to this child, and those of sad stern faces and stiff bearing touched her pity so much, that she talked quite aloud to them for sympathy. The old charwoman, catching the murmuring treble of the little voice, would come grumbling to the door now and again, and looking uneasily at the yellow head shining solitary in the middle of the great chamber, would listen in amazement to the small eager tongue that discoursed so nimbly and fantastically in the silence.

The lady at the window not far away was

Judith, Lady Humphrey, widow of Sir John Humphrey, a distinguished naval officer. She was a middle-aged lady, tall and narrow in figure, with shapely features, and light hair, like braids of buff-coloured satin. She might have been considered handsome but for her mouth, which was ugly; chiefly, perhaps, because sweetness was unknown to it. There was also a drawback to beauty in the cold yet restless expression of her colourless eyes, whose pale sharp light was unsoftened by even the lightest pencilling of shadow. People who knew her well could have told that her manners would have been attractive but for occasional tones in her voice. And probably it was owing to these three characteristics,—the curious light in her eyes, the corners of her mouth, and those odd tones turning up now and again when she was speaking—that no child, not even the little orphan who clung to her perforce, and who made idols of dim faces upon canvas for want of something warmer to love, could

ever get its arms around her neck, or have courage to lift its face to her lips.

This lady was writing to her son, Pierce, at h s military college. An open letter, in a careless dashing hand, lay spread on the desk before her, and she turned back a page, and read.

"I am glad," said the writing, "that you got the pearl necklace and the buckles for little Hester. I know how much amusement it gives you to see the little monkey looking pretty and picturesque. I will do without the money if I can——"

The lady here turned from this letter to her own, and began writing with a bold impatient hand.

"You speak," she said on the paper, "as if you had forgotten that your father was a gentleman, and that you also are expected to be the same. You talk about doing without money, as if that were possible, and allude to Hester's necklace as if its purchase must prevent your debts being paid. I only mentioned that item to show

you how difficult it is to find money for everything. I have pawned the diamonds which your grandfather gave me before you were born, and though they were never a handsome set, the earrings being too short, and the brooch an awkward pattern, still they are valuable, and I send you the sum you require. As for Hester, the child is getting tiresome, and teases me with her questions. I have heard of a cheap school to which I think of sending her. It is almost a charity school, indeed; but I cannot afford a better one, and I dare say it will do for the creature very well."

Did the soldier boy smile or sigh when these lines came under his eyes, or had he leisure in the hurry of his own young life to pause and ruminate on the mystery of a pearl necklace and a charity school? One might wonder a little looking over this letter, seeing that Lady Humphrey had a determined appearance, and that one is apt to associate determination of character with

strength of mind, or at least with common sense. But Lady Humphrey was as determined in her indulgence of her smallest personal whims as in the dauntless carrying out of her most audacious plans.

Hester Cashel was utterly friendless, except in so far as Lady Humphrey had stood and meant to stand her friend. Some one had died abroad, and bequeathed an infant to the cold-eyed lady. What motives were at work to make the owner of so hard a voice open her heart and take the child in, has never been clearly ascertained by any one. People said she did open her heart; but I am disposed to think that she only extended her arms, maybe held out a reluctant hand, or a finger. But even a finger is enough for a toddling baby to grasp, and hold on by with its two tiny hands. And so this orphan became the property of Lady Humphrey.

The woman's husband was dead, her son necessarily removed from her, and she herself was not

the sort of person to win her way into new hearts and draw them near her own. It followed naturally that the babe Hester, growing a strong and graceful child, should prove an interest and an amusement to her protectress. Her beauty had pleased the lady, and her prattle diverted her for some seven or eight years. She had been decked and flattered, indulged and neglected, trained and drilled, and left to run wild again, according to the humour and circumstances of Lady Humphrey. There had lately arrived a time, however, when the soul that was in the child had began to trouble the worldly woman. Hester was growing too thoughtful, too questioning, too fanciful, too "old fashioned." Even the sight of the pretty figure, tricked out in trinkets and satins, did not compensate for the annoyance of the child's earnestness. So long as the small lisping voice would content itself with trilling sentimental ditties accompanied by chubby fingers thrumming a guitar, to the delight of Lady Hum-

phrey and her visitors, it was all very well, and the clever little mite was charming. But it did not amuse Lady Humphrey to hear the words of wisdom coming out of the lips of a babe, nor did it please her at all to be convicted of ignorance by the truthful troubled gaze of two spiritual eyes, looking out of even so tiny a puzzled head. The child, too, was becoming less gay and lively, and getting a habit which the lady could not endure, a trick of talking to herself and to lifeless things. And it was this simple folly of the little one that sealed her childish fate at the last.

For on the evening of that summer day on which a letter was written mentioning a humble school, Lady Humphrey, after some seeking, found the missing Hester among the pictures alone, and it was almost dark. The child was leaning softly towards a dusky canvas, from which a pale face just glimmered through the shadows. "Come out, Mary Stuart," she was whispering, with her hands extended pleadingly

towards the picture, "Come out, Mary Stuart, and hear the nightingales!"

The witness of this scene, the lady on whose mouth there had never been any sweetness, felt forcibly that a whole ocean of mystery lay between the opening nature of this child and her own, which was grown and matured, and never could know change. And she wanted to get the child out of her sight. And next day she drove to a dingy house in Islington to make inquiries. And very soon little Hester was carried away out of her dreams under the shadow of the great palace, from her talks with her dear kings and queens, and her raptures at the singing of the nightingales. And this is how little Hester was banished from Fairyland.

Her anguish and fear were terrible at first; they frightened the children of the school and wearied the mistress. But a week of punishment tamed the little spirit, and Hester settled meekly to her lessons in the schoolroom. With pale

cheeks and shadows round her eyes she announced herself "very happy," by and by, over her books. She hemmed some ruffles for Lady Humphrey and wrote her a letter. And the lady did not quite desert her. She missed the little presence about her more than she had expected. Besides, she was at this time much vexed by the failure of speculations, of cherished plans for the enrichment of her son, and sometimes needed a novelty to distract her thoughts. She called often at the dingy house, and brought Hester back to her paradise. It amused her to see the half-laughing half-weeping ecstasy of the child at sight of the country. Not a wreath in the hedge, not a green-breasted duck among the sedges missed her eye, or was too simple a subject for her joy. Lady Humphrey could understand clapping of hands and merriment, and as gradually the little girl grew shrewd enough to keep her wonders and fancies to herself, and to refrain from asking difficult questions, she was found to be exceedingly

improved, and a much less tiresome companion than she had been.

Thus she lived, henceforth, a strange two-sided sort of life. At her school she was driven about harshly enough, shrieked at and scolded for the smallest fault: mocked by rude schoolfellows for her daintier habits. Her garments became slovenly and her hair unkempt. Her recreation was making cockle-shell grottoes in a gaunt back yard with high walls. Yet here she existed contentedly, feeding her imagination upon history lessons, till wondrously at a moment's notice, there would appear the magic finger beckoning her into the land of enchantment. And the next day, with smooth ringlets, and in the delicate white clothing she liked to wear, little Hester would find her way back into the stately company of her pictured friends, and revelling in the congenial atmosphere of beauty and refinement, would make herself as rapturously happy as it is possible for a lonely child to be. Then were there no tasks to

be learned, and no occupation was appointed for her, but only the following of her sweet will from morning till night among the flowers and pictures.

But too soon this brilliant heaven was overcast. At a moment's notice, and Lady Humphrey's word, back again she was dropped into the lower life. The smoky city received her once more, and the door of the dreary house shut her in. Here were waiting for her just as she had left them—the close blank yard and the rude companions, the threadbare frock and the shoes with the holes in them, the angry word and the hasty punishment, the rigid monotony and the utter unloveliness and unyieldingness of everything and person, which yearning eyes might look upon or helpless hands lay hold of. There were quarrelsome voices for the singing of the nightingales; a patch of rank weeds, instead of acres of scent and bloom; boisterous humanity for delicate dream creations, and slow movements and a cramped will, in exchange for a royal liberty of foot and fancy.

In her earlier days the woe of the little heart found its comfort in tears, and, the passion of the moment over, the child would content itself, child-fashion, with whatever materials for amusement might lie in the way. But when a few years had passed, and an unusual capacity for grief had grown stronger within her, the sudden change in her life became more painful, the conversations of her schoolfellows more irksome, tears were less frequent with her; but a grave trouble grew up in her young life, the trouble of not knowing where her place was to be in the world. For with a true instinct Hester felt early that she had won no place in Lady Humphrey's heart, that her footing on that enchanted hearthstone under the palace roof was dependent on the humour of each moment that passed. And with a sure foreboding, she felt that any day might find her shaken off and forgotten.

CHAPTER II.

HESTER, SOMEWHAT LATER.

When Hester was twelve years old, she had rather advanced in Lady Humphrey's favour. Her progress in learning had pleased the lady, and she had sent her to a better school. The gratitude of the little girl was unbounded, and her efforts to profit by the boon incessant. To-day she is bending over a book in a schoolroom—flushed, eager; her frock out at elbows, her shoes broken, her stockings overrun with darns. To-morrow she will be at the palace, and there must be a brave list of triumphs for Lady Humphrey. A medal

is to be won, and some solemn books, and Lady Humphrey will look pleased. She will not smile much; but she will put on a satisfied look, and say approvingly, "Hester, you will be of use for something yet." And the vague promise of that something in prospect is sweet to Hester as the birds in the boughs.

And a fresh white frock will be handed to Hester, and it will be delicately frilled and crimped; and there will be, if not exactly glass slippers, at least pretty ones of black silk with shining buckles. And there will be Shakespeare on the drawing-room table, the mark in its pages never moved since Hester closed the volume last holiday. And she will nestle in the firelight by the glittering hearthplace with the book. And perhaps she will suddenly start to find that unconsciously her fancy has been clothing Lady Macbeth with the outward form and features of Lady Humphrey. And she will shudder and veil her eyes, lest her patroness should read the cruel libel in her glance. But

the lady does not think of her so often, nor look at her so closely as to notice when a cloud or a shining light is to be seen on her eager face.

Then in the evening the stiff brocade curtains (so different from Miss Hemisphere's dull green damask) will be drawn across the windows, and the wax candles will be lit all through the wide chambers, and the fire will pour its ruddy splendour over the curious andirons, burning grandly and with dignity, as a fire should burn under the roof where kings and queens have made their home. And the few dark pictures on the walls will retire farther than ever into obscurity, and only just peer in ghostly fashion from their frames. On the table in the corner, with its cover of Indian embroidery, will be set forth the tiny exquisite service of china and silver in which Lady Humphrey is wont to dispense tea to her guests. And the lady's little page in his fantastic costume will be tripping about, arranging seats in expectation of visitors. Lady Humphrey does not see com-

pany on an extended scale however. A few antique beaux and dowagers will drink her coffee and play whist at her card tables. And of these, though Hester has seen them coming and going for years, and knows every nodding powdered head and painted smirk by heart, as she does the pictures in the gallery, yet she recognises the identity of not a single one amongst them. They are all illustrious personages of history, the guests of bygone kings.

The first blush of morning will find her abroad, encountering his dread majesty upon the king's staircase. For the fierce Henry and his great cardinal walking about Hampton Court are as familiar to her as Miss Hemisphere or Lady Humphrey. Elizabeth will hold a pageant at high noon in the greenwood, and later, Lady Jane Grey reveals herself, musing in some quiet haunt, weaving herself and her sorrows into a poem for the reading of ages. And when twilight comes on, and the trees stand shadowless in the cool air,

and the crimson begins to grow brown, and the violet black, in the darkening window of the great hall, then Hester, returning homeward by some shrouded alley, where the walls of olive foliage are draped in a purple mist, and unseen birds sing lullabies to all nature, will find a weird ghostly troop coming out to meet her. Anne Boleyn is here in all her splendour, and the hoary trees sigh and shake their heads as she goes past. Wicked Henry, too, strides along, frowning, with the ghost of a murdered wife on either hand. There is a shadow and a whisper of every heart-broken thing that ever might have stolen from the gilded prison of that palace, to flutter wild about here with its anguish, sobbing to the singing of these nightingales. Thus ghoules and gnomes have grown up within the paradise.

It was at this time of her life that Hester gathered up all her childish strength and made an effort to crave the love of her protectress. It was not much for a child to ask, but it was too much

for the woman to bestow. And who shall blame her? That which one has not got, how shall one give it away? Hester arrived one day breathless and panting, her arms full of prizes, a medal in her hand. She could not speak, but emptied the treasures in Lady Humphrey's lap.

"Softly, softly, child!" said Lady Humphrey. "Such sudden movements are very unladylike. Now take these things away. I am quite content. This is nothing but what I have expected."

And this was nothing but what Hester had expected also, yet her heart was crying out for something more. She went swiftly and suddenly down on her knees, and with passionate tears besought that the dear madam would love her, "just a little." And then she knelt trembling and sobbing in terror at her own boldness.

"Hester!" said Lady Humphrey, in her iciest tones, "I beg that you will not make yourself ridiculous. I had hoped that you had given up

these childish vagaries. What more would you have than I give you? There is no one in the world from whom you have the right to claim sixpence, and yet I feed you, clothe you, and keep you at school."

"Yes," said Hester, suddenly checking her wild sobs, and becoming quite still.

"You cannot expect these favours to continue all your life. It is better, then, for you to make much of them while they last, than to disturb yourself about nothing, crying like a great baby for more than you can get."

"Yes," said Hester, more steadily.

"And let me warn you," added Lady Humphrey, quite roused by the successful impression she was making, "that people who go through the world moaning about love, are only pretty sure to get laughed at for their pains. So take these things away, child, and go and wash your face."

And Hester took up her hard-won prizes and

packed them all away into a dark corner. And she came back with a very quiet face, and nothing more was said upon the subject.

But there was a difference in Hester from that hour forth, and after three silent days she spoke again.

"Lady Humphrey," she said, "will you tell me, please, what is to become of me when I am grown up?"

Lady Humphrey paused a few moments before she answered, as if considering the child attentively, her age, her manner, and her possible meaning. Then she said,

"I believe you will have to earn your bread."

"How am I to earn it, please, my lady?" said little Hester, eagerly.

"As a teacher, perhaps," said Lady Humphrey; "if I can afford to keep you long enough at school. Perhaps as a dressmaker."

Hester lowered her head, and retired, without a word, to her seat in the corner. Her eyes wan-

dered round the handsome chamber, and her fingers went feeling to the dainty pearl necklace round her throat. Gradually she unloosed the fastenings as she sat, and the ornament lay glistening in her lap for a silent hour. Then she was again at the lady's elbow with the necklace in her hand.

"I would rather not wear this any more," she said.

"What do you mean, you strange creature?" said Lady Humphrey, rather provoked and much surprised. "But you must wear it," she added. "I intend that you shall wear it at my pleasure. Put it on."

Hester obeyed, but still kept standing, as if all had not been said. Her hands were pressed together, so were her lips. The lady went on writing, as forgetting the child's presence.

"If you please, Lady Humphrey, may I go back to school to-morrow?"

"What now?" said Lady Humphrey?" frown-

ing darkly. "Will you tell me what is the meaning of this new idea?"

"If you please, Lady Humphrey, I would rather be a teacher."

"You shall at all times do just as I command you," said her ladyship, in her hardest tones. "Leave the room now, to begin with."

And Hester vanished at the word, and sought refuge among the pictures, weeping bitterly to her dear Mary Stuart.

After this she made rapid progress at her studies, and was left a whole year undisturbed in her schoolroom. At the end of that time Lady Humphrey had need of her, and she sent for her to come to Hampton Court. A carriage arrived at Miss Hemisphere's door, and the coachman had a note for the schoolmistress. Hester was packed into the coach without delay, and went wondering all the way to her destination. Lady Humphrey met her with more feeling in her manner than Hester had ever seen in it before.

"My son," she explained, "is shut up in a dark room yonder. His eyes have been injured by a hot blast in India, and he is not allowed to see. You must read to him, amuse him, help him to pass the time."

Hester promised to do her best, and was taken to the darkened chamber. Poor Pierce was extended upon a sofa, with his head tied up in bandages. Nothing was to be seen of his face, but a very rueful mouth and some black whiskers. Hester was obliged to make herself and her errand known, for Lady Humphrey was with the doctors in the drawing-room.

"Please, Mr. Humphrey," said Hester, "I am come to amuse you."

The rueful mouth broke into a broad smile. "Are you, indeed?" it said; "I am glad to hear it, I am sure; and I must say you have made a very fair beginning. And who are you, might I ask?"

"My name is Hester," said the girl, "and I come from Miss Hemisphere's school."

"Ah, little Hester! Well, you know I can't see you, but shake hands, little woman. Yes, that's a nice soft firm little hand, and I don't like the handling I get here, I can tell you. Nobody fit for a nurse to be had in these quarters, and the least jerk gives such confounded pain. You shall tie all my bandages, little Hester."

"Yes," said the little girl, and was as good as her word. And the young gentleman and she became great friends after that. She read him to sleep sometimes, and talked to him when he liked, and was a great little mother to Pierce Humphrey. And the young man, who was a kindly young man, grew very fond of her though he had never seen her face.

"I think you love me very much, little Hester," he said to her one day.

"Why?" asked Hester, in a wondering voice.

"Why? because you are so good to me," said the soldier. "Confess, do you not love me very much?"

"I like you as much as ever I can," said Hester, earnestly.

The young man bit his lip and reddened. The answer was not quite what he expected.

"Come!" he said, "what fault do you find with me? Am I not a handsome fellow enough?"

"You are very handsome," said Hester, gravely. "I never saw any one so handsome before."

The young man blushed again, this time with satisfaction.

"And am I not a good-natured chap?" he said, "and very grateful for all you are doing for me?"

"Oh, yes," said Hester, eagerly.

"What is it, then, little puss?"

"I think," said Hester, making a great effort, "that you swear too much at the pain and the doctors, who are doing a great deal for you. And I think you ought not to grumble as you do at Lady Humphrey."

"By Jove!" cried young Humphrey, and the

mouth under his bandages began to widen, and the fragments of black whisker to tremble with laughter. "Well, well, little sweetheart!" he said, "I must try and mend my manners. And now, though you can lecture a fellow so well, perhaps you would not mind sharing his troubles?"

"What troubles?" asked Hester, anxiously.

"Oh, fearful troubles!" he said, with an air of desperation. "I have a terrible debt, and not a farthing to pay it with."

"What is to be done?" cried Hester, in distress. "Have you asked Lady Humphrey for the money?"

The young man groaned. "She would not give me a penny," he said, very deeply in his chest; "not if I went upon my knees to her. But, perhaps," he added, bent upon trying how far the little girl would go to serve him—"perhaps she would do it if you asked her."

Hester turned pale, but this he could not see.

"I don't think she would listen to me at all," she said, trembling.

"Oh yes, she might," said Pierce Humphrey. "Will you promise me to try? It is my only hope," he added, tragically.

The next instant he heard Hester's light foot across the floor, and she was gone. Then Pierce Humphrey got a little anxious as to how his joke might end. He did want the money, but not that the child should get into trouble.

"Lady Humphrey," said little Hester, standing close to the lady's elbow; "if you please, Lady Humphrey, Mr. Pierce is in bad need of money."

"Is he indeed?" said her ladyship, sitting upright in her chair.

"Yes," said Hester, shaking with fear. "He wants a large sum of money to pay a debt. And I am sure, Lady Humphrey, that as you love him so much you will give it him, and not let him be unhappy."

"And pray, little madam," asked Lady Humphrey, with her hard mouth tightened, and her chin at a right angle with her throat, "when did you become my son's confidante?"

"He told me just now," said Hester, fading under the angry eyes, but not flinching.

"He did?" said Lady Humphrey; "yet he has not thought proper to mention the subject to his mother. I am to give *you* money for him because *I* love him so much. Pray, why do you presume that I love him so much? Do you love him yourself, little mistress?"

"No," said Hester, guiltily, hanging her head; "I like him very much, but I do not love him. But then," she added, apologetically, "you know I am not his mother, Lady Humphrey. If I were his mother, I am sure I should love him dearly: and I am sure I should give him everything he asked for."

Lady Humphrey took one long look at the pale, shrinking, persistent face, and said no more.

She had a stormy scene with her son after that; but the debt (not so great as he had described it) was paid.

Pierce Humphrey's eyes were cured. Almost the first use he made of them was to take a peep of curiosity at his little nurse's face. Hester was sitting, unconscious, on her stool before the fire. It was a slender young figure, in the usual white frock. Her hair hung round her neck, a luminous cloud of curls, which were always getting cut, and always growing long. Her eyes were wide open and serious, fixed on the flaming wood. Her mouth was sweet; but tightened at the moment into an expression almost of pain. Her head leaned to one side in an attitude of attention. Her hands clasped her knee, an old babyish trick, which in a short time after this must be outgrown. It was the attitude of her infantine discourses to the pictures; her reveries of enthusiasm or trouble; her meditations.

She thought her patient was asleep. The fire flared and fell in. Burning spars lay scattered on the hearth. What terrible scene in her days that were to come was Hester foreseeing through the medium of this tumult and débris? Crash went the wood, and the tall flame was felled.

"Mother," said Pierce Humphrey next morning, "that little puss will be a beautiful woman."

"Will she?" said Lady Humphrey, drily. And the next day Hester was sent back to her school.

Months passed away after that, and at last it did seem as though the time that Hester dreaded had arrived; and she felt herself shaken off and forgotten. The schoolmistress clamoured for the money that was her due, and Lady Humphrey listened, considered, remembered. Yes, to be sure, the little beggar must not starve. She ordered her carriage, and took her way to the school. A wild light of expectation sprang to Hester's eyes, as the well-known horses pulled up at the door,

and she was quickly by the side of her benefactress. Ah, how tall and awkward and plain the girl had grown! Anxiety, it was true, had not beautified poor Hester. Her eyes had dark circles round them, and her cheeks were pale and thin. Her poor frocks were outgrown, making her look a grotesque figure.

"What is to be done?" said Lady Humphrey. "This creature must earn her bread."

CHAPTER III.

HESTER, A DRESSMAKER'S APPRENTICE.

So, after a few more days, Hester was transferred to a new abode, a needle and thread were put into her hand, and she was told that she had become a dressmaker's apprentice.

She sat in a gloomy room and sewed long seams without lifting her eyes. All round her were busy chattering young women, whose conversation informed her that they were well supplied with fathers, brothers, mothers, and sisters. Their gossip was of vulgar beaux and holiday treats, the last visit to the pit of the theatre, the

next Sunday's excursion to Ranelagh or Richmond. They criticised Hester, even audibly, when the mistress was out of the room; remarked on her outgrown frocks and broken boots, and tittered at the blushes in her face. By-and-by, when they began to suspect that pride as well as shyness kept her sitting in her corner aloof, they mercilessly sneered her down. There was Hester, desolate, against a whole laughing, joking, jeering band.

The mistress of the establishment was not an unkind woman, but her windows full of millinery were an ornament to Sloane-street, and she lived amongst her bonnets and feathers. Her shop was gay, and her customers were many, and she had little time to notice Hester Cashel. She did not know that the girl was unhappy. But Hester was learning her business, all the more surely and rapidly, because of her painful isolation in the workroom. Hasty stitches had to do instead of sighs, and anxiety for the pattern of a trimming,

or the goring of a skirt, often held off the necessity for tears. But by-and-by the assistant in the workroom began to whisper to the mistress that "that girl 'Ester had uncommon nice taste." And presently the apprentices began to pause in their persecution and stare when particular work was handed over their heads, and entrusted to the fingers of their victim.

After some time it dawned upon Hester that she was growing quite expert at her business. She could cut out a satin bodice, and plait in a voluminous court train to fit a dainty waist as deftly as any mistress of the art who ever handled a needle. She had also devices of her own in the matter of trimmings which were apt to charm the fancy of fine customers. "Give it to young Cashel," the mistress would say at length, whenever there was anything pretty to be done.

She was seventeen by the time this point was gained, and womanhood was beginning to look out of her troubled eyes. She was still shabby

Hester, untidy Hester, in spite of all her efforts to be neat; and the envy of others did not fail to make her conscious of her needs. Things that had once been indifferent now pressed upon her sorely. Shame oppressed, and bitterness afflicted her. The past, with its intervals of sunshine, was gone, and the fulness of the present was swelling painfully around her.

There came a day, however, when the sneers and the insults that had harassed her were silenced. Hester spoke out once, and frightened her bugbear away for ever.

One day an unusual supply of nice work fell to her share. An envious spirit had been making merry all the morning over her "embroidery," as she called the poor stains and discolourments of Miss Cashel's frock. Hester suddenly stood up, and spoke as no one had ever heard her speak before.

"Young women!" she said, "for two years and a half I have borne your ill-usage; but I

give you notice that I will bear it no longer. What if I am poor and friendless, and wear shabby clothes? Is it an insult to you? You should rather thank God that you at least have got plenty of fine flaunting gowns, and brass jewellery. If you please, then, you will annoy me no more."

It happened that the mistress entered the room just as Hester began to speak. The words "for two years and a half I have borne your ill-usage" smote her ears like a reproach; for she had known that there were many who were jealous of Hester. The girl did not attempt to hide her hot cheeks and sparkling eyes, but held herself erect, amidst the amazement of the room, busying her trembling fingers with her work.

The apprentices sat thunderstricken, expecting a scene; but the mistress made no remark. It was in the middle of the night before that she had come upon Hester kneeling by her baby's crib, hushing the child to sleep, while the nurse snored

close by; and this mistress was not an unkind, nor a stupid woman.

That evening, just when it was time for the apprentices to go home, she made her appearance in the workroom with a parcel in her hand.

"'Ester Cashel," she said aloud, "I have brought you some fine gray stuff to make you a gown, a piece of black silk to make you a hapron, and a yard of blue ribbon that you may tie up your 'air as the other young women wear it. And as for the cost, I owe you much more than the price of these things for hover work, which you have cheerfully done."

The apprentices put on their bonnets in silence, and went away to digest the shock. Hester was left sitting in the deserted workroom to plan and cut out her new dress. And she did it right skilfully.

"I declare that girl is quite a picture in her new things!" said the kind-hearted milliner to her husband. "And I do wish that that fine lady

who sent her here would take a little notice of her sometimes. She's different like from the other girls, and they're not kind to her, and she don't seem to take to hany of them. She never takes a 'oliday, and never gets a breath of hair unless I send her to the park with the children. She does her work well, but it's plain she's too good for it."

"Does she grumble about it then?" asked the husband, a matter-of-fact person who kept his wife's accounts. These two worthies were at their tea when this conversation occurred, in their neat little parlour behind the shop.

"Grumble!" said the milliner. "Not a word out of her 'ead. And she'd work her fingers to the bone at a pinch. But it's plain to see she's been born and bred a lady. And I do wish that fine madam would come to see her now and again. I don't like the 'ole charge of such a one upon my shoulders."

It was characteristic of Lady Humphrey that

one day about this time she made her appearance in our milliner's shop, being forgetful at the moment of the very existence of Hester. Her thoughts were very busy with strange matters at the time; but she wanted a new bonnet all the same.

"Sweetly pretty!" cried the milliner, taking a step backward, after having mounted her most stupendous chapeau on Lady Humphrey's severe buff braids. "How sweetly pretty to be sure! And how exceedingly thoughtful of your ladyship to remember poor 'Ester. For I don't take this favour to myself, your ladyship; you'll excuse me for saying that I know something of the 'uman 'eart, and I can see through a noble haction as plain as if it was a pane in this glass case."

Lady Humphrey was so amazed at this digression from ribbons and lace, that she was silent for some moments, and sat gazing rather suspiciously at the clever little woman, who, with her head on one side in the most innocent attitude, was busy

snipping out an objectionable flower from the trimming of the head-gear that had been purchased.

"I can see, too, that your ladyship is annoyed," she added, deprecatingly, "because I have served you myself, instead of sending for 'Ester. But I assure your ladyship that she is hout on particular business of mine. I would not have disappointed your ladyship for the world. Had I known you was coming I should have gone hout myself sooner than sent her from 'ome. But about the dress, your ladyship; plum-coloured satin I think your ladyship said, with a tucker of point round the bosom, and a little flounce of the own round the 'em of the skirt. Very 'andsome indeed, it will be; and shall 'Ester go out to fit it on?"

Lady Humphrey could think of no particular reason why Hester should not fit on the dress, and so the milliner had her own way.

"Very hanxious she was to see you, my dear," she said to Hester on her return after Lady Hum-

phrey's departure; "and a very nice little hout it will be for you; which you want it, if hever a girl did."

"I'd rather not go, ma'am," said Hester, doubtfully. "I wish you would send one of the other young women."

"Nonsense!" cried the milliner. "After all the arrangements I 'ave made. I sent to Mrs. Patacake's in Knightsbridge for a sally-lun, and you shall have a cup of tea and a shrimp with me hearly, and a new ribbon for your bonnet, so that you may go on your business in the cool of the evening; for sure I am she will keep you all night."

So Hester brightened up, and fell to trimming her bonnet. She thought that Lady Humphrey must have been wonderfully kind, when the milliner spoke so confidently.

That very evening about sunset a young man on horseback came cantering up the high street of Richmond, rode across the bridge, and took his

way through Bushy Park towards Hampton Court. He was a very handsome young man, with a dark face, which ought to have looked pleasant, but his brows were knit now, and he looked rather fierce and troubled. Whatever were his uncomfortable reflections they were speedily disturbed by the shouting of boys' voices, a great clapping of hands, hissings, and the barking of a dog. A little farther on he met a group of ill-looking urchins, cheering in great delight; and a little farther still, in the distance among the trees, he espied the cause of their amusement. He saw an ugly dog barking and jumping, and the figure of a young girl drawn up against the tree for protection, her little grey cloak almost torn from her shoulders, her bonnet hanging back upon her neck. One hand grasping a parcel was held high above her head, while with the other she kept beating down the dog, which flew savagely at her arm and her shoulder, sometimes leaping almost as high as the parcel in her hand.

"Fetch it, good dog! fetch it!" cried the boys, with roars of laughter.

"Oh, the satin, the satin!" the girl kept saying, desperately, too busy defending herself to cry out or make a noise. "Oh, the satin, the satin!"

And all the while the dog was leaping higher and higher, the girl's weary arm was relaxing, and the sun was coming dancing through the swaying branches, glittering over her bare yellow head and flushed face, as if in sheer merry mockery of her terror.

Then up dashed the rider. A few skilful cuts with his whip, sent the enemy, dog and boys together, all howling in chorus, and flying at their utmost speed.

"The little devils! I have a mind to ride after them," said the rider.

"Oh, please, don't punish them any more," said Hester. "They are only children, and they didn't mean to hurt."

By this time Hester had put her cloak straight, and was tying her bonnet strings, and tightening the bindings of her parcel, containing the plum-coloured satin for Lady Humphrey's new dress. And the stranger was observing her earnestly.

"I cannot be mistaken," he said at last; "you are Hester Cashel."

"Yes," said Hester, smiling; "and you are Mr. Humphrey."

"And how, in the name of wonder," said he, "do you come to be here alone with that great parcel on your hands? When did you return from your school in France?"

"I never was at school in France," said Hester.

"My mother told me——" he muttered, and stopped suddenly.

Hester turned pale. She had been indulging all the day in I know not what pleasant visions of a kinder and more helpful Lady Humphrey than she had ever yet known, to be met with at the end of this journey. Her old distrust of her bene-

factress was roused now at a word; and she wished herself back again in Sloane-street.

"Why will you not shake hands with me, little Hester?" asked Pierce Humphrey, as the girl persisted in not noticing his outstretched hand.

Hester hesitated a moment, then laid her hand frankly and gravely on his, with an air as if to say, "I will do it for this once."

"What is the drawback?" asked Pierce, smiling.

"Why you see," said Hester, hugging her parcel, and regarding the young officer with a business-like air, "when I knew you before, I was a sort of young lady with your mother up yonder, but now I am a dressmaker's apprentice. I am only the young person from Mrs. Gossamer's coming out to fit on Lady Humphrey's new gown. And dressmakers' apprentices are not expected to shake hands with officers in the king's service."

"Well, upon my word! what a bit of pride to

be sure! A dressmaker's apprentice. I must see what is the meaning of this. A dressmaker's apprentice! You no more look the part than I look like the Emperor of China. Why, Hester, your father was a gentleman."

"No matter," said Hester, with an imperious little nod of the head that shook two great tears from her eye-lashes. I earn the bread I eat, and that is better than being lady or gentleman. It is late now, Mr. Humphrey, and I must get on to the palace. I am very much obliged to you for sending that dog away."

"But you are not going to carry that great parcel," said Pierce Humphrey. "Give it me and I will lay it across my saddle. I am going to the palace also."

"You forget how the people would laugh," said Hester, smiling in quite a motherly way at his good nature.

The young soldier reflected a little, and did not urge this point.

"Well, at least, I insist upon your allowing me to escort you," he persisted.

But Hester remembered some holiday adventures related by one Sally Perkins in the workroom, and she steadfastly refused the honour of Mr. Humphrey's protection on her way.

"You will give me pain if you do," she said, earnestly.

"Then I will not give you pain," said Pierce Humphrey, gallantly; and he rode off at a quick pace towards the palace.

CHAPTER IV.

LADY HUMPHREY'S DREAM.

By the time Hester arrived, Lady Humphrey was busy entertaining her son. As they sat together, she looking at him constantly, her face was softened and altered. He was her pearl of price, her single possession. It was the one great provocation that kept all her life angry, the fact that this son was poor. She could not thank Providence for anything that befel her, because this glorious creature had not been born a millionnaire.

She had never shown him much tenderness of

manner, she had chafed with him always when there was a question of money, she had expected from him much homage and obedience; but she had worked for him all his life. And she had worked without success. By the assistance of a cunning man of business she had thrown herself desperately into one speculation after another, and had uniformly failed in all. She was poorer at this moment than ever she had been before she had begun to plan and scheme. And Pierce was deeply in debt, had a talent for getting into debt which would be sure to reach a rare state of development in the future, in the fostering atmosphere of good society, and with the constant culture of expensive habits and a generous disposition. At this present moment Lady Humphrey was bankrupt in pocket, and embittered at heart. There was just one bright streak on her horizon, and she was speedily to see it overcast.

She had been sitting at her writing desk, a seat where she was often to be found, and she had

been casting up figures in a dreary looking book. She was so anxious to gain money, this woman, so terribly, hopelessly determined to find possessions for her son. He had interrupted her at her task, and she sat opposite to him now, erect and grim, eager to question, to find fault, to direct. She did not kiss him, nor hold his hand, nor sit close to him, as many a fond lonely mother would have done. She only opened her grey eyes very widely, and gloated over him. He did not think she was very pleased to see him, this son. He never had felt she was at any time very glad of his society. Yet Lady Humphrey was a woman of strong passions, and love of her handsome Pierce was the strongest passion within her, except one.

As the two sat together there was a strange likeness and unlikeness between them. The likeness was in the shape and setting of the eye, the unlikeness in its glance and colour. The likeness was in the massive cast of the nose and chin, the

unlikeness in the workings of the mouth. The woman's face was all intellect and frozen passion. In the man's no marks were to be traced but those of gaiety and softness of heart, though a petulant trouble overcast it at this moment.

"Well, Pierce, what news?" asked Lady Humphrey, anxiously, seeing that cloud upon her son's face.

"Oh, there is news of all kinds," said Pierce, carelessly. "Our colonel's wife gave a ball last night, and a rebellion in Ireland is more likely than ever."

"You do not look so dismal merely for a night's raking," said the mother, impatiently. "Neither are you greatly concerned in the affairs of Ireland. Let the savages cut their throats if they like it. It is no affair of yours, nor of mine. At this moment I want to hear about Janet Golden."

"Yet, news from Ireland and news of Janet might mean the same thing at this moment," said

Pierce, in a caustic tone, most unusual with him, "Miss Golden being in Ireland."

"Miss Golden being in Ireland," Lady Humphrey repeated, as if assuring herself that the words had been said.

"In Ireland with Lady Helen Munro. And it's all over between us. We had a quarrel, and I was sulky, and behaved like an idiot. Lady Helen Munro arrived in town at a crisis, and Janet returned with her to her glens."

A heavy frown gathered on Lady Humphrey's brows at the first mention of the name Lady Helen Munro, and grew dark at every word that followed it.

"And you allowed this thing to happen?" she said, turning almost fiercely on her son.

"Allowed?" echoed the young man, bitterly. "My permission was not asked in the matter. My opinion was not consulted. We had a quarrel, as I have said. I sulked and stayed away from the place for a fortnight. When I returned at last, I learned that Lady Helen Munro had been

there, and was gone; and in place of Janet I found a small parcel containing the ring I had given her. No letter, no message. And more than this, when I saw her aunt, the old lady coolly reminded me of that story of a silly childish betrothal between Janet and Sir Archie Munro. She thought it very probable the old arrangement would be carried out now, according to the wishes of both families, that the marriage might take place this summer."

"Archie Munro!—Archie Munro!" murmured Lady Humphrey, almost in a whisper, and with an unwholesome light in her eyes. "I am very poor, Pierce, very poor, but I would risk ending my days in an almshouse to prevent such a marriage."

"Yes, mother, it was you who led me into this trouble," said Pierce, sadly. "I might never have met Janet had you not driven me to seek her for her money. I am punished now, for I love the girl, and I have lost her."

"All through your own foolish temper, as you

confess," said his mother. "You have lost her for the moment, it is true, but you will find her again. She has gone off in a fit of pique, and is breaking her heart by this time. You must write to her at once, or follow her."

"I will do neither," said Pierce, "If I were not a poor man, and she a wealthy woman, I might think of it; but, as it is, let Sir Archie win her if he can. She must hold up a finger and beckon me before I go near her. I don't expect that she will do it, for she's prouder and stiffer than I am, if that be possible. So Sir Archie will get her, I suppose."

"Softly, Pierce; you run on too fast. I will own to you now, that I know more of the progress of affairs in that wild country than I have led you to suppose. And, trust me, the coming year will be no time for marrying and giving in marriage in Ireland."

"Tush, mother! How women exaggerate all dangers. Some parts of the country are disturbed;

but the glens will be quiet enough. Sir Archie's people are too happy in their lot to turn malcontents, and Sir Archie himself is as free to pursue the ways of peace in his castle at Glenluce, as you or I. Only," he added, with a short laugh, "he has got a trifle better means of doing it."

"He may not be long in that condition," persisted Lady Humphrey, again in that soft voice. "Wiser men have not been able to keep free of suspicion in times of disturbance. Sir Archie has rebel blood in his veins."

"I wish him no evil," growled Pierce.

"Wishing will not alter fate," said Lady Humphrey. "I have more thoughts about these Irish people than you could imagine—more than you could imagine, you simple boy, if you sat here till midnight thinking about it. The danger of their position at this moment haunts me."

"I did not know you sympathised with them so very much," said Pierce, a little injured; "but of course they are old friends."

"Old friends," repeated Lady Humphrey, with a pitying, an almost tender glance at her son's troubled face.

"Older than I am," said Pierce, "therefore you naturally dwell more on their concerns than mine." And he rose and walked about in a pet; like a cross schoolboy.

"It seems that your concerns have become strangely identical with theirs," said his mother. "Sit down, till I tell you a dream that I have had about you, and about them, a dream that has returned to me night after night, till I can think of nothing else."

Pierce made an impatient gesture, as if he would say that he was not in a humour for listening to the recital of dreams. But Lady Humphrey went on without heeding him.

"In this dream," she said, "I saw Sir Archie Munro discovered to be a rebel and a traitor, and banished from his country. And I saw his forfeited lands, his castle of Glenluce, and all his

various possessions of many kinds bestowed by the king upon Pierce Humphrey."

"After the approved, but irregular fashion of dreams," said Pierce.

"Nay," said Lady Humphrey, "but such a proceeding would not be in the least irregular. For I thought," she said, laying her hand on her son's arm, and looking narrowly in his face—"I thought that the gift was made to Pierce Humphrey as a reward for loyal vigilance in a time of danger and treachery."

Honest Pierce returned her strange look with eyes full of uneasy wonder. "Mother," he said, putting her hand from him, "I do not understand your conversation to-day. You cannot wish that such a dream might come true. Your words would bear a construction which I will not dare to put upon them."

A look of contempt passed over Lady Humphrey's face. "You are a fool, Pierce," she said. "If you were a thousand times my son, you are a fool."

"Let me be a fool then," said Pierce. "And you, mother? it is because you are my mother that I will not consent to understand you. I will try to forget what you have said, and we will talk of something else."

He walked once up and down the room, while his mother sat silent, with her face turned away from him, frowning out upon the glory of the sunset, burnished water gleaming through the hazy trees; flower-beds flaming out of the gilded turf, like spots of coloured fire. Lady Humphrey saw nothing of the scene. Her eyes took in neither colour nor light, but fixed themselves on a little black cloud in the distance, steadfastly, greedily, as upon something that she desired to possess.

"The young person is here from the dressmaker's, my lady," said a servant at the door.

"Take her to my dressing-room," said Lady Humphrey, "and tell her to wait till I am at leisure."

"The young person from the dressmaker's!" said Pierce, when the servant had gone. "So this is to be the end of poor little Hester."

"How do you know that this is poor little Hester?" said Lady Humphrey.

"I met her coming out, that is all," he answered. "She would hardly shake hands with me, poor girl, she was so proud, and so humble. And she has the beauty and the bearing of a princess. 'Tis a sin not to let her be a lady."

"I have no objection to let her be a lady," said Lady Humphrey. "I only profess that I am not able to make her one. She must earn her own bread."

"'Twould be no great bounty to give bread to such a creature out of kindness," said Pierce.

"I gave it her when I could," said Lady Humphrey. "Now I can do no more than find my own. I have done well in giving her the means of supporting herself, and I desire that you will not interfere."

"Something must be done to place her among people in her own class of life," said Pierce, hotly. "You must think of it, mother, or you and I shall quarrel."

"It seems that there are a great many points at issue between us," said Lady Humphrey, growing colder as he grew warm. "We must leave it to time to decide upon our differences."

"If you will do nothing, then, I shall see about it myself," said Pierce, angrily, taking up his hat. "I must ask you for Hester Cashel's address."

"Which I decidedly refuse to give you," said Lady Humphrey.

"In that case I must find it for myself," said Pierce. And then he wished his mother a good evening, and was gone.

After he had gone Lady Humphrey's eyes went back to her little black cloud, which had spread and increased as the sunset faded. Lady Humphrey's eyes now carried and added to it that last

little fume of her son about Hester. So in that moment Hester's future was overcast with and wrapped up in the shadow of that cloud, which was one day to burst on Lady Humphrey's enemies.

"But I will win fortune for you yet, you wrong-headed simpleton!" she said, addressing her absent son, "and I will lay it at your feet when you are least expecting it. And you shall walk over those who scorned your mother before you were born." And then Lady Humphrey remembered who was waiting up-stairs; and she thought about her plum-coloured satin.

"Well, Hester!" said Lady Humphrey, and gave the girl the tips of her fingers to touch. And this was all her greeting after the lapse of three years.

"I hope you have made the most of your time at Mrs. Gossamer's," she went on, while Hester was busy producing her scissors and her pins, and choking down a lump in her throat. The girl

did not know what it was she had hoped for, hardly knew that she had hoped for anything at all; only now she felt the aching at heart of a disappointment.

"I expect you will take pains with this dress," said Lady Humphrey. "It costs more money than I can afford to pay for it. I think it was not very considerate of Mrs. Gossamer to trust the fitting on to an apprentice."

Hester knew her place by this time.

"If you will please to step this way to the mirror," she said, "you can watch what I do, and make your own suggestions. But I believe I know my business pretty well."

Lady Humphrey in her mirror watched the face that flitted over her shoulder, behind her back, beneath her arm, as Hester pinned, and snipped, and ripped, and stitched again; and she saw and recognised that it was a rare face, in which all the changes of expression followed one another in as perfect a harmony as do full chords of music when

they are following out the method of a tune ; with great sweetness and delicacy about the mouth and chin, great breadth and earnestness about the eyes and forehead, and much childlike grace in the little waving locks of warm golden hair that lay within the shelter of her bonnet. Passion and poetry, courage and simplicity, all were in that face, and Lady Humphrey knew it. And as the serious eyes criticised the fall of the satin on her shoulder, and the steady little fingers plied here and there about her waist with pin and needle, the woman felt the same antagonistic spirit rise within her against the girl that had risen once before against the child, when it had whispered, "Come out, Mary Stuart, and hear the nightingales."

Hester, having finished her work, was not asked to take off her bonnet, nor invited to any refreshment. That it was cruel treatment, Lady Humphrey knew, for the girl looked fatigued, and decidedly not robust ; but Lady Humphrey's

mood was to be cruel on that evening. Her son had made her angry and disappointed. She had hinted to him of things that lay next her heart, and he had turned from her in disgust. She could no longer dare to think of him as an ally. He had left her at last in anger on account of this Hester. And now here was this Hester, at her mercy. Should she give her meat and wine, and lay her to rest upon her softest bed? No; she would send her out alone, in the rain that was beginning to fall, and let her find her way back, unprotected, to London. A girl whose pure spiritual face, shining unconscious over her shoulders in a looking-glass, could make her feel gross, and cunning, and wicked, deserved no better treatment at her hands.

"How do you purpose returning to town?" asked Lady Humphrey, as the large summer raindrops came sliding down the pane. Hester was tying up her parcel, and the room was growing dark. Lady Humphrey expected terror, tears, and a prayer to be allowed to remain in shelter till

morning. After all, perhaps she hoped for such a scene. It gratified her at the moment to be harsh, but it would have suited her plans to be obliged to relent.

But Hester, nothing daunted, explained. She had been turning this matter in her mind while she worked, and had hit upon a means of getting home.

"Mrs. Gossamer's laundress lives in Richmond," she said; "and to-morrow will be her morning for starting at daybreak for London. She will take me in her cart, I daresay."

"But where will you pass the night in the mean time?" said Lady Humphrey, unwillingly.

"Oh, she will let me sleep in the crib with Baby Johnny. Baby Johnny and I are great friends."

And so Hester went upon her way. "Oh dear! oh dear!" she wept as she went along; "I will never come back to Hampton Court again!"

And yet it would have suited Lady Humphrey to have taken her by the hand, kept her by her side, affected an interest in her, kissed and made friends. Within the last few hours, even, while her son Pierce had been talking to her, while she had mused alone after his departure, and again while Hester's head had gleamed over her shoulder in the looking-glass, a light had shone upon her difficulties which had shown her the necessity of withdrawing this girl from her wholesome distance and independence, to fill a gap in the plan that was daily taking shape within her brain. She had wrapped her up in that cloud no bigger than a man's hand, which had risen in the western sky. She had found a place for her in the economy of the scheme that lay at her heart. She had work marked out for her to do, with her innocence, her truthfulness, her beauty, and that well-remembered fervour of her nature, which had made her hostile, but might make her useful. She had had this arranged, and yet she had lost an

opportunity, increasing the difficulties of the task that lay before her; and all for the gratification of an impulse of ill-will.

"I have been silly!" said Lady Humphrey; "but it is not yet too late." And she sent off a messenger to Richmond.

Hester was supping on bread and milk, with Baby Johnny in her arms. The cottage door was open, and the summer rain was falling, falling, pattering over the broad freckled faces of the laurel leaves, beating the fragrant breath out of the musk, filling the pink cups of the sweet-brier roses upon the gable, till their golden hearts were drowning in refreshment. The laundress was packing up her snowy linens and muslins in their baskets, and Baby Johnny was falling asleep with his face buried in Hester's yellow hair, when Lady Humphrey's page arrived, and looked in at the open door.

The boy brought a note. Lady Humphrey

desired earnestly that Hester should return and stay the night. The morning would be wet, and a drive in the cart not pleasant. And a nice soft shawl had been sent for muffling, and an umbrella to protect her. Hester could not choose but go. She looked round the homely cottage with regret, kissed Baby Johnny, and set out.

The night was not dark, and the gardens of the palace were delicious with the genial rain. Falling, falling, it quenched the fire at the earth's heart. So had melted that little cloud in the evening sky, that had spread and increased, and saddened the fierce glory of the sunset. Farmers in simple homesteads looked out from under the thirsty eaves, and blessed Heaven for the relief of the parched fields. Was there no one to pray that that other cloud which was growing and darkening within Lady Humphrey's secret ken, might also come to earth in timely tears of repentance and benediction?

But Hester, tripping along the wet lawns, through those whispering showers, and all the fragrant breathing of the newly awakened perfumes, felt only that some echo of her childish raptures had come back to her for the hour.

CHAPTER V.

HOW SHALL IT BE DONE?

After Lady Humphrey had sent away her messenger, she found it very warm in her solitary drawing-room. The air seemed thick and feverish with the atmosphere of her own thoughts. She put aside the curtains from her window with both hands, threw open the sash, and looked out upon the grey twilight, creeping mistily over the dripping, silent, satisfied world. And then she began to walk slowly up and down the room, getting so dark that she could just see the path that she marked out for herself, up to a grimly

beautiful little statue of Nemesis, on its pedestal in the farthest corner, and back again; there and back again. The cool rain was blowing in, and there was not a sound to disturb, but the dabbling of the drops among the little pools upon the window-sill. So Lady Humphrey, having taken her first step towards a cherished end, delivered herself up to an hour's reflection. It was not so much that she was taken possession of by thoughts, at the first, as that she set herself determinedly to think some matters out.

Her face, as she moved through the shadows, with its grey hue, its knitted brows, and hard-set mouth, might have matched with some of those other faces of bygone plotters and spoilers of the peace of the innocent, which were hanging up on high walls, only the breadth of a few chambers removed from her, fixed for ever under the gaze of all time, with the story of their secret misdeeds written in the open daylight on their brows. But there was no observant dreamer present—no

Hester, with straight open eyes, to take notes, and draw comparisons; and the statue of Nemesis looked on its own goal, and knew nothing about the matter; and the rain was busy gossipping to the window-sill; and Lady Humphrey's thoughts were as far from the subject of the musty legends and faded pictures of foolish people who were found out, as any lover of fresh air and fair dealing could desire.

Lady Humphrey's thoughts surrounded her with brilliant scenes, as sweet and peaceful, as fresh and wholesome, as ever memory undertook to furnish. Mountains lying in an atmosphere of summer light, serene and magnificent; crags covered with heather; mighty ravines with the clouds dipping into them, and the slight ash lifting its tasseled head to meet the sky, and shaking its scarlet berries against the blue. A stream, perpetually descending, swift and flashing, like a sword dividing two hills, falling into the valley with foam and thunder, slackening, flowing,

smooth, silvery, musical, taking all sweet things with it to the sea; children's voices, lilies, sedges, echoes of the blessings that arise from and return upon the valley homesteads, like the pigeons that soar from and alight upon the thatches.

For there is also a bay of the sea in Lady Humphrey's picture, with a village sitting at its feet, and the brown sails of fishing craft floating to and fro in its harbour; and there is a castle, away up hillwards, half mossed over, and ivied up to its chimneys, with nestling there for so many centuries in its hollow among the mountains. In this castle there are venerable chambers, and ancient household gods. And there is plenty of life about, faces coming and going, in the light and in the shade; and there is a great peace and dignity about the place.

It is many a day since Lady Humphrey has seen this castle, and the date of her intimate acquaintance with it is thirty years back. So it is not to be expected that the faces which her

memory beholds set in its atmosphere should bear the same features, or at least wear the same look, as those which at this actual moment inhabit it. The old may be expected to have passed away, and the young to have grown old. No one can know this better than Lady Humphrey, with those thirty years of life lying behind her; and yet they are the faces of thirty years ago that she sees with her mental vision. One is the face of an elderly woman, proud, keen, benevolent, and, albeit a good face, and one long since vanished from the earth, it is hateful, and lifelike, and present to Lady Humphrey at this moment. Then there are the faces of two girls; one, with pale satin-like braided hair, and severely handsome features, is surely the very image of Lady Humphrey in her youth. She looks with envy and jealousy towards the other, who, with dreamy eyes, sensitive mouth, and aristocratic mien, stands slightly aloof, fearing a little, and pitying, and wondering, and sheltering herself by the elder woman's side.

And there is a man's face too, sometimes of the group, and sometimes not of it, a genial, laughing, tawny face; and this last also has left the earth long ago; but its memory is not hateful to Lady Humphrey.

But these are not the people whom she has to deal with at this day, and with a stern shake of the head she dismisses them to the past to which they belong. They disappear, and others spring up and take their place. Lady Humphrey's eyes now rest upon a happy family group. There is a stately looking mother, with surely the same eyes and mouth as that dreamy-faced girl who has vanished; the same brow, but for wrinkles; the same hair, but for silver threads. And there is a son, with a great deal of the delicate nobility of that mother in his countenance, mixed with much of the sunny geniality of the father who has passed away. And there is a girl, with a bright face and a merry tongue, standing beside and between them. And all pleasant things are round

them in their castle among the hills. And if into the midst of this happy group and into the heart of this peaceful home, Lady Humphrey should be planning to introduce her lonely friendless Hester, who could venture to call her cruel or unkind?

How are you going to do it, Lady Humphrey? It is long since you had any intercourse with the Munros. They have no happy memories of you, nor you of them. How, then, will you establish a stranger at their fireside, to listen at the key-holes of their locked closet doors, and report to you the secrets of their lives? Lady Humphrey does not see as yet how it shall be, but she knows that she will find a way to do it. And in the mean time the drops outside patter on, and Hester has not yet arrived, is still tripping gladly through the rain and the flowers, hastening to put her foot in Lady Humphrey's trap, to enlist herself unconsciously as a spy in Lady Humphrey's service. Ireland is but a name to her, and the troubles which she has heard spoken of as thickening in the island

are no more to her than colourless dreams. Yet even at this moment she is running through the darkness towards Ireland; her arms are extended to it, her heart is opening to take it in, the glare of terrible scenes is reflected in her face. It has been already decreed by an unscrupulous will that she is to crush, despoil, suffer, and perhaps die there, before another year of her young life shall be spent.

How shall Lady Humphrey work her will? Is there not one in all that sunny hill-country where her youth was passed to whom she can appeal, out of the fulness of a benevolent heart, for assistance in her scheme of rescuing an innocent and industrious orphan girl from the dangers of a friendless life in London? Can she not write to Lady Helen Munro, who has reason to remember her well? Ah no; that were too dangerous a venture. Well, then, there is a brave bright face looking out from among trees somewhere, a face that Lady Humphrey can never have forgotten, in which all

the world of the simple-hearted and the straight-minded put involuntary trust. Why not enlist the sympathy of Mrs. Hazeldean, the doctor's wife? That were still more impossible. Those good bright eyes are of the few things ever feared by Judith Humphrey in her youthful days.

Why, then there is the little convent on the hill. Bethink you, my lady, in your solitary chamber, after all the years of forgetfulness that have gone by, of the silver bell dropping down its homely hints about prayer to the simple people of the village, about forgiveness before the going down of the sun. There are gentle souls within those whitewashed walls, too busy with the ailments of their poor to be not easily deceived by a pretty tale of mercy. Why not write them such a letter as you can write, and have them singing praises to heaven that so noble a heart as yours has remained unspoiled in the wicked world? Ay, if the mother abbess, who was a friend to the pale-haired Judith in her girlhood, were dead,

this might be done. 'Tis true she is an aged woman now, but she has not yet descended to take possession of her appointed corner in the little graveyard beside the sea. Are there not yet many others in this neighbourhood whose assistance might be sought in so creditable an enterprise? Yes; but from the questions Lady Humphrey has been putting to herself this hour past, and the answers she has been finding at the bottom of her heart, it would seem as if every door, even the lowliest in the village, must have a bar placed across it at the approach of the shadow of Judith Blake. Lady Humphrey must leave this difficulty to Time, or the future inspirations of her own ingenuity, for here is Hester's step upon the stair.

And Hester must be welcomed now, wooed, won over to have confidence and faith in her benefactress. And accordingly there is a pretty pleasant chamber prepared, gaily lighted, with the rain shut out, where chocolate, and cakes, and

fruits are set forth to propitiate this child of eighteen years. And, in truth, it seems to Hester that some good fairy must have suddenly taken her destiny in hand, when she sees Lady Humphrey coming forth to meet her, with her hand extended, and a smile upon her seldom-smiling face.

"I think it will be too rainy to go to London in the morning," said Lady Humphrey, and she took off Hester's dripping bonnet, and tapped her on her wet rosy cheeks, and dared to look playfully in her wondering eyes.

"Yes, Lady Humphrey," said Hester; "at least, if you wish me to stay."

"And I do wish you to stay, you little sceptic!" said Lady Humphrey. "Why else should I have sent for you all the way to Richmond? It was only to try you that I sent you out in the rain, all alone."

"To try me?" repeated Hester.

"To try what you were made of," said Lady

Humphrey, provoked at the girl's quiet amazement. She had counted upon more effusion, more gratitude and delight, from the fervent little Hester of other days. She forgot how the fervour had been crushed by her own will, that the other days were gone, and that important years had passed over Hester's head, of the experiences of which she knew nothing.

"Only to try what you were made of," said Lady Humphrey. "To find out whether you had a spirit of your own, were proud and independent as I should wish to see you. Your behaviour has been perfect, and I am now quite content."

Hester's wet garments were clinging to her, but her thoughts did not reproach Lady Humphrey for having put her to an uncomfortable test. She only said mechanically, still lost in her wonder:

"I am glad you are content, Lady Humphrey."

"And I am glad that you are glad," said the lady. "You and I must become better friends. I intend that you shall be my visitor here for some time. You shall do as you please, and we will send away all this satin to Mrs. Gossamer to be finished by other hands. I will take you to the theatre, and we will buy some pretty gowns. And now," finished Lady Humphrey, not being able to think of any other tempting bait which she could hold out upon the moment—"now I think you had better eat your supper, and go to bed. And we will talk of a great many other things in the morning."

Hester did as she was bidden, not, however, without some rueful regrets about Baby Johnny and a drive to London. The memory of her chill reception still clung round her, as pertinaciously as the wet cloak round her shoulders. She was too much taken by surprise to be ready to make an effort to forget it. She would forget it in time, if permitted to do so, but this kind-

ness of Lady Humphrey was so new and curious, and Lady Humphrey's appearance agreed with it so badly, that Hester's poor wits were astray with trying to comprehend the sudden change.

"I wonder what she wants with me," was Hester's first thought, after the shock of the surprise was over. It never struck her that such a reflection was ungracious. That Lady Humphrey, after all these lonely years of neglect, had drawn her to her side again from an impulse of compassion or tenderness, was a belief that must be slow to enter Hester's mind. She had been well grounded by the lady herself in the conviction that she was a creature to be put away out of sight, or drawn forth and made use of, according to the emergency of the moment. Picked up and put down, called out and sent back again, it was thus that Lady Humphrey's will had been wrought on her; and surely Lady Humphrey was Lady Humphrey still.

So Hester sat on the corner of her pretty

bed, and had her wonders all to herself. Once more, suddenly, she found herself surrounded with the bright dainty things she had so loved long ago. Here were the same silken hangings; the pictures; the chair with the little low seat, and the tall carved back. She went round the room on tiptoe, touching her old friends, and making sure she was awake. "But how long will it last?" said Hester, sighing; "how long will it last? And I had rather," she soliloquised further, shaking her fair head at the flame of her candle, "I had rather far go back at once with that satin to the workroom than sit waiting here for her anger or her coldness to return. And I will never be her dependant, so long as my fingers can hold a needle."

These were Hester's first impulses of feeling about this change; dread and distrust. Further on towards morning, however, when the rain had ceased, and Lady Humphrey was asleep, other

thoughts grew out of the night and took their place. Rest and comfort did their work, and brought gratitude and peace. And Hester fell asleep thanking God that Lady Humphrey was Lady Humphrey no longer.

Every day after this was a surprise to Hester; a pleasure, a trouble, a confusion. Most strange it was to see how Lady Humphrey's good humour lasted; most strange to feel the effort it cost her to be kind; almost fearful the determination with which the difficulty was conquered. The frown would loom out, but the smile was always ready to shine it down. The voice, involuntarily harsh, would smooth itself. The hand was ever generously open. But the bounty crushed Hester, and the caresses made her fear.

Yet what was there she could fear from Lady Humphrey? Nothing worse than to be sent back to Mrs. Gossamer and the workroom. A needle in her fingers gave her courage. And in

the mean while it was pleasant to play the lady for a time, with the long day all leisure, and the gardens and the pictures close at hand.

So Lady Humphrey was pleased with her own success.

CHAPTER VI.

HOW HESTER WAS TAKEN TO A BALL.

It seemed that Fate took that puzzle of Lady Humphrey's in hand; with a few simple shakes and touches made the pieces fit together, and dropped it in all simplicity into the lady's lap.

When Pierce Humphrey came out, and found Hester at Hampton Court, he was pleased, astonished, confounded, at the recollection of his own ill temper. And it pleased his mother now that he, Pierce, should be attentive to and gentle with little Hester; that he should present her with a rose, write her a valentine, play chess

with her the length of an evening (his heart being safe all the time with his Janet at Glenluce). But it would be no harm at all if simple Hester should remember him at parting with kindness. Any tie that could help to bind the girl to herself, however indirectly, must be forged at any cost, without delay.

It would be nothing to Lady Humphrey if Hester should go to Ireland with a pain at her heart. And Pierce was (as his mother knew well) a young man who could take a fancy to any good thing that came across his way, and pass on with a little look backward and a sigh of sentiment, and love the next sweet thing just as freely as the first. And the next after that again had quite as good a chance as the rest, and it must hang upon little things, as trifling as the accidental (or artful) holding out of a hand, the chance passing by a door, whether the first or the last should know the permanent enjoyment of the tender hospitality of that softest

amongst the hearts of mankind. So Pierce, with a fiancée in Ireland, whose sudden desertion had cost him throes of unexampled anguish, devoted himself most easily and naturally to Hester, his little nurse of other days—the seamstress and dressmaker—the young lady on a visit with his mother at Hampton Court.

And Hester? Well, even as a child, she had found herself disappointed in him, and in the truth of her nature had not refrained from avowing it. Neither did she approve of him now. But she was driven to him often for companionship and sympathy, and this last she found plentiful at least, if not deep of its kind. She liked him, admired him, in as far as there was anything to admire; her heart warmed to him as the only one who had ever as yet come near her bringing love. She would have soothed him in a trouble as she would have soothed Baby Johnny, got a habit of relying on his good nature and affection as the only present thing

she had to trust. That it was a weak thing to cling to she felt. But that feeling was a trouble in itself.

He would take her out and row her among the lilies up the river; Lady Humphrey having commanded her to go. He would tease her with the swans, read her a tender sonnet, stick water-lilies in her hair, tell her that a fellow could not choose but worship such a face as hers. And he would take her wise rebuke with meekness, sighing over it till she was obliged to be kind again for pity. And Hester had no other friend, and was afraid of Lady Humphrey. And that lady looked on in silence at the delicacy and reserve, the simple dignity of the girl's untutored conduct, and congratulated herself that, in the stealthy work of harm that was before her, she had found so fine a weapon at her hand.

Thus a brilliant uneasy phase of Hester's life went past; busy with pleasure, but straitened by doubts; very brightly coloured, but with colours

somewhat gaudy and coarse, and utterly unwarranted to wear. There were poetry books and pictures, and visits to the theatre. There were smart bonnets and fair gowns, and excursions to Vauxhall. There were occasional frowns, and even taunts, when Lady Humphrey's temper was not proof against the anxiety of her mind. But then there was always soft-hearted, easy-going Pierce, with his refuge of goodnature and his shield of protection.

One day a little old snuffy-looking gentleman arrived and was shown up to Lady Humphrey's drawing-room. It was early in the day, but Mr. Campion was never denied by Lady Humphrey, no matter at what hour he might appear. The lady was yawning over her morning papers, nothing of special interest having caught her eye. Hester, at a window, was busy with some sewing, turning a half-worn gown for Lady Humphrey's morning wear. For even in these fleeting days of her young-ladyhood, it was found useful that

Hester's needle should get exercise. Mr. Campion was announced, and the gentleman appeared. He advanced with a dancing-master's gliding step, and wore a full dress of black, with some snuff upon the collar of his coat. His face gleamed as yellow as a guinea from under the whiteness of his powdered wig. His lively deep-set eyes took a few turns round the room, and fixed themselves on the floor, a few rapid turns round the room again, and fixed themselves on the wall; but seldom did they so favour the person who might be addressing him. His face was all dragged into wrinkles, more, it would seem, from his habit of twisting it about into a hundred changing expressions, than from age.

Hester looked up from her sewing and remembered something dimly. Had she seen this little smirking man before? Probably she had, over the card-tables so long ago, when the winter nights were long, and the visits to Hampton Court were so many fresh chapters of an un-

finished fairy tale. For Mr. Campion was Lady Humphrey's man of business, and it was many years since he had first enjoyed the dearly earned boon of her social condescension. This visit was one of business, and Hester was dismissed from the room.

"Well?" said Lady Humphrey, simply, when the door was closed and they were alone.

"Your ladyship is before me with the news of the day, I perceive," said the little man, in a tone and with a look half bantering and half cringing, while all the time he was stroking and fingering two folded newspapers which he held caressingly on his knee, as if they had rather been some kind of living things which had behaved so very well that they deserved to get a petting.

"I am waiting your pleasure to inform me," said Lady Humphrey, hiding her impatience under a cold reserve, sinking backward in her chair, an image of indifference.

"Pardon my little jest," said Mr. Campion,

humble in manner, yet with a hidden triumph in his creaking voice. "I but dallied with the time till retreating footsteps should have leisure to descend your ladyship's staircase."

"I see no jest," said Lady Humphrey, curtly; "and we have no eavesdroppers here. Pray be good enough to proceed."

"Pardon again," said the little man. "I delay no longer. It is true there is a matter which I am come to speak of. Our young friend is in London at this moment."

"In London!" echoed the lady. "And what of that? Why is he in London?"

"For an excellent purpose, your ladyship. Neither you nor I could have a motive more innocent or more laudable. Sir Archie Munro comes to London—to meet a friend."

Lady Humphrey made an impatient gesture. "And the friend?" she questioned.

"Comes from Paris. And is not so much a friend of Sir Archie as of Ireland. A banished

patriot, a sufferer in the great cause, who ventures to England in disguise, to carry information to his fellow-rebels, and to seek it."

"And Sir Archie meets him to receive such information, and to give it?" said Lady Humphrey, fully aroused now. "This is more than we had reason to hope for."

"We suppose it to be so, Lady Humphrey—we suppose it to be so," said the little man, growing mysterious and abstracted as her ladyship's interest got enkindled.

"It is all that we require, is it not?" said Lady Humphrey, her voice beginning to quaver with the passion of her eagerness.

"If things turn out well, why—yes," said Mr. Campion. "But 'there's many a slip,' you know, my lady. If this information of mine be worth anything, we must witness the interview."

"Will that be possible?" asked Lady Humphrey. "Have you people who can manage such a difficulty?"

"We will look to it ourselves, Lady Humphrey. We will do our own work, and it will be done all the better."

"Go on," said the lady.

"Lady Humphrey has doubtless intended to grace with her presence the fancy ball at Almack's, which is to be held on the twentieth of this month."

"This is the fourteenth," said Lady Humphrey. "Go on."

"Sir Archie Munro will wear a blue domino," said Mr. Campion, with his eyes upon the ceiling; "and the friend from over the water will wear a black one, with a mask. I am not yet sure who the latter may be. Two or three names have been mentioned. It may prove to be the arch conspirator himself, Wolfe Tone. It will be enough for Sir Archie Munro to be taken in his company. An acquaintance of mine, whom it will not be necessary for me to introduce to your ladyship, must attach himself to our party. And

neither of our gallant compatriots need return to his own lodging that night."

"A strange place to be chosen for their conference," said Lady Humphrey.

"A good place, and cleverly thought of," said the little man, beginning to twinkle his eyes about again and to chuckle. "There is not a lonely garret in all London so safe for telling secrets as the centre of such a mad conceited crowd. But we will dog their steps, my Lady Humphrey, and we will trip them up. Not a vain belle nor silly coxcomb in the place shall be led such a dance as we will lead them. Aha! we will trip them up!"

Lady Humphrey sat silent and reflecting. "In that case," she said, "if this thing goes well, we shall not require any one in Ireland on the spot." And she thought within herself that Hester might go back to Mrs. Gossamer's at any time.

"If this thing goes well," said Mr. Campion, "all that we can do will be necessarily finished off at once. We shall be rewarded for our services to

the value of our services at present. But your ladyship must remember that the goodly consequences of our loyal endeavours must be much less important now than they are sure to be some six months hence. The evil in Ireland is growing apace. Next spring, next summer, will see the active operations of a civil war. Nothing easier than a transfer of property then, Lady Humphrey. Not a few paltry thousands for your trouble, but a wholesale transfer—money, lands, goods, and chattels. Nothing to be done but make a bonfire of the escutcheon of the Munros."

"'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush'—Mr. Campion is fond of proverbs, I observe," said Lady Humphrey, after a grim pause.

"True, true!" said Mr. Campion, rubbing his hands with glee. "And if we can settle Sir Archie's affairs for him now, how silly to run the risk of delay! Excuse me, my lady, but, had circumstances permitted it, what a splendid man of business your ladyship would have been!"

"Pshaw!" said Lady Humphrey, with abrupt displeasure. And she sat silent and reflecting again,. thinking within herself that Hester had better not go back to Mrs. Gossamer's as yet.

"And those papers in your hand?" said Lady Humphrey, by-and-by.

"Irish publications," said Mr. Campion, "containing little noteworthy tit-bits of gossip and news. Your ladyship will be amused and encouraged. The wretched old hulk of a country is going to pieces, as we have seen, without fail. And we, my Lady Humphrey, you and I, and mayhap other sensible people, are like the wreckers from the coasts, who dare the breakers to help to put the monster out of pain. Our boat has pushed off about the first, ha! ha! and the spoils promise well; but just now and then we get a hint to refrain from laying hands upon the share we have worked for, till we know that some desperate holes have actually been battered in the ship's sides. Ha! ha!"

The little man laughed at his own wit, with a strange hiding and peeping out again of his twinkling eyes, and a great dragging and knotting up of his wrinkled visage. And he wrung his hands together tightly, and polished them with each other till all the joints grew bright and shone again. And Lady Humphrey fixed her silent gaze, with a ferocious contempt, on the contortions of his delight, and her hands twitched the folded papers he had put into them. Perhaps, if those papers had been bullets, she might have taken a fancy to send them spinning through the shaking head. But that would have been a pity, for Mr. Campion was a most useful little man.

"I do not relish jests on this subject," she said, after a few moments' wrestling with perverse inclinations. "What is there in these sheets worth looking at?"

"I beg your ladyship's pardon, I am sure," said Mr. Campion, with a bow of mock courtesy and a grimace. "We will begin with a curious

little record in the *News Letter* of Belfast. It is short: it will not weary your ladyship with words:

"'Mr. William Orr, of near Antrim (now in Carrickfergus Jail), has had his entire harvest cut down by near six hundred of his neighbours in a few hours.'

"And here in the *Northern Star* is a corresponding announcement:

"'About one thousand five hundred people assembled, and in seven minutes dug a field of potatoes belonging to Mr. Samuel Nelson of Belfast, now in Kilmainham Jail.'"

"What do these morsels signify?" asked Lady Humphrey. "What do they tell you?"

"Tell me!" cried Mr. Campion, in triumph. "They tell me that the jails are gaping for men who are beloved by the people. They tell me that if we choose to be expeditious we may have some thousands of fools cutting down Sir Archie Munro's goodly harvest in some ten or fifteen

minutes, if we but choose to hold up our finger. But they warn me also that these Irishmen are furious in their passion for their chiefs, that jails are slippery strongholds, with doors through which people can come out as well as go in, and that their keys have a trick of changing hands in time of civil war. They also hint to me," continued the little man, "that by-and-by our dealings with our dear sister island will be more prompt and less ceremonious than they have been, that the formality of jails will be dispensed with, that other harvests will be reaped in those same fields where the grain is now falling so quickly; that those very ready reapers who are over busy with their sickles will be apt to be mown down in their turn, laid low among their furrows, by as speedy an application of his majesty's bullets as such nimble-handed bumpkins could desire."

"I see nothing in all this that I did not know before," said Lady Humphrey, folding up

the paper and dismissing the subject. "I have thought it all out long ago. I know how the fools will behave and what they will come to. We had better spend our time in making arrangements for this fancy ball, I conceive."

And some further consultation having been held upon this subject, Mr. Campion at last made his farewell grimace, and slid out of the room as he had slid into it.

So Hester was informed that she was to be taken to a fancy ball. It was to find her a novelty, to show her a pretty picture, that Lady Humphrey had planned such a treat. She was as pleasantly excited about the matter as even Lady Humphrey could desire her to be. And "I think I can undertake them," she answered, with animation, when called upon to exert her ingenuity on the contriving and making up of two costumes for the occasion. Whereupon Lady Humphrey wrote off some little notes to a very select few of her most intimate and frivolous friends; and she

got some other little notes in return. And a party was made up for the ball. Five individuals, including Lady Humphrey and Mr. Campion, were to make their appearance in the assembly as—a hand of cards. Hester was to be Red Ridinghood, and Lady Humphrey the Queen of Spades.

Some black velvet, some satin, some white muslin, some red cloth, were all furnished to Hester without delay; and the costumes were in readiness when the evening arrived. Lady Humphrey's sweeping train of black velvet, ornamented with white satin spades, was pronounced a marvel of elegance and conceit by the party. Her fellow cards of the hand all dined at the palace with Lady Humphrey. There was also a Spanish cavaliero who made his appearance at the dinner-table, and who praised the English cooking very much, but who proved to be Mr. Pierce on minute investigation. Hester had also an

honoured place at the board, and with her gold hair all showered over her shoulders under her little red hood, made a picture such as seldom can be seen. Mr. Campion surveyed her with attention, and rubbed his knuckles up to the highest degree of polish that it is possible for skin and bone to assume.

"Our fair instrument?" whispered he to Lady Humphrey, with his eyebrows going up into his wig. "Then——"

"Little Red Ridinghood!" sighed Mr. Campion, sentimentally sweeping Hester's face with his eyes, and then fixing them on the moulding of the ceiling. "How this carries one back to the days of one's childhood! A very charming impersonation indeed! But there ought to be a wolf in attendance, ought there not?" he added, suddenly addressing the company. "The wolf who put on the grandmother's nightcap, you remember, Lady Humphrey."

But Mr. Campion's little witticisms were always lost on Lady Humphrey. Yet in spite of her discouragement, the little man kept up a high flow of spirits; and the company went laughing and jesting into London.

CHAPTER VII.

SOME ACCOUNT OF WHAT HAPPENED AT THE BALL

NOTHING outside the covers of a fairy-tale book, can be half so bewitching as the scene on which this company entered. No stage could present one with so gorgeous and vast a piece of grouping. No dream of expectation could foreshadow its shifting brilliancy, its dazzling variety. Mr. Campion the knave of diamonds, conducted Red Ridinghood to an excellent post of observation, where troops of dream people passed by them in the flesh: Cinderella and her godmother, Lady Macbeth and Robin Hood, popes

and their cardinals, kings and their jesters. There were summer and winter, the devil and an angel, sylphs and mermaids, a savage and St. Agnes; the three weird sisters (three maidens in their bloom), the graces (three withered old spinsters in their paint). Some with masks and some without: glowing and glittering, laughing and jesting, sneering and ogling, coquetting and love-making; pointing witty speeches and ridiculing dull ones; dragging out bashfulness and tripping up blunders; fanning, blushing, sighing, whispering—so the motley crowd went by. Love jostled hate, and misery joy. Beauty rubbed skirts with ugliness, and security with danger. Youth aped age, and age aped youth. Virtue mimicked wickedness, and wickedness virtue. It was all very fine, yet the Queen of Spades thought but little of the pageant. Hester might have leisure to note the oddities and contrasts, but Lady Humphrey had only eyes for one sober-looking figure.

"Sir Archie Munro here!" said Pierce to his

mother. "Surely that is he over yonder. What can bring him to London at such a time?"

And Pierce involuntarily doubled up his fist under his ruffles. It was an insult to his faithless Janet that this rival of his should be indifferent to her presence in his home.

"How dared he be there looking at her every day?" had been the lad's thought, but an hour before; now it was, "how dare he be here, not caring whether she is there or not?"

"Perhaps he has come to London to arrange about the marriage settlements," he said, bitterly. "Or perhaps, indeed, he may even now be here in the character of Benedick."

"I think not," said Lady Humphrey. "Why does he not wear a mask, I wonder. It would suit him. Hist, Pierce! I will tell you—he is here in the character of an Irish rebel; his true character. His proper costume would be a pitch-cap, with a pike on the shoulder."

"Nonsense, mother! I beg your pardon!

But you know you are a little astray on that subject."

"I am not going to harm him by talking," said Lady Humphrey. "You need not get excited, as you did upon another occasion. But I know why that gentleman is here."

Pierce was silent and uncomfortable. "Why, then, is he here?" he asked presently, unable to control his curiosity.

Lady Humphrey shook her head. "I think it is better to say nothing whatever," she said, a little mournfully. "His family were old friends of mine, Pierce—a truth of which you once reminded me."

The young man was silent again, glanced at his mother's face, once, twice, and hung his head with remorse.

"Forgive me, mother," he said at last. "I remember that other occasion well. I terribly misunderstood you on two points. Your conduct to Hester has delighted me of late. I will never

doubt the goodness of your heart again, even for a moment, in a passion. If you know aught against Sir Archie Munro, I will never ask you to repeat it."

"It is safer not to talk here, at all events," Lady Humphrey answered drily, and turned away her face; perhaps to look through the crowd after Sir Archie Munro, perhaps to avoid the glance of her son's honest eyes.

"And now," she said, presently, with a sprightly change of manner, "we will leave the gloomy subject of treason. We came here to amuse ourselves, did we not? Let Sir Archie Munro have a care of himself, while you go and take Hester about the rooms. And forget your saucy Janet for a time, if you can, and make yourself agreeable."

Pierce was fain to do as he was bidden, and so Red Ridinghood and the cavalier made a tour of inspection round the brilliant chambers, whilst the Queen of Spades returned to her hand, and

was shuffled over and over again with her companions in a stately dance. That was the hour in which Pierce Humphrey unexpectedly found himself telling the story of his love and his troubles to Hester.

"Who is your saucy Janet, Mr. Pierce?" asked Hester, suddenly, as they pushed through the crowd together.

Pierce Humphrey blushed. He felt startled, dismayed, ashamed; and yet on the whole rather pleasantly excited. His vanity half-hoped half-feared that Hester would be grieved to hear the story about Janet.

"Where have you heard? What do you know of her?" he asked, evasively.

"Nothing," answered Hester, simply. "But I heard Lady Humphrey speak of her just now; and I thought I should like to know."

Pierce Humphrey sighed, but on the whole was relieved. There was no jealousy, no bitterness, in the young girl's tone. She was only at her old trick of wanting to give help. It was

better so, better that little friendless damsels like this should have no hearts to get hurt. And it was pleasant for a man who had vexation on his mind to find ready-made sympathy at his hand.

"You were always willing to share a fellow's troubles, little Hester," he said, joyously. "And I should be glad, indeed, to hear your opinion of this one." And he plunged into his story, and told it frankly from beginning to end; how he loved a merry maiden called Janet, how the merry maiden had gold and beauty and a temper of her own; how he had been bound to her by a bright betrothal ring; but now, woe the day! he had happened to offend her, whereupon she had flown across the sea, to bide under the roof of one supposed to be his rival. And lastly, how he was wasting for her sake; though he made efforts to pass the time pretty well.

Hester listened patiently, attentively; weighing his difficulty, believing intensely in his pain, now and again asking a question as he went

along; while they two threaded their way up and down through the crowd, he flushed, eloquent, gesticulating, so very much in earnest that Lady Humphrey, catching a glimpse of him from a distance, grew uneasy. Had she not gone too far in thus keeping him so constantly with this Hester, who walked by his side, a pale, patient-looking little Red Ridinghood? Was he making an offer of his fickle heart, even now, to this dressmaker, whose work was already cut out for her so many miles across the sea?

"I do not know much about such matters," Hester was saying at the moment, gravely, and with a business-like air; "but I should think the young lady must be true."

"God bless you for that, little Hester," said Pierce Humphrey, squeezing, in the enthusiasm of his gratitude, the hand that was holding on by his arm. "But how have you come to such a happy conclusion?"

"Why you see," said Hester, earnestly and deliberately, as if explaining a knotty problem, "you are brave and good natured, Mr. Pierce; and you love her a great deal, and you have told her so. And she had wealth of her own, and rich lovers; and yet she once promised to marry you. I should think she must be fond of you," said Hester, wagging her head sagely, as if too great a volume of evidence had been summed up to admit of their being doubt upon the matter.

This was the amount of Hester's wisdom and penetration, but it satisfied Pierce to the full. He glowed and sighed, and became more humble, more doubtful of himself, in his speech.

"You have not seen my rival, little Hester," he said, deprecatingly; "and you must not imagine him an uncouth mountaineer, with great coarse hands, and a brogue. Sir Archie is a travelled gentleman, wiser, better, more clever than I am. And he has a castle many hundred years old;

and he has money at his bankers; and he has fine woods and mountains on his beautiful estate. Heigho!"

"All that makes no matter," said Hester.

"You are the pearl of comforters," said Pierce; "but these things make all the matter in the world. I am ashamed to confess that I have thought of them myself," he said, hesitating, and looking a little sheepish. "I knew that Janet was rich, and that I wanted money. But I would give all the money to you, little Hester, or to any one else, if she would marry me to-morrow;—and we could do the housekeeping on air," he added, ruefully, as if remembering how little hope there was of his ever being able to put his genuine feelings to the proof.

Now, soon after this arrived the very moment when Fate took up that puzzle of Lady Humphrey's, shook it into perfect shape, and dropped it in her lap.

I never could clearly understand how it was

suffered to happen that Hester got separated from her party that night. The story runs thus, as far as it goes. Hester was thirsty, from the heat of the place, and the intentness of her listening. Pierce, after gleaning up every atom of sympathy and advice which she could ransack for him out of her heart and brain, responded to her complaint by rushing off gratefully to seek some lemonade for her refreshment. He placed her in the corner of a small dimly lighted room where only a few people were wandering in and out. He ought to have taken her to his mother, no doubt; but then —where was his mother at the time? Besides, he was too careless, and Hester too ignorant, to think of the danger of separation in the crowd. He bade her not move till he should return.

And I am willing to believe that he intended to return with all speed, for Pierce was in the main a true-hearted lad, and he loved little Hester, after a fashion. But the history of his adventures in the mean time is obscure. Did he get into a

quarrel with the confectioner? Did he also feel thirsty, after his talking, and drink just one glass of wine too many for his memory, so that he could not find the room to which he was bound to return? Or did he stray into a place where they were gaming, and linger a moment, only to see how the play was going; perhaps to get mixed up in it himself? Any or all of these escapades were possible to the young man at this time of his life. But that he was humble and contrite for his mistake next day is all that we are permitted to understand.

In the mean time, the rest of the cards having been dealt about the rooms, Lady Humphrey and Mr. Campion followed their own will from place to place, keeping watch over that before-mentioned sober-looking figure. That this person was unconscious of observation Lady Humphrey had the best means of knowing. Had he once recognised her he would have approached her immediately, and greeted her with outstretched hand.

But his thoughts did not seem busy with this company. He was a grave-looking man, about thirty-five years old, tall, slender for his height, but well-built, and stately. One might say, without much extravagance, that there was a sort of majesty in the motions of his figure, as he carried the long gown about his shoulders and limbs. His hair was a very dark red, as if the ruddy tresses of some sanguine ancestor were struggling to shine out through the duskier locks which nature had intended him to wear. His features were of the eagle cast, yet I warrant you there was nothing hard nor sharp in the countenance of Sir Archie Munro. Keen it might be, and bold and firm, for there was mental strength and nerve in every latent expression of his face; but the brave blue eyes knew well how to break into a smile, and the lips to relax into softness.

Sir Archie, watching for some one with anxiety, waited and was disappointed, waited still and was

still disappointed. Lady Humphrey and Mr. Campion followed, and lingered, and wondered, and grew impatient. Was the man really more conscious of their presence and their motives than he would seem? Was he playing with them, tricking them; would he presently laugh at the useless cunning with which they had laid this little plan, the feeble effort they had put forth in it, and the hidden irritation with which its failure must harass them? Even Mr. Campion could not deny that this was possible in a treacherous world. But even while Mr. Campion's face was lengthening, a little black imp came tumbling up the room.

This young monster had flames shooting out of the top of his head, as well as other hellish adornments, and looked, for the credit of those who had so blackened and bedaubed him, a very worthy little scion of the house of Satan. The crowd parted with much laughter as he came whirling along wildly, spinning round and round on his

hands and his toes, like a young acrobat. He had the awkwardness, or the ill-luck, or the cleverness, to trip over Sir Archie's feet and fall. That gentleman immediately bent down, with the impulse of a humane man, alarmed lest the boy might be hurt. The little devil had seemingly a human perception of pain, was not proof against a bruise or a scrape, for he caught the good gentleman's arm, and held on by his hand while he groaned, and twisted, and whimpered, and rubbed his legs. And while this absurd scene was going on Sir Archie's palm became suddenly acquainted with a very slim morsel of folded paper, which though it might not have expected to receive, yet his fingers did not fail to close upon with care. And no sooner was that strong hand locked upon its secret than the legs of our little devil became fit for further exercise; and with a sudden unearthly shriek, and a spring, he was whirling to the other end of the room. Lady Humphrey's eyes might be sharp, and Mr. Campion's might

roll knowingly, but they should never see the writing on that slip of folded paper. They did not resist the natural impulse to turn with the crowd, and look after the tumbling imp; and when their gaze was released from the momentary obligation of following a popular absurdity, and returned to its more serious occupation, Sir Archie Munro had passed out of their ken.

He had taken his way to a quiet room, where he could read his letter unobserved. And here are all its contents:

"I find that we are watched," said the note, "and so I fail to keep my appointment. Come to me at half-past four. I have made arrangements which will prevent any risk to you. For me it is all risk; but I sail for France to-morrow. I cannot leave without trying my personal influence, without praying you with my voice, in the name of God, to change your mind, and give us your help in the great coming struggle of our

country. Eat this when you have read, if there be not a light at hand.

"Yours, full of hope,

"THEOBALD WOLFE TONE."

There was a lamp on a stand close by, and Sir Archie held the paper to the flame. The flash which consumed it made Hester look up, for this was the room in which Hester had been left sitting. It was deserted now by all but herself. One and another came and looked into it now and again, and passed on. Hester glanced up, and saw the stern face and the burning letter. Sir Archie, even before holding the paper to the light, had observed the picture in the corner, and marked it. The shower of golden hair and the quaint little red cloak had first caught his notice as a matter of colour; a moment later it was the pale troubled face, and the downward abstracted gaze, the patient shadow of fatigue or sorrow round the eyes, the helpless clinging together of

the hands, that had left the impress of a poem upon his mind. He had considered its depth and truth a little, even from under the pressure of his own weighty thoughts; been conscious of a latent question under the surface of his own anxiety of the hour—was this sorrow and piteous loneliness of spirit that he had looked upon, or only natural physical fatigue, and the involuntary patience of a minute's enforced waiting?

And where had Hester's thoughts been in the mean time, all the long hour during which she had sat there, with that grief-struck face? What simple, half-fledged dove of feeling, that had been wickedly lured to try its unformed wings, was she anxiously bringing back again to the safety of its nest? What grains of bitter husk was she winnowing in her heart, that sweet wholesome material for the daily bread of life might be found lying at the bottom, for her storing when the folly of the chaff should have blown by? There

are little storms for the very young, which, if their purifying tyranny be but tolerated with meekness, will nip all the buds of selfishness in the garden of the soul. And Hester was getting strengthened for the burthen of her future.

CHAPTER VIII.

SOME FURTHER ACCOUNT.

Sir Archie Munro had hardly passed out of the room where Hester sat waiting, when a person of venerable appearance, in the garb of a pilgrim, long grey beard, brown woollen gown, approached her, leaning on his staff, and making a most profound salutation.

"Daughter," said he, in a quavering voice, "thy party awaits thee with impatience upon the last step of the staircase. They have commissioned me to be thy escort to bring thee to them in safety. Place thy fair hand upon my arm, and

these grey hairs shall be thy protection through the giddy crowd !"

Now it will doubtless appear that Hester was to the last degree simple and foolish to believe for a moment in such a style of address as the above; and it must be allowed that in the beginning of her days she was simple in the extreme from many points of view. But then if it had not been in her nature to put faith overmuch in the well-meaning of others, this history could never have been written. And if we would follow her adventures we must take her as we find her, with all her lack of smartness, her credulity, her untimely attacks of dreaminess, her enthusiasm. If we endure her helpless short-comings with patience we shall find pretty quickly how Time soon took her roughly into training; how Experience stepped in, and with a few puffs blew all the golden dust out of her hazy brains, leaving them strong enough and clear enough to do strong and

skilful work in the hour which came to put them to the test.

In the mean time, we may say for her that she was at this moment, on this night, in this fantastic unaccustomed scene, utterly weary in body, terrified with loneliness, and almost stupefied by the depression of a new trouble; a weariness that a night's rest would cure; a forlornness which the presence of a friend could put to flight; a trouble that was the mere wraith of a trouble, made up of the mists of an unwholesome atmosphere, too low for her moral breathing, which must be scattered in sparks of colour by the first ray of the sunrise above those mountain tops towards which her unconscious feet were alreadys tumbling. Yet the weariness and the loneliness and the trouble were all present in this hour to afflict her; and how was she to know that they were things feebler than herself, with only a small hour allotted to them wherein to work their will upon her? She was

conscious only, at the moment, that they were with her, forcing her to admit that the gay path of variety down which she had been hurrying of late had ended all abruptly in a hopeless cul-de-sac. She could not see yet the little friendly postern, with its arch of benediction hidden under the shadow of the frowning wall, the latch already lifted, the sun shining warmly through the chinks.

It is true, then, that she was dull enough to accept the idea that Lady Humphrey was waiting impatiently for her somewhere on a landing; that perhaps Mr. Pierce might be ill; and the fact that a somewhat strange-tongued messenger, picked out of a long past century, had been sent to fetch her, could not reasonably startle in a place where for the last few hours all ages had met together, all tongues had spoken in chorus, all costumes had been worn, and all manners had been practised. The longing for escape and the habit of obedience were both strong; and Hester

rose with relief on the instant, and put her hand on her conductor's arm.

Once fairly launched in the great crowd, however, with her strange escort, she was not long left in ignorance of her mistake. It was plain that a group of mischievous young wags had played a trick upon her. They had observed her unprotected loneliness, and agreed to make a pastime of her difficulty. He who had so successfully imposed upon Hester had been chosen for the office because of the venerable appearance which his disguise presented. When he emerged from the inner room where he had played his part, with his prize upon his arm, his companions gathered round him, laughing and prating with a mischievous delight.

"Oh, pray, sir!" cried Hester, turning in dismay to her supposed protector, "take me back to the room where you found me. I do not know these gentlemen;—I cannot be the person you came to seek!"

Her companion replied on the instant by pulling off his long grey beard, his wig of snowy hair, his mask, and exhibiting the laughing roguish face and curly head of a youth not more than eighteen years old.

"Not so fast, pretty Mistress Simplicity!" he said, gaily. "Nay, you will never cut old friends in such a heartless manner. And when did you come up to the town, fair sweetheart? And how are all the charming little cousins in the country —Miss Buttercup and Miss Daisy, and the rest? And how does our champagne taste, after your curds and cream?"

So he rattled on, evidently the wit of the party, whilst his companions pressed close upon his steps, laughing and applauding in ecstasy at the fun. They were only a set of wild thoughtless boys, who had drunk much more wine than they were accustomed to, who ought to have been at home learning their Greek for the tutor, and who probably never should have entered such a place had

their mothers been consulted. Perhaps had one of them taken time for a thought, and glanced at the same moment at Hester's frightened face, remembering that he had a sister at home, the merry-making might have ended much sooner than it did. But in the midst of the pleasant glow and hum of such a crowd, the mystery of disguise and general abandonment to shallow wit and mirth, as well as with the fumes of wine and the madness of unusual excitement in their brains, where was the shadow of a chance that such wild young scapegraces as these should pause to think?

Some friend must come and rescue Hester. And where was there a friend to be found? She looked right and left, but nowhere was any person of her party to be discerned. Numbers of people came crowding to the staircase, to the doors, for it was wearing pretty far into the morning. And Hester's tormentors bent their steps towards the staircase. What crazy plan, if any, was in their heads, where they meant to take her, or where

to leave her, Hester was destined never to learn. The little group, six flushed chattering boys, and one pale speechless girl, were swept into a corner of a landing by a sudden pressure from the crowd, and remained there, wedged into their places, unable even to move till some loosening of the human mass might be felt,

Hester, during these minutes, gazed anxiously up the staircase. The great lamps, swinging in mid air, had grown useless, their flame had waxed dim, for the pale green light of dawn was coming streaming through a vast upper window, with its pathetic suggestions about anxious mothers and dying children, sickening the gaudy colours on the walls, making the painted beauties hurry on their masks, and the showy gallants of the evening look haggard and dishevelled and uncleanly. But by-and-by, in the midst of the feverish faces, there appeared one different from these, overtopping most of the crowd, a quiet brave face, cool brows, eyes unsuffused, a face going forth, not

ashamed to lift itself to look upon the sunrise, accustomed to breathe a breezy atmosphere suggestive of early rides when the first furrow is getting ploughed of a morning. Hester saw this good face coming down the staircase, and, for the first time, the idea sprang up in her mind, that she might appeal to a charitable stranger for protection.

Whether she could ever have summoned courage to do so is not known; does not matter. Sir Archie Munro's wide-awake eye caught the girl's frightened appealing look directed towards him, and responding to it interiorly, like a true gentleman, he quietly so guided his course through the crowd that the girl soon found him, as if by accident, at her side. Desperation was at her heart then, and struggling to her lips. She need not be dragged into the streets of London by these worse than crazy youths. Sir Archie did not miss seeing the half-lifted hand and eyelid, that only wanted a little boldness to make a claim on his protection.

He met the glance firmly, encouragingly, and a great promise of powerful help shone out of his steady blue eyes.

"You have lost your party?" he said. "These are not your friends? I thought not. Be good enough to put your hand on my arm, and have no uneasiness."

Then he turned to the scapegrace lads, who took different attitudes at his interference, some ready to pick a quarrel, some inclined for a more prudent retreat.

"Come, young sirs," he said, severely, "begone and get you home to your beds. Such youngsters cannot be trusted out of the nursery without mischief. As the friend of this lady I owe each of you a horsewhipping, but I will let you off on account of your tender years. When you have slept on this matter, I trust, for the sake of the men you may one day become, that you will have the grace to feel ashamed of your conduct."

No other form of treatment could have punished

the delinquents so keenly. Afraid of such terrible words being overheard, as addressed to them, they slunk away; one or two hanging their heads, the rest with a faint attempt at bluster and swagger.

After this was over and they had finally disappeared, Sir Archie and Hester passed half an hour on the staircase, watching in vain for a glimpse of any member of Lady Humphrey's party. At the end of that time Sir Archie became uneasy; looked at his watch, and grew more uneasy still. He had pressing business of his own on hand, important as life and death, yet how could he desert this trembling girl, whom he had volunteered to protect? At last he said:

"I fear it is useless our waiting here longer. Strange as it may appear, I think your friends must have left the place without you. If you will tell me your address, I will bring you home myself without further delay."

"Oh!" said Hester, with a new dismay; "but

it is such a distance—such a very long distance—all the way to Hampton Court Palace."

"Hampton Court Palace!" repeated Sir Archie. "Ah! that is far, that is too far, indeed."

The hands of his watch were wearing towards four, and at half-past that hour it was required of him to be present in a very different place from this, and engaged upon far other affairs than the relief of distressed damsels. Whilst considering what there was that could be done, he brought Hester down the lower stair, into the hall below, into the open air; and then, without further pause, he hailed a waiting vehicle, placed Hester within it, gave instructions to the driver, and took his place in the coach at her side.

As they drove along he explained himself. "When you reflect upon this adventure to-morrow," he said, "you will not blame me, I hope, for not consulting your wishes more than I have done. You must excuse me also if I have been brusque or stern. I am doing the best I can for

you. It would be impossible for me to drive with you to Hampton Court to-night, and I could not send you on so long a journey in a hired carriage alone. I have not a moment to lose for my own part, and I am going to leave you in the only place of safety I can think of. To-morrow I will call to see you, and we will contrive to send a message to your friends."

The carriage at this moment turned into an old-fashioned square, with a dusty-looking garden in the centre, and tufts of grass growing up here and there between the paving stones. It stopped before a tall, wide, aged-looking house, with a gateway and windows which suggested that the house might have once been a nobleman's dwelling, perhaps in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. A great lantern hung before the entrance, whose flame still burned feebly in the grey daylight. Sir Archie, who had been scribbling in his pocket-book on his knee, sprang out of the coach, and

pulled the heavy handle of a bell, which answered immediately with a great voice, that, in the utter silence of this place, they could hear making its sudden startling music among the passages and chambers within. Sir Archie then assisted Hester from the coach, led her to the still-closed door under the shadow of a great black arch, and placed a written leaf of paper, unfolded, in her hand.

"There may be yet some moments' delay about the opening of the door," he said, "and I have not one to spare. But you need not have a shadow of fear. You are safe to gain admittance here," he added, with a latent smile about his eyes and lips as he looked down at her standing with her passport in her hand, full of faith—"as safe to gain admittance, as if you were waiting at the gate of heaven itself."

And then Sir Archie returned to his coach, and gave a fresh instruction to the driver. A moment

longer he waited to hear the first bolt withdrawn behind the massive door, and to let his eye dwell with infinite approval on the slim white strip of a figure, the pale rim of a cheek, the little red hood half huddled over the loose golden hair. Truly Sir Archie had the eye of an artist, since, even in a moment like this, he could make pictures for himself out of a masquerading girl, a patch of dawn-streaked sky, and an old black archway with its lantern. A man who had seen all the wonderful sights of the world ought to have been less easily charmed with such simple materials. Yet long years later, it was found that this quaint bit of painting in the deserted old square had held its own in his memory, through light and through shade, against all the finer experiences of his educated eyes.

Meanwhile, Hester, standing on the grass-grown pavement, under the expiring lamp, and with the daylight brightening all round her,

read the words written on the slip of paper in her hand:

"Dear Mary. [So ran the pencil marks.] Take the bearer in, and be kind to her. She is a young lady who has been parted from her friends by accident, through no fault of hers. I know nothing of her father. She must, of course, communicate with her friends immediately. I will call to-morrow to see you, and we can talk about this, as well as many other matters.

"With kind love, your brother,

"ARCHIE MUNRO."

"Archie Munro!" cried Hester, aloud, in her amazement, and turned her head quickly over her shoulder to look after the retreating coach. It just passed out of sight, the sound of the wheels died away, and a large old rook, on a morning excursion far from his home in one of

the parks, alighted almost at her feet, and hopped round and round her. But at the same moment the last of the bolts was withdrawn inside the queer old dingy house, the faint flame of the lamp was suddenly quenched overhead, and the great black door shuddered, groaned, and swung back upon its hinges.

CHAPTER IX.

A HOUSE OF PEACE.

THE person who opened the door for Hester was a little plump pleasant-looking nun, comely and fresh, with a fair round face under her plaited wimple, most like a pink and white daisy. Her long black rosary clanked against the knee of this little portress from the struggles she had been making with the great chains and bolts of the heavy door. Doubtless in the days when this portal had been fashioned it had been the duty of at least two strong men to manage such ponderous bars upon the gate of their noble

master. But a soft-handed young maiden sufficed to deal with them to-day.

She did not look much older than Hester, and the two girls stood gazing before them some moments, each in the most thorough amazement at the unexpected apparition of the other. Hester had never seen any one in such a garb as this before, and the little nun, if she had ever met with costumes like this of Hester's during the term of her short acquaintanceship with the world, yet had certainly not looked to see a frightened Red Ridinghood on the threshold of her convent door of a morning.

But before there was time for a word to be spoken, the bright eyes of the little nun had travelled to Hester's weary lids, the look of surprise had passed away, and the paper which Hester carried being read, a very warm glow of sympathy kindled the countenance of the portress.

"This is for the mother," she said, briskly.

"The sisters are singing matins in the choir; but the mother will be with you at once. Come in."

So saying, she laid hold of Hester's hand like a child, and led her down the hall. This hall was long and wide and lofty, as the entrance to such a dwelling should be, but it was neither dark nor dingy, as one might have expected to find it. It had a flooring of warmly coloured tiles, with a mat here and there, on which waiting unaccustomed feet might take their stand, if it so happened they felt cold upon the stones. A landscape was painted on the lofty ceiling, a little faded and obscured by age, but with colours still rich enough and soft enough to suit the present character of the place. There was a very broad staircase in the background, balustrades and steps alike of dark-grained oak, over which the warm living jewels came dropping with the sunlight, whilst cherubs' heads, laid lovingly together, looked down out of a deeply-stained window on

the landing above. Most truly that old nobleman had known how to make beauty in his dwelling.

There was a sound of muffled music in the air, lulling and swelling as through closed doors, supplicating strains rising and sustaining their demand, then falling, sinking away softly, with great comfort, as in thanksgiving. The little nun bent her head, and moved her lips while she walked, as though it were her duty to join in the prayer as well as she might be able, being accidentally at a distance from her nook among the singers.

"In a place of pasture he hath set me," murmured the little nun, at a breath, like one hasty and hungry, swallowing a good thing. "The Lord ruleth me; and I shall want nothing. He hath set me in a place of pasture."

Then she threw open a door, and smiling, with the gladness of that whisper still lurking about her lips,

"Will you please to step in here," she said, "and wait, and I will go on the instant and give your message to our mother?"

The room into which Hester was thus shown had been the nobleman's dining-room. It had brown panelled walls, and a brown glittering floor. The two long windows set up high and narrow in the wall had heraldic devices carved over them. There was a large vase of roses and lilies, a full-length statue of Christ blessing little children, an alms-box, with its label, "For the sick and dying poor," a table covered with a plain red cloth, an inkstand, bearing writing materials, a few books. The windows were already open, and there was not a speck of dust about the place. It shone with cleanliness, it smiled with cheerfulness, it gave one good morning out of all its corners. It said, "See what a pleasant place has been prepared for you; sit down and rest." But Hester had no heart to respond to such a greeting. She stood there in this atmo-

sphere of freshness and order, feeling all out of place in her flimsy crushed draperies, her gaudy mantle and dishevelled hair. She turned her back upon the sunlight, and stood waiting with her eyes upon the floor.

By-and-by the handle moved, turned; there was a little rustling, as of fresh linen, a little rattling, as of heavy beads; the door opened, and the "mother" appeared.

Sir Archie's sister. One could see that at a glance; though, upon reflection, nothing could be in better contrast than the masculine boldness of the man's face with the feminine softness of the woman's. Here were sweet, tender, pitiful blue eyes, and a brow smooth and serene under its spotless linen band; no latent fire; no lines to show where frowns had been. The face was oval and softly moulded, and very winning in its exquisite freshness and purity. The mouth was mobile, and, though ever quick with a right word, was yet, in its changing expressions, most eloquent

of much that it left unspoken. The complexion was so dazzlingly fair, so daintily warmed with vermilion on the cheeks, no paint nor powder could mimic it; only early rising, tender labours, never ceasing and perpetual joy of spirit could have combined in producing it. The quaint black garment, the long floating veil, and narrow gown of serge, were right fit and becoming to the wearer. They laid hold of her grace and made their own of it, while she, thinking to disguise herself in their sombre setting, wrapped the unlovely folds around her, and shone out of them, as only the true gem can shine. The shadow that the black veil threw round her face made its purity almost awful, but made its bloom and simplicity the more entirely enchanting. Not the satins of a duchess, not the jewels of an empress, could have lent half such a fitting lustre to this womanly presence of the gentle Mother Augustine, of the daughters of St. Vincent, of the very old convent of St. Mark, in Blank-square. There were sick

men and women in her hospital up-stairs who could have talked to the world about her beauty.

A slight expression of wonder passed over the nun's face at the first glimpse of Hester's apparel. But one quick searching look in the shrinking eyes seemed to satisfy her. She drew the girl to a chair and sat down by her side.

"You have got astray, my poor child," she said, with sympathy. "You shall tell me all about it before you sleep, that I may write to your mother—to your friends."

"I have no mother, no friends," Hester broke out, with a sudden passion. "I am an orphan, and a dressmaker's apprentice. I do not want to trouble any one, and I will not go back to them. I should have got on very well if they had left me at my sewing."

The nun listened in surprise, with a troubled doubt springing up in her mind at the quick incoherency of this speech. Then she glanced at

Hester's face, which was held away, and saw that the eyes had darkened and swelled, and that two heavy tears were coming dropping down her cheeks. And she knew by the controlled lips that this was sanity in grief.

"You are in trouble, my dear," she said, softly.

"Ah, it is that music!" cried Hester, making a desperate little gesture with her hand. And surely so the music was rolling on within hearing, with its solemn appealing, and its sublime content; enough to make a sore heart break with envy.

"True; the music!" said the mother, comprehending. "Dear child, you must confide in me. What! not afraid, surely? How the old men in the wards, and the children in the schools, would laugh at that original idea! You would be sadly out of fashion to be afraid of Mother Augustine."

Such a speech was too much for Hester. It

broke all restraint. Her face dropped down upon her own hands, and she sobbed in an abandonment of loneliness and grief.

"There is nothing but rest for this," said the mother, standing before her, an arm round the bowed shoulders, a hand on the bent head. "A long sleep first, and then—confidence."

And so saying she led, almost carried, the girl to the door, across the hall, and away up that massive brown staircase, through the jewelled sunlight.

"You must not be afraid that I am going to put you into hospital," she said, smiling, as they went along, Hester walking composedly now, but hanging her tear-stained face, and clinging to the mother's hand. "We have a nice little cell for stray children like you. Sometimes we call it 'the little bower,' and sometimes 'the little harbour,' because we think it so pretty, and find it so useful."

So in the little harbour Hester was moored, and

left alone, the nun having possessed herself of the name and address of Lady Humphrey. The prettiness of the room was not in truth made out of the luxury of its appointments; but bright it was, as a brown shining floor, snow white walls, a white little bed, and a vine round the window could make it.

And there was a garden under the window of this little bower. It would seem that the very apple-trees of that so ancient nobleman, were still bearing their fruit between its walls. At least there are none but the ghosts of dead gardeners who could tell us to a certainty whether they were the same trees or not. Yet, however that might be, the sick old men and women in the hospital of St. Mark knew the taste of the ripe fruit in the cup of their cooling drink. Now a long gleaming row of white lilies lifted the dew in their chalices to the sunlight, making a line of dazzling fringe along the sombre ivy of the wall. Vagrant boughs of jessamine were swinging loose

upon the air, grasping at the breeze, as if the tough old bricks were not enough for them to cling to. Birds that had their nests in the trees, whose ancestors had had their nests in the same trees, were singing jubilates for the morning, perhaps meaning them for thanksgiving, that they, having been born city birds, had been so happy in their generation, never fearing what was to become of their posterity when the fair garden should be swept away with another cycle, when a weedy crop of houses would have struck root in the mellow earth, shooting their chimneys far higher than these branches had dared to soar.

This garden was all still, all holy. Neither the noise nor the wickedness of the city seemed to reach it, though both had been there, without a doubt, in the echo; in the memory and suggestion of a thing past, and left away in the distance; making the silence more delicious, making the holiness more solemn. Yet there were other things stirring in it at this hour,

besides the bees. A few tranquil sickly faces were moving between the ranks of the flower beds, the rows of precious herbs, the nests of fragrant fruit, smiling here, and sighing there; mayhap wondering wistfully at the bounty of the good God, who had so brought them to life again out of the throes of anguish, and the travails of death, to thus bask in a sunny atmosphere of peace and bloom; to rest and be strengthened, and be led hither and thither; to be dealt with, in a sweet providence, by the unwonted hands of love. For these were the mother's convalescent patients from the hospital, and they were taking their morning airing while the sun was warm and new.

These things Hester saw from between the leaves of her vine; and these, and the ideas they brought with them, she gathered under the pillow of the little white bed, and so slept upon them; the plaining and exulting of that music still following her slumbers, and taking

the guidance of her dreams. And she wakened refreshed, though with a bruise somewhere in her heart that smarted at the touch of a recollection. And the mid-day sun was then hot upon the window.

Her limp white dress had been removed, and in its place she had a plain black robe, very neat and slim, with a broad leather belt to gird its folds round her waist. And while this was being assumed she considered, would it not be well if she could find a home in this place? She could sew, teach, tend upon the sick. She would see about it.

Two people were walking round the garden now, talking, stopping, walking slowly, very earnest. They were Sir Archie Munro and his sister, the Mother Augustine.

"Good God, drop a blessing on those two moving heads!" cried Hester, suddenly awaking to an enthusiasm of gratitude. "I will hold by their hands, and they shall not send me back to

Hampton Court. They will help me to be independent, and I shall not be shaken off any more. I shall not be loved and forgotten, cherished and deserted. Oh, Lady Humphrey! Oh, Mr. Pierce!"

The figures in the garden turned at the moment and came back again down the path, as if responding unconsciously to her cry; the features growing distinct each moment; two faces breathing and moving through the warm air together; two heads laid together for her good, had she but known it; two pairs of eyes full of promise for her, as she was vaguely aware, though she felt herself too strange in her new place in their lives to even dare to look such promise in the face. And these two people were—the rival of Pierce Humphrey and the sister of the rival. And Hester was in their hands, and had found the hands strong and kind.

Here then was the man held in aversion, yet to be honoured and admired, of Pierce Hum-

phrey's love-story, the other hero of the romance, the second lover of Janet Golden. And Hester fell to wondering, aside from her own case, about this rare, remarkable, and most heartless Janet Golden. For rare and remarkable Hester had settled in her own mind that she must be; and any woman must be heartless who could endure to have two lovers. There was a page of pure romance now laid open to Hester's eyes. This grave stately person in the garden, was it possible he could have robbed the jovial Pierce of anything so trifling as a fickle lady's heart? As well might one tax royalty with picking pockets. Thus Hester was inclined to be enthusiastic about her new friends, as well as a little bitter against her old ones. And she placed the two men side by side in her thought, and judged them, unconsciously, with the simplicity and fairness of pure justice. The one who should have protected, had abandoned her to loneliness and danger in a crowd. The other, upon whom she had no claim, had

rescued her at inconvenience to himself: had brought her and set her here, where she was in a goodly place of safety. Thus Hester judged, as most people judge, according to her own lights and experience. She did not say that Pierce was but a baby, while Sir Archie was a man. She did not say that Pierce, her old companion and playfellow, was a person to be comforted, laughed at, piped to, and danced with, never to be wept against, or appealed to; while that Sir Archie might be leaned upon as a staff that would neither bend nor break. Yet something of such thoughts must have been present to her mind, though she did not make the effort, perhaps would have not had the will to give them shape.

And, despite the so sympathising assurance that she had given Mr. Pierce the night before, Hester could not now choose but have a doubt upon her mind as to the faith of Janet Golden in the fealty of her lover. Fate, perhaps, would

not be dealing unkindly with that young lady if so be that it should force her to draw her hand from the loose clasp of Pierce Humphrey, and give her life with it into the keeping of this Sir Archie Munro.

CHAPTER X.

A COLLOQUY.

"I AM uneasy about you, Archie," the mother was saying, as those two were walking up and down the garden path. "My mother writes me that she fears you are entangled, even against your will, in these schemes of rebellion that are on foot."

Sir Archie's face grew clouded. "That was indiscreet of my mother," he said. "If others suspect me, as I have been led to think they do—if my letters should be opened——"

"But it is not true—it is not true?" appealed

the mother, with her blue eyes distended, and anguish on her lips.

"Dear Mary," said Sir Archie, tenderly, taking her hands, and holding them between his own. "It is not true, not exactly true, at least, though certain it is that I am in difficulty and trouble about these matters, as every Irishman, with a head to think or a heart to feel, must be. Now I will tell you all about it, if you will be patient, that is, and strong. Why, Mary, to think of a courageous woman like you, who can dress a bad wound, who can go with a dying sinner to the very brink of eternity, who never quailed at fever, who is not afraid of the very plague itself!" he said, smiling; "to think of you turning nervous on my hands, and fading your cheeks at a moment's notice—all for a great brawny mountaineer like me—a strong fellow, who never felt a pain nor ache."

"This is not a case of pain nor ache," said the mother, sadly. "If it were I might help you.

But if this be treason, rebellion, why you would melt away like snow from among our hands. We could do nothing for you."

And the mother's voice broke, and she trembled with great fear.

"Mary, Mary, Mary," said Sir Archie, lifting her face, and looking in it with smiling rebuke, "what would all your large family in yonder think of you if they saw you breaking down like this? It is enough to tempt a fellow like me to turn the tables and quote texts to you. Indeed, my darling, this distress is without cause. There, I knew you would be reasonable; and now you shall hear the whole story."

The mother recovered herself quickly, drew her veil around her face, and bowed her head to endure the listening to what she dreaded to hear. And the two walked on together as before.

"There is not much to say after all," said Sir Archie. "I need not tell you that my own little

corner of the world has always been peaceful and happy; but neither need I tell you that I have mourned over the misery of the country at large. My heart has bled for it; bleeds for it. One would need to have lead in one's veins, instead of blood, to endure to see the things that are done in the name of justice in the open face of day."

"But you cannot cure them," broke in the Mother Augustine. "It is impossible that you can cure them."

"Impossible, I believe, by the attempt that will be made," said Sir Archie, "and, therefore, so help me God, I will guard my little flock from the destruction that must follow such an attempt. I will not lead them out to death, nor invite desolation to their thresholds, well knowing that not the shadow of an advantage will be reaped by their children nor their children's children from the horrible sufferings they must be made to endure. Were they already in torture, like the unfortunates of many other parts of the country, and did they

call upon me to lead them in battle, I would do it were it only a forlorn hope, and I were to fall among their feet at the first shot from an English gun. But we have always lived apart from the rest of the world; our mountains have shut us in, and I pray God that they may shut out from us the horrors that are impending. I tell you, Mary, I never ride up the glen of an evening and see the wee toddling babies come peeping to the door to see me go by without swearing to myself that I will never make a sign that will be the cause of dabbling their helpless feet in the bloodshed of their kin. Let the sun rise and go down upon our peace so long as it pleases Heaven to leave the peace upon our thresholds. I have been placed over a few, and for the welfare of that few I am accountable. As for the many, God pity them! They will not succeed. Their leaders have been surprised, are in prison; they who could arrange and command, who carried the longest heads, if not the stoutest hearts. The informers are abroad,

and the rulers of the land are urging on a rebellion that they may crush it with the greater ease. I will guard my happy glens from the wreck. But what folly to talk in this way!" he added, lightly, catching a glimpse of the mother's white averted cheek, "it will never come to that, I trust. The government will relent, will grow wise in time, and treat the country more kindly than it has done. Statesmen will see at last, though late, the mistakes of many ages. They will try redress of grievances instead of pitch caps and hanging. Come, cheer up, Mary, and let us talk of something pleasant."

But the mother was not ready to leave the subject. "Who is it that suspects you?" she asked. "If you declare yourself for peace, who can say a word against you?"

"No one but an enemy," said Sir Archie. "I did not know I had an enemy, but it seems I have one in ambush somewhere. No matter; let them do their worst. The only thing they can

say is that at the first opening of the society I belonged to the United Irishmen. Like all other young men who had a throe of feeling or a spark of hope in their hearts, I rushed into it, eagerly insisting that we must wring attention from the King to the desperation of the country. That chimera faded," said Sir Archie, bitterly; "and since things have grown wilder and more hopeless, I have withdrawn from the schemes of the society, impelled by the motives I have described."

"It is well, it is well," murmured the mother, tremulously. "But this enemy, dear Archie? Who is there who should be at enmity with you?"

"That I cannot tell," said Sir Archie; "but there are few men so fortunate as not to have an enemy somewhere. I was not aware that any one was busy with my concerns until late last night, or rather early this morning. I had then an interview with Wolfe Tone, who has put me on my guard."

The Mother Augustine groaned. "Wolfe Tone," she repeated. "Oh, Archie!"

"Well, Mary? Is he a terrible 'old bogie' to your fears?"

"I know what he is well," said the mother, energetically. "He is a brave, daring enthusiast, but he will die in his cause. And you shall not die with him — no, Archie, no, Archie!"

"I am not going to die with any one, little sister, till my appointed day has been lived till the last minute," said Sir Archie, tenderly. "I agreed to meet Tone for the purpose of explaining to him clearly the conduct which I intend to pursue, and the motives which have determined me to persist in that conduct, in spite of many strong feelings of my own, and unbounded sympathy with the misery which is the main-spring of the attempt that may be made. I have tried to assure him that if such attempt be made it will be done clumsily, and must end in failure. I

have implored him to use his influence in holding back the catastrophe, as the time is not ripe, as the leaders are in prison. He says that were impossible. The madness of the people is getting stimulated every day. They will have a leader of some kind; or, if necessary, they will act without a leader. We parted as we met, he deploring that I should insist on remaining neutral, I more and more resolved to follow the light of my own judgment and experience. I believe, however, that I have succeeded in convincing him, at least, that I am in no respect actuated by cowardice or want of patriotism in my decision."

"Cowardice!" said the mother, amazed, and blushing at the word. "Who could venture to accuse you of such a vice?"

"Yet it may be that I have left myself open to the charge," said Sir Archie, "from those whose disappointment or anger may blind them for the moment, so that they cannot look my position in the face. It is known that I feel strongly for the

affliction of my country, and those who know it may not all be aware that I believe myself more far-seeing than themselves, that perhaps I have more means, more leisure for looking onward than they have, that I find myself responsible for the well-being of my little clan, who look to me out of their peaceful doors for counsel and guidance. Yet," continued Sir Archie, thoughtfully, "did they but consider the matter thoroughly they would see that, in the event of a struggle, by refusing to side with one or other party, I should leave myself at the mercy of the fury of both, and deprive myself of all hope of the protection of either—a position which it requires some little nerve to face. But come, Mary," he added, "we have had enough of this. You must ask for your old friends, or there will be woful disappointment when I go home. The old women will be bobbing curtseys along the roads, and will think something is sadly amiss indeed if his honour

cannot give them a message from 'Miss Mary, God love her.' "

The Mother Augustine, thus admonished, made an effort to dismiss her fears, and became, in outward appearance at least, her tranquil self again.

"There is much home news that I want to hear," she said, turning her voice to its ordinary tone of steady sweet contentment with all things. "What is this that my mother writes me about Janet Golden, dear Archie? Are we likely to have a wedding soon, if all go well among our mountains?"

Sir Archie started slightly at this question, as if it were one he had neither wished for nor expected. A shade of pained perplexity was on his face as he made answer.

"My mother can tell you more of this affair than I can," he said. "I really can hardly explain how it has grown up. If you ask me do I

wish to marry Janet Golden, I say frankly, I do not. I have no wish to marry any woman at present; neither is Janet the kind of woman I should select. She is too fond of gay life in the cities to love a happy country home. She has no interest in my interests, no concern with my concerns. She is—let me see—well, I believe I am not good at drawing nice definitions; but she is not my ideal of a wife, sister Mary. You will wonder, then, how I have been weak enough to become so entangled, well knowing that I am not versed in the art of love-making for pastime. But of course you have heard it all before now; that silly old story of an engagement made by two mothers when Janet was a baby and I a mere boy. I own I have been hearing of it and laughing at it for years, and not troubling myself to realise my position or to interfere and declare that I had no intention of acting up to such a ridiculous arrangement. And now suddenly of late, when I had forgotten the whole affair, the young

lady is introduced under my roof, and I am presented to her by my mother as her fiancé. And she seems quite content: takes it as a matter of course. How else should she take it, says my mother, when she has looked forward to the prospect all her life? And I have never summoned courage to undeceive her as yet. And so the matter stands, while every day assures me she is not the woman I could love. I cannot feel any wish for her perpetual presence at my fireside, any impulse to share with her my most intimate feelings; therefore, I find it hard to wed my wishes to her whims, as I find her constantly expecting me to do."

"I am sorry to hear this," said the Mother Augustine. "I had hoped it might all have been so different. I remember Janet a merry arch little girl, and I had hoped that she might be very fit to bring new life into the old home."

"Do not let me underrate pretty Janet," said Sir Archie. "She has indeed all those points

which are said to make up a charming woman, to wit, bright eyes, saucy words, a very tiny satin slipper, and a more than ordinary share of caprice. But I am afraid there are some things which are sadly thrown away upon me, Mary, some super-excellent enchantments which the modern poets rave about. Now, if her soul were but as deep as her eyes, her sympathies as keen as her wits—I am afraid I am a very old-fashioned fellow in my tastes. But then you see, if a man lives in an old-fashioned castle, among old-fashioned hills, over-seeing the lives of old-fashioned people, it seems naturally to follow that he should allow himself to be moulded by his circumstances, or else always live at war with his fate. And so I suppose he may be excused for feeling rather doubtful about the propriety of taking a new-fashioned wife, at the risk of poisoning her with his uncongenial atmosphere."

"My mother should have had an eye to the antique in her search," said the nun, smiling; "I

should not wonder if you had set your heart on Cousin Madge on the sly."

Sir Archie laughed. "Poor Madge!" he said. "How indignant and shocked she would be to hear you! But I did not make any mention of the antique. Old-fashioned is a word which is applied oftenest to children."

"Yes; and my mother's Janet is neither simple enough nor wise enough to suit you. It is a pity —a pity; and her wealth would have been so useful in your hands, dear Archie."

"What is the world coming to when even you are turning mercenary," said Sir Archie, smiling.

"I mean useful to the world," said the mother, gravely. "If I did not know you fitted for such a stewardship, I should pray that you might remain untempted by the trial of over plentiful possession. But you are not a boy now, Archie, and the years of your early youth have proved you. I would make you guardian of the poor

over untold gold. The blessing that is settled on your glens must extend beyond their limits, so far as wealth can carry your power. If our poor Janet marry some worldly man of fashion, for instance, will not her many thousands be swallowed up in the whirlpool of folly, of selfish luxury and neglect of her fellow-creatures? If you have their management they will be sown deep in the very heart of nature, to come up again in peace and security, in love and enlightenment, for the future generations of at least one happy corner of the earth."

"May be so, Mary, may be so," said Sir Archie. "But you do not know how I might change my ways if it happened that I turned out a millionnaire. I could indeed enjoy the freedom of action which enormous wealth can give. But in the mean time I have always had enough for myself and my people."

"And Janet?" asked the mother, after some uneasy reflection. "What attitude does she take

in these arrangements? It seems to me, Archie, judging from the tone of this confidence, that you must play the part of lover in a lukewarm manner. And it strikes me, as I remember the little Janet of old times, that she was of rather an exacting disposition."

"I can vouch for her that she has not lost that trait in her character," said Sir Archie, smiling. "But as I have said before, my mother assures me that she is satisfied. And that being so, she points out to me that I cannot draw back from this engagement with honour."

"Then you mean me to understand that you and Janet have never spoken on the subject?"

"I do," said Sir Archie. "She seems to avoid it, and so do I. Indeed, I hardly know what we could say if we tried."

"That may change, if you are wise and kind, Archie; but it would be terrible for you to marry while things are thus."

"I do not believe we shall ever marry," said

Sir Archie. "In the mean time I leave the chances of my release in the hands of time and a capricious lady, and have many other matters to think of."

"Yes," said the mother, thoughtfully. "And I had almost forgotten," she added, after a pause, "that I too have another matter to think of and speak of. That poor child whom you sent here this morning."

"Well," said Sir Archie, with interest, "what of her?"

"I have written to her friends," said the mother. "Though, indeed, I question if they be much her friends either, so reluctant does she seem to return to them. And, Archie, is it not strange——?"

"Well, Mary, what is strange?"

"How oddly people turn up again in the world. Do you remember the name of Judith Blake, the heroine of so many of our old nurse's

strange stories? Judith Blake, who became afterwards Lady Humphrey?"

"I remember."

"This girl in some way belongs to a Lady Humphrey, whom I believe to be that identical Judith Blake. It is to her I have written—to Hampton Court, where she lives. And this girl does not love her, no more than did the people of Glenluce, long ago."

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE HOSPITAL.

"I KNOW Lady Humphrey," said Sir Archie, "I have met her and her son in London. The son is a good-natured young fellow enough. He informed me on one occasion that our mothers had been friends. From the way in which her name was received at home when I mentioned it—never connecting it in my mind with any person of whom I had heard—I should have thought that not likely to be true. The recollection of the woman is not pleasant to my mother."

"All bitter feeling has had time to be for-

gotten," said the Mother Augustine. "Judith Blake was poor and proud, handsome and a dependant, and there are many excuses to be made for such people. Stories will be exaggerated, and reputations whispered away upon very little. We will hope she is not a bad woman, but it is plain she has not the gift of winning affection. And that may be truly called a misfortune in itself."

"And this girl is dependant upon her, you say?" asked Sir Archie.

"From the few words I have gathered from her I should think so," said the mother; "that she is bound to her in some way and would be glad to escape. How much is the girl's own fault, I do not know, but that the lady has been foolish with her, and neglectful of her, we can guess from the circumstances which have led to her coming here."

"If all we have heard be true, or even half of it," said Sir Archie, "the girl is to be pitied. And she looks like a young creature who would

need delicate handling. You must see to it, Mary. Take my word for it, she is worthy of your notice. I never met an eye more pure and simple, and there is much patience as well as energy in the habit of the features."

"It is true," said the mother; "though I did not think you could have observed so much in your haste."

"I do not often see a face like that," said Sir Archie: "and when I do it pains me to see such a face in trouble. I think you may safely take yonder little maid under your wing, sister Mary. The whole character of her bearing is true. She endures fear without losing self-possession, and she takes a favour in good faith and with all simplicity."

"It is pleasant to hear you say so," said the mother, "for I have thought much the same myself. "I will take care not to lose sight of our protégée. And we will make ourselves her guardians: as far as Providence permits us."

In the mean time Hester lingered amongst her vines up so high, till the brother and sister passed out of her sight, from the paths in the garden down below. The next thing of interest she saw was a lay sister in her white veil and apron, with a basket of new-laid eggs, coming down the long green alleys from some unseen home of hens. It did not occur to Hester's mind that this vision had any significance with regard to her own coming breakfast. But it was dinner-time with the inmates of St. Mark's.

The Mother Augustine had a little corner of her own in her convent, a place where she transacted her business, where she had a right to sit in private when she liked; which the novices kept dressed with fresh flowers for her sake; which was called among the sisters the mother's room. It had no adornments but those flowers, and a statuette of St. Vincent, the guardian of poor children. One sole strip of carpet relieved the barrenness of the shining floor. There was no

lack of papers and books, of sunshine when it was to be had, and there was generally a heap of pears somewhere on a dish of leaves; encouragement at hand for timid little ones, to whom the mother might find it necessary to talk, on occasion.

Hester was not, certainly, a child; yet the sweet fruits found their way to her plate. And the Mother Augustine herself poured the coffee into her cup, and dealt to her cream and butter, plums and apricots, with as much lavish nicety as if the furnishing and attendance upon delicate repasts were the most important concern of her life.

When the meal was over the Mother Augustine drew some sewing from a basket and fell to working in her sunny window. One might guess from appearances that she was making flannel nightcaps to cover rheumatic jaws. A stool was found for Hester, who sat quietly at her knee. What was now to be said? The mother desired

a confidence. Every stitch that she put in her flannel was aware of that. But Hester was not accustomed to being questioned about her circumstances, to making descriptions of her feelings. The mother had written to her friends at Hampton Court. Well, that had been said before. Still, the saying it again was better than silence; and, besides, such a common-place repetition might lead to other and more original remarks.

"It was kind to take the trouble," said Hester, "and I know that it was necessary to be done. But I will not go back to Hampton Court again. Help me, dear madam, that I may be able to keep away!"

"Have you other friends, my child?" said the mother.

"No other friends," admitted Hester; "but I am better without any."

"That is far too sad a speech," said the mother, "too sad, and not likely to be true." And she

put her hand on the girl's shoulder, and looked searchingly and pityingly in her eyes.

"Don't!" said Hester, quickly, fairly turning her head away. "That is like your music. I cannot bear it. I do not know it, and it hurts me." The mother withdrew her gaze, and dropped her hand to her side with a sigh.

"I must ask you to tell me something of your story," she said, "of your relations with these people, before I can make the venture to give you counsel."

So it all came forth at last, with reservations and hesitations it is true, for had not Lady Humphrey, after all mishaps, been a bountiful protector? And Hester was abashed at her own ingratitude, even as she felt herself begin to speak. Still the story of her childhood, her youth, her dressmaking experiences, and later young ladyhood, gathered shape out of the confusion of the telling, and made itself known somehow to the ear, or at least the mind, of the listener. Hester

had hardly herself known before how well she had weighed each novelty, each event, each excitement of her life; been conscious of its unwholesomeness, been weary of its unlastingness, been indignant at, and oppressed by, the injustice that had forced it on her. The restless dissatisfaction had all been lying aching at the bottom of her heart. She had been patient with it, angry with it; had humoured it, and suffered from it; but she had never given it a voice before. The nun was amazed hearing her, that, being young, she had already so learned to think and speak. Hester was amazed, hearing herself, that, being old, as she felt herself, she had never so spoken her thoughts before.

"I am tired," she said, "of changes and shocks. I want to know how to think of myself. Every other person in the world has some place, but I am one thing to-day, and another to-morrow. If I am not to be a lady, I would rather be left alone to get accustomed to my level among

tradespeople. And if I cannot be loved long, as I know I have no right, being so low, then neither have those people who are higher the right to insist upon loving me for a little while. Perhaps the peace of my life is as valuable to me as their whim of an hour is to them."

So the nun tried no further endearments. The girl in her present humour was not ready to put her trust in them; in her present excitement was, perhaps, not equal to the labour of fighting them off, according to the habit that had been trained in her. And the mother said, quietly, by-and-by: "We will return to all this another time. Now, if you please, you can come and see my hospital."

And the mother had a meaning in this abrupt diversion. Who, in sound health and the strength of youth, passing down those long rows of quiet beds, looking on the wasted forms, the shrivelled hands lying here and there listless on the coverlet, the marks of pain upon the weary faces, and

detecting only now and then a half-checked groan or sigh, could help feeling confounded at the thought of his own impatience, his fretfulness about the shortcomings of his fate? He must forget his own sorrow; he must hang his head and feel ashamed "to sit down on his little handful of thorns."

Just once did the mother lead Hester round the wards where the patients lay in mortal pain, that her young restlessness might be abashed by the presence of real agony. It was also a sort of test to which she thought of putting this girl in whom she had found a new interest. If Hester shrank and retreated in a weak fear, she should know how to deal with her in pity. If the sympathy at her heart, and the awe and appreciation suddenly widening her mind, kept her foot unflinchingly on the sad track of pain to the end, then she should know how to deal with her in honour and in joy.

The mother passed softly up and down the little alleys between the beds, now wiping a poor moist

face, now bathing a burning head, now holding the grateful cup between thirsty lips. And a broken word followed her here and there; sometimes it was "God——" and there was breath for no more: yet such crude beginnings of prayers as even this may find a listening angel at hand to take them up and put a finish to them in Heaven. Or perhaps it was only the living eloquent eyes that tried to speak while the tongue was already paralysed by the swift approach of death. And Hester, all the while, stood just a little way off, not afraid to be in such presence, but not daring to draw too near. The mother looked up at her sometimes with a smile of indescribable sweetness and approval, as she stood pale but strong, fixed in a sort of terrible rapture at what was passing.

"This is her daily work," thought Hester, her eyes filled with the graceful figure of the nun, taking in all the refinement and dignity of person and bearing which even the folds of harsh serge had obeyed so lovingly that themselves had become

beautiful in clothing her; following the slim satin hand as it flitted to and fro over wild shaggy heads, laying hold of rough horny other hands, reducing all things around to a sort of order in peace, leaving hush and comfort in its track, as with the influence of a holy magnetism. "This is her daily work," said Hester, "and I——? I have been thinking about whether or not I was to live a lady!"

One dying woman, with the very print of death upon her face, was raving meekly about her home and her children; her husband, who was trying to keep things together till such time as she might be cured and come back to laugh over his troubles, his makeshifts, his helplessness, in her absence; about the baby who badly wanted the tender hands about his little body, who wailed now through the nights and would not let the neighbours sleep, but who would coo and be comforted when next she chirruped in his face; about the tender little daughter of few years, who had a burden upon

her shoulders, too much even for a woman to bear.

"And, mother!" she said, "Won't the good man be right glad to see me? And won't he be surprised to see me walking in to him? And now he'll be going to his work in the morning without the house and the children on his back as well as the hod of mortar. I'll be there some evening before him when he comes home. And won't the lonesome look go off his face? And won't he give me a kiss?"

So spoke the dying heart; with its little hopes so green and flourishing on the earth, while their root was already torn from them and shrivelling into dust.

"Oh, yes!" she said, in answer to the nun, "I'll be willing enough to go, when so happen the Lord may want me. But sure I am he doesn't want me yet. I couldn't go to heaven till I rear my little baby."

In another corner a candle was burning, two

nuns were praying, and a soul was passing away. Hester and the mother knelt also at a distance, till the supreme moment of a fellow-creature was over. And a few minutes after, in a quiet passage leading from the ward, with a door closed between them and the dead and dying, Hester was weeping with wild sobs in the mother's arms.

"Let me stay with you," she whispered. "I am not much use now, but I might learn, and I could help."

"No, no, my dear; not for always, at least," said the nun. "You do not know what you are asking."

"I could make these black robes, dear madam," pleaded Hester. "And I could sit up at nights."

"Could you?" said the mother, smiling. "We will find you some more suitable work, perhaps."

"Suitable for you, then why not suitable for me?" persisted Hester.

"People do not come here so rashly," said the mother, gravely. "They think about it long. They lay their case before God for years, and only make up their minds when they feel assured by long trial that he wants them to do his work in this way. Your call, I have little doubt, is elsewhere. Yet never fear but we will love you and protect you all we can. And you shall always be our sister, wherever may be your place, whatever may be your work."

The next ward visited was a pleasant room up-stairs, a place in which the sick people were getting better. In one bed near a window a woman was propped up, with some needlework in her fingers; a white happy face, only newly rid of pain, newly enraptured with peace; two bony hands stitching feebly, the hair banded with smooth care, the head crowned with a snowy cap, the whole figure arranged with festive joy, and raised up out of prostrate weakness to give a grateful welcome to the return of life. A friend

had come to see her; had brought flowers. A child sat between them, reading aloud from a book. In another bed a fragile-looking girl was lying dreaming about her mother in the country, dreaming with wide-open eyes that followed curiously all the gambols of the flies upon the ceiling. She wanted a letter written to her home. And Hester undertook to write the letter.

While that letter was getting written, the mother was called away, and Hester remained sitting by the sick girl's bed; who told her about the hills amongst which she had lived, about the pleasant wooded valley where her mother's cottage stood, about her hens, and her dairy, her churning, and her gardening.

"And nothing would do for me," she said, "but I must come up to London to be a milliner. And my mother cried sore. And the town air choked me after the wind that goes blowing through our hills. But now I am getting stout and well, and I will go back to the green fields.

The sister gives me a little bit of lavender sometimes, and I snuff it on my pillow here when my eyes are shut. And it has just the old smell of mother's parlour at home."

Meanwhile the Mother Augustine sat over her desk, in her little room.

A letter was unfolded before her, with the Munro arms at the top; and the date showed it written from the Castle of Glenluce, a full month before that present hour.

"Our dear Janet is a very sunbeam under our roof—so brilliant—so piquante——"

"Ah, that is not the place," said the Mother Augustine, and turned a page.

"It is a want we really feel in our seclusion"—yes, this was the part that the mother wanted to refer to—"in our seclusion." And the mother unfolded and straightened out the paper.

"Now that we go so very seldom to London, it is most desirable to have a person at hand, who will really be accomplished at her needle. You

know I like my gowns to fit nicely—a wrinkle annoys me. Then it is so difficult to wear out one's handsome dresses here, and one reads of the changes in the fashions—more frequent than ever—and it is vexatious to sit down to dinner with fringe around one's shoulders, when one knows it is out of date, and one ought to have puffings, or falls of lace. I have talked upon the subject to your aunt Margaret Hazeldean, but it is of no use asking her advice upon such matters. She only laughs in a provoking way, and says the dressmaker in the village—the same who makes stuff gowns and petticoats for the farmers' wives—is quite good enough for her. Poor Madge has been the only person to sympathise with me till lately—and you know I never like to take an important step without support—but even she is so very odd, has so many fantastic ideas about embroideries and furbelows that we never could come to agree in our desires on the subject. But now that our dear Janet is with us—and likely, I

trust, to remain with us for life—I think it is high time I set to work to supply this deficiency in our domestic resources. The dear girl has such exquisite taste, is so fastidious about everything she will wear—she is quite after my own heart in this; as indeed I may say in everything else. And apropos——"

But the mother went no further. She joined her hands above her desk, and leaned her brow upon them thoughtfully.

"I wonder how it would do," she said, softly to herself. "I wonder if they would be tender and kind to her, if I sent them a stray lamb to be folded at Glenluce!"

After pondering thus a little time longer, she drew forth a sheet of paper, with a sudden impulse, and wrote a letter of consultation to that very Aunt Margaret who could laugh so provokingly over the trouble of wrinkles in a dress, and who was simple enough to wear gowns made by homely village hands.

A letter about a Red Ridinghood who was flying from a wolf, about a young spirit that had been tried, a young heart that had known the danger of growing embittered, a young will that was resolved to do work. She said: "The case is an exceptional one. The girl would do her part, I believe, but I should in all respects require that she should be treated like a lady." The pith of the letter was, "Think, observe, question, and let me have your advice; by which I shall act, if that be possible."

And so it happened, that on an evening soon after this, in a far distant house near the village of Glenluce, a face that was soon to shine on Hester's path, a bright dark face full of strength and sweetness, was bending over this letter with interested attention; considering the matter of its contents—which was the fate of Hester—wisely, sympathisingly, with all the earnestness and generous zeal of a strong fervent heart.

CHAPTER XII.

HESTER'S CHARACTER DESCRIBED.

Lady Humphrey's carriage, rather dingy, though with a look important, was seen stopping, soon after this, before that black ancient archway in Blank Square.

Never in her life, perhaps, had this lady looked so beaming, so benevolent, so perfectly convinced of and satisfied with the generosity of the world, as in that hour which saw her present herself in the quiet reception room of the convent, to look after her charming Hester, and to thank that dear

courteous abbess for her hospitality to the poor child.

"Ah, good madam!" she said to the Mother Augustine, while shaking her finger playfully at Hester, "how well it is for the world that such charity as yours is to be met with occasionally! When naughty girls get astray from their chaperones at balls, they do not deserve to be rewarded with such a treat as being taken into such a delightful home as this, being entertained by such a charming person as you. How shall I ever thank you enough? And your noble brother. You must please make my acknowledgments to Sir Archie Munro. I have the pleasure of knowing him slightly, through my son."

Now, behind Lady Humphrey's smiles there lurked a puzzle in her mind. Did this sister of Sir Archie, the daughter of Sir Archie's mother, recognise in her, Lady Humphrey, that Judith Blake whose young days were remembered amongst the elders of her home, who had truly

not been approved in the days that were so remembered? If not, it would be well; but if luck were so far against her, then it would now be her part to remove, by appearing in a new character, whatever hostile or doubtful impressions might have laid their mark upon the mind of this good abbess.

"Such enthusiasts are apt to indulge charitable opinions," she reflected, and she set about winning the full faith of this new ally; for an ally in some shape or other Lady Humphrey had resolved that she must prove. She had once known an abbess before, but she was a homely old woman, with the poor of a country district under her wing—as homely as a hen among her chickens. But a young abbess like this must be of the kind known in poems; where she is usually found sitting with her back to a mediæval church window, with an unfortunate love-story in the background of her life, a crushed heart ever open to the public inspection, and with an unhesitating

belief in the virtue and misfortunes of all who may draw near to hear the story of her sorrows and see her praying by moonlight.

"It should be easy to manage her," thought Lady Humphrey, but looked in vain for the seraphic although heartbroken smile, the lack-adaisical self-conscious drooping of the eyelids; listened fruitlessly for the half-smothered, tale-telling, egotistical sigh. This was no etherealised victim of romance whom Lady Humphrey had to deal with; and indeed the graceful young woman in her black garb, was so much, in very honesty, like the creature she had been born to be, to wit, the good guileless daughter of one—of two—whom Lady Humphrey could remember, that, albeit her ladyship held a stout heart within her body, she had some twitches at her conscience, some pains about her memory, which threatened a persecution from unwholesome recollections.

It was ominous to Lady Humphrey to see

Hester affect no joy at their meeting; to see her take a pale grave stand at her new friend's right elbow; to feel the confidence which already existed between these two, the conviction that her own late efforts to bind Hester to herself had failed, while that a stranger had accomplished in one night and a day what she could not effect through all the years that had changed a babe into a woman.

And Lady Humphrey was now in a difficulty. She wished to appear anxious to take Hester back into her arms, and yet she hoped that the nun might yet assist her in getting the girl transported into Ireland. She must let this daughter of Glenluce see the uneasiness of her kind heart; how she did long to keep the girl with her, be a mother to her, yet found herself disabled by circumstances from indulging this fond desire of her affection. It was impossible to do this while Hester was standing by, so quiet and so resolute;

so wickedly forgetful, it would appear, of all the gratitude and enthusiasm that was due from her to this tender benefactress of her youth. But Lady Humphrey was not to be daunted by a trifle.

"I must ask you, my love," she said, "to allow me to have a few words with this dear lady in private. You look tired, my Hester, after your raking and your fright. Go and rest, my dear pet! You need not weary yourself with attending to a tiresome conversation."

"To the garden," said the Mother Augustine; and Hester sat under a sunny wall with ripe plums about her ears, and saw the sun set in a fierce glare behind the city spires and chimneys, and heard all the clocks, from towers and churches, dropping down their music or their clangour, many times round and round, before Lady Humphrey's lean horses took their way out of Blank-square, and the Mother Augustine might be seen

coming thoughtfully along between the lavender and the rose bushes, casting about her glances, looking for some one.

But the conversation in the parlour had gone on somewhat in this way.

"You may have heard my name mentioned before, dear madam," began Lady Humphrey, cautiously, fully alive to the importance of being sure of the ground she trod, before venturing to take an excursion of any length into ways where she had any cause to doubt the foundations under her feet. Had the Mother Augustine said "no," she was prepared to back from her suggestion with some graceful apology. But the nun, not having a taste for the art of dissembling, gave her a knowledge of her position on the instant.

"Yes," she said, readily, "I have heard your name before, Lady Humphrey. My brother has mentioned it to me. And I understand, moreover, that you had some acquaintance with our family many years ago."

"It is true," said Lady Humphrey, pensively. "Ah! how pleasant it is after years have passed away to find the memories of one's youth still shared by friends, even if—as, alas! has been my case—those friends have been estranged from us. I knew your father and your mother, when they and I were boy and girls. I loved them dearly, as a sister, and I received much kindness from their hands. But I was a sadly wild girl in those days, my dear madam, and it was easy for evil tongues to do me a mischief if they would. Unkindness and interference divided us, and I fear much that cruel stories, perhaps provoked by my waywardness and foolishness, must have lingered at Glenluce with the memory of my name. But ah! how the world tames one, dear madam!"

And Lady Humphrey cast her eyes upon the backs of her nice gloves, and studied them with a sorrowful little smile, as though she saw her youthful follies mirrored in the shining kid, and compassionated them out of the depths of her

mind, now grown so sage, of her heart, now grown so sober.

The nun smiled in good faith and good-humour. She was willing to believe all she could, through the charity of her desire.

"If all the world of the good were to be judged by the hastiness of their youth, Lady Humphrey," she said, "I fear there would be but few to receive honour or praise. It is after the battle that the victor is crowned. No fighting, no laurels."

Lady Humphrey glanced furtively at the mother's sweet serious face, and was satisfied that her story had been fully known, that her apology had been received. She sighed, and resumed.

"Ah, yes! there is fighting needed, as you say, and it costs care and anxiety to the friends of youth before the training can be happily accomplished. I was even wilder, I believe, and more difficult to manage than that dear girl who has

just left the room. And it is about her I would take your counsel, dear madam, knowing your charitable interest in all good works and honest cares. You see me with this poor girl. She is an orphan, and has depended on me for food, and clothing, and protection, since she could speak. I have educated her well, and yet of late I have found it necessary that she should be taught some means of supporting herself. I had wished, it is true, to make her independent of such need, but that is impossible. I cannot keep her as a daughter under my own roof, and this displeases her. Her tastes, alas! are beyond her station, and I tremble to think of the dangers which surround her in this great city. She is wild, I will own to you, and frets at my control. I fear she is not grateful. I fear she is inclined to be rebellious and a little vindictive. But, ah! dear madam! I need not tell you, who know it so well, that we should not do good in this world through a seeking for gratitude. She is not a bad girl, I believe,

only, as I have said, a little wilful and wild. You have an example of it before you, my dear madam, in the circumstances which have brought her under your notice. I cannot even take her for a little amusement under my own wing without risk of some accident like this which has happened. And consider how dreadful it would have been, what distraction I must have suffered, had she fallen into less kind hands than yours."

The nun's face had been growing gradually very grave indeed as this recital went on.

"I am sorry to hear this of the young girl," she said. "She has seemed to me good and charming."

"Ah, charming she is indeed, madam!" said Lady Humphrey, sighing, as if that were the very worst of the whole story.

"And good, I think," said the nun, with a gentle persistence.

"Good, yes, surely, in the main—I trust so," said Lady Humphrey; "but so charming, as you

say, and so impatient of control—alone, as she must be when following her employment, in London! Do you wonder at my uneasiness, dear madam?"

The nun was silent for some moments, then she said:

"Have you thought of any way in which I may be of service to this child? I presume that you have, since you have taken the trouble to inform me of so much."

Lady Humphrey felt her breath a little taken away. This nun would so bring her to the point. However, it could only have been conscience that made her so reluctant to speak out; for surely there could be nothing discreditable in her desire when it did come to be stated, though without much of that circumlocution which had been intended to accompany it.

"It is true," she said, boldly, "that I have wished to be able to remove the dear girl to some quiet country place, where she might be able to

support herself in respectability, and also be removed from the dangerous excitements which lie in wait for her in London. And I confess, dear madam, that, knowing of your generous sympathies, and also that you have connexions in the country, I have been presumptuous enough to hope that you might interest yourself to assist me in so placing her."

The Mother Augustine brightened at this speech. Surely it held nothing unfair, could have no ungenerous motive lurking behind the judicious anxiety which prompted it. Perhaps, indeed, the mother might have thought within herself, just in passing, that, had she been interested from babyhood in such a girl, she would not have been so eager to banish her from her presence. But this unacknowledged thought was in itself a little triumph for Lady Humphrey, seeing that here was only a small sin, and but a negative sort of misconduct, after all, wherewith to charge a person of whom many hard things had been said,

and whom she herself, despite the remonstrance of her charity, had not been able to meet without a prejudice.

"I thank you, Lady Humphrey," she said, warmly. "I am glad that you have placed this trust in me. It is true I may be of use in this way. I will do my best to find a home for the poor child. But there is one favour I must ask of you," she added. "I must beg you to leave Hester with me, here, for a few days. I shall the better be able to judge of her temper and capabilities."

Lady Humphrey was not altogether glad of this arrangement, but when so much had been gained she must relinquish a part of her will, must consent to run some little risk. And the worst that could happen would be too much confidence between the nun and Hester, too good an understanding on the nun's part of the foolish treatment which the girl had received. And Lady Humphrey felt instinctively that Hester would be

somewhat likely to use delicacy in dealing with her character.

And so, after having detained the nun in conversation for some time longer, ingeniously exposing the generosity of her own nature, and quite as clearly insinuating the instability of Hester's, Lady Humphrey at last made a most reverent farewell salutation to the abbess of St. Mark's, and rumbled away in her old coach, out of the quietude of Blank-square.

And when all this was over the Mother Augustine sat thoughtfully in her little room; and afterwards took her way into the garden to seek Hester; and came gravely through the sunset light, between the lavender and the rose-bushes.

Vindictive, ungrateful, not to be trusted! Our Mother Augustine's kind heart was disturbed about her protégée. The lady, be she what she might, had spoken wisely, and her anxiety could scarcely be assumed.

If Hester were to prove wild, impetuous, not

easy to be controlled? If she were to get herself and her friends into trouble wherever she went? What then? Why, disappointment of course, to those who had loved, and trusted in her; disappointment but never despair. She should fall seven times; and seven times be raised up again.

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. HAZELDEAN ACTS UPON HER INSTRUCTIONS.

Post hour was not breakfast hour in the village of Glenluce. The postman had to travel some thirty miles by outside car from the nearest rather important town, at which the letters for the mountains arrived early in the morning. Consequently, people in this neighbourhood read their despatches from their friends—or their enemies—over their supper table, and take their news with them to their pillows, instead of looking for it beside their plate in the morning. The post-horn is heard sounding through the village just as the children

in the cottages are going to bed. They can hear the first echo of it before they sleep, coming down to them from some winding of the high road, around the hill above the bay and the village street. To many a little dreaming ear it has seemed like the "horns of Elfland faintly blowing;" while to older watchers, wide awake and abroad, it has sounded terrible and significant, as the first blast from a war trumpet. For I speak of seventy years ago, when all the heartstrings of Ireland were strained, from east to west, from north to south, and a fearful sympathy thrilled its veins.

Autumn evenings are wont to wear out the remnant of their summer balminess much sooner in wild Irish bye-ways, haunted by sea breeze and mountain mist, than they are known to do in regions more civilised and less moist. Evening fires blaze on the long-idle hearthstones of drawing-rooms under the shelter of the everlasting hills, whilst people sitting close to the walls of cities are yet lingering by their open windows,

loath to stir. First heralds of the winter are the roaring of such homely flames. And so pleasant and genial an under-current of melody is kept up by the piping and whistling of the new wood upon the hearth, so fragrant is the perfume from the long-glowing peat logs, that our farewell shake-hands with the summer grows less reluctant. We watch her slow retreat from our gardens and dingles; see the sad cloak of her departure dropping gradually over the gay bravery of attire which was her wearing; we put our feet, which have rambled, upon the stool before our fender, and wonder that we can hardly bear to sigh.

The post brought a letter to Mrs. Hazeldean one evening, when her first autumn fire had just been kindled in her grate. Mrs. Hazeldean at her tea-table, with her letter spread before her, made the centre of a picture such as most eyes would like to see. It was not in her pretty drawing-room that she made tea for herself and husband, albeit, her upper windows admitted a

noble view of the mountains, around which, on this evening, cold mists were wrapping winding-sheets. Mrs. Hazeldean's teapot had made its way into her dining-room. Her garden lay stretched beyond her window, before her eyes. Her geraniums, still blooming, clung together in burning circles, her late roses yet lingered in sparse blossoms on their trees, and her ferns, scenting rain in the moist air, lifted their long delicate plumes and grew green in the chill dews.

So the warmth of deeply-coloured flowers, set in the cool greyness of the air, filled the space of the lower window, while the firelight took impertinently to itself all the credit for making brightness in the room. It gambolled over everything in the ecstacies of this conceit, books, pictures, the curtains, the tea-kettle. It fell upon the floor in adoration, and kissed the hem of Mrs. Hazeldean's purple robe. It played with her little well-shod foot; but glanced off the fair foldings of her white muslin vest, as if it felt the

inferiority of its own warmth when so near the fervent heat of her most womanly heart. It was restless, as if it felt that it could not have things all its own way until the dusk should have quite fallen, and extinguished the rival brilliance of the flower-beds without. But in the mean time the new fire that sent it forth intensified its glowing in the ardour of its delight, and sang songs to itself loudly and cheerily. It had resumed its magic empire within the dwellings of men. It had recovered its lost influence over human heart and limb.

Mrs. Hazeldean rested her cheek in her hand as she read. Her head was leaned aside a little; a head of such rare shape, both for intellect and womanly beauty that people involuntarily wondered while they delighted in looking at it. Ignorant people, who would have stared if you had told them such was the fact, put faith, without knowing it, in the moulding of that head. It spoke to them of her judgment, just as her smile spoke

of her heart. And it was clothed, not disguised, with a tight-fitting covering of satin-smooth hair, seamed with silver threads, which last had made their appearance—too soon if we would speak of fitting time; not too soon if we would only speak of beauty. No nut-brown tresses, nor golden curls, ever more enriched the head that wore them than did those gleaming braids passing the richly-coloured cheeks. Her broad brow, full of grace, shone with the goodness and power of all the thoughts that continually passed behind it. Her soft hazel eyes seemed black sometimes, from intensity of expression, as well as the shadows that lay above them from their strong dark settings. They were mirthful, tender, or solemn, those eyes, and they always carried sunshine to whatever side they turned. As for her mouth, it began and finished the perfection of her face. It was so firm and yet so indulgent, so sweet, and yet so grave; people listened, and looked at it, and were won. Its smile was so

good, and said so much, that its word could scarce be better, or say more. But when the two came forth together it were little wonder if a hard heart should give way in sheer surprise. The habitual expression of her face was a serene look of happy content, as if she had a secret joy somewhere, which would not consent to be altogether hidden —under which dwelt a strong presence of mental resources, quietly basking in the sunshine of her temper, ready to spring at a moment's notice into vigorous action.

Dr. Hazeldean sat opposite to his wife, and he also read his letters. He was a pleasant-looking fresh-complexioned gentleman, with a face betraying high intellectual culture, as well as a peculiar generosity and benevolence of disposition. If one wanted to know his opinion of his wife, one might just watch him looking at her across the table. "The heart of her husband trusteth in her," said that look. "She will render him good and not evil all the days of her life."

"Will you read this, John, and tell me what you think?" said Mrs. Hazeldean. And she handed him her letter from the Mother Augustine.

The doctor read and shook his head.

"It is a scheme worthy of Mary and of you," he said; "and if only you and Mary were to be the actors in carrying it out, I should feel no doubt that you would make it flourish to perfection. But, considering the style of the people at the castle, I don't think such a poor girl would be happy in the position."

"I can see that danger myself," said Mrs. Hazeldean; "yet Mary seems anxious about the matter; and if the girl is now in the keeping of Lady Humphrey, who was Judith Blake, why I would rather see her out of it, if I happened to be her friend."

"Which you will be, I foresee, if she comes here," said the doctor.

"Which I will be, please God!" said Mrs.

Hazeldean. And the doctor took up his paper with a smile, and his wife poured out the tea.

The next morning, when Doctor Hazeldean was seated in his gig, his wife appeared, in her bonnet, in the doorway.

"I am going to pay a visit at the castle," she said, "and I want you to leave me a bit up the glen, on my way."

And so a bit up the glen she was left. The mountains opened before her as she walked, after that, and the village and the bay lay behind and far beneath her. The glen unfolded its windings, and the river that ran meeting her, which she had seen playing with the sedges in the lower ground, grew noisy and angry and picked a quarrel with all the stones in its way. Purple hills loomed high in the distance, looking through their wreaths of silver mist. Autumn woods lay in the lap of the hills, and stood round about the grey chimneys of the castle.

Mrs. Hazeldean paid many a visit on her way,

as she went along; for all things knew her on this road, and the humblest creature felt no awe at her approach. Even the hen-mothers pecking about the doors of the thatched cottages just blinked her a bright look and did not hurry themselves to drive their broods out of her way. The children lifted their heads and laughed right in her face. The very cows looked up from their grazing and approved of her as she passed by. Many a brightening face was thrust to greet her through open doorways; many a welcome awaited her within, from expectant sick people beyond the thresholds; many a homely chair was dusted that she might rest.

There was not an interest of these poor people that was too little for her sympathy. Were they sick or were they in trouble, here was their friend. Not alone the sister of the late baronet, who had been their master, but a sister of their own; never impatient at their ignorance, never scornful of their poverty, never angry at their mistakes, never

weary of their complaints; not sweeping in, like Lady Helen, in a grand dress, breaking her feathers and her temper against the low lintels of their doors, overwhelming them to confusion with a few words of condescension, chucking the frightened children under the chin—may be giving a present like an alms, and sweeping out again; more like the old lady, her dead mother, but warmer, less stately, more familiar.

Most like of all to Miss Mary and Sir Archie, though with an amount of experience, and a keen insight into all the little needs of humble lives which even they did not possess in the same degree. These two had been her children, her disciples; though not a great many years younger than herself.

Just of late there had been many a wild torrent of grief which Mrs. Hazeldean had been called upon to stem. Though the horrors that were abroad in the country had not actually set foot upon the glens, yet scarce a cottager of the moun-

tains but had some friend elsewhere, who was in prison or in torture, who had been beggared, or put to death. Pale faces were getting plentiful in the fields and on the roads, and tears by the firesides.

There was a fine new approach to the castle, through great gates, round a sward, near a deer park. Lady Helen's carriage horses had room to prance in the avenue. But there was another way of coming upon the castle, by a wilder bit of glen than had been passed. In ancient times there had been a moat, and a part of it yet remained, in which lilies multiplied and sedges mustered, while wild weeds and flowers dipped and dabbled in its margin. This had been the former entrance to the castle, and the old drawbridge still arched its brown back over the water, throwing a solemn black shadow amidst the whiteness of the lilies. Crossing this old bridge one came upon the most ancient portion of the castle, now worn into disuse, with a little black door, no bigger than a postern

gate, set low in the wall, studded with large iron nails. It had once been the main entrance, but trees were growing about it now. Farther on, at either side of the bridge, this remnant of a moat wandered away into dryness; and in its bed here and there long ferns had struck their roots, rich ribbon-grass had straggled up, bringing with it scarlet poppies, the creamy meadow sweet, and the crimson tassels of the lusmore blossoms.

Lady Helen Munro, Miss Janet Golden, a King Charles spaniel, and a white French poodle, were all in the drawing-room when Mrs. Hazeldean arrived. Lady Helen had just issued from her dressing-room, Miss Golden had just returned from her morning ride. Lady Helen, in white, with pink ribbons, was extended on a couch, showering kisses upon one dog. Miss Janet, in her riding-habit, was teasing the other with her whip.

"Ah, dear Margaret, how are you?" said Lady

Helen, languidly holding up her cheek, which she expected should come in contact with Mrs. Hazeldern's bright lips.

"How do you do, Mrs. Hazeldean?" said Miss Golden, contriving to hold out her jewelled hand between the pauses of her laughter over the dog.

"Dear Margaret, how you trot about!" said Lady Helen. "You are as nimble and as fresh as a girl. And I—see how languid and good-for-nothing I am. It is all in the constitution of one's family."

"Doggie, doggie, doggie! why don't you laugh?" said Miss Golden, poking the spaniel with her whip. But this must only have been her sport. She could not have meant him to laugh at Lady Helen.

Lady Helen was fifty-five years of age, and Mrs. Hazeldean was forty. Lady Helen always spoke as though Mrs. Hazeldean were the elder; but they were sisters-in-law, which as least placed

them quite on an equality. Mrs. Hazeldean's silvered braids could surely never look so juvenile as Lady Helen's jetty ringlets. True, Lady Helen's long handsome face was thin and full of lines, but then that was to be accounted for by her delicacy of constitution. Dear Margaret's soft bright cheeks were the result of her perfect health. Besides, Lady Helen was the daughter of an earl, and blue blood is pale and cool. Mrs. Hazeldean was only the daughter of a baronet, and had been pleased to marry a doctor of medicine. And dear Margaret was well known to be a little common in her tastes, which was, no doubt, the reason why her lips remained so red, and her eyes kept so undignified a brightness. But Lady Helen had been a beauty of an aristocratic type.

"I hope you have not brought a bundle of horrors with you, Margaret," said Lady Helen. "I don't want to hear anything about the state of the country."

In truth, Mrs. Hazeldean so seldom walked up to the castle, merely for the sake of paying a morning call, that it was no wonder she should be suspected of having a further motive in coming. She did not hesitate now in unfolding her business.

"Well, I must say it was very thoughtful of Mary to attend to my commission so quickly," said Lady Helen, with more spirit in her manner than she had yet shown. "But why did she not write to me, I wonder? Come over here, Janet, my dear, and let us have a pleasant talk about our new dressmaker."

Miss Janet came over reluctantly, swinging her whip. She was a sumptuous-looking little person, with a tight plump figure, and a jewel in each ear as large as a half-crown piece. She had roguish dark eyes and a graceful self-sufficient-looking little nose. What with her pretty white hands, and her fair smooth cheeks, and her glossy dark curls and glancing white teeth, she would certainly

have been charming all over, but for a sarcastic little twist which came and went about her mouth. Yet some people thought that this last gave a peculiar piquancy to her countenance.

"Can she make everything?" Lady Helen went on, eagerly. "Ball dresses and dinner dresses? morning robes and spensers? Can she copy the Paris fashions from a picture?"

"I have heard," said Mrs. Hazeldean, "that she was chosen by her mistress to compose a court dress for a duchess; so I think you may safely trust yourself to dine in a gown of her making at Glenluce."

"Then why does she come here?" asked Lady Helen, all alive. "Oh, we shall surely never be lucky enough to get her amongst us! She will be certain to stay in London and make her fortune. It would be cruel to ask her to bury her genius alive."

"Not cruel, if she wishes it," said Mrs. Hazeldean, judiciously repressing a smile. "There is

one reason for her wishing it, which I am charged to explain. This girl is not an ordinary dressmaker, who would drop her h's and make friends with the housemaids. She is well born, well bred, and educated; she is young, and an orphan; she would like a quiet home with people who would be kind to her. Mary considers her a treasure, as I have told you; but she has bid me declare to you that she will not allow her to come here unless you promise to treat her at all points as a lady."

Lady Helen opened her eyes and looked aghast.

"What! make her an equal?" she exclaimed. "Bring one's dressmaker into one's drawing-room! How ridiculously like Mary's notions! Janet, love, what do you think of such a proposal?"

"Rather high a price to pay for the making of a gown, I think," said Miss Janet, with that curl coming over her lips, "to have the seamstress at one's elbow at the dinner-table."

"But then it is not the case of merely making

a gown," said Lady Helen; "my maid can turn out a neat gown when necessary. This is a case of style and ornament and fashion, my darling. It were worth some little sacrifice to secure such results. But then, as you say, to have one's seamstress at the dinner-table! Dear Margaret, are there no other terms to be made than these?"

Mrs. Hazeldean laughed heartily.

"What a trouble I have brought to you!" she said. "But I said nothing about a dinner-table. Mary will be satisfied, I dare say, if you keep her little friend from amongst the servants."

Lady Helen breathed a sigh of relief.

"I can readily promise that," she said, gratefully, "and I will engage to show her kindness and attention. Let me see. I can give her a couple of rooms in the east tower, above Madge. And, by the way, that reminds me that poor Madge will expect to be invited to this conclave."

A bell having been rung and a message sent, a fourth lady made her appearance in the room.

This lady was of age uncertain, of looks ill-favoured, and in manner of the style known as "flighty." She wore a short yellow gown of Chinese silk, trimmed with rows of little flounces to the knee. She wore sandalled shoes and mittens, and beautiful large clocks upon her stockings. She wore a band going round her head, fastened by a little brooch upon her forehead. In this brooch was a tiny miniature of her lover of bygone days, who had been drowned in the deep seas on his way home to make her his wife. This lady was a second cousin of Lady Helen; not mad, as had sometimes been startlingly proved, but a little more than "odd," to say the least. She was the Honourable Madge M'Naughten by name, and never forgot the dignity of her title. It had come to her late in life, without bringing any lightening of a poverty that had half-crazed her youth. But it had soothed her so much that, after its acquisition, she had consented to accept the bounty of her cousin, Lady Helen.

And she was known to all comers, never as Miss M'Naughten, but always, for her satisfaction, as the "Honourable Madge."

"Now, Madge," said Lady Helen, "we are going to have a talk. Here is Margaret going to find us the very thing we want. The dress-maker, you remember, whom you and I have quarrelled about."

"I like flounces, you know," said the Honourable Madge, sitting down by Mrs. Hazeldean, with a confidential air. "They furnish the figure so much, especially when it is thin. And I have always been as thin as a whipping-post. Members of noble families are often observed to be thin."

And Miss Madge shook out all her little fluttering frills, and drew up her figure, which, indeed, had somewhat the outlines of a broom-stick.

"You shall be flounced up to your neck, if you have the fancy," said Lady Helen; who, to

do her justice, was always indulgent and considerate with this cousin whom she sheltered. "But, dear Margaret," she continued, "I trust there will be no mistake about the attainments of this young person. Poor Mary, you know, had never much taste for style, even in the world. I should like to see a specimen of the young woman's work before I made the final arrangements to bring her here."

"Dolls!" cried the Honourable Madge, clapping her mittens together in excitement; "dolls, my dear Helen, would be the plan. Fit them as if they were women, flounce them and trim them. Copy them from the fashion-books and send them in a box."

"An excellent plan, I declare!" said Lady Helen. "I will write about it to Mary myself."

Mrs. Hazeldean's business had now come to a conclusion. "I think it will be better to say

nothing about Lady Humphrey," she reflected, as she retraced her steps down the glen.

So letters came flying from Glenluce to the Mother Augustine. "I think they will treat her fairly; we must try and make her happy," wrote Mrs. Hazeldean. But Lady Helen's letter was all about the dolls.

Therefore Hester set to work to furnish specimens of her skill. Pretty scraps of silks and satins were procured for her, some well-shaped little dolls, and some pictures out of the latest book of fashions. Sometimes she brought her sewing to a little table in the convalescent ward, by the bedside of the young milliner who loved to talk about the country. Hester also might be sent away to live among fresh hills. Would the sick girl tell her more about the mountains? And the sick girl told her more. And the time sped pleasantly by. And the little dolls were clothed and sent away.

And the dolls did their duty. Judging from

her letters Lady Helen's cup of happiness was now full. She was anxious only to receive the young dressmaker under her roof. If propriety had permitted it she could almost have taken her into her arms.

Lady Humphrey was duly informed of the Mother Augustine's exertions and their success. I will not pause to expose her private feelings on the occasion; neither have I time to repeat the thanks which she poured out in the convent parlour. The only thing which it is necessary to relate is the fact that she insisted that her dear Hester, so soon to be torn away from her, should pay her at least a short visit at Hampton Court before her departure.

This Hester unwillingly agreed to. Yet why should it have been unwillingly? Was ever doating mother more careful and fond than Lady Humphrey was daily proving herself now? If Hester had been about to become a bride, this good friend could not have furnished her with a

more generous trousseau. She should not be a shabby Hester going to live among fine people; she should not want for a becoming gown to appear in, when that time should arrive, which Lady Humphrey foresaw, when a glimpse of her pretty face should be desired in a castle drawing-room. She should not be kept away in the background through the need of fitting attire; she should be furnished at all points and for all seasons like a lady.

And Hester was confounded and overwhelmed with much bounty. Had she ever, indeed, been sufficiently grateful to Lady Humphrey? Had it not been her own perverse nature which had hindered her loving this friend? Now, when the hour of separation, perhaps for ever, was drawing near, her heart swelled in regret, and reproached her with sore pain.

And there were many little instructions and advices to be given.

"You will write to me constantly, of course,

my dear love?" said Lady Humphrey: "and you will always speak of me kindly, will you not my little Hester?"

"Oh, Lady Humphrey!" said Hester, blushing guiltily, but with sincere pain for the past, and a desire to be very loyal in the future.

"I may not have been wise, my love," said Lady Humphrey, "but I have acted for the best, as far as I could see. And I wish to warn you, my dear, that these people to whom you are going are possessed by a prejudice against me. We were friends in former days, but mischief was made between us. Yet long absence has not deprived me of all interest in their fate."

Lady Humphrey paused. Hester was silent and surprised, not knowing what to say.

"And you, too, dear Hester," Lady Humphrey continued, presently, "you also must feel an interest in these good people, who have been so kind to you—in that dear lady of the convent,

and in her brother, who did you so important a service."

"Yes," said Hester, readily.

"Well, then, my love, I will entrust you with a secret," said Lady Humphrey, lowering her voice and with an air of deep concern. "There is a way in which you and I can be of use to these worthy people. We can save them, perhaps, from trouble—from destruction."

"Can we?" said Hester, with open amazed eyes.

"You know, my dear love, that the country of Ireland, to which you are going, is disturbed by revolutionary troubles—nay, you need not turn pale, all is peace in the neighbourhood of Glenluce. But Sir Archie Munro may be implicated—may be suspected of encouraging the people elsewhere to rebellion. Do you understand me, dear Hester?"

"I understand," said Hester, faintly.

"In case such things were proved against him he must be seized—perhaps hanged," said Lady

Humphrey. "But it may lie with you and me to avert this danger from his head."

"How?" asked Hester, fearfully.

"By watching over his interests," said Lady Humphrey, with enthusiasm. "I am here, you see, in London, and I have friends," she added mysteriously. "You watch well over Sir Archie's movements at Glenluce. Write me constantly, and describe events without reserve. Thus kept constantly informed of all his doings, I shall be able, from my knowledge of facts, to keep all danger and suspicion from his path."

The very vagueness of this speech gave it an especially terrible meaning for Hester. She had heard of troubles in Ireland, but she had not thought about them until now. And she was to do so great a service to these friends who had been so good to her. And this was Lady Humphrey, whom she had feared, who was enabling her to do it. Oh, how stupid, and blind, and unfeeling, she had been!

"You must remember, my little Hester, that

this is a secret between you and me," said Lady Humphrey, by-and-by, having watched some time in silence how her instructions had been received, how they had sunk in and settled down, with a great hold, in Hester's mind. "You will promise never to repeat what I have just said to you. It would be terrible to give a hint of it to our dear friend, the Mother Augustine. It would needlessly alarm and give her pain. You will promise?"

"I promise," said Hester, solemnly; then laid hold of Lady Humphrey's hand and kissed it.

"God bless you, Lady Humphrey!" she said. "You are a good, good woman!"

Pierce Humphrey arrived one evening to bid adieu to little Hester. He had written to her apologising for his conduct at the ball, and she had long ago forgotten the offence; so also, it would seem, had he himself.

"So you are going to Glenluce, little Hester?"

said Mr. Pierce. "You are going to live under the roof with my Janet. What a friendship you and she will strike up!"

"Oh, no!" said Hester, quickly. "That is not likely, indeed; for you know I am not going as a lady."

"Pooh! nonsense!" said Pierce Humphrey, laughing. "You could not be anything else, if you tried. Yes, you and she will surely be good friends. And I think you will say a word for me, little Hester?"

"That I will," said Hester, smiling, "if I am allowed to have a chance."

"Nay, I think you will make a chance," said Pierce, coaxingly. "You must talk to her about me, and you will write to me. That you will, like a good kind girl. And you will tell me how she speaks of me, and what she thinks of that great baronet, Sir Archie Munro. You will promise to do this?"

"I will do it if I can," said Hester, doubtfully.

"That means that you will do it. And look here!" said Pierce Humphrey, "if she seems at all to listen to you, you must give her back this ring; it is her own, which I gave her once, and which she returned to me in a letter. You must tell her that I sent it to her; and if that does not touch her heart," said foolish Pierce, with a great sigh, "I am sure I know of nothing else that will."

After some doubts and difficulties, half expressed, but strongly felt, Hester was simple enough to consent to take the ring. And soon after this she returned to the Mother Augustine; and then there arose the question of how to ship her off to Ireland.

CHAPTER XIV.

GOING TO GLENLUCE.

On this subject—the question of how Hester was to be conveyed to Glenluce — the Mother Augustine took counsel with her brother. For Sir Archie Munro had not yet gone from London.

He had been coming nearly every day to visit his sister in her convent, and very often he had seen Hester at her work in the mother's room. He acknowledged himself rather shocked at her childish occupation of dressing dolls; thought her too full-grown and serious-looking for so simple a diversion.

"She does these little things very prettily, you know," he said one day, when she was absent at Hampton Court, and he lifted and handled a little figure with a man's curiosity about a woman's work. "But isn't it rather an odd amusement for a young woman? And she is a young woman, you know, Mary; young, indeed, but still a woman."

The Mother Augustine was very merry over this mistake. "So you have thought that poor Hester was playing the baby!" she said. "But you must know that each of these figures represents a woman — my mother, for instance, or Cousin Madge."

"My mother! Cousin Madge!" repeated Sir Archie, in bewilderment.

"Yes, or any other lady requiring to be handsomely clothed by a pair of skilful hands. These are not a child's dolls, but a dressmaker's models."

Sir Archie did not follow the explanation. At

all events, it did not enlighten him as to Hester's actual calling.

"And I want to consult with you about getting our young protégée sent to Ireland," said the mother. "I have found her a home. You could never guess where. In Glenluce Castle."

Sir Archie's face beamed with satisfaction. "Why, how have you managed it?" he said. "I should not have thought it easy to persuade my mother to invite her. I did think myself of petitioning Aunt Margaret——"

"But, Archie," said the mother, gravely, "you must not be under a mistake. This young girl is not going as a visitor to Glenluce. My mother needs a dressmaker and seamstress at the Castle, and I have accepted the situation for Hester."

Sir Archie was a long time taking it in. That his mother should have need of some one to do her sewing he could not wonder, but that Hester should be sent into his house in such a character; it did not seem to please him.

"I do not think such an arrangement can ever suit," he said. "Aunt Margaret would have taken her in upon a visit. I had thought of writing to her."

"You had thought of writing to her!" said the Mother Augustine, in surprise, and then checked herself and was silent, though she looked as if she could have said more.

Her brother glanced up suddenly, at the change in her voice, and met her eyes. And then he did a thing unheard of in the family traditions of Sir Archie—blushed.

The Mother Augustine returned Hester's little lay figure to its box in silence; and began to speak of something else. In the midst of such speaking the sound of a carriage was heard outside upon the stones, the door was thrown open, and Hester appeared.

Her fair hair was dressed gracefully under a pretty little hat. She wore a pale grey robe of silk, and long coral ear-rings in her ears. Her

cheeks were flushed with a slight shame, and her lips were quivering with a joyful smile. She was conscious of being better dressed than it was fitting she should be, but so eager to see her friend that the uneasiness of such consciousness was swallowed up in joy.

She advanced a few steps into the room, then stopped short, and stood abashed. Sir Archie on the one side looked flushed and embarrassed, the Mother Augustine, on the other, looked grave and displeased.

Hester stood, as at bay, for a few moments, seeming as if she would have turned and run away, then suddenly came forward rapidly, pulled off her coquettish hat and threw it on the table.

"I knew how it would be," she said, in a low vehement voice, a tear flashing from under her drooped eyelids. "Lady Humphrey would insist on dressing me up so. I knew it was not right; that you would not like it."

The Mother Augustine glanced at her brother,

and caught the expression of his face, before he turned and walked away to the window. It seemed that things were taking a strange turn. But no perplexity of mind could make the mother unjust, even for an hour.

She drew a long anxious sigh, and put her arm round the girl's trembling figure.

"Put on your pretty hat, my child," she said. "Your charming dress becomes you very well." Perhaps she reflected that if the pearl had already been discovered, it did not make much matter about the setting. But none the less was she uneasy in her mind. Sir Archie was not a man who took much notice of strange women. If his peculiar interest in Hester should continue, what was this that she, the Mother Augustine, had done?

But, let the mischief be what it might, it was accomplished. Hester's trunks were in the convent hall, side by side with the small luggage of a lay sister who was to travel with her to Ireland.

Lady Helen, among her mountains, was waiting impatiently to be attired like one of the dolls upon her dressing-table. Hester must go, come what might.

A strong foreshadowing of some part of the strange things which were to happen was on the Mother Augustine's mind when she gave her parting instructions to Hester.

One of those injunctions came right pleasantly to the girl's ear, though she did not know at the time how much it comprehended. It was this:

"If ever you are in a difficulty, remember that you can find a friend in Mrs. Hazeldean."

But another was more startling, and not so easy to obey.

"Unless absolutely questioned on the subject, you are not to speak of your connexion with Lady Humphrey. You are not even to mention her name."

Now how could this injunction be obeyed? Hester remembered Lady Humphrey's last in-

structions, which were yet ringing in her ears. She remembered Pierce Humphrey's petition, and her promise made to him. She wore his ring on a ribbon, for safety, round her neck. She blushed up to her hair at this new command.

"It will be difficult——" began Hester.

"You need not find it difficult," said the mother. "You may speak of her to Mrs. Hazeldean, but not at the Castle. It will make mischief if you are foolish enough to forget this."

So Hester reluctantly gave her word. What then? Was she to post her letters secretly to Lady Humphrey? It must be so; for she could not forget her promise which had been made to that lady, nor misuse her opportunity of doing a service to Sir Archie. She kept thinking how much would the mother alter her way of thinking did she know Lady Humphrey's anxiety about her brother. But here also she was bound to silence. And she departed on her

journey considering deeply in her mind how best she should be able to obey both these friends.

The lay sister who travelled with Hester was bound for the little convent at Glenluce. Sir Archie acted as escort on the journey, and the three arrived in the shades of an autumn evening at Glenluce Castle gate.

There was company at the castle; a few visitors from Dublin. Lights were glinting from the small windows of the long low grey wall of the oldest wing, but the ivy-covered turrets still kept some hue of their rich green in the outer air. A faint glow from the vanished sun still hung about the castellated summits of the walls, while the damp purple air of the heavy twilight had darkened the more distant walls and chimneys, and grouped them along with the trees in an indistinguishable mass. That odour which tells of the neighbourhood of heathery mountains was in the air, mingled with the perfumes from well-stocked

gardens somewhere near. There was a murmur of waters all around, for the falls had already begun their music; and when the wind took a fit of wrestling among the trees, pale streaks of moving mist became visible between the shadows, like long spectres descending out of the clouds, and crawling with straggling limbs along the hills to the lower earth.

The entrance to the castle was new when compared with the little old gate, studded with big black nails, which now frowned in disgrace at the back of the building. Yet even this door, which was called new, looked old-fashioned enough, with its oddly shaped steps and its curious bronze urns. If Lady Helen Munro had not been busy in her dressing-room she might have come to this open door to welcome her son upon the threshold, such good old customs having it all their own way at Glenluce. It was lucky, perhaps, that there was a delay in the fixing of an ear-ring, or the pinning

of a ringlet, or this lady of a noble house might have fainted on a mat to see the order of his arrival, and his conduct on the occasion. Yet the simple lay sister, who remained sitting quietly in the coach, waiting to be moved on, saw nothing but what was fitting in Sir Archie's care of Hester.

But the lay sister departed, and went dreaming through the dusk, down the glen, about her people who had been buried in the little graveyard by the sea, whose peaceful graves she should visit on the morrow. And, forgetting fever, bad wounds, and broken limbs, she strewed her prayers on the night air as she went, all in thanksgiving that she had seen her native glens once again.

In the mean time Hester was in the castle hall on the stairs, in an upper corridor, where she was detained a few moments standing waiting, the servant who was attending her having been called

away by accident. There was everywhere a dim religious light, and an air of ancient repose about the grandeur of the place. As if in its nobility there was no disdain. As if the same time that had rubbed the edges of its carvings, rounded the little corners, and softened most sharp-set outlines, had stolen the fire of barbaric pride from the oak heart of the ancient roof-tree, and only left a solemn dignity in its place. Here was something that impressed one, as if a simple child-like spirit were looking forth from aged eyes

Two voices went whispering, round the corner of the passage, of servants who had met going their several errands.

"Praises be to God, he's home!" said one whisper. "They were havin' it in the village this mornin' that he was took."

"Holy Vargin!" said the other, "I niver h'ard a word o' that. Did her ladyship know it?"

"Not herself?" said the first whisper, "or it's in stericks she'd a been. We kep' it dark as dungeon in the kitchen. But the people in the village har'ly slep' a wink all night."

"Well, thank the Lord of Heaven, we have him back safe an' sound."

And then Hester's conductor made an appearance, with apologies; and the stranger was conducted to her room.

It was a ghostly round room, this room in the east tower, which had been assigned to the new comer's especial use. It had two quaint turret windows, knowing the secrets of the glen, looking down on green peaceful slopes, peering up at wild lonely wildernesses of wood, and of rock, and of mist. A strait strip of tapestry hung by each side of these narrow windows, like the single scanty tress by each cheek of an aged face. There were figures wrought in this tapestry; and as the breeze that came in with Hester stirred its folds,

the figures nodded their heads, a moan went through the sash, and a shudder shook the dim panes of the windows.

There was a pleasant fire of turf alight in the grate. It made the dark corners glower, and the glasses on the pictures flash; and for the two black marble imps who carried the chimneypiece on their shoulders, it threw a lurid light of mischief into their eyes, making them wink at each other and grin till they seemed plotting to pull the walls about their ears.

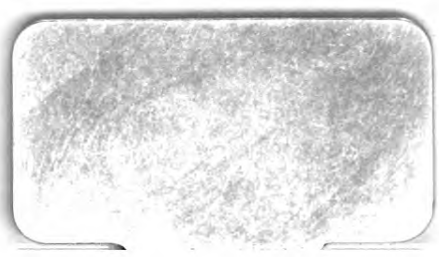
But whatever else the fire did it gave Hester a cordial greeting. The door was shut in the passage, and it had her all to itself. It laughed in her face, it licked her hands, it stroked her head, and made murmurs over her. It approved and caressed her, it loved, and perhaps pitied her. It purred in her ear, "Cheer up, and don't cry!" It may also have meant, "You have come here to much trouble!" Hester

only understood that it was a friend giving a welcome.

She untied the strings of her hat, and spread her hands before the fire. Those whispers heard in the passage still went rustling through her ears. Lady Humphrey had said well that Sir Archie was in danger. But these people did not know that he had a friend able and willing to protect him; still less could they imagine that she (Hester) was to be the instrument to be made use of by the loving hands of that friend. Now how strangely all other interests had grown trivial compared with this one. She thought but little of Janet Golden and her lover; she thought less of Lady Helen and her gowns.

A servant brought her dinner and a lighted lamp. After dinner she unpacked her desk, and set to work to write a letter to Lady Humphrey. The wind began to rumble round the tower, and to pipe, like an organ, in the chimney. The

windows began to moan, and the faces on the tapestry to nod. Hester's first letter of tidings from Glenluce was getting written. A slim young person in a pale woollen dress, with the lamplight making a glitter about her fair bent head. This was Hester, as a person might behold her from the doorway.

END OF VOL. I.

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