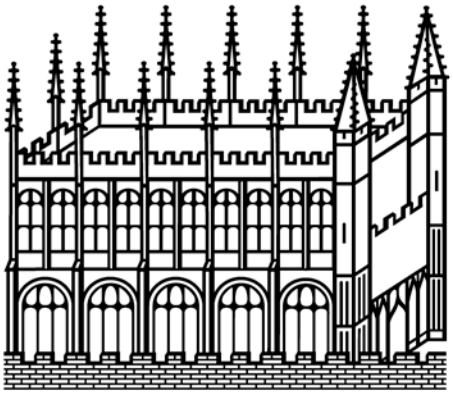
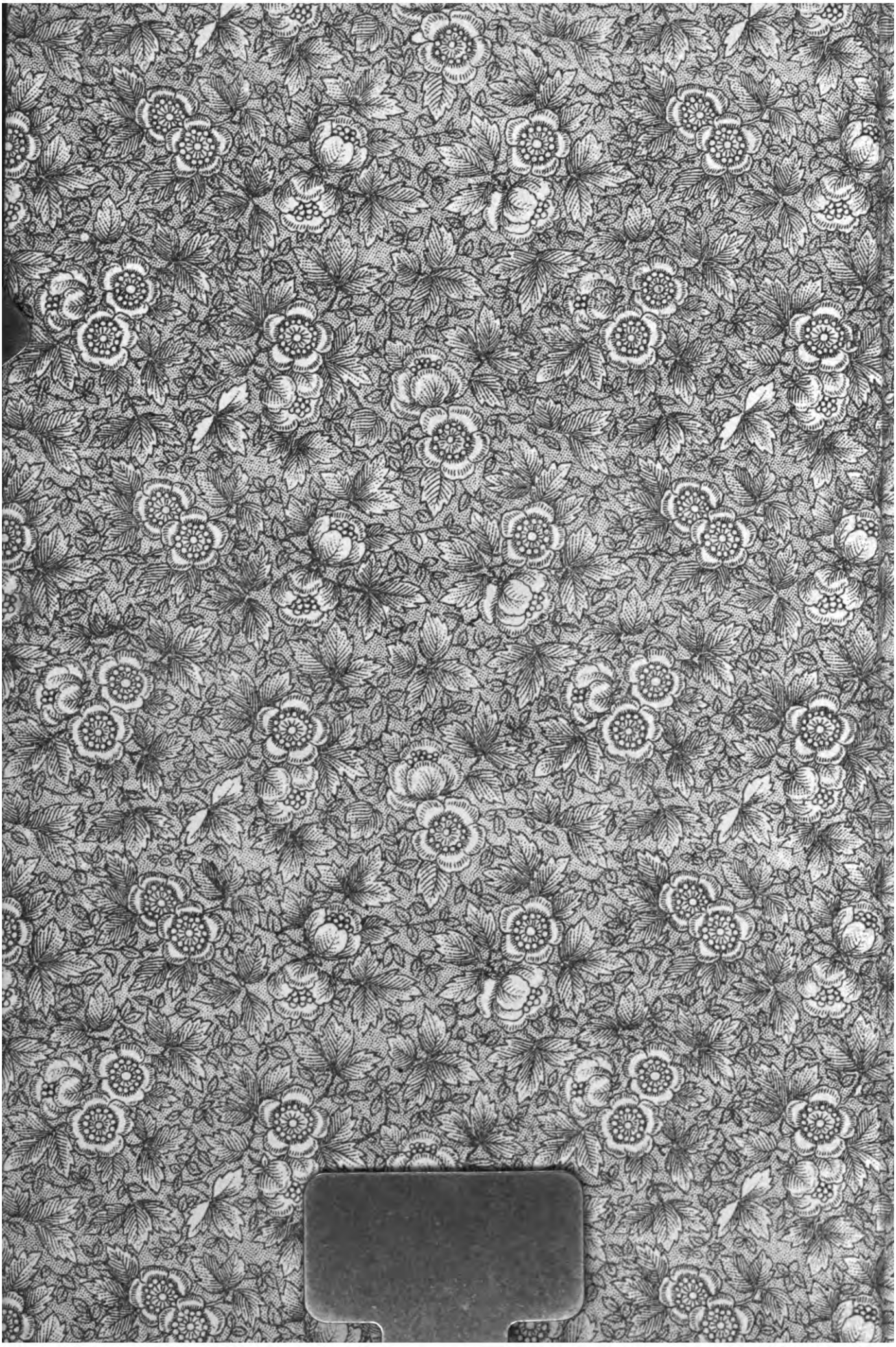
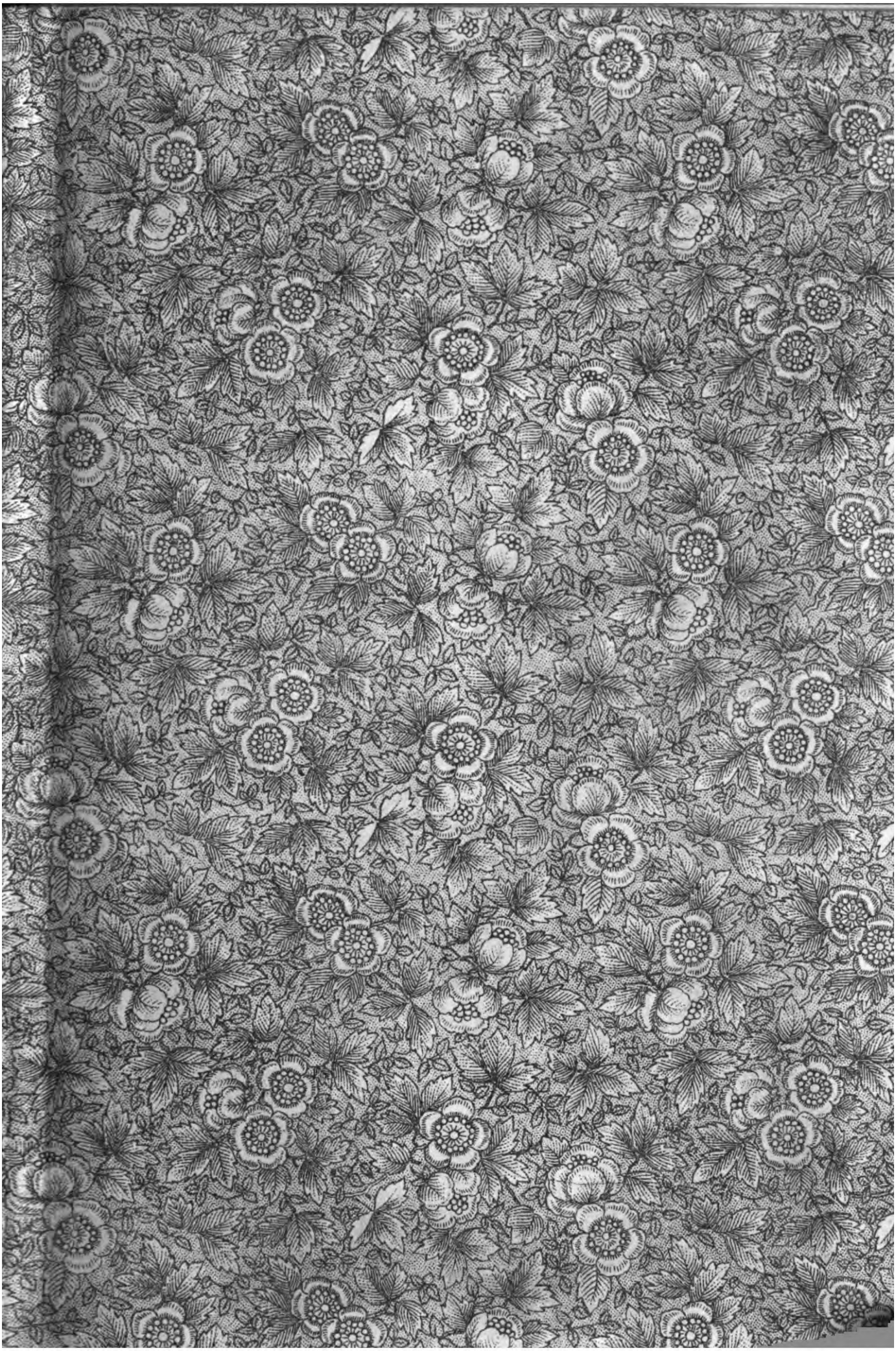


Was Hers The Fault?

By the Author of "Wooing A Sweetbriar"





WAS HERS THE FAULT?

A NOVEL.

BY

L O L O,

AUTHOR OF "A CRUEL SECRET," "WOOING A SWEETBRIAR,"
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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WAS HERS THE FAULT?

CHAPTER I.

PALAZZO LAURENTI.

HOW hot it was! The fierce July sun was beating pitilessly down on the parched, dusty coast of the Riviera, scorching the grass and searing the fair green leaves of the trees, and baking the dry earth, till it burnt and blistered the feet to tread on it, even though they were protected by the strongest and lightest of boots. The little, dancing waves of the Mediterranean flashed and glittered in the bright sunlight like so many small, revolving mirrors, till it made the eyes ache to look at them; and the light, nagging sea-breeze only served to lodge

the dry, sandy dust in the ears, eyes, nose, and hair of the unfortunate wayfarer, without affording him much relief from the suffocating heat.

"Oh, for a breath of my own native heather!" groaned Ned Huntingdon, as he trudged valiantly along the white, dusty road, which coasted round one of the numerous bays which embroider the north Italian seaboard. Surely no one but a fool, and surely no fool but an English one, would have dreamed of coming out for a four-mile walk at three o'clock on a July afternoon, with a broiling Italian sun overhead. To Ned, trained, as became a young Briton, to excel in all manly exercises, a four-mile walk had appeared a very light undertaking when he first set out on it; but already, though it was only half-accomplished, his feet were blistered, his eyes aching with the white glare, which the heat seemed to throw over every object, and his courage well-nigh exhausted. Had it not been for the shame of the thing, he would have turned back even now, and retraced his steps to Pepignio, the little village nestling on the north-west arm of the tiny bay, round which he was making his weary way; but pride urged him on.

The pretty Italian Contessa, to whom he had devoted himself all yesterday, had warned

him against attempting to make his way on foot to Palazzo Laurenti, when he had mentioned his project of doing so to her this morning, during their early swim together in the briny ocean; and his pride revolted at the idea of having to confess himself vanquished to her. He had assured her grandly that Englishmen never succumb to fatigue, and he felt himself compelled to maintain his national character in her eyes. Besides, as he was now half way on his journey, he thought he might as well persevere to the end. He had now reached the head of the little bay of Laurenti. On his right lay the sea, flashing and sparkling in the sunshine; on his left, forming a sort of natural rampart round the little gulf, and shutting it off from the rest of the world, rose the hills, clothed with olives, chestnuts, vines, and tall waving corn, already ripening for the harvest, and higher up, crowned by sweet-scented pines. Behind him, a spur jutting out into the sea, formed the north-west arm of the bay, at the furthest extremity of which Pepignio lay half-buried beneath the olive-clad hills; and in front of him projected the second arm, on which stood the Palazzo Laurenti, the object of his present pilgrimage.

The Palazzo itself could not be seen either from Pepignio or from the road

along which poor Ned was toiling, for the trees which covered the little hill on which it was built, completely concealed it on three sides; but from the open sea beyond the bay, you got a front view of its white loggias and terraces, and the broken marble steps leading down to the water edge. Its walls, once fresco painted, were now stained and soiled with age, and its carved marble porticoes, balconies, and balustrades were discoloured and broken in many places, and the whole place was fast crumbling into decay. But from the sea you did not observe all this, and the fine old Palazzo presented a very imposing appearance when viewed from a respectful distance.

It was thus that Ned Huntingdon had first beheld it, and in his admiration he had been moved to ask the boatmen the name of the ruinous old pile, and had learnt that it was the Palazzo Laurenti, after which the diminutive bay was named, and which belonged to the Conte Laurenti—his own uncle, as Ned had suddenly concluded; and he had hastily inquired whether the Conte was staying at the Palazzo. No, one of the boatmen had said, Il Signor Conte seldom came down here; but then another of the men had declared that old Marina, the fish wife, had been up to the Palazzo the day before with

some fish, and had brought back the news that the Conte had just arrived at it. Altogether, Ned was not quite certain whether Count Laurenti was at home or not; but any way, he determined to go and see the Palazzo, and if his uncle were at home, it would be grand fun introducing himself to him as his nephew, he thought. No doubt as to his being well received crossed his youthful mind. His father and uncle had been deeply offended with their sister Ida for throwing herself and her fifty thousand pounds away upon the needy Italian noble, and since her death, all communication between them and their brother-in-law had ceased. But still there was no positive quarrel between them, and Ned fancied that, if he held out the right hand of friendship to the Count, it would be readily accepted. No doubt his English relatives would be annoyed if they knew of his thus seeking the acquaintance of his Italian uncle; but he told himself that "that was all bosh." No doubt his people were very good folks in their way, but they were absurdly prejudiced; and, as far as he could make out, Count Laurenti had been guilty of nothing but the audacity of marrying his aunt Ida. And surely—he thought, a man has a right to marry any woman if he can win her.

Add to these just considerations, that

Pepignio, though pretty, was very dull, and that the prospect of becoming acquainted with his foreign relative, and beholding with his own eyes the interior of a foreign *ménage*, was irresistibly attractive to Ned's youthful imagination, and it will readily be understood how he came to be tramping along the dusty road leading to Palazzo Laurenti, the very day after it had been pointed out to him by the Pepignio fishermen, from whose boat he had first beheld it the previous evening. He was a good-looking young fellow of five-and-twenty, tall and stalwart, and manly-looking, with a heavy fair moustache, honest blue eyes, and a frank, almost boyish smile. He was not exactly handsome, speaking in the strictest sense of the term; but everyone agreed that he was very good-looking, and everyone liked him. He seemed to have the art of making himself liked wherever he went; and perhaps it was the consciousness of this that had inspired him with courage to throw himself upon the hospitality of his unknown uncle. If he could once reach Laurenti, he would be all right, he felt assured; but in the meantime he had not reached it, and the heat and dust were becoming more unendurable every minute. The scene around him was very fair, and under happier circum-

stances, Ned would have viewed it with warm admiration; but one can hardly expect a man to go into ecstasies over the loveliest scenery, when he is choked with dust, his feet are swollen and blistered, and his eyes blinded by the white glare of the heat. The only object on which our hero's gaze rested approvingly were the well-wooded heights behind Palazzo Laurenti. The promontory on which it stood consisted of two hills, the hindermost one being covered entirely with olives, and the furthest and lowest one (on which stood the Palazzo) with chestnuts and arbutus, whose light green foliage stood out well against the dark background of the olives. The promontory on which Pepignio lay was far more picturesque; its hills were much higher, and more uneven in their outline, and were interspersed with huge clumps of jagged rock; but to Ned's weary eyes the two low wooded hills behind Laurenti appeared all that was most desirable, and to gain their shelter was, at present, his only thought.

On he toiled, along the white, glaring road, keeping his eyes fixed longingly on the dark woods ahead. The dust rose of itself from the ground, and lay motionless in the hot, breathless air; nothing seemed to stir in the

heat, and the only sounds which broke the noonday stillness, were the chirping of the grasshoppers among the burnt herbage by the road side, and the soft murmur of the waves on the beach.

"The Lord be praised!" ejaculated Ned, piously, as he found himself beneath the friendly shelter of the olives. "A little more of that sun would have dissolved me entirely. It would have been a case of mysterious disappearance of a young gentleman. The only trace remaining of me would have been a small spot of grease by the road side, and that wouldn't have lasted long either in this heat."

His road lay uphill now, and was tolerably steep; but that affected him little, since it was sheltered from the sun. The air was hot even here, but it was free from dust, and was sweet and luscious with the scent of the luxurious vegetation around. By-and-by the road took a turn and began to wind round the side of the hill; and then it slanted gently downwards to a little gully, which separated the hill of olives from its lower neighbour, at the extremity of which Palazzo Laurenti was built. A lively little stream flowed bubbling and gurgling through the bottom of the gully, and in the clefts of the rocks, which rose on either side of it, grew

huge clumps of delicate maiden-hair and harts-tongue. A rustic bridge, considerably the worse for wear, crossed the gully here, and on the other side, two paths went straggling up the opposite hill, either of which might lead to the Palazzo. Finding himself unable to decide which of them to follow, Ned threw himself down on the soft turf by the way-side to rest, and laying his head back against a convenient grass mound, he closed his eyes, and gave himself up to a delicious feeling of dreamy repose.

Close to him, a tiny rivulet trickled down into the gorge, making a soft tinkling noise as it splashed in a miniature cascade over the rocks into the larger stream below; while far away could be heard the low, monotonous murmur of the unseen sea. It was very pleasant lying there, listening to the sooth-ing voices of nature, and Ned was beginning to grow dangerously drowsy, when the sound of approaching footsteps roused him, and looking up, he saw a young man descending the left-hand path behind him. This was a chance not to be lost, and hastily gather-ing himself up, Ned prepared to inquire the way to the Palazzo Laurenti.

The stranger was a singularly handsome young fellow of two or three and twenty, with a slight, graceful figure; straight, finely

chiselled features; a clear olive complexion, and a pair of glorious eyes, which would almost have lighted a plain face into beauty. His face was smoothly shaved, except for a small, carefully waxed moustache, and his hair was dark, wavy, and abundant. Yet many people would have objected to his beauty as being too effeminate; while some few might even have admired the splendid physique, and kind, honest face of the young Englishman, more than the superficial beauty of the Italian. Certainly Ned's face, though by no means strictly handsome, was the pleasanter to look upon of the two.

"May I inquire which of these roads leads to Palazzo Laurenti?" he asked, in his best French, as the young Italian, whom he recognised as one of the visitors from Pepignio, drew near.

"I cannot direct you, monsieur," returned the other curtly, darting a sharp, half-suspicious, half-defiant glance at his interlocutor; and without further words, he strode hastily across the bridge, and disappeared among the olive trees on the opposite side.

"Now, what the deuce was the matter with that fellow?" wondered Ned, as he stared after the retreating figure of the Italian. "I'm sure I spoke civilly enough to him; but he just looked as if he would have liked

to pitch me head foremost into that gully—the surly brute!"

And with this muttered comment, the young man was preparing to make his way up the right-hand path, when he perceived an old peasant woman descending the path from the left, and once more he endeavoured to ask his way. This time he met with a more civil reception, and the old lady was so captivated by his smiling blue eyes,—ladies, as a rule, always were captivated by them,—that she volunteered to re-ascend the hill a little way with him, and point out a short cut to him.

"Does vossignoria know the Signor Conte?" she inquired inquisitively.

Ned replied that he did not yet, but that he hoped to have the pleasure of making the Count's acquaintance that day, if he was at home.

"Oh, he's at home safe enough," laughed the woman. "I saw him walking on the terrace to-day with the Contessina."

"The Contessina?"

"Yes, the Contessina Ida."

"Oh, oh—to be sure; his daughter?"

"Yes, his daughter. Holy Madonna, but she is a beauty, that one."

Ned's face assumed an even more than usually cheerful expression at this; for he

had a strong partiality for ladies' society, especially if they happened to be good-looking.

"Let me see, Ida must be about grown up now," he observed reflectively.

"The Contessina was sixteen last January," said the old woman, glancing inquisitively at the young man, who was evidently a stranger to the Laurenti, and yet presumed to call the young lady by her Christian name. "I had her age from her nurse Teresa herself," she proceeded proudly. "It is now two months since she returned from her convent; and she would have been married by this time, only the Marchése Montini died just after the contract was signed. Madonna, was there ever such a misfortune! People said it was a judgment on him for betrothing himself to a heretic; though truly he was so old, that he must have died soon in any case. See, Signor, this is the path I told you of; it will cut off nearly a mile. Keep straight along—you cannot mistake it, and it will take you into the garden of the Palazzo. Addio, Signor, many thanks; and may the Madonna give you luck," she added, smiling, for it occurred to her that this fine young Saxon might be a suitor for the hand of the little Contessina.

Ned proceeded briskly along the narrow foot track, swinging his cane gaily to and fro, and

congratulating himself upon his good luck in finding both the Count and his daughter at home. A grown-up young lady would be pleasanter company than one old gentleman, and Ned selfishly rejoiced that she had not really married the old Marchése Montini.

By-and-by he found himself arrived at a low, uneven fence, through which a rickety wooden hand-gate led into a fruit orchard, filled with orange, lemon, and fig trees, covered with their green, half-formed fruit, and some of the former bearing the golden crop of last spring, as well as the green, unripe harvest of the coming autumn. Evidently this must be a side entrance to the Palazzo, thought Ned, as he opened the gate and made his way boldly among the trees. Suddenly he caught sight of a girl, stretched lazily on the ground, beneath a large, shady fig-tree; but at the sound of his steps, she raised herself slowly on her elbow, and turned a pair of lovely laughing eyes upon him, while her rosy lips half parted, as if about to utter a welcome. But as she perceived who the intruder was, the smile died away into a look of quick disappointment, which was in its turn replaced by one of intense surprise. Who could this blue-eyed stranger be, who had sprung up thus mysteriously in the middle of her father's garden, and now stood regarding her with a

smile of mingled doubt and amusement lurking round the corners of his blonde moustache? With a slow, graceful movement, she rose from the ground, and stood quietly confronting him, with a look of grave inquiry written in her soft, dark eyes. Certainly she was not at all what Ned had pictured her to himself. Like many other English people, he firmly believed that all foreign ladies (Germans excepted) were always ravishingly dressed, that their manners were graceful, airy, and piquante; and that they were usually coquettes. But this little thing looked as grave and matter-of-fact as possible; and certainly there was not a grain of consciousness or coquetry in the serious, wondering look with which she regarded him. Nor was her toilette by any means ravishing. She had on a shabby old Holland frock, which had been patched, and lengthened, and washed, times and times out of number; her broad-brimmed hat was battered, and jagged about the brim; her garden gloves were soiled, and perforated with holes; and her abundant dark hair was bundled up untidily behind her head, while one unruly tress had found its way half down her back, and several smaller locks curled saucily over her brow. Evidently she was only a school girl, and for a minute Ned felt rather disappointed at not finding a come-out young

lady, with whom it might have been possible to strike up a flirtation, if his uncle invited him to remain at the Palazzo. But this did not disturb his good temper, and it was with his usual frank, pleasant smile that he inquired, raising his hat,—

"Have I the pleasure of speaking to the Contessina Ida Laurenti?"

She gave a little grave bow, and he proceeded,—

"Then may I introduce myself to you as your cousin? My father was your mother's brother. My name is Ned Huntingdon; and I have ventured to come here in hopes of the pleasure of making the acquaintance of yourself and my uncle."

Ned brought all this out with an easy *bonhommie*, which deprived it of all *brusquerie* or awkwardness; and while he was speaking, he had time to notice that the girl had a very pretty, slim figure, in spite of her clumsy gown, and that her little, grave face looked very sweet and innocent.

"My English cousin?" she said, with a soft, dimpling smile, which lit up her whole face, and caused Ned to wonder how he could ever have thought it *grave*.

"Yes, your English cousin," he repeated, with a good-natured laugh, and holding out his broad palm.

She placed her small hand in it, rather reluctantly, as Ned fancied. Evidently she was rather shy, but she did not blush or simper as many school girls would have done; and it was with a simple courtesy that enchanted Ned, that she replied,—

"I have often heard of you, Mr Huntingdon."

"I hope you always heard good reports of me?" he said, with his hearty laugh.

She smiled, but did not seem quite certain how to reply.

"You wish to see my father? He is in the house," she said, gently, turning to walk down the path beside him.

Ned cast a longing look at the cool fig-tree beneath which she had been reposing, and remarked, suggestively, that it looked very pleasant here.

"Yes, very," she replied carelessly, and evidently not perceiving his meaning.

So he had nothing for it but to allow her to conduct him towards the Palazzo, and for a minute or two he strolled along beside her in silence, trying to accommodate his long strides to her little steps. She sauntered along very slowly—languidly, almost—as if the heat had robbed her of all energy, Ned thought; but her movements were easy and graceful, and he readily forgave her for not

appearing in any hurry to bring their *tête-à tête* to an end.

"You must be very fatigued with walking in this heat, Mr Huntingdon?" she said, presently, looking quietly up at him, and speaking in very good English, but with a pretty little accent which completely bewitched the always susceptible Ned. He was immensely relieved to find that she understood English, for though he spoke French fairly well, he naturally felt that he could make himself much more agreeable in his native tongue.

Oh no," he replied, smiling kindly down at her with his pleasant blue eyes. "It was rather hot work coming round from Pepignio, but it's awfully jolly here in the shade."

A few more remarks brought them to the Palazzo, and before entering it, Ned stood still with an exclamation of admiration at the lovely scene around. Below them stretched the blue Mediterranean; to the right, across Laurenti Bay, rose the jagged hills above Pepignio, though the village itself lay too low down to be visible from the Palazzo; and on the left rose another arm of the hill, which, though it shut out the view on that side, still looked picturesque—with the fringe of pines projecting from the ridges and clefts of the rocks on its summit. The old Palazzo itself, with its time-stained marble colonnade

and porticoes, was not the least striking feature in the scene; and over all, the glorious Italian sun was shining, drawing out colours and casting deep shadows, and softening and blending the vivid southern colouring of nature into one harmonious whole. Yes, it was very beautiful; and for a minute or two Ned paused involuntarily to admire it all, while Ida stood patiently beside him, and gazed rather wearily at the, to her, well-known scene. Then he turned back to her with a smile, and suffered her to lead him up a flight of decayed steps, and through an equally decayed portico, into a large, mosaic paved hall, which reached to the roof, and from which a flight of dirty marble stairs led to a gallery which ran round the upper part of the hall, and from which the upper rooms and corridors opened. In the centre of the hall was the marble basin of a fountain, which, however, had long ceased to play; and Ned thought what a charming place this would be to live in, if only one spent a little money in putting it in order.

"Donna Ida, Donna Ida, do you want to kill yourself going out in this heat!" screamed a harsh Roman voice, as the girl stepped into the hall; and an elderly female, clad in a gown of home-spun linen, and innocent of cap, apron, collar, or cuffs, and with a coloured

kerchief round her long yellow throat, advanced, scolding at the top of her voice. But she stopped short on catching sight of Ned, and gazed from him to Ida with an expression of stern disapproval, which brought a faint pink colour into the girl's cheeks.

"This gentleman wishes to see papa, Teresa," she said rather hurriedly; whereupon the donna della casa—or housekeeper—requested Ned sternly to follow her, and prepared to lead him to her master's presence. For a minute the young man hesitated, hoping that the young lady meant to accompany him, but she had evidently no notion of doing anything of the kind; and Mrs Teresa looked so uncompromising that he did not venture to do anything but follow her in silent submission.

Under ordinary circumstances Teresa would have requested the stranger to wait, while she carried his card to her master; but at present her sole object was to carry him off from the Contessina as speedily as possible, and she therefore conducted him without ceremony through a couple of bare, gloomy saloons, with polished carpetless floors, and scanty, faded, old-fashioned furniture, and, flinging open the door of a third apartment, announced shrilly, "Il Signor Huntingdon."

CHAPTER II.

AN EVENING AT THE PALAZZO.

THE room in which Ned now found himself was smaller than those through which he had just passed; and though its furniture was scant and stiffly arranged, a writing-table littered with papers and a well-filled bookcase gave it a more home-like appearance than the other rooms. An extremely tall, gaunt man, with a pale, cleanly-shaved face, and sunken but piercing dark eyes, with a strangely sardonic twinkle in them, was seated by the writing-table perusing a letter as Teresa banged open the door and admitted Ned. He did not catch, or did not recognise, the name which the woman mispronounced so terribly, and it was with an expression of considerable surprise that he rose from his seat and bowed grandly to the young stranger. He had an em-

broidered smoking-cap on his head, and a flowered dressing-gown hung loosely about his spare, erect figure. A dark blue line on his sallow face showed where the beard and whiskers had been shaved; and his thin, compressed lips seemed to have a perpetual sneer lurking round them. Certainly his appearance was not prepossessing, and Ned's buoyant spirits began to sink as he felt his strange uncle's piercing black eyes regarding him with a disagreeably satirical twinkle.

"To what am I indebted for the honour of this visit, sir?" began the Count, in Italian.

Ned understood what he said, but not being able to say more than a few words in Italian, he began to blunder out an explanation in French.

"Huntingdon — Huntingdon," interposed the Count, in very fair English, though he did not speak it nearly as well as his daughter. "I have the pleasure of speaking to my nephew, then! You are very welcome, Mr Huntingdon," he added, cordially.

Ned found that his uncle could be very agreeable in spite of his somewhat cadaverous appearance; and he soon found himself chatting away to him in his usual happy, fearless style.

"I'm staying at Pepignio, you know," he explained; "and last night when I was out for a row I caught sight of the Palazzo, and

learnt that it belonged to you. So to-day I thought I'd come up and introduce myself to you."

"You have given me a great pleasure by doing so," returned Count Laurenti politely. "We dine at five; you must stay and dine with us," he added, ringing the bell.

Ned readily accepted the offer, and presently a man appeared, whom the Count ordered to inform Teresa that Mr Huntingdon would stop to dinner.

After a little more conversation, in which Count Laurenti inquired after the various members of the Huntingdon family, and Ned informed his uncle of the manner in which he had made his cousin Ida's acquaintance, the man servant (who acted as butler, valet, and general utility man) reappeared and conducted the latter to a dressing-room, where, after obligingly brushing the dust from his clothes, he left him to wash his hands for dinner. The dinner was served in one of the bare, dreary rooms which Ned had passed through on his way to the library, but in the present heat the bare boards and scant furniture appeared rather cool and comfortable, he thought. Ida sat opposite him, in a neat white dress, with a deep red rose at her throat, and her dark hair falling in one rich loose curl to her waist. It was a very simple cos-

tume, and the rose was her only ornament; but she looked very fresh and sweet in it; and Ned was surprised to see how much prettier she was than she had appeared in the ill-fitting holland frock and battered old hat in which he had first seen her. All through dinner, while he was chatting away to the Count, he kept watching her surreptitiously. She lent languidly back in her chair, without attempting to join in the conversation, but her laughing dark eyes seemed to belie the demureness of her demeanour, and showed that she was listening attentively to all that passed. Once or twice Ned addressed some remark to her, and she answered him frankly with a bright dimpling smile, which played like a sunbeam in her eyes and on her lips, but she made no effort to continue the conversation with him, and so for the most part he contented himself with watching her, and secretly admiring her white, pure soft complexion and beautiful dreamy eyes.

After dinner they went into the other big saloon, which was furnished with faded white and yellow chairs and curtains, and had several large, mildewed mirrors round it. The ceiling was painted, and a couple of dilapidated chandeliers depended from it; evidently it had once been a state apartment, though to Ned it now appeared inexpressibly dreary.

He was glad to get out of it and sit on the terrace in front of the windows, sipping coffee and talking to the Count, who was looking more cadaverous than ever, in a long dark blue frock coat.

Everything outside was looking sweet and calm in the soft evening light; and the hot, pale air was heavy with the scent of roses and jessamine. Below the terrace where the two men sat, a succession of broken steps and neglected terraces led down to the trees which formed a belt between the garden and the sea shore. Over their heads could be seen the sea, and beyond that the hills on the opposite side of the bay. But what struck Ned most was the complete loneliness of the scene; for though only a few miles removed from a fashionable bathing place, the Palazzo might have been on a desert island for all the signs of life visible from it.

"Are you staying long at Pepignio?" said Count Laurenti's voice, breaking the stillness presently.

"No—that is, I am not sure," replied Ned, who fancied that if he was made welcome at the Palazzo, he might be induced to prolong his visit to the little village. "I only came there yesterday," he added; "I was staying at Celigni before that."

Celigni was the fashionable bathing place,

round the corner of the promontory of Pepignio.

"Ah," said the Count, "I expect you will soon grow tired of Pepignio, there is not much to do at it. It is quite a new thing for strangers to go there—they used all to go to Celigni before. But within the last two or three years they have got a stabilimento at Pepignio, and two or three pink villas. If they began to build a little higher up the hill (and I suppose they will do so soon), we should see them from here, which would be an advantage, and remind us that we were still in the land of the living. Now all we see of life are a few passing sails every day."

"I like the quiet; I think it is delightful," cried Ned, gazing at Ida's white-robed figure, which was leaning over the balustrade of a terrace below, beside a tall stone vase crowned with a bunch of stiff yet graceful aloes.

She was playing with a kitten, and looked very picturesque with her long dark hair falling to her waist, and Ned did not feel as if he wanted to look at anything else.

"You are young to have a taste for solitude," remarked Laurenti politely, but with a slightly sarcastic curl of his thin lips. "Now, for myself, I have arrived at that time of life when a little repose is acceptable."

"I suppose you stay here a good deal?" said Ned, who was still staring absently at Ida.

"No indeed," laughed the Count with a shrug. "It is more than two years since I was here last, and already I begin to think the quiet oppressive. Ida!" he called suddenly to his daughter.

She raised herself from the balustrade on which she was leaning, and came slowly up the hill, with her kitten in her arms.

"Yes, papa."

"Sing us something, daughter mine; it is at this hour that one enjoys music the most."

She was preparing to drop the kitten on the ground, when Ned eagerly stretched out his arms to receive it, and she gave it to him with a bright smile, asking whether he was fond of kittens.

"Very," he replied, rapturously, and, we fear, not quite truthfully; "I adore them."

Apparently, however, the kitten did not reciprocate his affection, for it mewed piteously, and endeavoured repeatedly to climb over his shoulder on to the back of his neck. Its mistress had to soothe and coax it before it could be induced to lie quiet in his arms; and as she did so, Ned remarked what lovely little white hands she had, and even contrived to place his big brown paw over one of them as it rested lovingly on the kitten's

back. It was the first time that he had touched her hand (she had worn gloves when she first shook hands with him), and the sensation was a very pleasant one to him.

"Come, my daughter, that kitten is incorrigible; do not waste thy time over it," interposed Laurenti, in his driest tones; and the girl moved away through the open drawing-room window instantly, and presently she began to sing, as Ned had never heard anyone sing before.

"Yes, she has a good voice," said the father, when his guest expressed some of his admiration to him. "But she will sing ten times better in a few years, when her voice has developed. She wants a little more teaching, but I fear she is not likely to get it."

To Ned, the father's *sang froid* was incomprehensible. He himself thought Ida's singing simply divine; and as he listened to her clear, fresh, young voice, he fell in love—for the hundredth and first time. Presently the music ceased, and a soft voice behind him asked,—

"Where is my kitten, please, Mr Huntingdon?"

Where, indeed? Ned had forgotten all about the little creature while he listened entranced to Ida's singing, and now he blushed crimson all over his honest, sunburnt face, and stum-

bling awkwardly off his chair, gazed wildly around, in search of the missing pet.

"Oh, never mind; she is sure to be safe," said the girl, standing by with quietly folded hands, and regarding the confusion and dismay of the big Englishman with a gleam of amusement in her eyes. Perhaps, after all, there was a germ of incipient coquetry in this demure little witch.

"Indeed, that kitten is a little wretch, and deserves nothing better than to be drowned," laughed Laurenti. "Come, my child, give us one more song, and we will be content."

Ida moved away to the drawing-room readily, and this time Ned accompanied her, and hung over the piano while she sang. He was very much annoyed, however, when the Count followed them, and seated himself at a little distance from the piano, but where he could overhear every word that passed between the young people. He was not ill-natured in this, as Ned imagined, but considered that he was simply fulfilling his duty to his daughter. He had taken a great fancy to young Huntingdon's frank manner and cheery smile; but he also perceived that the young fellow greatly admired his pretty little daughter, and knowing something of English ways and customs, he feared lest Ned should attempt to make love to the girl. So though

he would much have preferred to remain smoking on the terrace outside, he no sooner saw the young couple disappear into the drawing-room, than he rose with a profound sigh, and followed them. To Ida this appeared quite natural, and she would have been greatly astonished had her father allowed her to remain *tête-á-tête* with a strange young man, even though he were her cousin; but Ned felt quite savage with his uncle, and called him an ill-natured old curmudgeon in his own mind.

"I suppose it's about time for me to be going?" he said regretfully, as Ida rose a second time from the piano.

"I am afraid it looks like a storm," remarked Laurenti, going towards the open window; and indeed the wind was already sighing among the trees, and white horses were visible on the sea. As Ned came out and joined him, one or two large drops of rain began to fall heavily, and dark clouds scudded hastily across the dark blue sky, in which the moon was shining, for it was already eight o'clock,

"I'd better be off as fast as I can," said Ned looking rather blank.

"Indeed it is impossible for you to return to Pepignio to-night. See, it gets worse and worse every minute. No, no, you must

spend the night here; my valet can supply you with anything you want for your toilette," said Laurenti kindly; and Ned accepted his offer heartily, and began to think him a regular old brick.

During the rest of the evening, the two gentlemen amused themselves with *écarté*, until Ned had lost ten pounds, when he laughed good-naturedly, and informed his uncle that he would rather not play any more.

"Come, come, courage my friend," laughed the Count. "What are ten pounds to an English milor?"

"I am not a milor, you see," smiled Ned, "and if I go on, I may lose ten pounds more."

"More likely you will win this time. Come, one more game. You are too prudent, you play such low stakes that it cannot hurt much if you do lose this. Come, come, courage."

"Well, one more, since you wish it," said Ned good-naturedly, not knowing how to refuse his host any longer.

So they played one more game, which Ned won; and then he said he would rest on his laurels, and not tempt fortune further.

"What! you give up just as she begins to smile on you!" cried Laurenti. "*Peste*, but you are a wonderful young man," he

added with a rather satirical laugh as Ned still shook his head; but in his heart he rather admired his nephew's pluck, and when he bid him good-night, he shook him warmly by the hand, and said he hoped he would always be as firm as he had been to-night, in refusing to gamble.

"It is not the few pounds one loses at the beginning that matter so much," he said shaking his head reflectively. "It is the spirit that gets into one, and that never gets out. I may speak with feeling, for it is that spirit which ruined me," he concluded, with a sigh and a shrug of his long lean shoulders.

CHAPTER III.

MADAME LA MARQUISE.

NED slept soundly that night, and dreamt that he and Ida were searching for her kitten in the orange orchard where he had first met her. When he awoke, Paolo, the valet, was entering the room with hot water and a cup of chocolate, and informed him that il Signor Conte would be going down to bathe in half-an-hour, if Mr Huntingdon wished to accompany him.

Mr Huntingdon *did* wish to accompany him, and in a short time he joined his uncle, and went with him down the wild, neglected garden, where roses and other perennial flowers bloomed in rank luxuriance, and through the trees below, down to the beach. He had a delightful swim, and then, as he and his uncle were re-ascending

the hill to the Palazzo, he again mentioned the subject of his departure.

"We breakfast at eleven," said the Count politely; "will you not stay for it?"

He liked the young Englishman wonderfully well, considering how short a time he had known him; but he did not feel disposed to invite him to prolong his visit. It would have been different if there had been a lady in the house to chaperon Ida; but as it was, Laurenti thought it best to suffer his young guest to depart as soon as possible.

"Thank you," replied Ned, hesitatingly, "you are very kind; but don't you think it will get very hot for walking after eleven o'clock?"

"Possibly," replied the Count. "The storm last night has laid the dust and cooled the air; but by twelve o'clock it will probably be as bad as ever. Still, if you will stay for breakfast, I can send Paolo for a boat to row you over to Pepignio."

So it was settled; but "man proposes," etc. On his way back to the Palazzo, Ned contrived to stumble over one of the unsteady steps leading up to one of the terraces, and when he attempted to rise, he found himself unable to stand.

"It's nothing much—I've only given my ankle a twist," he said, trying to speak

lightly, as his uncle hurried up to him. But he turned very pale, and it was as much as the Count and Paolo (who was following with an armful of wet towels) could do, to get him into the house between them. It was only a sprain, he said lightly, and indeed it proved to be nothing more serious; but it was evident that he would be unable to leave the Palazzo for some time; and the Count's vexation was considerable, though he took care not to let the young man see this.

Ned, however, was rather inclined to think his accident a stroke of luck at first, since it detained him in the same house with Ida Laurenti for some time longer. But he soon found that he was not destined to see much of his little cousin, although they inhabited the same house. In the day time he was moved on to the sofa in the library, where his uncle spent most of the day reading or writing, or smoking by the open window; and where Ida seldom or never intruded. The Count was a very agreeable companion, when he chose to exert himself to talk, and he did all in his power to make the time pass pleasantly for the invalid. But Ned had an uncomfortable consciousness that his uncle must find him a terrible nuisance, and he felt very much aggrieved at the persistency with which Ida was kept out of his way. He

asked his uncle numberless questions about her; but the Count did not respond very cordially, and was careful never to let Ned see the girl for more than a few minutes in the course of the day. At last, however, about a week after Ned's accident, his uncle informed him he would be obliged to go to Celigni next day to meet his sister, Madame la Marquise de Clinville, who proposed to pay him a visit at Palazzo Laurenti.

"I shall be sorry to leave you alone," added the Count. "But my sister writes to ask me to meet her, and of course I must go."

"Of course," acquiesced Ned, cheerfully.

"Nina will amuse you more than I do," continued Laurenti, with a peculiar twinkle in his dark, sunken eyes, for he quite understood why Mr Ned was so willing to get him out of the way for a day. "She is lively and young—only twenty-five."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Ned, amazed.

"You wonder how I come to have such a young sister," laughed Laurenti, with a slight curl of his lips. "Nay, do not apologise; I assure you it is quite refreshing to meet someone who is so thoroughly natural as you are, my dear nephew. Let me explain to you how an old fellow of fifty, like myself, comes to have such a charming young sister. My father married a second time when I was quite grown

up, and Nina is my half-sister—do you now understand?"

Ned replied that he did, and the conversation was changed.

The next morning Count Laurenti departed for Celigni, leaving Ned in charge of Paolo, who read aloud very well both in French and Italian, and chattered volubly and amusingly in either tongue. To-day Ned hoped to be able to exchange a few words alone with Ida, since her father was no longer here to look after her. But the wary old Count must have given particular instructions to Teresa to look well after the young lady in his absence, for she did not venture near the library all day, nor did Ned see her in the garden opposite his windows. For once in his life he grew quite surly and cross, and at last Paolo took huff at the scant attention he paid to some of his best stories, and leaving him to his own devices, went off to gossip with Teresa. But at last, about half-past three in the afternoon, Ned espied the kitten cantering along the terrace outside his window, and in another minute, Ida followed in pursuit.

"Contessina, Contessina!" he cried wildly, while he invoked numberless blessings on the tawny head of the refractory kitten, who had led her thither. She was obliged to pause, and asked him how his foot was, though she

looked as if she was rather frightened of doing so.

"Oh, my foot's all right," cried Ned, "but I'm most awfully dull."

"Oh, papa was afraid you would be," she said, drawing a step nearer to the window, and looking at him with grave concern.

"Won't you come and talk to me?" he asked boldly. "You don't know how terribly dull I am."

"I was looking for my kitten," she answered hesitatingly.

"Never mind it; it's sure to be safe. Do come in; it must be terribly hot out there."

It certainly was hot, and perhaps the young lady was not as loath as she ought to have been to improve her acquaintance with this blue-eyed Saxon; anyway, she stepped quietly into the room, and stood beside him, with a little smile on her lips.

"I am glad Aunt Nina is coming," she said; "she will help to amuse you."

"I would rather be amused by *you*," he replied boldly.

She laughed gaily as she replied,—"Oh, but Aunt Nina is very pretty and clever; and she lives in Paris, you know, and can talk about all sorts of things."

"And have you never been in Paris?"

"Oh, no; never."

"Have you lived here all your life?"

"Not quite. We lived in Rome till I was ten years old, when poor mamma died; and then I was sent to live here with my nurse Teresa, and Mademoiselle Dupuis, my Swiss governess."

"I thought you had been educated in a convent?"

"I have been in one at Florence for two years. But mamma was afraid that if I was sent to one when I was a little girl, they would try to bring me up a Roman Catholic, so she begged papa to leave me with dear Mademoiselle Dupuis. But"—with a sudden moistening of the eyes—"she died two years ago, and then I was sent to Florence."

"And you lived here all alone with your governess?"

"Yes; and there was Teresa and sometimes another woman in the kitchen; that was all. Papa often came down for a month in the summer, and Teresa is always cross when he comes, because his man Paolo always waits at table when he is here, and does different things, that Teresa thinks her special business."

Ida laughed a little as she spoke; but Ned gazed at her with deep pity. Poor child, what a forlorn existence hers must have been!

"And don't you find it very dull here?" he asked gently.

"I did, after I first came home from the convent," she answered, after a slight hesitation and a blush which puzzled Ned. "I was all alone with Teresa for two months, you know, before papa came here."

"And don't you find it dull still? Wouldn't you like to go away to Paris with your aunt?"

"Oh, no," cried the girl, with a sudden vehemence, which perplexed Ned more than ever.

"Have you often seen Madame de Clinville?" he inquired, thinking that perhaps Ida was too shy to like the prospect of going to live with a comparative stranger.

"She used to live with us before she married. I was seven years old when she came home from her convent, and she was married almost at once. I remember I had such a lovely dress for the wedding! Then I saw her again in Florence, just when—when I was leaving my convent."

"I wish I could show you my home in England," he said musingly.

"I know mamma had two brothers—John and Pomphry.'"

"Sir Pomphry; and John, my father!"

"You have no brothers or sisters?"

"No; I am the one hope of the family."

"And has your uncle any children?'

"No, poor old fellow," laughed Ned. "You

don't seem to know much about us, cousin Ida?"

"No," she replied, blushing faintly, and afraid lest she had asked too many questions. But his jolly laugh reassured her, and she added, smiling, "No one told me anything about you; and somehow I never thought of asking."

"Quite natural," he replied laughing. "My home in England is nothing like this; but it's not by any means ugly, and it's near the sea too."

"Is it? Do you live with Lord Pomphry at Tyndale? You see" (with a little laugh) "I know the name of his house."

"No, I don't live at Tyndale; but I live near it,—and by-the-bye, Sir Pomphry's only a baronet, Contessina; and a precious high and mighty old gentleman he is too—quite grand enough for a lord. We call him Sir Pompous Huntingdon at home."

"But that is not his name?" she said, looking puzzled.

"No, only a nickname; because he's such a pompous old boy."

She regarded him gravely for a minute, without attempting to laugh; then she asked irrelevantly whether it was true that it was always raining in England.

"No, indeed," Ned was beginning indig-

nantly, when a shrill voice was heard shouting for "Donna Ida!" on the terrace outside, and with a quick, startled movement, the girl ran out of the room, just as Teresa appeared at the window.

"Is the Contessina here, vossignoria?" asked the old woman sharply.

"No," replied Ned innocently.

"She has been here, though," muttered the nurse, crossing the room, and picking up Ida's handkerchief, which lay on the floor near the door. And then she marched away without another word, and Ned felt that he had probably got his little cousin into a nasty scrape, by enticing her into a *tête-à-tête.*

"Poor little soul!" he thought, pityingly; "what a lonely life hers has been. And if her intended hadn't died so opportunely, they'd have married her to a man old enough to be her father! By Jove! what a dear little thing she is, and what a sweet little wife she would make. I wonder why that old father of hers seems so anxious to keep her out of my way?" By which reflections, it will be seen that Mr Ned was pretty far gone.

Dinner was postponed till six o'clock that evening, as Madame de Clinville did not arrive till half-past-four, and could not possibly be expected to rest herself and perform her toilette in less than an hour-and-a-half.

When she arrived,—accompanied by a maid and a courier, much to Mrs Teresa's dismay,—she went straight to her own apartments; so Ned saw nothing of her till dinner-time. His portmanteau had been brought over from Pepignio, and now, with the assistance of Paolo, he donned a suit of evening clothes, and was rolled on his sofa up to the dinner-table, and propped into such a position with pillows, that he could eat his meat comfortably at table with the others. Here Count Laurenti found him when he came to look for him, and inquired whether he had passed a very dull day all by himself.

"So you are enjoying your dinner in anticipation?" he laughed, looking at the young man with a peculiar twinkle in his dark eyes, which made Ned feel vaguely uncomfortable.

"And how did you amuse yourself all day?" he added. "Did you find it insufferably dull while deprived of my society?"

Something in his manner made Ned fancy that Teresa must have informed him of his *tête-à-tête* with Ida; so he said boldly,—

"I was horribly dull all the morning without you, my uncle; but this afternoon I got hold of my cousin, as she was running past the window in pursuit of her kitten, and told her how dull I was, etc., etc., and made her amuse me a little."

"How you must adore that kitten," remarked the Count, with the utmost gravity; but in his heart he liked the young fellow for his frankness. Still, the sooner he went the better, he decided; since he was evidently bent upon making love to Ida.

"I should think you would soon be able to walk now?" he said cheerfully.

"Oh, I'm sure I shall," acquiesced Ned, who was growing very tired of his confinement to the library sofa.

Here Paolo entered with the soup; and presently a soft rustle was heard in the drawing-room, and Madame de Clinville entered, leaning on Ida's arm. She was a tiny brunette—a whole head and shoulders shorter than Ida, though the latter was only of middle height—and was undeniably pretty in her own style. Having been informed that there was a good-looking young man in the house, she had arrayed herself in a charming costume of black and crimson; and being in the country, she had seen fit to discard all jewels (except rings, with which her little fingers were perfectly laden), and with a sweet simplicity, wore only natural roses, to match the *garniture* of her dress, in her bosom, and among the raven coils of her elegantly arranged hair. She advanced smiling, and bringing with her a faint, mysterious perfume,

as if a flower had walked into the room; and beamed graciously upon Ned as her brother presented him to her, and refused playfully to listen to his apologies for not being able to rise to receive her.

"I have heard of your unfortunate accident, monsieur," she said, in good English, though she did not speak it with nearly such a pretty accent as her niece. Indeed, for such a little woman, her voice was wonderfully harsh and loud. "It is now a week that you are obliged to lie on that wretched sofa?"

"The sofa is very comfortable, Madame; but one does get tired of being cooped up in one position all day you know."

"Ah, you see what it is to be a strong young man! Now for me, I ask nothing better than an excuse to lie still all day in this weather. But you English are so energetic; nothing will satisfy you but racing in the hot sun as if you were going for a prize. That is what you call a constitutional, is it not? *Ma foi*, I would not have an English constitution for all the world, since it takes so much trouble to keep it well."

"Thus it is that the English overrun the world," observed Laurenti, laconically.

"Ah! villain!" cried his sister, shaking her finger angrily at him, "I will not permit you to talk such lies. Do the French and

Italians never travel then? *Ma foi*, they go as far as those English, and further."

The little dinner-party passed off cheerily. Madame de Clinville took a fancy to Ned, and laughed, and chatted, and made herself very agreeable to him; and also helped him on good-naturedly to be agreeable to her. He was so simple, this good-looking young Englishman; and he allowed the little lady to see his admiration for her so openly in his eyes. The Count, too, could talk very well when he chose; and though Ida did not talk as much as the others, yet she said more than she had ever done when alone with her father and cousin; and her merry laugh, whenever anything amusing was said, did one's heart good to hear.

After dinner, they all went together into the drawing-room, and Madame de Clinville suggested that they should go out on to the terrace.

"Not yet, Nina," said Laurenti, who was rolling Ned's sofa across the floor. "The dew is just falling. Wait half-an-hour, carina, and then it will be safe."

Madame turned away from the window with a shrug, and a pretty little *moue*, and glanced contemptuously round the shabby old salon.

"*Dio*, is that *me?*" she screamed, catching sight of her own figure, hideously distorted in

one of the large dimmed mirrors which adorned the walls. "Positively, I look like a monkey! Giacomo (to her brother), how can you reconcile it to your conscience to keep such a monstrous glass in your house? It has nearly killed me with fright. *Allons*, let us see whether the shock has left me any voice," and seating herself at the piano, she began to sing—an elaborate operatic piece. She sang wonderfully, no doubt, but her voice had none of Ida's natural beauty or sweetness, and Ned was glad when at last she made her niece take her place at the instrument.

"But the dear child sings charmingly!" she cried enthusiastically to her brother.

"She has not your polish," returned Laurenti suavely.

"Ah, but she has been excellently taught; a *very* little more training will perfect her. And I promise you her voice is ten times better than mine. *Allons cherie*, let us hear you sing something else. Is it not a ravishing voice, monsieur?" to Ned.

"Lovely!" he replied heartily, "and her voice is so sweet in speaking too."

"Yes," acquiesced Madame, glancing sharply at him. "She has an English voice for speaking, and an Italian one for singing."

After the music, they went out on to the terrace, and sipped chocolate, and smoked—

Madame de Clinville also smoking a cigarette with the utmost grace. She grew very sentimental with Ned; and he, the young sinner, was not backward in meeting her advances half way. In the course of conversation, he learnt that Monsieur le Marquis de Clinville was at Biarritz for the summer; that he was fat, a gourmand, old, and unsympathetic. Poor Madame la Marquise! truly she was much to be pitied from her own account; and yet she had sufficient spirit left to laugh heartily at Ned's jokes, nor was there anything in her air or appearance to give one the idea of her being a blighted being.

CHAPTER IV.

COUNT LAURENTI'S DISCOVERY.

TEN more days passed away, and at last Ned was going to leave Palazzo Laurenti. He had been able to walk for the last three days, but he had appeared in no hurry to take his departure, and Madame de Clinville had done all she could to induce him to remain at Laurenti as long as she did. She had come for the purpose of seeing her niece, and arranging the girl's future with her brother; but she found the life here very dull, and looked upon Ned as a perfect godsend. He was so cheery, and unaffected, and jolly; and though his face might not be particularly handsome, yet he was amusing, and always ready to flirt in an open, good-natured way, whenever Madame bid him. He might not be as devoted or obsequious as many of the

pretty little Marquise's Parisian adorers; but he was better than no one, and Madame made the best of him. So long as she remained in the house, Count Laurenti was quite content to allow the young man to remain also; but now her visit was drawing to a close, and he raised no objection when Ned reluctantly observed that it was about time for him to take his departure too. The life at Laurenti was certainly very quiet, but Ned had enjoyed the latter part of his visit (since Madame de Clinville's arrival) immensely. He liked the little Marquise, and found her a very amusing companion; and then, too, since she had been here to chaperon Ida, the girl used often to come and sit beside him while he was talking to her aunt, and he was sometimes able to draw her into the conversation too; though, as a rule, Madame la Marquise did not allow him to bestow many words on any one but herself.

But now the end had come. Madame de Clinville was to leave Laurenti the day after to-morrow, and to-morrow Ned was going also.

"He is a nice young man—a very nice young man, and very like my poor Ida," soliloquised Count Laurenti, as he strolled down towards the sea on the morning previous to Ned's departure. "But it would

never do to allow him to remain here after Nina went—it would never do at all."

It was an hour before the time when the Count and his guests usually repaired to the sea for a sociable swim together, and it was a wonderful thing for him to be abroad so early. He went down on to the shore, and paced slowly on, past the little bathing-boxes which had been erected for the convenience of the dwellers at the Palazzo, till at last he came to a boat drawn up in a little creek, and with a fisherman dozing lazily in the bottom of it. The man sat up and regarded the Count uneasily; but the latter proceeded quietly with his walk without addressing him. There were the prints of a man's feet in the soft sand, and Laurenti followed them, till they disappeared among the trees which reached down the hill almost to the water's edge.

"I thought so," he muttered, while his thin lips twitched ominously; and with quickened steps he made his way up the narrow foot track, till suddenly he came upon a sight which seemed to transfix him for a minute, though he had half expected to find something of the sort. There, in front of him, seated on the trunk of a fallen tree, was Ida, and beside her, with his arms round her waist, was a young man, handsome as Apollo, as the

Count perceived at a glance. With a deep curse he strode towards the pair, who started up at the sound of his approaching steps in trembling alarm. With gleaming eyes, livid face, and tightly-compressed lips, Laurenti advanced towards the young man, who cowered and shrank before him in evident dismay and fear. One was an oldish man, and the other was a young one; but the former certainly seemed likely to get the best of the encounter, whatever it was to be, for he was tall and powerfully built, and was besides under the influence of an overpowering fury; whereas the latter was slim and effeminate looking, and was pale and quaking with fear. But ere her father could reach the stranger, Ida, who had been standing in silent terror, with her hand pressed convulsively to her heart, and her eyes dilated with fear and excitement, sprang forward and threw herself on her knees in front of him so as to impede his progress.

"Father, father," she cried wildly, clasping her arms tightly round his knees, "do not touch him—do not touch him. Oh, go Luigi, go," she continued piteously to her lover, who, after a moment's hesitation, obeyed her, and fled precipitously down hill towards his boat.

It would have been impossible for Laurenti to shake himself free from his daughter's clasp all at once without positive brutality, and by

the time he had succeeded in loosening her arms from about his knees, her lover was out of sight among the trees."

"Let him go, the low coward," muttered the Count, with a contemptuous shrug. "It is not worth while to waste one's anger on such a contemptible cur."

Apparently, however, he entertained a higher opinion of his daughter's worth, for he raised her roughly from the ground, and grasping her arm with a grip that made her cry out with pain, he hurried her up the path towards the house.

"Oh, papa," she sobbed piteously, raising her dark, beseeching eyes to his face, "do let me marry him; I love him so!"

"What! Let you marry that low-born cur!" hissed Laurenti, while his face paled, and his sunken eyes glittered with fury.

"If you knew how I love him!" she sobbed, burying her face in her hands.

"Love! What has a girl like you to say to love? I would have done well to allow them to make you a Roman Catholic, I begin to think. Perhaps the priests might have kept you in some order; and at least I could always have shut you up in a convent if you did anything to disgrace yourself."

Ida could only sob and tremble; and her father marched her into the Palazzo without

uttering another word, and locked her securely into her room. Then, after calling Teresa and saying a few sharp words to her, he returned to the beach, where he found his sister and Ned already disporting themselves in the water.

"Where have you been, Giacomo?" cried the former. "Paolo said you and Ida had gone out before us, so we expected to find you here."

"I did not sleep well last night, and went out early for a little stroll. As for Ida, I know nothing about her," he added; and as Ned happened to have his head under the water at this minute, he made a sign to his sister not to pursue the latter part of the subject.

She nodded to show that she understood that something was wrong, and insisted upon returning home much sooner than usual (greatly to honest Ned's surprise), in order to have a talk with her brother before the eleven o'clock breakfast; for she was burning with curiosity to learn what had happened, besides being considerably alarmed by the ominous expression of Laurenti's face.

She retired to her own room on reaching the Palazzo, and, as she expected, her brother shortly followed her, and inquired whether she could spare him a few minutes, as he had something important to communicate to her.

"What is it?" she cried, dragging him into the room before he had finished his speech. "I know it is something about Ida. Tell me quick, or I shall expire of impatience."

"You need not be in such a hurry to hear bad news," he replied, with a polite sneer on his thin lips. "For the last two or three mornings I have remarked a little boat cross from Pepignio to our beach, and, on making inquiries, I discovered that Ida often went out into the garden before any of us were down; so this morning I went for a stroll through the plantation down by the shore, and I found—what do you think?—Ida in the arms of a young man. So much for her demure air and innocent manner."

Madame de Clinville sank on to her chair, and raised both her hands in pious horror. The idea of a girl like that having a lover! It was too shocking.

"And yet, perhaps, it is natural," she murmured.

"Natural for my daughter to forget herself so far as to allow a strange young man to address her!" said Laurenti savagely.

"Eh, *mon Dieu*, do not look at me like that," cried Madame deprecatingly. "I only meant that all women have a natural tendency towards coquetry; that is the reason that girls require such constant watching."

"I thought Teresa could have been trusted to look after the girl for a short time."

"You ought to have sent Ida back to the convent when the Marchese Montini died, until we could have found another *parti* for her."

"The convent was expensive—but why talk of what might have been! The question is, what is to be done now?"

"Is it impossible for her to marry this lover of hers?" asked the Marquise, who was good-natured and very romantically inclined.

"Impossible, I tell you, Nina. I know the fellow well; he is an artist, without a penny in the world, except what he makes by his brush."

"Ah, then, of course, it is out of the question," sighed Madame regretfully. "What is his name?"

"Luigi Olivetti; and if you care to know more about him, I may add, for your benefit, that his father was a merchant, who made some money and then gambled it all away, after purchasing the title of a Count—the same as Migul, by the way" (with a cynical laugh). "Is there any other point on which you would care to be informed about him?"

"*Dio*, yes," cried the lady, in nowise discomposed by her brother's caustic tone. "How did he contrive to meet Ida?"

"That I do not know, and it would be useless to ask her, as she would probably tell us a pack of lies about it."

"Come, come, you must not vex yourself too much about this," said the sister good-naturedly. "Things might have been worse. Here we know no one, and there will be no talk and no scandal. You must send the girl back to a convent for a little while, and next winter I will take her to Paris and bring her out. Let me see, I know of a charming convent in Paris—just the very thing for Ida. She can perfect her singing there, and they will finish her in other ways. She is charming, that dear child; but she is too much of a child to come out in society. Her manners require forming, and she must learn to comport herself better. They will take all that is too natural out of her at the Convent de Sacré Cœur. I know several young persons who have been finished there, and their manners are ravishing."

"It is always an expense keeping her at a convent," said Laurenti lugubriously. "Ida is sixteen now, and it is high time for her to get married."

"She only turned sixteen last January—not quite six months ago."

"Well, and did you not marry when you were fifteen, my sister?"

"But I was older for my age than she is—girls are so different, you know. And then I did not fancy myself in love with any one; I married first, and amused myself afterwards."

"A very wise and judicious course," observed the Count, with a profound bow. "But it is precisely because Ida has fallen in love that I should like to marry her soon."

"Well, you see, there are difficulties," sighed the Marquise thoughtfully. "Ida is of noble birth, and she is pretty; but so are lots of other girls: and then, you see, she has no dowry, and she is a Protestant."

"Religion does not go for much now-a-days, my sister."

"*Dio*, but it does," cried Madame, scandalised. "I know of several young men in want of wives, but the parents would object to Ida as a Protestant."

"She is a pretty girl—lots of men will be sure to wish to marry her; and we are not under our priests' thumbs as completely as you ladies, you must remember."

"A man may not be religious himself, and may yet wish his wife to be so. They do not care to marry a girl whose creed puts her out of the *mode*. Ah, I always told you you made a mistake in yielding to your wife about that. If she had lived it would have been different, but when she was dead—!"

"Surely you would not counsel me to break my promise to the dead?"

"Ah, bah, what is the good of talking of what cannot be helped! Ida is a Protestant —and a very obstinate little one too, I should think, from one or two things she said to me when I spoke to her on the subject—and it only remains for us to find her a Protestant husband. What do you say to that good English cousin, Mr Ned Huntingdon?"

"Ned Huntingdon!"

"Well? Surely you can see that he is in love with her. He flirts with me, you say? Bah! that is only *pour passer le temps.* I tell you he would be glad to marry her if you consented. Now, of course, I cannot possibly tell whether he is rich or not, but from what he told me of his home, I should think he must be."

"His uncle, Sir Pomphry Huntingdon, has no children, so Ned is his heir presumptive. And I know his father had fifty thousand pounds (for the benefit of my English readers I put this in English figures), the same that Ida had."

"Well, I will speak to him, and send him to you."

"I hope Ida will not tell him to his face that she won't marry him."

"Oh, if she is obstinate, we mustn't let him see her to-day. You will see she will soon get over her love affair; I do not believe

a girl as young as she is has it in her to fall *really* in love."

So when the breakfast hour arrived, Madame de Clinville informed Ned that Ida had a bad headache, and could not leave her room ; whereupon Ned's face fell so terribly that the lady nearly laughed outright, and shot a quick, triumphant glance at her brother across the table.

After breakfast she had a long confidential talk with the young man, and for the first time since her arrival she spoke to him about her niece, and told him all about her previous engagement to the old Marchese Montini.

"In one way, I am glad Ida did not marry him," she sighed. "He was an old monster of ugliness, and the girl would have been miserable with him."

"Yet you helped to engage her to him," interposed Ned, with considerable heat.

"No, indeed ; I had nothing to say to that affair. It was all arranged by our cousin, the Marchesa Rositto, and Signiora Ravelli, a relation of Marchese Montini's."

"And you disapproved of the marriage ?" asked Ned eagerly.

"Well, of course I was sorry for the girl ; it could not have been a very pleasant marriage for her. And yet it was not a bad match for her in many ways, for the Marchese

was of an old family and moderately well off, though not rich ; and as Ida has no dowry and is a Protestant, she cannot hope to marry very well. I am going to bring her out next season in Paris, you know ; and I shall be very well satisfied if I can secure as good a *parti* as the Marchese Montini for her, I assure you."

Ned ground his teeth, and turned hot and cold all at once ; and after regarding him attentively for a couple of minutes, the lady said softly,—

"Come, Mr Huntingdon, do not fear to confide in me. Am I right in supposing that you are yourself attracted by my niece?"

"Oh, Madame, dare I venture to hope that you will be my friend?" cried Ned, feeling ready to fall down and worship the little woman on the spot.

"Of course you may," she laughed gaily, extending her hand, which he caught eagerly and raised to his lips.

"I would have spoken sooner, but, from my uncle's manner, I feared he objected to me as a suitor for his daughter's hand."

"Why should he object? I suppose you have the means to support a wife?"

"Oh yes, if she will be content to live quietly in England.

"*Allons*, then, I will speak to my brother if you like, and you can see him after I have

prepared him for your news. Not that he will be inclined to object—he was only afraid that you might try to make love to Ida *à l'Anglaise*, which, you know, would not have done at all."

"But I was going to tell you that I did speak to Ida yesterday."

"You spoke to Ida herself?"

"I asked her to marry me—why, was there anything so very shocking in that?"

"It was immoral," said Madame.

"I hope not," laughed Ned.

"But it is no laughing matter, Monsieur."

"But, my dear Madame, surely you must understand that I do not wish to marry my cousin unless she accepts me of her own free will."

"Certainly not; but you should have spoken to her father or me first. However, I know you have strange customs in England, so I suppose I must not scold you too severely for your indiscretion. And what did Ida say?"

"Begged me not to speak of it, and ran away," replied the young fellow dolefully.

"Bah! she was frightened, that was all. You know she has only just left the convent, and she is shy, and knows nothing about love-making."

"You think that was all?"

"I am sure of it; and besides, very likely

she felt that it was not right for her to listen to you."

This view of the case enchanted Ned, and he implored Madame de Clinville to lose no time in speaking to her brother for him.

"I will go at once," she replied briskly. "Since you go away to-morrow morning, you should speak to him to-day."

So she departed on her mission, leaving Ned alone in her dressing-room (where the above conversation had taken place) in a very hopeful frame of mind. Of course Ida had been frightened by his sudden love-making last night. He had found her alone in the drawing-room before dinner, and had asked her to be his wife rather abruptly, for he feared every minute to be interrupted by the Count or Madame de Clinville ; and the girl had certainly looked startled and terrified, and after saying nervously that it was impossible, she had flown out of the room like a frightened hare, and had not returned till both her father and aunt had descended for dinner. Ned had been terribly disheartened by her refusal at the time, but now he began to understand that he must have startled her ; and very probably, as Madame de Clinville had suggested, she had been afraid of getting into a scrape if she listened to him, since her father seemed such a strict old codger.

CHAPTER V.

NED PROPOSES.

FOR half-an-hour Ned paced up and down the room, growing momentarily more and more impatient, til at last Madame de Clinville reappeared, and told him that her brother was waiting to see him in the library.

"So, my sister tells me, you wish to marry Ida?" began Laurenti urbanely, as his nephew entered his room.

"If I have your consent," replied the young man rather awkwardly, for such interviews must always be more or less formidable to young suitors.

"As far as my personal feelings go, I can only say that nothing would give me greater pleasure than to have you for a son-in-law as well as a nephew. Now it remains to be seen whether other things suit. Do

you understand that I can give Ida no dowry?"

"I am willing to take her without a penny. I am not rich, but I can offer my wife a tolerably comfortable home. I have one thousand a-year of my own, and when my mother dies I come into two more."

"And you are Sir Pomphry's heir, are you not?"

"He has no children, and unless his wife dies and he marries again (which, however, is very improbable), I shall be his heir."

"And he is very rich, Sir Pomphry, is he not?"

"He has nine thousand a-year, but it's only the estate that's entailed, and it is only worth four thousand a-year. The other five thousand my uncle can leave to any one he likes; still, he has always given me to understand that they are to come to me too."

"I suppose," said Laurenti after a pause, during which he reflected that Sir Pomphry Huntingdon must be close upon seventy, and that in ten years at the outside Ned would probably be reigning in his stead,—"I suppose you and your wife would live with your mother, would you not?"

"Well, we could if you wished it," replied Ned doubtfully; "but as a rule young wives like to be in houses of their own, don't they?"

"In England perhaps; but not here. Three thousand a-year makes a much better income for three people, than one thousand does for two, and perhaps more."

"Oh, of course we'd be much better off if we lived with my mother," replied Ned readily; reflecting that, by this arrangement, there would be no need for him to give up his hunters.

"Of course you would; but the question now is, would your mother receive you?"

"I'm certain she would; and I'm sure she'll be awfully fond of Ida."

"Still, I should like to be assured that you had both her consent and your uncle's before marrying my daughter."

"Oh, they're sure to be all right."

"I am not so sure about that, my friend. They have never forgiven me because I refused to allow them to dictate to me how I was to bring up my own child."

Ned coloured uncomfortably, for he knew quite well what the Count meant. Seven years ago, when the late Contessa Laurenti died, her brothers had felt it their duty to see that her husband (whom they both regarded as a hopeless ne'er-do-well) did not neglect her child. Sir Pomphry had offered to pay all the expenses of her education, provided Count Laurenti allowed her to be placed

at a good London school and brought up in the Protestant faith; and John Huntingdon, who was a clergyman in the Church of England, had written a long dictatorial letter to his brother-in-law, abusing the errors of the Romish Church, and exhorting him not to allow the child Ida to be brought up in them. No doubt the Huntingdons acted well according to their lights, for they knew Laurenti to be a dissipated foreign gambler, and had good reason to suppose that he would bestow very little care upon his young daughter; but unfortunately they forgot that, because a man is poor, and has led a fast life, it does not follow that he must be devoid of pride and natural affection, and they couched their letters in terms which were, to say the least, offensively patronising and dictatorial. Sir Pomphry seemed to take it for granted that the needy Count would be only too thankful to be relieved of the burden of his child's maintenance; and the Rev. John did not attempt to disguise his belief that his brother-in-law was one of the lost. Laurenti wrote them both a courteous letter in reply, and assured Sir Pomphry that, though he was certainly poor, he was still able to support his child, without allowing her to be dependent on the charity of her "great" English relations; and informing John politely, that he should certainly place Ida at a convent

to finish her education, if he saw fit. He said not one word about his promise to his dead wife to bring her child up in her faith, and the brothers Huntingdon concluded, from the tone of his answer to John, that he intended the child to grow up a member of the Romish Church. One thing was clear to them—Count Laurenti would stand no interference with his child; and they accordingly washed their hands of both him and Ida, and from that day to this all communication had ceased between them and him, though no formal quarrel had taken place. All this Ned knew, for he had been a lad of sixteen at the time of his aunt Ida's death, and he remembered distinctly the rage into which Laurenti's letter had thrown his father, and the unsparing abuse which the latter and Sir Pomphry had heaped upon the absent Count.

"I do not fancy Sir Pomphry, at any rate, will be pleased at the idea of your marrying my daughter," added Laurenti, smiling at the discomforted expression of his nephew's face.

"I can answer for my mother's consent certainly, and as for my uncle, what does it matter if he does object at first? He can cut me out of five thousand a-year, but even then I shall not be poor; and I don't think he will be really so angry as all that; he is

always wanting me to marry, and I am sure he will like Ida when he sees her."

"He will not like it. You must often have heard him abuse me. No, don't protest or look vexed; I've no doubt I deserved all the abuse he heaped on me. I married your Aunt Ida against her brother's wishes, and since then I've gambled away her fifty thousand pounds. I was not unkind to her, as her brothers tried to make out, and I think I made her tolerably happy; but I have lost her money, and so it is that her child has no fortune."

"I do not want money with my wife."

"That is well," replied Laurenti drily; and turning to his writing-table, he unlocked a drawer and took out an old leather jewel-case, champed with iron.

"This is all the dowry Ida will have," he said quietly, unlocking the case, and beckoning Ned to approach.

The young man accordingly drew near the writing-table, and an exclamation of mingled surprise and admiration escaped him as his uncle raised the lid of the casket, and displayed a set of magnificent diamonds, glittering on a bed of white satin. Laurenti lifted out one tray after another, and displayed the whole set—necklace, earrings, bracelets, brooch, and two lovely stars for the hair. There were also three handsome rings—a diamond, an opal,

and a diamond and sapphire—besides several smaller trinkets which had belonged to the late Contessa.

"There was a diamond tiara as well," said Laurenti, "but—but I sold that. Ida—my wife never wore it, and I was hard up for money at the time I sold it. I don't know why I have kept these so long, only that poor Ida was so fond of them, and begged me to keep them for her daughter. You see" (with a dry laugh) "I *am* influenced by affection to a certain extent, though Sir Pomphry Huntingdon and his brother did not consider me a fit guardian for my own child."

"They are superb," exclaimed Ned, regarding the diamonds admiringly, and wisely avoiding taking any notice of the latter part of his uncle's speech. "Very few girls have such a handsome dowry."

"They were family jewels; but as I have no son and am the last of the family, they can go to Ida. There were other sets which I sold, but my wife had such an affection for these that I did not like to part with them. I suppose you think me a sentimental old fool; you can tell Sir Pomphry so if you like, but I don't suppose he'll give me credit for much sentiment."

"But you will not allow his prejudices to stand between me and Ida?"

"Well, I would not like my girl to marry into a family that did not want her. You ought never to have come to see me at all, you know, by rights—"

"I am independent of my uncle, and I do not see why I should allow myself to be influenced by his unjust prejudices."

"Well, well; I like you for yourself, and if you are still of the same mind this time next year, you may have Ida."

"But why am I to wait so long?" asked Ned blankly.

"I wish Ida to return to a convent and finish her education—"

"But you were going to have married her two months ago to another fellow."

"That was different. Montini was old and could not afford to wait, but you can; and as this is a *love match*, upon which you are bent, it will be as well to wait and see whether your affection proves durable."

"I am certain it will."

"So all young fellows think. If your love is real, it will not hurt by waiting a year."

"But is Ida to be shut up in a convent all that time?"

"No, no; only for a few months. My sister will take her to Paris this winter, and introduce her into society. She is too much of a child to marry yet; she wants forming."

"But I do not want her to be formed," interposed Ned hotly. "I want her exactly as she is."

Laurenti laughed outright at the young fellow's impatience, and patting him reassuringly on the back, declared that Madame de Clinville had no intention of demoralising her niece in any way.

"But it is always better for a girl to see something of society, for her own sake, before she marries," he added. "A girl who marries straight out of a convent does not have a fair chance; you must see that yourself."

Ned did see it, and though he thought the Count's present words inconsistent with the fact of his having betrothed his daughter to the Marchese Montini before she left her convent, yet he refrained from saying so, and merely asked whether he might see Ida before he left the Palazzo.

"I think it would be better to say nothing to her just yet," replied Laurenti persuasively.

"But why? I do not understand your motives for putting me off like this. I do not want the girl to be forced to marry me—"

"Certainly not," interposed Laurenti, sauvely.

"Then may I not see her myself, and ask her whether she will have me?"

"Impossible! For her aunt will tell her if you wish; but you must know that in Italy young girls are not allowed to see their lovers alone, as they are in England."

Ned fancied this must be an exaggeration, for surely, he thought, a girl *must* be allowed to be alone *sometimes* with her future husband, even in Italy. But he was a foreigner, and knew little or nothing about the habits and customs of the country; and his uncle looked so shocked at his even suggesting to speak to Ida, that he hardly ventured to press the question further. But he looked and felt very dissatisfied, and Laurenti hastened to add,—

"You must remember that until you have been to England and seen your relations, nothing definite can be settled; and I do not think it would be wise to speak to Ida while there is a chance of all this coming to nothing. When you have your mother's consent, Ida shall be told of your offer, and, if she is willing to marry you, you can be married next spring, by which time she will have seen a little of the world."

This sounded so plausible, that Ned could not raise any further objections; and so it was finally settled. He saw nothing of Ida all the rest of that day—she was still ill in bed with her headache, he was told; but the

following morning she appeared at breakfast, looking pale and heavy-eyed after her late indisposition, and Ned was able to talk to her a little in her aunt's presence before the hour of his departure arrived. The girl was evidently nervous and ill at ease with him, but he told himself that that was natural after what had passed between them the other evening; and so he went away, feeling happy and confident that he would soon win her, and quite unsuspicious that anything was wrong.

CHAPTER VI.

NED'S HOME.

TYNDALE COURT, Sir Pomphry Huntingdon's place, was situated on one of the loveliest parts of the south English coast. It was built on some white chalk cliffs, and had a splendid view of the sea on one side, while on the other lay the park and gardens, both of which were very fine; for as the ground slanted down hill on the land side, they were in a great measure protected from the sharp sea breezes, which might have interfered with the growth of the trees and flowers. About three miles below the Court, on the land side, lay the little town of Lynborough, where the late Rev. John Huntingdon had held a living, and where his son and widow still resided. No one could ever explain how Lynborough ever came to be built at all; for it was not pretty, nor was there anything about it to

attract residents. It was not a sea-port, nor had it any special industry or *raison d'être;* it was simply a very ugly, stupid, out-of-the-way little town, with the disadvantages of both town and country, and the attractions of neither; and it was a never-ceasing marvel how it had ever sprung into existence at all, and a still greater marvel how any one could be found to live in it. The *élite* of the town consisted of Mrs John Huntingdon (who, though only a wood merchant's daughter, was considered quite a leader in the Lynborough social world, owing to the fact of her son's being Sir Pomphry Huntingdon's heir, and also to her having a slight acquaintance with some of the "county" families); Mr and Mrs Elton, the clergyman and his wife; Mr Carr, solicitor, and his wife, who was cousin to Mrs Huntingdon; and several more of their ilk. There was a boys' school a little outside the town, and the bright faces of the scholars made the High Street appear a little more lively on half-holidays; but, as a rule, they remained in their own grounds, and were not much seen in Lynborough, except in the neighbourhood of the confectioners.

Mrs Huntingdon's house stood by itself at the end of the High Street; it was a good-sized, comfortable old house, and had a large garden behind it, though its front door opened

on to the street. She lived here with her son and a companion, for Ned was often away from home, and then she would have felt lonely by herself. Certainly Ned was a good son to her; he mixed in all the best county society, and was asked about everywhere, and he must have seen that his old mother was commonplace, and must have felt the society at Lynborough terribly boring and dull; yet he continued resolutely to live with the old lady, and was as affectionate and attentive to her as if she had been the greatest lady in the land.

For a great many years after John Huntingdon's marriage, his brother, Sir Pomphry, had refused to have anything to say to him and his humbly-born bride; but as the years rolled on, and he had no children of his own, the baronet began to see that John's son would probably be his heir and the future head of the family, and he thought it a pity to allow the lad to grow up among a set of petty towns-folk, when he ought to be educated to hold a prominent place in the county. He saw Ned out in the hunting field, and was delighted with his fearless riding and fine figure; and he would gladly have become reconciled with his brother, for the sake of having the boy up at the Court sometimes, had the Rev. John not been possessed of a

temper which made it impossible for him ever to forgive any one with whom he had once quarrelled. But on the clergyman's death, Sir Pomphry and Lady Huntingdon came and called on Mrs John, and condoled with her on her loss; and she, being wiser than her late husband, readily accepted their proffered friendship, and submitted meekly to be patronised by the baronet, of whom she stood in great awe. By his advice, she removed Ned (then a lad of eleven) from Dr Baird's school at Lynborough, and sent him to Eton, and afterwards to Oxford. The young fellow was brought up to no profession, for there seemed no need for him to work for money, and Sir Pomphry wished to keep him about Lyndale. John and Ida Huntingdon had each inherited two thousand a-year from their mother, who had been a considerable heiress; and John had left one thousand a-year to Ned, and the other thousand to his widow for her life. Mrs John had also inherited another thousand a-year from her father, the wood merchant, which would also revert to Ned on her death; so that altogether his prospects were such as to justify the young man in being idle. His present income was amply sufficient for all his wants as a bachelor; he could keep his two hunters through the hunting season, and his dog-cart and driving horse as well;

and he could run up to London whenever he pleased, join a friend on a grouse moor in Scotland, or a salmon-fishing expedition to Norway; and, in short, indulge freely in all those sports and pursuits dear to the heart of British youth. He was a universal favourite both with men and women, and got asked about all over the country; but he always made his mother's house his home, and never by word or sign let her suspect that he looked down upon her Lynborough friends; though, mixing in good society as he constantly did, it was impossible that he could feel quite at home among the petty Lynborough set in which Mrs Huntingdon mixed. Certainly he was a good son, and the widow had good reason to be so proud of him.

It was to her house that he betook himself as soon as he returned to England, about the end of July, after his visit to Palazzo Laurenti. It was five o'clock when he reached his home, and he found his mother and Miss Boyd, her companion, seated in their accustomed chairs in the drawing-room (or parlour, as Mrs Huntingdon called it), the former knitting, and the latter reading out loud something from a magazine. He had not written to warn his mother of his intended arrival, though she knew that he was on his road home from the continent, and now she rose with a little gasp,

as she saw him standing laughing before her, and flung her arms warmly round his neck.

"Ned, my boy, why did you not let me know you were coming?" she cried, as soon as she could speak.

She was certainly a common-looking old woman, but her face had a kindly, simple expression which was very attractive, while her white hair and widow's cap imparted a venerable aspect to her appearance.

"I say, don't throttle me, mother, in the excess of your affection," laughed Ned, emerging with rather a red face from his mother's vehement embrace. "Why didn't I write? Oh, because I thought I'd like to give you a pleasant surprise. Well, Miss Boyd, and how are you? Blooming as ever, I see."

Miss Boyd, a rosy, roundabout little body of forty, smiled and simpered out some reply; and then Ned sat down and submitted to a long cross-examination from his mother concerning all he had said and done at Palazzo Laurenti.

"Sir Pomphry was very indignant when he heard where you were," said the old lady, when her curiosity was somewhat appeased. 'I hope he will not quarrel with you on account of your having gone to see Count Laurenti."

"Oh, he'll get over his indignation in time," laughed Ned carelessly.

"But he was *that* annoyed, my dear boy."

"Well, I'm not answerable to him for all my actions," said the young man rather impatiently; and just then the sound of merry voices came in through the window, and Mrs Huntingdon hastened to change the subject by saying,—

"The girls and Dick are trying my new lawn tennis out in the garden. How glad they will be to see you back."

Ned knew that by "the girls" his mother meant Bella and Emily Carr (daughters of her cousin, the solicitor's wife), and his face lengthened somewhat, especially when Miss Boyd added,—

"Yes, poor Bella has looked quite dull since Mr Ned went away."

Mrs Carr had set her heart upon capturing Sir Pomphry Huntingdon's heir for her eldest girl, and had persuaded her simple-minded cousin, Mrs Huntingdon, to join in her scheme. Of course Bella would be a very bad match for Ned; but Mrs Huntingdon maintained that he did not require money with his wife, and she did not seem to see how far the girl was beneath him in a social point of view. She had never mixed in good society herself, and did not understand the rules by

which it was governed. It would doubtless have been a great triumph for her to have seen one of her own kin ruling as mistress of Tyndale Court, and she was not capable of perceiving how utterly unfit Bella Carr was to fill such a post. Consequently, Ned had undergone a good deal of mild persecution on the fair Bella's account, and he was not at all pleased to find her here on the very first day of his return home. The Carrs lived close to Mrs Huntingdon, and were in the habit of running in and out of her house at all hours of the day; and now that they had persuaded the old lady to invest in a set of lawn tennis, Ned foresaw that they would spend half their days playing in her garden.

"My dear mother," he said, "whatever do you want with lawn tennis? Do you and Miss Boyd contemplate learning it?"

"Oh, Mr Ned, how droll you are," simpered Miss Boyd.

"The girls persuaded me to get it," smiled Mrs Huntingdon; "their father not being in a position to indulge them, you see, poor dears."

"Why didn't you make them a present of a set? They have a good bit of ground for playing on, and they would have enjoyed it much more at their own house."

Mrs Huntingdon looked delighted by this

evidence of dear Ned's consideration for his cousins (as she persisted in calling the young Carrs), and she replied with alacrity,—

"That I will, my dear. I will write to-morrow for a set exactly like mine—and I'll mind and tell them who they've to thank for it," she added, with a meaning smile.

"Why not give them your own set?"

"Oh, it is the *right thing* to have lawn tennis at one's summer parties now, so I'm told," replied the old lady grandly. "I do not suppose that either Miss Boyd or I shall care to play, as you were saying, but it helps to amuse one's guests, which is always useful."

Ned heaved a resigned sigh, and his mother asked whether he would not join the others in the garden; but he refused, and remained talking to the old ladies till the six o'clock tea-bell rang, when the lawn tennis players made their appearance indoors. They came in laughing and talking gaily — Bella and Emily, two tall, buxom young women of one and three and twenty, first; then their brother Dick, a tall, thin, sallow-faced, sandy-whiskered young man of two-and-twenty, now a clerk in his father's office; and lastly, the Rev. Henry Williamson, the new curate, a small young man, with a meek manner and a very weak voice, a white, puny face, and enormous ears, usually brilliant red.

'La, Ned, is that *you?*" exclaimed Bella, coming to a sudden standstill, as she found herself face to face with young Huntingdon, and trying hard to work up a blush.

"Whenever did you come back?" added Emily, also amazed.

"I got here about an hour ago," said Ned, shaking them heartily by the hand.

"And never took the trouble of coming out to speak to us!" cried Miss Emily, tossing her head, and shaking her finger at him in playful reproach.

"I got up to come twice, but my mother and Miss Boyd got hold of my coat tails and held me back," explained Ned seriously, whereupon there was a universal laugh.

"See you go in for giving people surprises, Huntingdon," remarked Mr Dick, who was leaning languidly against the mantelpiece, stroking his sandy whiskers with his thin white hand, of which he was inordinately proud.

He was always the best-dressed and the best-behaved young man in Lynborough, and his mother often declared that he looked far more gentlemanly than Ned Huntingdon. And yet Dick never felt quite at his ease in Ned's presence, though the latter's hearty manner usually made people feel at home with him at once. Dick's position was so equivocal, that he dared not indulge in a

rough-and-ready manner like Ned's; yet he was vaguely conscious that his own elaborate politeness appeared snobbish when contrasted with young Huntingdon's easy, unaffected bearing.

"Suppose we go in to tea?" suggested Mrs Huntingdon.

"Suppose we do," agreed Ned; "I'm famishing."

According to the universal *mode* at Lynborough, they walked into the dining-room in pairs, "as if it had been a dinner," Ned thought.

He led the way with Bella, then came Mr Williamson and Emily, and finally tall Dick, with his aunt (as he was pleased to term Mrs Huntingdon) and Miss Boyd on either arm. The tea-table was spread with an abundance of cakes, jam, and fruit, and there was also a large dish of bacon and eggs, in case Ned should be hungry after his journey.

"I'd have ordered something more substantial, Ned," said Mrs Huntingdon, "but I was so put about with your coming so sudden, that I forgot about tea till it was too late."

"Oh, this will do famously," replied Ned; and he certainly did ample justice to the fare set before him.

Dick Carr, on the contrary, leant languidly

back, sipping his tea with his little finger well cocked out, and cutting his thin bread and butter into diminutive morsels before eating it. He not only looked, but really was delicate, and he regarded Ned wonderingly as he ate and talked away at a pace which fairly took away his (Dick's) breath. "Was that the way that all well-bred men behaved?" Dick wondered, as he had often wondered before; and Miss Boyd mentally decided that Mr Dick was a much genteeler young man than Mr Ned, though she could not help liking the latter best, on account of his kind, courteous way of speaking to herself.

The tea passed off merrily; both the Carr girls laughed and chatted as much as Ned, and little Mr Williamson giggled mildly at all their jokes. The two Carrs were certainly pretty girls. Emily was fair, with light brown hair and blue eyes; and Bella with dark hair and hazel eyes. But their chief beauty lay in their complexions, which were of a clear pink and white which many a duchess might have envied. They were merry, good-natured girls, too; and if their voices were rather too noisy at times, one could not but forgive them on account of their good temper. Ned found himself obliged to devote himself exclusively to Bella, for Emily

was entirely engrossed with the curate, and no one else would come to his assistance. Miss Bella asked a great many questions about his visit to Italy, and especially about Laurenti; but somehow he could not bring himself to be very communicative with her on the subject, and he was surprised to find how he shrank from mentioning Ida's name to her.

"Ma said you'd be falling in love with that Signorina Laurenti if you stayed there much longer," said Bella, hoping he would make an indignant denial; but he only murmured, "Indeed?" in rather a cold tone, and she asked suspiciously,—

"Is the girl pretty?"

"What girl?"

"Your cousin, of course."

"Yes, she is pretty."

"Very pretty?"

"Well, I suppose that would be a matter of taste."

"Is she—now I am going to ask you a very conceited question, Ned—is she as pretty as *I* am?"

"No, she certainly is not as pretty as you are," he said coldly, with a faint accentuation on the "pretty." Bella, however, did not perceive it, and she flushed with relief and pleasure at his verdict, for she considered beauty to be the one thing needful in a woman.

After tea, the young ladies played a duet, and then sang two or three songs; for they had been educated at Miss Jenkins' seminary for young ladies, which was situated in a healthy position a little out of Lynborough, and where all the well-to-do Lynboroughites sent their daughters to be "finished."

To Ned, coming as he did fresh from the finished singing of Madame de Clinville and her niece, the performance of the Misses Carr sounded simply excruciating; but he thanked them good-naturedly after each song, fearing to hurt their feelings unless he did so.

After the music came a round game of cards, over which there was much laughing. Mr Williamson was repeatedly pronounced by the cards to be the first of the party to marry, and he was much chaffed in consequence.

"I'm afraid you're of an amorous temperament, Williamson," said Ned, shaking his head.

"People in glass houses, etc.," laughed Dick significantly. "You're always falling in love yourself, old man."

Ned rather liked Emily and Bella, but his affection hardly extended to their brothers, and he coloured slightly as Dick addressed him thus familiarly; but he laughed good-naturedly, and accepted the accusation quietly.

"Oh, but Mr Williamson's mamma takes

better care of him than yours does of you, Ned," cried Bella.

"Do you think your mother will ever allow you to marry, Williamson?" asked Dick facetiously, as he stroked his whiskers gracefully.

"Perhaps I may be tempted to do so without her leave," replied the curate, glancing sentimentally at Emily, and then blushing furiously at his own boldness; whereas the young lady laughed, in nowise abashed.

At last, just as the clock was striking half-past nine, the Carrs rose to go, and Mr Williamson also prepared to depart.

"I suppose you will walk home with your cousins ,Ned?" said Mrs Huntingdon; and Ned had nothing for it but to do so.

Mr Williamson also accompanied Emily to her door, lingering far behind the others with her; but he refused to go into the Carrs' house, saying that his mother was expecting him at home.

"He daren't call his soul his own, he's so afraid of his mother," said Emily crossly, as he walked on down the street; and Bella also was looking vexed, for she had found Dick sadly in her way during her walk.

They all joined, however, in pressing Ned to come in and see their mother; and at last he was obliged to yield and do so. They

found Mrs Carr sitting in the dining-room (which was indeed the common family sitting-room), busy darning some socks; but she hastily hid her work away as Ned entered, and insisted on kissing him, rather to his disgust.

She was a thin, erect woman, of about forty-five, with a hard, worn face, and sharp, dark eyes. She had had a hard life of it, for her husband was poor and her family large (hence the deep lines on her brow and round her mouth), but every one agreed that she was an excellent wife and mother, and a clever manageress. Ned felt that she was too clever a manageress to suit him, for he could not help being aware that she intended him to be her son-in-law, and her masterfulness alarmed him. He was glad to turn from her and shake hands with the younger members of the family—Janie and Flora, two school-girls of twelve and fourteen, now home from Miss Jenkins' (Mrs Huntingdon paid for their schooling) for their midsummer holidays; and Harry, a rough lad of sixteen. There was another son, George, of eighteen; but he was out in America, learning farming with an uncle, and Ned asked Mrs Carr whether she had good accounts of him.

"Yes, they had good news of him; he seemed to be doing very well," replied Mrs Carr, glancing irritably round the shabby

room, which was littered with Harry's books and the girls' work.

It was not often that Ned was a visitor here (though he was always cordial to the Carrs, and any of the other Lynborough folks whom he met at his mother's house), and when he did come, he was usually received in the tidy drawing-room; but to-night Mrs Carr had never dreamt of seeing him, and she groaned inwardly as she glanced round the untidy sitting-room, and remembered that she had on a very old cap and gown.

It was extremely thoughtless of the girls to ask him in at this hour, she thought; or, at least, to bring him into this room: but she put a good face upon the matter, and insisted that, as he was here, he must remain to supper, which the servant carried into the room at this minute. In vain Ned protested that his mother would like him to spend his first evening at home with her; Mrs Carr pooh-poohed everything he said, and Dick twitted him gracefully with being as afraid of "Aunt Huntingdon" as Mr Williamson was of his mother.

Finally, Ned found himself obliged to yield, and sat down with the others at the supper-table, which was spread with brawn, cold beef, cheese, bread and butter, and beer. As they were sitting down, Mr Carr came in from his

office, where he had been smoking a pipe, and greeted Ned good-naturedly, but without any apparent surprise at his being here. He never displayed much emotion about anything: he was a stout, middle-aged man, with a bald head, and a placid manner which contrasted strongly with the quick, sharp movements of his wife.

After a few remarks to Ned about the weather, etc., he relapsed into silence, and applied himself to eating his supper. As at tea, Dick leant back in his chair, saying little, and eating less. It set his delicate feelings on edge to see the vulgar manner in which his father and Harry bolted their food; and he blushed as he saw his sisters helping themselves liberally to cheese and beer. How often he had striven to impress upon them that it was unladylike to partake of cheese and beer; and yet there was Bella draining a tumbler of the latter, and Emma conveying a huge piece of cheese into her mouth with a knife. Dick glanced uneasily at young Huntingdon, to see what effect his sisters' vulgarity produced upon him; but Ned was talking to Harry about some races which were to come off in a few days at Seaville, a fashionable bathing-place about five miles from Lynborough, and did not appear to be taking much notice of the girls.

"Dick, aren't you going to ask Ned to go to the races with us?" said Bella.

"Yes, do come, old fellow," said Dick, striving to address the heir of Tyndale Court with easy familiarity. "We've hired the waggonette and pair from the Blue Boar, and we'd be delighted if you'd come with us, you know."

"Thanks. I'll see about it," replied Ned evasively.

"Of course you could drive yourself in your own trap," said Dick, waving his hand. "But the more the merrier, you know."

"Do come," added Emily. "We're to lunch at the Seaview Hotel, and it will be awful fun."

"Yes, *do* come," said Bella softly; and that soft inflection in her voice decided Ned that nothing earthly should induce him to accompany the Carrs.

He jumped up and bid them all a hurried good-night, and dashed off to his mother's house as fast as he could, thanking his stars that Dick had not offered to walk home with him.

"What are you bothering that fellow to go to the races with you for?" asked Mr Carr as Ned departed. "He won't come, so it's no use."

"Why shouldn't he come?" asked Mrs Carr tartly.

"He'll be going on Lord Nashville's drag, you may depend. He's far too great a swell for us. He's wonderfully little nonsense about him, but still I shall be very much surprised if he comes with us."

And with these words the solicitor left the room, and so escaped further argument with his indignant wife and daughters.

CHAPTER VII.

BREAKING THE NEWS.

NED had seldom felt as thoroughly out of temper in his life as he did when he left the Carrs' house. In the first place, he was dying with impatience to speak to his mother about Ida Laurenti, and his temper had been sorely tried by the resolute manner in which the Carrs had held him prisoner, and refused to suffer him to escape, though they must have seen that he wished to spend his first evening at home with his mother. He had always thought them common sort of people (though he was invariably friendly with them, in remembrance of their kindness to him as a child, and also to please his mother), but never had their ill-breeding struck him so forcibly as to-night. Perhaps it was the fact of his having fallen in love with a piece of

refined gold like Ida, that made him so fastidious all of a sudden; but, any way, he shuddered as he remembered how nearly his mother and Mrs Carr had trapped him into a marriage with Bella a few years ago, when the latter was a slim, graceful girl of seventeen. She was beginning to grow rather coarse now, but five or six years ago she had been a lovely girl, and had it not been for the intervention of Lady Huntingdon, who had contrived to make her husband's heir fancy himself desperately in love with a Miss L'Estrange (a cousin of Lord Nashville's), the young man would probably have ended by marrying the solicitor's daughter. He had had a good deal of trouble to escape wedding Miss L'Estrange afterwards, but he felt ready to forgive her any annoyance she had caused him, in consideration of her having saved him from Bella Carr. Poor Bella! she was a good girl in the main, and she had certainly been very pretty a short time ago; but hers was a style of beauty that soon runs to seed, and Ned shuddered as he contrasted her with his gentle little Italian cousin.

It was half-past ten when he got home, and found that prayers were over, and his mother and Miss Boyd lighting their candles and preparing to go to bed.

"Wait a little, mother; I have something to talk to you about," he said; and his mother turned back obediently into the drawing-room, and seated herself again in her arm-chair.

"You stayed to supper at the Carrs'?" she asked.

"Yes; I wanted to come straight back to you, but you know what Mrs Carr is—she is the most masterful woman I ever saw."

"She's had a deal to try her temper, poor thing. It was sad for her having to send Georgie so far away, but every mouth out of the house is a relief to them. And Dick is so delicate, poor fellow — did you see? he hardly ate any tea. And then those girls not marrying yet! It is strange, for they are so pretty. Mr Williamson seems very much taken with Emmy, don't you think? But I doubt his mother won't approve of his marrying a girl without money. It is not every one who can afford to disregard money as you can, Ned."

"What would you say if I told you I wanted to marry, mother?" asked Ned, as his mother paused for breath.

"Who is it?" cried the old lady eagerly. Is it—is it your cousin, Ned?"

"It is *a* cousin, but not the one you mean," began Ned; but his mother took

no notice of the end of his sentence, and began to congratulate him vehemently.

"My own dear boy," she cried, rising and flinging her arms round his neck. "You know how I have always longed and prayed for this."

"But, mother—" he began.

"You cannot tell how happy you have made me," she proceeded, unheeding him—"Bella is such a dear, good girl."

"But it isn't Bella, mother!"

"And I'm sure I am as fond of her as if I was her mother already—"

"Mother, it is *not* Bella!"

"Of course, Sir Pomphry and Lady Huntingdon will be displeased, but you are independent of them, thank Heaven! I was afraid at one time that they would persuade you to marry that stuck-up Miss L'Estrange; but Bella is twice as pretty as she is, and will make you a far better wife."

"Now mother, will you listen to me?" said Ned, half laughing and half impatient, as his mother paused for want of breath.

"Surely, my dear," she replied innocently. "What did Mr Carr say?—but, of course, he has expected this all along."

"Well, in the first place, it isn't Bella that I want to marry."

"Not Bella!" gasped Mrs Huntingdon

blankly. "Then why did you say it was?" she demanded reproachfully.

"I never said anything of the sort."

"Surely it isn't Kate L'Estrange? Oh, Ned, Ned, you'll break my heart if you marry that girl. She's a set-up baggage, that's what she is; and she'll teach you to look down on your old mother, because she isn't a great lady," and the old woman began to whimper.

"Don't fret, mother; you're wrong again," said Ned, laughing as the absurdity of the whole thing struck him.

"I don't see why you should laugh, Ned; it isn't like you."

"But I'm not going to marry Kate any more than Bella."

"Not Miss L'Estrange either! Then who *is* it?"

"Here we come back to the beginning of our discussion again. Well, it's no one you ever saw, mother—"

"No one I ever saw!"

"No; but I'm sure you'll like her. See, this is her photograph," said Ned, handing his mother a photograph which had been taken of Ida when she was last in Florence, and which Count Laurenti had given him to show to his relatives in England.

"It is a dear little face," said Mrs Huntingdon, after examining the photograph

attentively for a minute. "But she looks quite a child, Ned."

"She was sixteen last December."

"Sixteen! What an age for a child to marry! But who is she, Ned?"

"My cousin, Ida Laurenti."

"What! little Ida Laurenti! Oh, Ned, and you know what your poor father always said of the Count!"

"I don't think my father knew much about Count Laurenti. At any rate, Ida is the sweetest little mortal in the world."

"I like her face," said Mrs Huntingdon, turning back to the photograph. (Certainly Ned had been wise to show it to her at once.) "She is not half as pretty as either Emmy or Bella, though."

"No; but beauty is not everything. Besides, that photo does not show you what a lovely complexion she has; it does not do her justice at all."

"But, Ned, she is a Roman Catholic."

"No; that's just where you are all mistaken. Count Laurenti must have been very fond of Aunt Ida, for, by her request, he has insisted on bringing his daughter up as a Protestant, in opposition to all his family."

"Hasn't she a title in her own right?"

"She is a Contessa, or Contessina."

"And they are a good old family?"

"A good deal older than the Huntingdons. The Laurenti are one of the real old noble families of Italy."

This satisfied Mrs Huntingdon, who felt almost pleased at the prospect of having a Contessa for her daughter-in-law. It is doubtful whether she would have been equally satisfied had she not seen Ida's photograph; but she liked the little grave, childish face, and though she was disappointed that Ned was not going to marry Bella Carr, yet it was also a great relief to know that he would never marry Kate L'Estrange.

"Well, my boy, you know that my greatest wish is that you should please yourself and be happy," she said. "And when do you want to marry her?"

"Her father wants me to wait till next spring. She is not out yet, you know."

"No, she's not old enough to marry yet—not to judge by her looks any way. Yes, it is a sweet face certainly. Here, my dear; I suppose you'll be wanting her likeness again."

Ned took the little picture eagerly, and after impressing on his mother that she was not to speak of the affair to any one—not even to the Carrs—he bid her good-night, feeling greatly relieved at having overcome her prejudices so easily. It only remained for him now to break the news of his intended mar-

riage to Sir Pomphry, who, he expected, would object to it far more strenuously than his mother had done. Of course he was independent of his uncle, but it would be disagreeable for him to quarrel with the old gentleman, and Count Laurenti had warned him that he could not let his daughter marry into a family that did not want her. Since Mrs Huntingdon was ready to welcome the young Contessina as a daughter-in-law, the Count might be willing to dispense with Sir Pomphry's consent; but Ned knew that it would be disagreeable for Ida to come into this strange country with Sir Pomphry for her enemy, and he feared lest Laurenti should see this too.

The following morning he walked down to the Blue Boar, where his horses were kept, and ordered his groom to have his horse ready for him at twelve o'clock, intending to ride over and lunch at the Court, and try to enlist his aunt, Lady Huntingdon, on his side. But great was his surprise when, on returning home, he saw his uncle's barouche and pair of spanking greys standing at his mother's door. Once or twice a-year Lady Huntingdon paid her sister-in-law a formal visit, and once a-year the latter was invited to dine at the Court; but it was an unheard-of thing for either Sir Pomphry or his wife to pay

Mrs Huntingdon an informal visit at this hour, and Ned instantly concluded that their present mission must be in some way connected with himself. In this he proved to be right, for, on reaching the house, he found Sir Pomphry in the hall, highly indignant, because the maid-servant had admitted him, and assured him that Mr Ned was at home when he was not.

"Oh, here you are," began the baronet as his nephew appeared at the door. He was a tall, portly, red-faced man of sixty-eight, with a stiff, pompous manner, and a hard, disagreeable voice; his hair and whiskers were iron-grey, and his light blue eyes were cold and unsympathetic. He was very cross just now at having been admitted when Ned was not at home, but he was a great deal too pompous and dignified to show his vexation openly, though Ned, who knew him well, detected it at once in the more than usually hard and grating sound of his voice.

"They told me you were at home," proceeded Sir Pomphry, "otherwise I should not have intruded upon your mother at this hour."

"Well, you see I'm in now, so won't you come in again?"

"No, no; I merely came to say a few words with you. Jackson was in town last

night, and brought back word that you were at home again; so as I had to come into Lynborough this morning to speak to Dixon" (Dixon and Carr were the rival solicitors of Lynborough, and it was a sore point with the Carrs that Sir Pomphry always employed Dixon), "I thought I'd stop and speak to you."

"Thanks. I intended to ride over to the Court to luncheon," replied Ned, wondering what had brought his uncle here; for he was quite certain that he had not called merely for the pleasure of seeing him, as his words implied.

"I shall not see you then; I have to attend a county meeting at one o'clock, at Seaville. You have just come home for the races — it would never have done for you to have missed them. I suppose it is useless for us to count on your going with us; you will be going with Nashville."

Now, Ned understood what had brought his uncle; the baronet knew that the Carrs would not lose a minute in trying to engage him to accompany them to the races, and feared that he (Ned) might be induced to accept their invitation.

"I have hardly thought about it yet," he replied, laughing. "I was going up to the Court partly to see you, as I have some-

thing I wish to talk to you about. Come into the dining-room; there will be no one in it now."

Sir Pomphry pulled out his watch, and after pondering for a minute, with deeply-knit brows, he informed Ned patronisingly that he could spare him a quarter-of-an-hour —not more. One would have imagined from his tone that he was a prime minister at least, with the cares of a nation on his shoulders. He walked before Ned into the dining-room, with his portly figure well drawn up, and his head held very erect.

"Upon my word, you have a pleasant look-out here, you have indeed," he observed in his hugely condescending tones, walking to the window, which looked out over the sweet, old-fashioned garden behind the house. "Now, what have you got to say to me? You know that my time is not my own."

"I wished to tell you about my visit to Palazzo Laurenti."

"Ah, to be sure. I was rather surprised to hear of your going there."

"My mother says you were very much annoyed about it, but—"

"Your good mother has a most provoking habit of putting words into people's mouths which they never uttered," said Sir Pomphry, reddening. "I assured her that I was quite

indifferent to your visiting Count Laurenti, but she does not seem to have listened to me. *We* have never quarrelled with Laurenti; it was he who declined our aid, and refused to allow us to have anything to say to poor Ida's child; consequently we have troubled ourselves no more about him. But I am not sorry you went to see him; it will show him that there is no petty, spiteful feeling on our side."

The baronet might have added that he did not now raise any objections to Ned's having visited Laurenti, because he did not choose to admit that the young man had wilfully disregarded his (the great Sir Pomphry's) wishes on the subject. It would have been detrimental to his dignity, as the head of the family, to have confessed that, though he did object to Ned's seeking Laurenti's acquaintance, he had been powerless to prevent his doing so. So he affected to be good-naturedly indifferent to his nephew's proceedings, and inquired carelessly how he had liked being at Palazzo Laurenti.

"Very much," replied Ned, greatly relieved by his uncle's tone. "There were just my uncle and cousin, and the Count's sister, the Marquise de Clinville, at the Palazzo; and I liked them all very much."

"Indeed?" remarked Sir Pomphry coldly, as he consulted his watch, though he was really rather curious to hear all about the Laurenti.

"This is my cousin's photograph, if you would like to see it," continued Ned rather nervously.

The baronet took the little bit of card-board between his finger and thumb, and placing his double, gold-rimmed pince-nez on the bridge of his high Roman nose, he proceeded to examine it attentively.

"Hum—not a bit like her mother," he remarked slowly. "Ida was fair—what's this child's name, by-the-bye?"

"Ida Laurenti."

"Ah, to be sure; she was called after her mother,—I forgot. Good eyes, but not pretty otherwise," he added, laying the photograph carelessly on the table.

"Don't you think so?" said Ned, disappointed. "I am sure you would like her if you knew her," he added eagerly.

"Very possibly," replied Sir Pomphry, speaking with studied indifference, though he began to see what was coming. "But I am never likely to do so."

"I hope so — I have asked her father to let me marry her."

"You marry Ida Laurenti!" exclaimed

Sir Pomphry, forgetting his dignity in his consternation.

"Why not?"

"She is a beggar, a foreigner, and a Catholic; and her father's one of the biggest rogues in Europe," said the baronet with considerable energy.

"She may be a beggar—"

"To be sure she is. That rascal Laurenti has gambled away every penny of his wife's money."

"He may not be a saint; but, at any rate, he is a gentleman, and there is nothing about him to make him objectionable as a father-in-law. Then, as for Ida's being a foreigner, her family is one of the oldest and noblest in Italy; and she has been brought up a Protestant."

"Oh, she has, has she? Laurenti's got no particular religion of his own, so I suppose it was a matter of indifference to him what the child was."

"At any rate, she is a Protestant, and I do not see that you can raise any reasonable objection to my marrying her."

"You are your own master; I have nothing to say to it," remarked Sir Pomphry stiffly.

"Certainly I am my own master; still I should like to feel that you will welcome my bride."

"Mixed marriages seldom answer; and I have a great objection to cousins marrying."

"That is a thing which is done every day, though; and I might do worse than marry the daughter of a fine old house like the Laurenti."

This was true; and as Sir Pomphry thought of Bella Carr, his objection to the Italian marriage insensibly decreased. Besides, he was very anxious to see Ned settled; so, altogether, he decided not to oppose his present choice further. But he was too irritated to show at once that Ned's arguments had overcome him, and it was in a hard, dry voice that he replied,—

"Please yourself, please yourself. You are your own master, and I shall not attempt to dictate to you. I can only give you the advice which my greater knowledge of the world enables me to offer you; but, of course, you will not take it."

"I am afraid I cannot do so in this instance. But please do not mention the affair to any one but Aunt Huntingdon, as Count Laurenti does not wish his daughter to marry till next spring."

"I am not likely to talk about it," replied Sir Pomphry drily, and turning towards the door.

But just at this minute it opened, and Mrs Huntingdon entered hastily, and then stopped amazed on catching sight of Sir Pomphry.

"I did not know any one was here," she was

beginning, when her eye fell on the photograph of Ida Laurenti lying on the table, and she exclaimed,—

"Oh, Ned has been telling you all about it then, Sir Pomphry."

"He has been telling me that he wishes to marry Ida Laurenti," returned the baronet stiffly, "though I cannot quite see why he should be so anxious to secure my consent," he added harshly.

"Oh, I told Ned how vexed you were at his going to Palace Laurenti at all—"

"My dear Madam, permit me to say—"

"I'm sure you've been very kind to him, Sir Pomphry, and he is very sorry to displease you, but it was only natural for him to wish to see Count Laurenti when he was so near—"

"Perfectly natural, and I do not see why you should suppose I would object," stuttered Sir Pomphry, growing very red in the face, and striving vainly to raise his voice so as to drown the old lady's, without impairing the majesty of his demeanour.

But she proceeded without heeding his words, though she perceived by the tone of his voice and his expression that he was indignant.

"And, after all, he is his own master, Sir Pomphry, and I do not see what right you have to be angry with him for choosing his

own wife. If I, his own mother, am content to welcome this Italian young lady as his wife, I do not see what right you have to object."

"I tell you I—I do *not* object. I—he may go and hang himself in your garden if he chooses—"

"I know what it is you and Lady Huntingdon want; you want him to marry Miss L'Estrange—a girl who has had twenty lovers already, if she's had one. And now you're angry because my poor boy wishes to choose for himself—and you who call yourself a Liberal! It's what I call real tyranny on your part, Sir Pomphry, and very inconsistent in one who professes Liberal principles. But Ned's not the one to submit to it—"

"Good God!" roared the baronet, fairly stamping with rage, and forgetting all about his dignity in his exasperation. "Is the woman mad, or is she deaf?"

"Eh, deary me, whatever's the matter now?" asked Mrs Huntingdon, pausing suddenly in her speech and regarding her brother-in-law with open-eyed amazement.

"Madam, allow me to inform you once for all, that I—that I—that I should never dream of attempting to—to control your son in—any way. He is his own master, as you justly observed; and though, as the head of his house, I may—I—my opinion may

have some weight with him, yet, I assure you, I should never dream of attempting to exert authority where I possess none. I—I have the pleasure of wishing you a very good morning, Madam," and, with a lofty bow, the baronet bounced out of the room, holding himself very erect, and looking more than usually florid.

At the hall-door he encountered Miss Bella Carr, who simpered and blushed as she pretended to start timidly on catching sight of him. But her sweet looks were lost upon the great man, who strode past her without appearing to bestow even a casual glance upon her. But he had seen her clearly enough, and understood the meaning of her smiles full well, and as he entered his carriage he felt almost relieved to remember Ned's engagement to the Italian cousin.

"That Carr is a confoundedly pretty girl, in a barmaid style," he muttered, as he flung himself back on the cushions of his barouche, "and just the sort to take the fancy of a young fellow like Ned. And that old beldame of a mother of his would do anything to bring about the match. Well, well; perhaps, after all, it's as well he's safely settled at last. He'd never have taken up with Kate, and anything would be better than that Carr girl."

CHAPTER VIII.

KATE L'ESTRANGE.

NED was not particularly surprised when Bella came tripping into his mother's dining-room, bearing some trifling message from Mrs Carr as an excuse for her early appearance; but he was not exactly in a mood for making himself agreeable to her, so, after a few careless remarks, he made his escape from the room and the house.

As he was proceeding down the High Street, in the direction of the Blue Boar, he encountered an old friend of his, Jack L'Estrange, brother to the young lady whom Lady Huntingdon had hoped to induce him to marry. Jack was in the navy; he had not chosen the profession himself, but his father was poor and had a large family, and as the navy was a less expensive professon to enter,

than most others, he had put his eldest son into it while he was too young to raise any objections. Jack was five-and-twenty now, and a lieutenant; and at present he was at home on leave. He greeted Ned heartily, and pressed him to come home and lunch with him; and Ned accepted the offer readily, for since he had seen Sir Pomphry, he was in no particular hurry to go to Tyndale, and he knew, from long experience, what a pleasant house the L'Estranges' was to lunch at. So the two young men proceeded to the Blue Boar, where Ned ordered his groom to bring his horse up to the Folly (Colonel L'Estrange's house) at four o'clock; and then they walked on along the road leading from Lynborough to Seaville for about a mile, till they reached the Folly, which was built on the Tyndale property, and was a low, rambling house, only one story high in many parts, and completely covered with ivy and creeping roses. It stood near the high road, but was completely concealed from the vulgar gaze by a high ivy-covered wall, which also shut out the east wind and caused the flowers to bloom more luxuriantly at the Folly than in any other garden in the county. They were only common-place flowers, after all, for the L'Estranges could not afford to spend much money over them. In front of

the house lay a pretty lawn, opening into a little field which was always kept in grass, and was surrounded by clumps of trees, while in the middle was a large pond, which made a famous place for skating in winter. The flower garden lay on the side of the house nearest the road; at the back was the kitchen garden, with common flowers planted along the borders between gooseberry and currant bushes; and on the other side was the yard, well hidden by a high ivy-covered wall and several fine trees. There were only hens and pigs in this yard, for the L'Estranges could not afford to keep horses, any more than they could indulge in expensive flowers, though his garden was Colonel L'Estrange's pet hobby, and he spent the greater part of his days working in it. But there were the younger boys to educate, and Kate's dress cost a great deal, and his wife insisted on giving a certain number of parties in the course of the year, and so the poor gentleman had to content himself with the simpler kind of plants, with which, however, he contrived to make his little domain look very bright and gay.

To-day the brilliant July sun was making everything about the place look pretty and cheerful; drawing a rich fragrance from the roses clustering round the house, and casting

deep shadows under the two huge elms which grew at one side of the lawn in front. There was a little rustic table and several garden chairs under these trees, and it was evidently a favourite resort of the family in the fine summer weather; but at present there was only one young lady lolling idly on one of the comfortable seats, with a novel in her hand.

"There's Kate," said Jack, as he and Ned entered the high wooden gate which opened on to the short carriage drive. "Come and let us speak to her; she looks uncommonly comfortable there."

Kate L'Estrange laid down her book as the two young men approached, and held out one soft, white, gloveless hand to Ned, with a sort of careless, unconventional grace.

"It is really too hot to get up," she observed coolly. "Even the sight of Mr Huntingdon does not inspire me with sufficient energy to move."

She looked as fresh as a daisy, however, Ned thought, in spite of this complaint, in her simple blue and white cotton dress, which fitted her full, graceful figure to such perfection, and with the snowiest of neat linen collars and cuffs. Her fair hair was drawn smoothly off her high white brow, and coiled neatly round the back of her head; her fair, creamy

complexion, with just sufficient shell-like bloom on the cheeks to save it from the charge of paleness, looked as cool and fresh as one of the blush roses over the open French drawing-room window; and her clear grey eyes met Ned's heavy blue ones with a pleasant, fearless smile. Certainly she was a handsome girl, and, what was better still in Ned's eyes (accustomed as they were to the Misses Carrs' plebeian prettiness), she looked *thoroughbred*, from the crown of her head to the sole of her foot—which was only as it ought to be, seeing that her father was the younger brother of the late Viscount Nashville, while her mother was the daughter of a Scotch baronet and an earl's daughter. Certainly there was plenty of blue blood in the young L'Estranges, and Kate at any rate showed it, though her brothers were heavy, clumsily-built fellows. The girl was only twenty-one, but, in spite of her freshness, there was something about her that made her appear rather a young woman than a girl. What this something was, it would have been difficult to say; perhaps it was that her mind was not as fresh as her complexion, and that in some subtle way it affected her appearance, or possibly it was merely that she looked too sensible and self-possessed for a young girl. Certainly she was a remarkably self-possessed young person: she had toiled and angled as

hard to catch Ned Huntingdon as ever had Bella Carr; yet though she knew that he saw through her perfectly well, and also that it had been in a great measure to escape her pursuit that he had fled abroad two months ago, she looked him coolly in the face, and gave him her hand without the faintest possible increase of the delicate shell-like colour in her cheeks.

Jack threw himself full length on the turf, and Ned took a seat beside Kate, who leant lazily back in her chair, with her knees crossed, and one daintily shod little foot swinging slightly in the air. Perhaps it was rather a manly attitude, but the girl looked so graceful in it, and the foot displayed was so pretty, that it would have been hard indeed to find fault with it.

"How jolly cool it is here," observed Jack with a sigh of enjoyment. "No wonder you look as fresh as a fish, Kate!"

"You surpass yourself in eloquence to-day," replied his sister coolly.

"Oh, hang it then, you look as fresh as a *rose*, if that hackneyed phrase suits your taste better," said Jack with a heavy laugh.

"It makes one feel fresh to look at Miss L'Estrange," said Ned gallantly.

"It was very kind of you to come and see us so soon after your arrival," said the young lady, calmly ignoring Ned's remark—or, rather,

accepting the compliment as simply her due. "When did you return?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"And you come to see us to-day! Now that is what I call good-natured."

Ned replied that it was purely selfish motives that had brought him here, and Miss L'Estrange observed, with a slight shrug, that men usually were selfish.

"I hope you enjoyed your trip abroad?" she added, turning her clear eyes suddenly upon Ned.

"Oh yes, thanks," he replied, colouring slightly, for he understood perfectly that Miss L'Estrange meant to imply that he had been extremely selfish to go abroad when he had. "It was rather hot, though," he added. "I am not sorry to get home again."

"It seemed rather a mad thing of you to rush off when you did," she observed with a little laugh. "Lady Huntingdon was very offended with you; she declared you had gone abroad solely to escape going to Harrowgate with her."

"I do not see what should have put that idea into her head," said Ned awkwardly; for in truth he *had* fled to Italy in order to avoid accompanying Lady Huntingdon and Miss L'Estrange to Harrowgate, foreseeing that, if he went with them, it would be very diffi-

cult for him to avoid engaging himself to the latter.

His flight had been a very decided sell for Kate, as, in order to go with him and his aunt to Harrowgate, she had declined an invitation to pass the season with her cousin, Lord Nashville, and his wife in London. She too had foreseen that if she could get Ned to pass two or three weeks in a strange place where he had only her and his aunt (who would take care never to stand between them) to speak to, he would very probably be driven to propose to her; and in order to secure the heir to Tyndale, she had not hesitated to relinquish the London visit which she would have enjoyed so much. But when she discovered that Ned did not intend to accompany his aunt, and found herself condemned to spend three dull weeks alone with an old lady at a strange place, her disgust had been great, and she felt bitterly indignant with Ned as the cause of her disappointment. She did not relinquish all hopes of ultimately winning him, however, for she knew that Sir Pomphry and Lady Huntingdon were on her side, and she was sure that Ned himself admired her. It was only Lady Huntingdon's over-eagerness that had frightened him off; and old Mrs Huntingdon did not like her either; but Kate

thought that Ned might search a long time before he found any one who would make him a better wife than she would, and until he fell seriously in love with any one else, she determined not to despair. Not that it was a matter of vital consequence to her to marry him, after all; she was young and good-looking, and if she did not get him, she was pretty safe to get some one else; only, as she happened to like Ned, and he was ready to hand, she thought she might as well try for him. Just now she had a vicious pleasure in making him feel uncomfortable; he had cheated her out of her season in London, and he deserved some punishment.

"Ah, I am glad to see you have the grace to blush," she said, still smiling. "Jack, I wish you knew how to blush like that when you bring poor father a whole string of bills to pay."

"It's awfully slow work going to those sort of watering-places, you know," muttered Ned shamefacedly.

"Then you *did* run away to escape going with us?"

"Ha, ha! let the cat out of the bag there, old fellow," laughed Jack.

Ned laughed too, in a constrained sort of way, and then Kate turned the conversation, thinking she had made him feel foolish enough for that time.

After a time she suggested that Ned ought to come into the house and see her mother, and accordingly they all crossed the lawn towards open French windows leading into the pretty, simple, home-like drawing-room. Kate wore no hat, nor had she any parasol, and she walked fearlessly through the sunshine, which made her fair hair glitter with a lustre it did not usually possess. But she had no need to ward off the bright, warm rays, for she was one of those fortunate people who never freckle or tan or flush with the heat. The fact was, that her skin, fair and soft though it appeared, was far too thick to be much affected by either cold, heat, or emotion; and perhaps it was partly this that accounted for Miss L'Estrange's being such an eminently self-possessed young woman, for nothing is so discomposing as a facility for blushing. A girl who knows that she cannot blush, or that, if she does, nothing will be visible through her thick, white skin but a delicate suspicion of colour, has not the same horror or fear of blushing which oppresses more thin-skinned mortals, and consequently is far less liable to be disconcerted or put out of countenance.

Miss L'Estrange looked a very little thing as she walked along between the two tall, broad-shouldered young men, and indeed

she was rather under the middle height, though she appeared taller than she really was, owing to the beautiful symmetry of her figure and the graceful erectness with which she carried herself. She looked taller than Ida Laurenti, Ned thought,—though she could not really be quite so tall; for Ida came almost up to his huge shoulders, whereas Kate did not nearly reach them. Somehow Ned was always comparing every woman he met with the little Contessina, and greatly to their disadvantage as a rule. He had been forced reluctantly to admit last night that Bella Carr surpassed Ida in mere animal beauty; but in the present instance he did not hesitate to award the palm to his Italian cousin, for Miss L'Estrange was not so indisputably pretty as Bella—her beauty lying in her style rather than her face,—and, in Ned's prejudiced eyes, she was not one bit better looking than Ida. Dear little Ida! she seemed to rise before Ned, with her sweet, dark, laughing Italian eyes—which looked as if a living sunbeam had somehow got imprisoned in their liquid depths—and her slow, gentle movements. He smiled as he thought what a contrast she formed to the fair English maiden by his side, one of whose chief beauties lay in her life and

vigour. She led the way across the grass at a pace which would have taken away the little Italian's breath entirely, and yet each movement was perfect in its free, easy grace; and she herself looked as cool and trim as if she had just stepped out of a bandbox — rather different to the Italian ladies of a morning!

Mrs L'Estrange happened to come into the drawing-room by the door, just as the young people stepped through the window, and she greeted Ned with just the proper amount of benevolent, maternal warmth. She was a tall, thin, delicate-looking woman, who had evidently been good-looking in her youth. In private she was apt to be peevish and fretful, but in company her manner was perfect, and her tact was also good. She and Kate both sat and chatted pleasantly to the guest—the mother drawing into the background after the first few remarks, so as to leave the field clear for her daughter. She sat busy with her needlework, and allowed Kate to take the lead in the conversation, only putting in a word here and there when required. Jack talked a good deal, certainly, but that did not matter, since he was only another young man. At about twenty minutes past one Mrs L'Estrange looked up from her work

and bid Kate go and tell "Jane" to lay an extra place at the luncheon-table for Mr Huntingdon. The girl obeyed quietly, and in five minutes reappeared, and took her former place between her brother and Ned, and this was all the preparation required for the guest's reception.

The L'Estranges were poor, but they were sensible, and never made any attempts at display; but then Colonel L'Estrange was Lord Nashville's paternal uncle, and that stood in the place of a great deal of "display."

The luncheon to-day certainly did not prove a sumptuous repast when it presently appeared. It only consisted of cold beef, salad, and potatoes, with a milk pudding for the children (three little lads of ten, eleven, and thirteen); but there were two beautiful dishes of gooseberries and late strawberries, and the table was tastefully dressed with flowers, and everything looked fresh and inviting on that hot day.

Colonel L'Estrange, a short, stout, good-natured old man of fifty-eight, with white hair and benevolent, mild blue eyes, was waiting in the dining-room when the others entered, and he shook Ned warmly by the hand, muttering something about being glad to see him back again, and in the same breath

asked him whether he would have any cold beef.

"Your mother will be glad to have you at home again," said Mrs L'Estrange to Ned. "We were calling on her last week, and she did not seem to expect you back so soon."

"Were you?" said Ned, looking pleased.

The "county people" did not notice old Mrs Huntingdon much, as a rule, though her son was such a favourite. She had been cut for years by Sir Pomphry and Lady Huntingdon, and though these had "taken her up" during the last ten years, the county in general had been slow to follow their example, for, sooth to say, Mrs Huntingdon was a decidedly common-place old woman, and "the county" did not feel particularly attracted by the glimpses it occasionally got of her at Tyndale Court. Still, some few people did condescend to call on her now and then, for the sake of her son, who was such a "charming young fellow," and so "ridiculously fond of the old woman;" and the L'Estranges were among these.

Mrs L'Estrange rightly guessed that very probably Mrs Huntingdon might not mention their visit to Ned, so she took occasion to do so now, and Ned was gratified, and showed that he was. He never could learn to conceal what he felt.

"By-the-bye, she said you were paying a

visit to some Italian relations—Count Laurenti, who married your Aunt Ida."

"Poor Ida Huntingdon! I remember she was an uncommonly nice girl," said Colonel L'Estrange, with a puffy sigh, as he helped himself to salad. "Not pretty, you know—not at all; but uncommonly nice all the same."

"Yes, I spent a couple of weeks with the Count," replied Ned carelessly, and there the matter dropped, and the conversation turned to other things.

After luncheon, Kate challenged Ned to a game of lawn tennis, and insisted on playing him single-handed, so as to get rid of Jack, who sat under the elms and watched them at his ease. It was rather warm work playing, though a refreshing breeze had sprung up since the morning, and Ned allowed himself to be beaten two or three times running. He was a tolerably fair player, but it would have taken a tremendous amount of exertion to beat Kate, whose playing was the admiration of the whole county, and who never seemed to grow hot or tired. She had a way of moving about all over the ground, in the quietest, most indolent manner possible; wherever the ball alighted, there she was, cool and collected, to receive it, and *put* it well back into her opponent's court; yet she

made none of the ungraceful bounds and rushes with which unskilful performers ornament their play, and all her movements were graceful and lady-like, in spite of their freedom and agility.

"Go and gather us some gooseberries, there's a good creature," she called out to Jack, as she and Ned drew near the end of their third game.

Jack got up good-naturedly and departed, for Kate kept all her family in excellent order, and they all understood that they must not interfere with her flirtations. Jack, therefore, seeing that his sister wished to get rid of him, got up and decamped; and when Kate had brought her third game to a triumphant termination, she threw down her bat, and suggested to Ned that they should rest a little before beginning another set. Ned willingly agreed, and they sat down under the broad spreading elms; Kate leaning back on a low chair, and Ned lying stretched on the green sward at her feet.

Presently one of the little boys came and looked at them, with his hands behind his back in a defiant attitude, nor did he attempt to move when his sister bid him begone.

"Go and help Jack to gather us some gooseberries," she said more persuasively; and Willy yielded to the civiller tone and the

allurement of the gooseberries, and scampered off without more ado.

"How I hate children!" remarked Kate with a slight sigh, as she watched her young brother disappear from sight.

"Not all?" said Ned gravely, for he was devoted to small children himself, though he was fain to acknowledge that small boys of Willy's age are apt to be troublesome.

"Yes, all," repeated Kate emphatically. "I am always delighted when the holidays are over and the fry go back to Dr Baird's again. I see you are shocked, but wouldn't it be a great deal worse of me to tell an untruth and pretend to adore children just to win your approval?"

"Of course," replied Ned hastily.

"I can't help not caring for children; I was born so. But, thank goodness, I was also born honest, and I don't pretend to be any better than I am."

"I daresay you would have liked them better if they had been girls," suggested Ned, unwilling to think this fair, good looking girl cold and heartless. "I know small boys are often plagues—I remember what I was at Willy's age."

"I have no doubt you were a sad plague; boys always are, as you say. Yet I always thank my stars that our children are boys

and not girls. If they had been girls, I should have been expected to teach them, since I have been well educated myself. I know that if Ethel and Laura had lived, I should have had the pleasure of acting as their governess, for papa never could have sent them to a finishing school as he did me. Now don't look so scandalised, pray. You should learn to control your expression better, Mr Huntingdon; it's very rude to let a lady see that you think her cruel and heartless because she doesn't weep over the memory of two babies whom she cannot recollect."

"I did not know that I looked scandalised," protested Ned.

"Yes, you did; you looked as if you thought me no better than a heathen. But please remember, before you condemn me utterly, that Ethel and Laura died when they were in arms, and I was too small myself to remember them. If they had lived, they would have been sixteen and fourteen now, and I should have been making them strum on the piano, and very probably knocking them over the head with the music book; while they would have been raising an outcry at every new dress I got, and Ethel, aged sixteen, would have been treading on my heels, and trying to emancipate herself from the schoolroom and come out!"

"It certainly must be horrid work teaching."

"Horrid! I should think so. I don't know whom I should be most sorry for if I attempted to teach—my pupil or myself. And yet unless I marry, I may have to teach some day."

"You are sure to marry," he replied uncomfortably.

"I must," she said, with a sigh. "I have to choose between that and being a governess when papa dies."

Ned made no answer whatever to this, and she proceeded.

"People abuse the system of French marriages so dreadfully, but I do not see that the English is so much better. It simply comes to this, that in France the parents sell the girl, and in England she sells herself. Of course the English system is better for men in every way; they are free to choose their own wives, and they get all their parents' money. But no English woman can choose her own husband. She has to wait till some one asks her, and her sole privilege consists in being at liberty to remain an old maid, with barely sufficient money to support life upon, if she chooses. They take more care of their women in France, if they give them less liberty to start with."

"I think the English system has its advantages too, you know," suggested Ned mildly.

"For the men undoubtedly."

"And for the girls too. Just look how much more fun and amusement you have than foreign girls are allowed."

"Oh, but they marry early, and make up for it after they are married."

"A very bad time to begin flirting, don't you think?"

"Oh, heaps of English married women flirt too. *I* shall, I know, when I am married, unless—unless I marry some one I care for," she added softly—for her.

Again Ned remained immovably silent, and after a slight pause, Kate continued,—

"Certainly we English girls get a great deal of fun to compensate us for want of fortunes, but just see what a bad effect the present state of things has on girls' dispositions. They are educated to catch a husband, just as their brothers are educated to pass examinations, and they often grow bold and fast and forward in consequence. If they fail to make a good catch, so much the worse for them; they have to work for their living when their parents die, or live in genteel starvation, or at best grow into lonely old maids, even if they are left with sufficient money to support a fat poodle and a companion — whom, by-the-bye, it must be an immense relief to their disappointed feelings

to bully. Yes, depend upon it, we English girls have to work for our living in a different way to you men. It is a case of every one for herself, and the devil take the hindermost."

"You take a gloomy view of things," said Ned, feeling that he must say something. "I think there are a good many happy marriages in England."

"Ah, a great deal depends upon whether the right man asks the girl. Most girls would make good wives if they married men they cared for. But that is what is so hard; there are a great many unfortunate girls like me who are bound to marry, and who would make very good wives if only the men they cared for asked them, but who, if these men do not ask them, must needs marry men whom they do not care for. Then, of course, it is all a toss up whether they turn out good wives or bad."

How intensely relieved Ned was to see Jack and young Willy approaching with a goodly basket of gooseberries just at this minute. The conversation was growing uncomfortable, to say the least of it, and Ned began to ask himself reproachfully whether he had flirted too much with Kate L'Estrange, and whether it was possible she really cared for him. All men are more or less vain, in a heavy, stupid

sort of way; and though Ned was perfectly free from conceit, he was not utterly devoid of vanity. He felt sorry for Kate, and would have given a good deal to prevent her caring for him; but her words and manner certainly seemed to imply that she did, and he saw nothing very wonderful in her doing so. Had it not been for Ida Laurenti, he might possibly have been moved to make Miss L'Estrange a formal offer of his hand on the spot; but as it was, he held his peace, and bestowed a mental blessing upon Jack and Willy for their timely approach—which, however, was more than Kate did.

It was very pleasant work eating the cool refreshing fruit under the trees, and before they had come to the end of the gooseberries, Ned's horse and groom appeared, and after a few minutes' delay, the young man rose and took his leave of the L'Estranges.

"Mind you go to the races with Nashville next week," said Kate, as she bid him good-bye. "I know he's going to ask you to drive over to Seaview with him; so mind, I expect to drive beside you."

"I hope I shall have the pleasure of driving beside *you*," replied Ned pleasantly as he sprang on his horse, and rode off towards Tyndale.

He found Lady Huntingdon at home,

and was so fortunate as to enlist her sympathies on his behalf with regard to his proposed marriage with Ida Laurenti. At first, perhaps, she was a little inclined to disapprove his choice; but she had seen ere now that it was hopeless to think of his marrying her favourite, Kate L'Estrange, and then it was a great thing to get him safely married out of Bella Carr's reach! So she listened graciously to all he had to say, admired Ida's photograph, and finally promised to use her influence to make Sir Pomphry take a more favourable view of his nephew's engagement.

"And I am certain he will come round to approve of it in time—especially since you say he does not actually *dis*approve of it now," she added. "He is terribly anxious for you to marry, you know; and why not this little girl as well as any one else? I have quite fallen in love with her photograph myself; she may not be as handsome as Kate, but she has a dear little face of her own, and what lovely eyes!"

CHAPTER IX.

IRREVOCABLY BOUND.

THE Seaville races usually took place towards the end of the first week in August, and were followed the next day by a regatta; on both evenings there was a ball, so altogether this was the gayest week in the gay Seaville season. All the country round flocked into Seaville on both days; and those who lived at a distance and wished to go to the balls, put up at one of the hotels for the two days. Lowsworth, Lord Nashville's place, was only five miles from Seaville, so he drove in on his drag with his party, and on this occasion Ned Huntingdon made one of it, and had a place assigned him beside Kate, whose especial property he seemed to be considered. He was rather annoyed to see this, and began to think that it would be as well for him to

announce his engagement to Ida Laurenti publicly; but he could hardly do this till he received an answer to the letter which he had written to Count Laurenti, informing him that both his mother and Sir Pomphry approved his marriage with Ida, and that Mrs Huntingdon would gladly receive Ida into her house if she married him. He was expecting the answer daily, but till it came he hardly liked to tell people that he was engaged; for how unutterably foolish he would look if Laurenti, or Ida herself, declined his suit at the last!

He had very little fear on this point, for Laurenti had appeared quite ready to give him his daughter, provided his (Ned's) English relatives were prepared to receive her kindly; and he did not fancy that the girl herself would object to him. He had almost forgotten her frightened refusal of his suit at Palazzo Laurenti; or, at any rate, attached very small importance to it. Madame de Clinville had represented to him, that of course the girl was afraid of getting into trouble if she listened to him, and he had easily allowed himself to be persuaded that it was so. Of course Ida knew she ought not to listen to any young man who made love to her without her father's knowledge or sanction, and Ned liked her all the better for

having refused to listen to him. He could not believe that she disliked himself—on the contrary, he had very good reason to believe that she liked him; and then she was so young, and had led such a secluded life, that it seemed impossible she could like any one better than himself. His only fear was, lest she should fall in love with some one this next winter in Paris; but he consoled himself by remembering how carefully foreign girls are guarded, and also by the fact that Ida's guardian would be his friend, the little Marquise de Clinville.

For the rest, he had told Laurenti that he did not wish the girl's inclinations to be forced, and the Count had seemed quite to understand his wishes; but somehow Ned did not fancy that Ida would wish to refuse him in earnest. He was accustomed to be made much of by women, and the very fact of his loving Ida so intensely, made him believe that she must care for him in return.

Still he thought it would be advisable to await Laurenti's answer, before he formally announced his engagement to his friends. So he allowed himself to be placed beside Kate L'Estrange on the drag, and did his best to be agreeable to her without flirting—a very difficult task, however, seeing that the young lady was determined to make him flirt, or at any rate to make it appear to others that he was

flirting with her. What possible object could she have in this? Ned wondered. She must see that it was simple waste of time for her to try and fascinate him; and all she could gain would be to make people call her a flirt. They called her that already, as he was well aware, but he had no wish to give them fresh cause for doing so. Still, if she insisted on flirting with him, what was he to do? He could only submit quietly, and treat the whole thing as if it were a joke.

The Carrs were at the races too, seated in the monster waggonette from the Lynborough Hotel, and they turned many reproachful glances towards Ned as he sat by Miss L'Estrange's side on Lord Nashville's drag. He lifted his hat politely but rather stiffly to them as he rolled past them, and he felt decidedly foolish when Bella smiled and waved her handkerchief to him.

"Gad, Huntingdon, who's that deuced pretty girl who seems so delighted to see you?" cried one of the men near him; and Ned replied, as carelessly as he could, that that was a Miss Carr—a friend of his mother's.

As for Kate, she turned and regarded the Carrs with a look of cool, insolent curiosity, as if they had been a caravan of wild beasts. She had met them once when she had gone with her mother to call on old Mrs Huntingdon, but

now she seemed entirely to have forgotten them, and only returned Mrs Carr's somewhat hesitating bow with a rude supercilious stare from her large grey eyes.

By-and-by, however, Ned came up to the Carr conveyance for a minute, and shook hands with them all round. He only stayed to exchange a few words with them, and in two or three minutes took himself off again, but it had required a considerable amount of moral courage on his part to come and speak to them at all under the eyes of Sir Pomphry and of all the Nashville party. He knew that Miss L'Estrange would be angry with him for doing so, and would make merciless fun of the Carrs when he rejoined her, and that Lady Nashville would very probably join her in doing so; but he was not a man to be laughed out of doing what he considered right, and he could not forget that the Carrs had been kind to him when he was a boy, before Sir Pomphry had taken any notice of him, and he was not going to be such a snob as to turn up his nose at them now, because it pleased Kate L'Estrange to do so.

So he stood and talked to them for a little, and submitted to be chaffed by Kate afterwards, with a good humour that quite disarmed her ridicule, and made her respect him more than she had ever done any one before.

At the ball in the evening, Ned also danced twice with each of the Carr girls, and he danced twice with Miss L'Estrange. Only twice! Kate bit her lip and felt furious with him; and people in general laughed, and whispered to one another that Kate L'Estrange had failed again. Again! for this was by no means that young lady's first fish in the matrimonial waters. She had come out four years ago, when she was just seventeen, and every one had prophesied that she would "go off" at once, for besides being good-looking, she was so well connected, both on her father and mother's side, and she was in every respect fitted to adorn any station, however high. But somehow she had not married yet, and she was one of those girls who ought to marry early if they wish to marry at all. Not that her looks went off — on the contrary, they had rather improved with time; but she was one of those girls who go everywhere, whom every one knows, and whom it is universally understood are brought out for the sole object of being married. If Kate's parents had not been so poor, and if people had not talked so much about the desirability of her marrying soon, she would very probably have married at once; but as it was, she had not done so yet. No one

was ill-natured to her; on the contrary, the L'Estranges were a family to whom everyone was good-natured. They were too poor to hold themselves above the county magnates, and yet their blood was so much bluer than any of the county gentry's, that the squires and squiresses were all eager to claim them as intimate friends. Every one had been good-naturedly anxious for Kate to marry when she first came out; and the old ladies of the neighbourhood had watched her career with quite maternal solicitude, and hoped, for poor dear Mrs L'Estrange's sake, that Kate would do well. Yet if these good dames had only talked about the girl a little less, it would have been as well for her. Before she had been out a twelvemonth, she was well known all over the county; she was seen at every ball, racecourse, and flower-show in every part of the county, and always surrounded by young men. Then as time went on, she began to offend the good-natured county people by giving herself airs to them.

She used to stay with her mother's cousin, the Earl of Lowcomb, and his wife occasionally; and her mother's sister, the Baroness Farrar, was very kind to her, as were also her mother's brother, Sir Duncan Cameron, and his wife. Then the various members of the L'Estrange family, all of whom were well married and

connected, took a good deal of notice of her; and after her return from visiting her grand relatives, Miss Kate was apt to be saucy to the plain squires and their wives. Mrs L'Estrange was more politic, and did what she could to counteract Kate and Jack's indiscretion (for the latter had also a good deal of "side" about him); but this was not an easy task, and the L'Estranges were by no means so popular now as they had been before Kate came out.

People were rather disposed to chuckle over her disappointment with regard to young Huntingdon, therefore, and some very ill-natured remarks were made, *à propos* of the disgraceful way in which Kate L'Estrange flirted with every man she came across. As for Ned, he was not sorry to have this opportunity of showing publicly that he had no serious intentions towards Miss L'Estrange, though he was also sorry to have to mortify her, as he knew he was doing. But he knew that if he yielded to the promptings of his good-nature, and let her monopolise him, as she tried to do, she would compromise him so that her father or brother would have a right to ask him his intentions. So he thought of Ida Laurenti, and held himself resolutely aloof from poor Kate all the evening, excepting for those two waltzes which

he had to dance with her for courtesy's sake. Certainly his affairs had arranged themselves strangely: Kate had saved him from Bella, and now he was saved from Kate by Ida Laurenti. He thought a great deal of his little Ida all that evening, and danced so little that Lord Nashville twitted him good-naturedly with being in love; at which Ned laughed awkwardly, but did not inform his lordship how closely he had hit the truth.

A few days after this, Ned received a cordial letter from Count Laurenti, saying that, since the Huntingdon family were willing to receive Ida kindly, he (Laurenti) would be very happy to give her to Ned. But he added that he did not wish the marriage to take place till the following May, as Ida was not to leave the convent where she was being "finished" till the end of November, and he thought she ought to get a little accustomed to society before she married. Of course Ned chafed at the delay; but he supposed that Laurenti was right in the main, and he was too happy in feeling himself engaged to Ida to quarrel with her father's conditions. In his last letter to the Count, he had begged leave to come over and receive his answer from Ida herself; but Laurenti informed him that this would be quite impossible, seeing that Ida was now in a convent; and reminded

him that, if he chose to marry an Italian girl, he must conform to Italian customs. He had already informed Ida of Ned's proposal, he added, and he did not see any necessity for Ned to speak to her himself; indeed, it would be a great breach of the *convenances* for him to do so.

"Hang the *convenances!*" thought Ned savagely; but he consoled himself by going off to Seaville, and purchasing a magnificent double hoop ring of diamonds and opals, which he sent to Count Laurenti, requesting him to present it to Ida from him; and when he received a gracious reply from Laurenti, informing him that he had himself placed the ring on Ida's hand, and begging to thank him, in her name, for his magnificent gift, the young fellow's satisfaction was unalloyed, and he felt—what he had never quite felt before—that now he was really engaged, and that Ida was his very own.

CHAPTER X.

HIS OWN WIFE.

IT was a hot, sultry afternoon in May, and Ned Huntingdon was making his way hurriedly along the Champs Elysées, on his way to the De Clinville's house. He had only arrived in Paris a few hours ago, and now he was on his way to meet his *fiancée* after their ten months' separation. What wonder that he saw nothing of what was passing around him, and that he could not have told whether the carriages in the drive were filled with ladies or monkeys? His whole mind was absorbed by the thought that at last he was to see Ida again, and he felt as nervous and excited as a girl hurrying to keep her tryst with her lover.

Lord and Lady Nashville had passed through Paris about the beginning of April, and had

brought back to England glowing accounts of Ida Laurenti's beauty, and the universal admiration which she excited in Paris,—accounts which drove poor Ned almost wild with jealousy. In his desperation, he had written and implored Count Laurenti's permission to visit his daughter in Paris, and had received a polite reply from the Count, assuring him that he would be delighted to see him, if he cared for the trouble of coming to Paris.

"I perceive that you have not the faintest notion of our ways and customs over here," he had written. "You demanded to lay your proposal of marriage before Ida in person, and I was obliged to refuse. I and her aunt were the proper people to inform her of your offer; it would never have done to have permitted you to make love to her yourself. But once engaged, there could be no objection to your seeing as much of her as you like. In fact, the more *fiancés* see of each other the better, I think. But from the tone of your letter, you seem to imagine that I have forbidden you to approach Ida till the very day appointed for your marriage! What an idea! Come, my friend; come as soon as you please; there can be no objection to your being here now that you are her *fiancé*. Madame de Clinville has

wondered once or twice why you have never come over to see us; but we know that Englishmen are cool even when they are in love, and we supposed that you were enjoying your hunting, and could not tear yourself away from it; and it was impossible for me to suggest to you that you should come to see us, as such a suggestion coming from me would have appeared nothing less than a command to you, and I did not know whether you would like to be dragged away from your sport, which, after all, is the Englishman's best love. However, since I have been mistaken, come; we await you with impatience."

This letter had thrown Ned into a state of wild excitement and dismay. All these months (ever since December, when Ida had left her convent), while he had been eating his heart out with impatience, and at times wondering whether he was not a fool to allow himself to be separated in this way from his betrothed wife, Laurenti and Madame de Clinville had been thinking him guilty of rudeness and neglect in not going to visit her! What an infernal idiot he had been to suppose that, because Laurenti had refused to let him see his daughter before he became engaged to her, he should object to his visiting her after he was her acknowledged *fiancé!* And yet

the Count's words must have been strangely confused, when they could mislead him (Ned) so completely!

The young man wrote off post haste to Laurenti, informing him that he meant to start for Paris at once; but the day before his intended departure, Sir Pomphry Huntingdon was thrown out of his carriage, and broke his collar bone and a couple of ribs, and Ned had to wait till he grew better before paying his proposed visit to Paris. But after six weeks, during which the baronet lay between life and death, he began to rally steadily, and was pronounced to be out of danger, and Ned found himself free to start for Paris.

It was on the afternoon of the 10th of May that he was to be seen tearing up the Champs Elysées, at a rate which made many of the passers-by pause and look after him in surprise. He walked along, swinging his cane lightly to and fro, till he reached Madame de Clinville's hotel, when his nervousness almost reached the point of unconsciousness, and he was hardly aware of anything else that happened, till at length he somehow found himself in a bewildering nest of delicate rose colour, gilding, and white lace, and understood that he was in Madame de Clinville's drawing-room.

Madame herself was seated on a low fauteuil, arrayed in a toilette which defies description;

and as Ned approached she rose and held out her hand graciously towards him, while her brother also rose from a sofa on which he had been lounging, and approached his future son-in-law. But Ned's heart sank, and his cheeks flushed with disappointment, as he glanced hastily round the room, and saw that they were alone—that Ida was not there; and he dropped the little Marquise's hand coldly, after giving it a limp shake, for he was far too English, as well as too disappointed, to dream of kissing it.

"Welcome, my friend, welcome," said Laurenti, laying both hands on his shoulders, and kissing him effusively on either cheek. He must have known that Englishmen shrink with horrible shyness from such demonstrations of affection; but perhaps he was a little bit mischievous, this tall, solemn-looking Count, and enjoyed the sight of Ned's surprised blushes. At any rate, there was a brighter twinkle than usual in his dark, sunken eyes, as he removed his hands from the stalwart shoulders of his son-in-law elect, and proceeded to inquire politely whether he had had a pleasant journey, and how all his relations were in England, etc.

Presently, after a few trifling remarks, Madame de Clinville left the room, and Ned knew that she had gone to fetch Ida, and that now at last he was to see his little love

What an age Madame de Clinville was absent! and how difficult it was to sit still and pretend to listen to what the Count was saying! But at length there was a rustle of skirts; the door opened, and Madame glided into the room, leading her niece by the hand.

For a minute everything in the room seemed to swim before Ned's eyes, and then he heard Madame's voice speaking close to him, and felt Ida's dark eyes fixed wistfully upon him. Good heavens! was this Ida? was this lovely, elegant, self-possessed young lady, the little, shy, timid child with whom he had fallen in love last July? She seemed to have grown taller, older, more graceful, and ten times lovelier than he could have believed possible. He had thought her pretty when he had seen her at Palazzo Laurenti, in her short, shabby frocks, and with her unformed, childish manners; but now that he saw her in a Parisian toilette, with her beautiful hair dressed in the height of the fashion, and a new depth of expression in her soft eyes, which showed that she had passed from child to womanhood, he thought her, if not absolutely beautiful, at any rate wonderfully lovely, and felt stunned and bewildered by the transformation.

"Behold the dear child!" said the Mar-

quise sentimentally, placing Ida's hand in her brother's, who, in his turn, laid it in Ned's.

For a minute a strange tingle ran through all Ned's veins, as he felt the little, soft, warm hand in his own; and remembering that he was amongst foreigners, he raised it rapidly to his lips, and pressed a fervent kiss upon it, while the girl stood calm and unmoved, and without the faintest flutter of colour in her pale sweet face. But Ned did not think her cold, and was only charmed with the gentle self-possession of her manner —so perfectly free from all awkwardness or self-consciousness. He himself was anything but at his ease, and hardly knew how it was that he released his betrothed's hand and stumbled on to the chair from which he had risen at her entrance. Ida was nervous too, no doubt, but she did not show that she was so, as she leant back on her chair in a beautiful attitude, and waited patiently for her intended to speak to her. It was not her place to address him first, and she did not care to do so; and as Ned did not seem certain how to address her, the Count and his sister had to carry on the conversation between them.

"Ce chien d'Anglais!" thought the little Marquise impatiently.

She had been amused by Ned's honesty at Palazzo Laurenti, but now his *gaucherie* appeared as unpardonable as it was absurd to her. Was he a barbarian, this man to whom they were about to give their poor Ida? But even if he was, it was too late to draw back now; and there were very few men, barbarians or otherwise, who would be willing to marry a girl without a dot. So Madame's prudence got the better of her disgust, and she did her best to set the young Englishman at his ease.

Presently she rose, and moved quietly away to the other side of the room, where her brother was examining some new ornament which she had purchased, and which she called upon him eagerly to admire; and so the lovers were left virtually alone for several minutes. Now he *must* speak to her, Ned felt; but his ideas were in such a delightful whirl that he hardly knew how to begin. It seemed impossible for him to realise that that lovely girl was really his! He could have thrown himself on his knees before her, and kissed her hands and the hem of her dress, had her father and aunt not been in the room; but when he attempted to address some polite common-place remark to her, his tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth, and no ideas would come to his aid.

"You only arrived in Paris this morning, Monsieur?" said Ida's soft voice, after a minute of awkward silence.

"No, that is all," he replied gratefully. "I could not leave my uncle sooner," he added, gaining confidence with the sound of his own voice.

"Ah, that poor Sir-r Pom-pe-phry," said Ida. "We were so distressed to hear of his dreadful accident. I hope he was better when you left him?"

"Oh yes, thanks; I think he's going on all right now," answered Ned; and then he caught sight of his diamond and opal ring flashing on the slender finger of her left hand, and his heart gave a sudden throb as he beheld this outward and visible sign that she indeed belonged to him.

"You admire your ring?" she asked, with a smile.

It was the first time she had smiled since entering the room; and had Ned been a bold and self-confident wooer, she might have maintained her somewhat pensive gravity unbroken to the end of the interview; but she was actuated by an instinctive desire to set the young man more at his ease, and he flushed like a girl beneath that smile. Perhaps his eyes told her how she was adored, for she drooped her own, and moved uneasily

in her chair, while for the first time a faint pink colour rose to her clear white face.

"I think any ring would look lovely on your hand," he replied, with a warmth which took some of the commonplaceness out of his words. "You cannot think how happy it made me choosing it."

"You were very kind," she replied gently, but still looking down; and then Madame de Clinville resumed her seat by their side, and their *tête-à-tête*, such as it was, was over.

At last Ned felt that it was time for him to move, and he accordingly rose and took his leave, after promising to dine with the De Clinvilles. Count Laurenti accompanied him out of the house, and then, seeing that the young man did not seem quite certain what to do with himself, he good-naturedly proposed a drive in the Bois, to while away the time. Driving, or rather allowing himself to be driven, was not much in Ned's line; but he had no friends in Paris, and had nothing to do; so he allowed the Count to hail a low, open carriage, and drive him about the most fashionable drives, while he solaced himself with a cigar, stared at the surrounding crowd, listened to the Count's talk, and thought of Ida and the marvellous change which her season in Paris had wrought in her. It was the change from childhood to womanhood,

and it perplexed and puzzled Ned, even while it enchanted him.

That evening, punctually at the appointed hour, he presented himself at the De Clinvilles' hotel, and found the two ladies alone in the drawing-room—the Marquise looking charming in a pink toilette, and Ida very sweet in white. Then Monsieur de Clinville, a short, fat little man of forty, with a round black beard, and fierce black eyes shadowed by bushy eyebrows, came in; and while his wife was presenting him to Ned, dinner was announced, and they all proceeded to the dining-room together.

This time Ned was quite at his ease, and redeemed himself in his hostess's eyes by the ready way in which he seconded her efforts at conversation. Monsieur le Marquis also conversed very agreeably between the courses, and altogether they formed a pleasant little party. Ida was the only one who did not talk much; she leant back, looking very lovely, but saying little, and Ned noticed that she ate scarcely anything. But he did not want her to talk, and was quite content to have her sitting there opposite him, where he could watch her. He fancied that she grew rather uneasy beneath his persistent gaze after a time, and feeling that he was committing a breach of manners in thus staring at her, he tried to avert his eyes. But in vain; again and again they

found their way back to the lovely pale face opposite him, and he began to grow uneasy at the girl's want of appetite, and to wonder whether she had a headache. But then he reflected that probably it was the excitement caused by his arrival which had robbed her of her appetite ; and he felt a pleasant glow pass through him at this thought.

In the evening Count Laurenti appeared at his sister's house, and accompanied her and Ida and Ned to the theatre, and afterwards to a reception given by an English lady, who turned out to be a friend of Sir Pomphry and Lady Huntingdon's, and who welcomed Ned effusively when she found that he was their nephew, and begged him to come and see her whenever he pleased.

By-and-by, when Ned found himself beside Ida on a sofa (with Madame de Clinville keeping careful ward over them to all appearance, though in reality her attention was fully occupied just then by a perfumed dandy, who was whispering sweet nothings in her ear), he asked her tenderly why she was so quiet to-night, and whether she was not feeling well.

"I am quite well, thank you," she replied, bending her head and growing rather paler.

"Then has anything happened to vex you, dear ?" he persisted, anxiously.

"Oh no; indeed, there is nothing the matter," she answered, this time with a bright flush, and a quick, embarrassed glance towards Madame de Clinville, who turned suddenly away from her young gallant, and made some trifling remark to Ned, which forced him to turn his attention away from his betrothed.

Just then Mrs Greenwood, the hostess, bustled up, and carried Ida off to sing, and once more Ned had the felicity of feasting his ears on the voice which had so often haunted his dreams.

"She sings better than when you heard her last, do you not think so?" asked Madame de Clinville triumphantly of Ned.

"Does she?" replied Ned absently; for he was thinking of the way Ida had blushed just now, and pleasing himself by putting a construction very flattering to his vanity, upon the slight embarrassment which his questions had evidently caused her.

"I do not understand much about music," he added hastily; "but I thought she always sang beautifully."

"But she sings better now; it is a voice that will go on improving. She is young still, only seventeen and a-half."

"She looks older than that. It is strange, for last year she hardly looked her full age."

"Girls alter when they come out," said

Madame hastily; and then she turned the conversation skilfully into other channels.

The marriage was to take place on the 30th of May, and the three weeks which intervened between it and Ned's arrival in Paris seemed to fly by as if by magic. There was so much to arrange and to do, such heaps of pleasures and crowds of business to be got through, that the days seemed to end almost before they had begun. Ned's English lawyer came over to help to draw up the settlements, and he claimed a certain amount of Ned's time. The young man made one more unavailing effort to induce Laurenti to consent to his daughter's living in a house of her own; for though he had always made a point of living with his mother himself, yet he did not relish the idea of his wife's being thrown into intimate contact with all the worthy Lynborough folk. His mother had promised that if he set up housekeeping on his own hook, she would allow him an extra two hundred a-year, which would raise his income to twelve hundred a-year; and Ned thought that he and Ida could live very comfortably on this at Seaville, which would be a much more lively and agreeable residence for Ida than Lynborough. He drew a highly-coloured sketch of how they would live at Seaville, for Count Laurenti's benefit: he (Ned) would put down his hunters (for Sir Pom-

phry, who was highly disgusted at the prospect of his heir's wife living at Lynborough, had promised to mount him through the hunting season if he decided to set up a house of his own), and keep a neat one-horse brougham, and a dainty little "Victoria" for Ida, etc., etc. But, for reasons best known to himself, Laurenti thought his daughter would be better living in a house under her mother-in-law's eye; and though he did not say this to Ned, he stuck to it that if Mrs Huntingdon was so amiable as to wish to have her daughter-in-law with her, it would be much better to let them live together. So Ned gave way; for he did not like to explain his real objections to Ida's living in Lynborough to his uncle (who probably would not have understood them if he had), nor could he plead that his mother had not the most charming temper in the world, or that she might not get on with Ida.

He was too desperately in love to risk offending Ida's father, and, as far as he was personally concerned, he was very glad to continue to live with his mother; while the present arrangement left him free to spend far more money on presents to his bride than he could otherwise have afforded.

Ida accepted all his gifts prettily and graciously, but without any show of enthusiasm, and there were times when the

young fellow found his goddess's gentle, unemotional manner just a little bit aggravating. But he was too intensely happy to find serious fault with any one or anything during that time, and he won golden opinions from Madame de Clinville by his unfailing gaiety and good-humour. And if Ida did not show any great delight at receiving his presents, neither did she appear delighted with any one else's. Lady Huntingdon had sent her, by Ned, a handsome gold bracelet, studded with carbuncles (Sir Pomphry's present was the "Victoria" above mentioned); and there was also a broad silver-band bracelet from the Carrs, and a white satin sachet for handkerchiefs from Bella, embroidered with a wreath of forget-me-nots, and with Ida's initials in blue in the centre. Ned had been extremely cross when the Carrs had insisted on his conveying these offerings to his *fiancée*, and he felt a difficulty in explaining to Ida the exact connection between himself and the Carrs. But the girl asked very few questions, and pretended to be quite as pleased with the Carrs' simple offerings as with Lady Huntingdon's handsome gift; and for once Ned was pleased by her indifference to jewelry, and thought her manner of accepting the presents very sweet and lovable. The thing with which she seemed the most pleased was the

letter which Mrs Huntingdon sent her by Ned. The old lady had purchased a beautiful new piano as her present to the young bride, of whose musical talents Ned had spoken so enthusiastically, and of course she could not send it to Ida before her wedding; but she wrote her a kind, affectionate letter, which seemed to move the girl more than any of her fine marriage presents had done.

"Your mother seems very fond of you," she said, with a little laugh (though there was a suspicious mistiness about her bright eyes), handing the letter to Ned after she had perused it in silence.

And certainly Mrs Huntingdon was not sparing in her praises of her son.

"I am sure she will be very fond of you too," he replied, smiling fondly at her.

"I hope so," she said simply; and then she sat down at a dainty little writing-table (they were in Madame de Clinville's boudoir, and that lady was keeping careful watch over them) and wrote the sweetest little note possible in answer to her future mother-in-law's somewhat lengthy epistle. Ned was charmed with her letter when she showed it to him; and so was Mrs Huntingdon, who kept it in her work-basket, and showed it to every one who called to see her, for several weeks after she received it.

Certainly they taught the art of letter-writing well at the Convent de Sacré Cœur; just as they taught the art of sitting, standing, and moving gracefully! But neither Ned nor his mother knew this, and they imagined that all the pretty things in Ida's letter sprang from her own heart.

And so the golden days slipped by to the end of May, and Ned was able to count the time which had to elapse before he could call Ida his wife, by hours. The only drawback to his perfect felicity was the fact of his never being able to talk to Ida alone. He used to accompany her and her aunt to numerous parties and entertainments, and was often their escort during their afternoon drive; but though he saw a good deal of his *fiancée* one way and another, one or other of her relations were always on the watch to prevent anything like a *tête-à-tête* between them. And it is up-hill work making love with a whole body-guard of relations watching you! Madame de Clinville, who was young and pretty, and fond of amusing herself, must have found her task as chaperon extremely irksome; but she did her duty bravely, and even renounced flirtation during these three weeks, so as to be able to keep a stricter watch over her niece.

Sometimes, at balls and crowded soirées, Ned did contrive to say a few words to his

betrothed, unheard by any one; but they were always surrounded by a crowd of people, and though no one might hear what passed between them, yet lots of eyes were watching them, as though to make out their words by the movement of their lips.

Once, and once only, did Ned find himself really and truly alone with his *fiancée*, and that was on the occasion of a ball which Madame de Clinville gave the night before her niece's wedding-day. It was quite at the end of the ball, when every one was leaving, and Ned came into Madame de Clinville's boudoir, to bid her good-night before he also departed. He had fancied he had seen the Marquise enter her boudoir a few minutes before, but on going into the room he found only Ida, who had come in search of her fan which she had left there.

"I thought your aunt was here," he said, advancing delightedly to her side. "I never expected to have the happiness of finding you here alone, my darling."

"Aunt Nina is in the ball-room," said the girl, turning towards the door. But Ned caught her hand and detained her, though she was evidently reluctant to remain.

"Wait a minute, Ida," he exclaimed; "surely there can be no harm in our being together when you are to be my wife to-morrow. Tell

me you are as happy as I am, dear," he added softly.

"I cannot tell how happy you are," she replied evasively, looking down and playing nervously with her fan.

"Look at me and you will see, dearest," he said tenderly.

For one minute she lifted her dark eyes, and gazed into his heavy blue ones, which were shining with such deep, honest love for her; and then she turned away her head, and something very like a sigh escaped her.

"Why don't you answer me, sweetheart?" he asked passionately. "Say that you are happy."

"Don't I look happy?" she replied, turning towards him with a half-smile.

"It will not be my fault if you are not, my darling," he cried, catching her to him, and kissing her passionately, utterly forgetful of the Count and Madame de Clinville.

She made no attempt to resist him, but as soon as she could she freed herself from his arms, and he saw that her very lips were blanched.

"What is the matter, Ida?" he cried in dismay. "Did I frighten you, dear? or don't you feel well?"

"I—I am rather tired," she replied, leaning one hand heavily on the back of a chair, while

she clasped the other for a moment to her throat, as though she felt suffocated. "I feel nervous and excited to-night—you must not mind me," she added, with a slight laugh, which, however, struck Ned as being more hysterical than mirthful.

"Go to your room and get a good rest, dearest," he said kindly.

But still she stood in the same position, with her hand resting on the chair, and her lovely eyes fixed wistfully upon his kind, handsome face. He saw that she was about to say something, and stood silently waiting for her to speak, when suddenly Count Laurenti appeared at the door, and the girl started so violently that she made Ned start too.

"I was bidding Ida good-night," said the latter hastily.

"So I perceive," replied the Count drily, and casting a swift, keen glance at his daughter. "My sister is in the salon if you wish to see her."

So Ned departed, after kissing Ida's hand ceremoniously, and did not see her again until the hour appointed for their marriage the following day.

She looked very lovely in her white bridal dress and soft tulle veil; very lovely, and young, and pure, and sweet—and very pale

and cold too. There was no blush on her clear, marbly cheek, and no shyness or bashfulness in the glorious dark eyes that looked straight out from beneath her veil with a far-away, mournful expression which ill-befitted a young bride.

Ned was startled and alarmed by that look, even while he felt his brain whirl at the sight of her beauty; but he concluded that she was only a little bit scared, now that the solemn moment of marriage had really come; and as she went through the ceremony with perfect composure, he soon forgot his vague uneasiness, and remembered only that now at last she was his wife. His wife, his own wife, he kept repeating to himself, as he walked proudly down the aisle with the graceful girl leaning on his arm. He felt as if he trod on air, and at that minute it would have been hard to find a more supremely happy mortal than Ned Huntingdon throughout the length and breadth of Europe.

CHAPTER XI.

ARRIVAL OF THE BRIDE.

"GOOD-DAY, Mrs Huntingdon; delightful weather, is it not? And so you are here to meet your son and his wife? You must be *delighted* at the prospect of having them with you."

The speaker was Mrs Williamson, mother of the weak young curate of Lynborough,—a large, red-faced, loud-voiced lady of fifty or so. She had found out the train by which Ned Huntingdon and his bride were expected to arrive at Lynborough, and had come to the station nominally in quest of a parcel which she was expecting, but in reality in hopes of getting a glimpse of the bride before any of her fellow-townsfolk saw her.

She had only been settled two years at Lynborough, yet already she had forced her-

self into a prominent place in its social world, —"by pure impudence," as some of her neighbours jealously remarked. She was not rich, and could not entertain much, but she affected to be a "woman of the world," and as such she had gained a considerable amount of prestige among the quiet Lynborough folk. She was a handsome woman in a coarse, overblown style; and though she did not really dress in particularly bright colours, her bright, ashy-white hair, and highly-coloured face, gave her a brilliant appearance even when she was dressed in mourning, and made her appear very much like an overblown poppy. She knew she was not graceful, and did not "go in" for being elegant; but if asked to describe herself, she would have informed you, in her loud haw-haw voice, that she hoped she was stylish and good "*tong*."

To-day she wore a grey gown, a black cashmere mantle, highly bugled and a white straw bonnet, trimmed with broad black ribbon, and her face was redder than usual, owing to the fact of her having walked rather fast through the July sun, in order to reach the station before the train came in.

The Carr family were all assembled at the station (with the exception of Mr Carr and the three younger children), too, awaiting

the arrival of the bride and bridegroom, and they cast some very indignant glances at Mrs Williamson, as she marched into the station with her grey train sweeping up a cloud of dust behind her.

"It is like her impudence, coming here to meet Ned," muttered Mrs Carr to Bella; but she had reasons of her own for wishing to keep on amicable terms with the curate's mother, and so went up to her and held out her hand in the most friendly manner possible.

"Really, we look *quite* a family party," said Mrs Williamson in her big voice, opening her mouth very wide so as to articulate her words more distinctly. "Mr Ned will see that we have not forgotten him all this time he has been away. He has been spending his honeymoon among the Pyrenees, hasn't he?"

"Yes; and they have been at Biarritz too."

"Biarritz! ah, I have often heard of it. A *charming* place it must be, from all accounts. Here comes the train — *voila l'instant suprême.* I came to look for a parcel, but I think I *must* stop and say how do to the happy pair."

"Yes, do," said Mrs Huntingdon, overawed by the French quotation.

Then in rushed the train, and in an instant

the whole platform was swarming with passengers and porters, and Mrs Huntingdon and her friends found themselves pushed and jostled away from the train, rather than towards it.

"There's Ned!" cried the mother eagerly. "Bless the dear boy, how well he's looking."

And indeed it was easy to see by the young man's face that his first month of wedded bliss had been cloudless and unalloyed. He sprang lightly out of the carriage, and then turned and handed out a young lady, dressed in a costume of light and very dark grey from head to foot—bonnet, gloves, and necktie all matched; and consequently the plain travelling costume looked more stylish than many a handsomer toilet in which each separate article is of a different hue—the bonnet reviling the dress, and the gloves quarrelling with the necktie.

"Dear me, she's not a bit like what I expected," murmured Mrs Huntingdon rather blankly, for she had expected Ida to be a *facsimile* of her childish photograph, and had not counted on finding her developed into a fashionable young lady.

"She looks a most *perfect* lady," whispered Mrs Williamson patronisingly. "I can see at once that her air is *most* distengy."

"Mother, this is my wife—Ida, my mother," said Ned, leading his bride proudly towards the

old lady, who advanced with extended hands to meet them. But before she could speak, Ida had caught one of her hands and raised it gracefully to her lips; whereupon Mrs Huntingdon came to a dead stop, fairly staggered by this extraordinary greeting. Then she looked up, saw a pale, sweet face, and a pair of soft dark eyes fixed wistfully upon her, and with a little gasp she recovered her self-possession, and bestowed a hearty embrace upon her young daughter-in-law.

"And will you introduce *me* to the Contessa, Mr Ned?" said Mrs Williamson, bustling up; while the Carrs reddened, and thought that really it was quite too impudent of this woman to push herself in front of them, who were connections of the Huntingdons. "I'm a friend of the family's, Contessa," continued Mrs Williamson, very proud of being able to use the Italian title, for hitherto all the Lynborough people had spoken of Ida as "Mrs Ned," and she felt herself far above them in knowledge of the world when she addressed the young bride by that delightful title of "Contessa."

Ned did not perform the ceremony of introduction very cordially, for he could not help feeling that Ida must think his family friends rather a rum lot, if this brilliant widow was a sample of them. His

mother he was never ashamed of, for in her plain widow's dress she always looked nice, and her manners were quiet and unobtrusive; besides which he was very fond of her, and viewed her with rather prejudiced eyes. Neither was there anything about the Carrs to jar on one's susceptibilities at first sight, though they certainly did not look as if they belonged to the great world; but Mrs Williamson carried her vulgarity written unmistakably on her face, and proclaimed it aloud every time she opened her mouth, and Ned felt considerably aggravated at her being one of the first people to welcome Ida to her new home. But Ida, though she was not prepossessed by Mrs Williamson, was far from understanding how vulgar she really was; she had heard English women freely abused for their want of manner and taste in dress, and she supposed that this handsome, good-natured woman was merely an ordinary English woman, neither better nor worse than the general run of her compatriots. So, as the lady said she was a friend of the Huntingdons, she smiled sweetly upon her, and accepted her congratulations graciously; and then she was presented to the Carrs, and was deeply struck with Bella and Emily's fresh English beauty, though she thought their mother rather too sharp-mannered to be agreeable.

Then they all escorted her across the station to the neat one-horse brougham which Ned had purchased for her (his mother had never been persuaded into the extravagance of keeping a carriage of her own), and into this she was packed with her mother-in-law, Miss Boyd, and Ned, while her maid got up on the box in front. They were a close pack, and it was a hot day, and Ida was tired; so it was a great relief to her when at length they reached home. Mrs Huntingdon took her by the hand as soon as they entered the house, and led her upstairs to the bright, cheerful room which was to be her bedroom; and then, as soon as she had got her into the room, she turned and embraced her again, and Ida wondered how people could call the English cold and undemonstrative. This dear old lady looked brimming over with the milk of human kindness; and as for poor Ned, he was as desperately in love as any of her countrymen could be, she fancied.

"I hope you will be happy among us, my dear," said Mrs Huntingdon warmly. "This is a strange country to you, but I hope you will soon grow to love it as much as your own."

"I am sure I shall, dear Madam," responded Ida gratefully. "I love you from my heart already—indeed, I have felt an affec-

tion for you ever since I received your amiable letter in Paris. I knew when I read it that I should love you ; I only hope you will find it as easy to love me."

"I am sure we shall get on very nicely, my dear," answered the old lady, just a little stiffly, for she was confused by the girl's unnecessary warmth, and for a moment she felt half inclined to doubt her sincerity.

"That is Ned's dressing-room," she continued hastily, anxious to escape personalities, "and if you will come with me, I will show you your boudoir, which I hope will be to your liking."

She led the way down the passage to a pretty little room overlooking the garden, which Ned had had fitted up as a nest for his little bride. It was certainly a very dainty little bower, and Mrs Huntingdon ushered Ida into it with an air of conscious pride, which warned her daughter-in-law that she was expected to admire it warmly. And she did admire and praise it in a manner that gratified the old lady considerably.

"It was Ned's idea that you must have a boudoir of your own," she said. "He fitted it up, and chose everything in it himself. Some of the things he got from Seaville, but others were from London. He spent a deal of money and trouble over it, but it's the love

and thoughtfulness that counts for most, isn't it, my dear?"

"Indeed it is; he is far too good to me."

"Not better than you deserve, I'm sure, my dear. But he is very fond of you. Morning, noon, and night he could talk and think of no one but you; and though I know I ought not to say it, I think you are a lucky girl to get such a good husband."

"I know I am, Madam."

"And I am very glad he has got such a pretty wife, too, my dear. Well now, suppose you go and take off your bonnet. Remember this is quite your own room, to come to whenever you wish to be alone."

"Dear Madam, as if I should ever wish to be away from you!"

"Don't talk nonsense, my dear," said the old lady quietly. "And when you have taken off your things, maybe you would like a cup of tea—I am just going to have mine."

At seven o'clock Ned and Ida dined *tête-à-tête*. Old Mrs Huntingdon had been accustomed to have her tea at six o'clock all her life, and could not accustom herself to eating dinner instead. When Ned lived with her as a bachelor, he had usually had his dinner at one end of the table, while she and Miss Boyd had their tea at the other, and in order to suit him, she had generally put off her tea-hour

till half-past six ; but now that Ida was here, to keep him company at his meal, Mrs Huntingdon took her tea separately, and the table was relaid for dinner. Of course this double arrangement involved a good deal of extra work, so a tall buttons of fifteen had been engaged to help the neat parlour-maid in her work. I mention these little details because they were matters of intense interest to Lynborough at large, and were made the subject of a good deal of social gossip.

Afterwards in the evening, Bella and Emily Carr came in with their brother Dick ; and the curate, Mr Williamson, also made his appearance. He often came to visit Mrs Huntingdon, as he was generally pretty sure of meeting Emily Carr here, and he was thus able to court her without rousing his mother's suspicions, as he must have done had he gone openly to the Carrs' house. To-night he and Emily speedily became absorbed in each other, but Bella seated herself beside the bride, and tried to make friends with her, in which she easily succeeded, as Ida was prepossessed by her prettiness, and also fancied that she would please Ned by being cordial to his people. Poor Bella ! it had been a terrible blow to her when she had heard of Ned's engagement, for she had allowed herself to care for him more than was good for her peace of mind ; but she

bore no ill-will either to him or his bride, and she acknowledged with a sigh that Ida was far better fitted to be his wife than herself.

Ned was as "jolly" as usual to the Carr girls; but he had never liked Dick, and it tried his patience sorely to see him lounging languidly on the sofa beside Ida, showing off all his finest airs for her benefit. Ned thought him a "confounded snob," and he fumed inwardly as he reflected how entirely Ida was being drawn into the Lynborough set. He himself had always contrived to get on very well among them, for he had understood how to be pleasant to the ladies and civil to the men, without allowing any great intimacy to exist between them; and then he was a man, and a man can afford to make friends with many people whom he would not care to introduce to his wife. But Ida was different. Ned did not wish her to be anything but civil to his mother's friends, but he was deeply annoyed to see her allowing them to become intimate with her. He had fancied that her own instincts would have made her hold aloof from them; and he forgot that she was a foreigner, and did not understand what class of society this was that she found herself in. To her, Dick Carr's snobbishness appeared far less revolting than it did to her English husband. She thought the young man affected and con-

ceited, but she also saw that he was trying very hard to make himself agreeable to her, and she made allowance for anything that struck her as absurd in his manner, on the ground that he was *English*—a term which, in her mind, covered a multitude of sins.

The thing which roused her surprise the most, was the open and violent flirtation that was being carried on between Emily and the young clergyman; and when at length the two got up and sauntered out into the garden *alone*, her wonderment was written so plainly in her face that Ned could not forbear laughing.

"You see how we manage these things in England, Ida," he said, flinging himself into the seat which Dick had just vacated in order to help Miss Boyd to draw out a card-table. "Can you wonder that I found the restrictions which your aunt placed upon our love-making horribly irksome, when you see the perfect freedom we enjoy in England?"

"Are they engaged?" asked Ida in an undertone.

"Well, I expect they understand one another pretty well; but they can't marry till Williamson gets a living."

"They must be very happy," said Ida, with a half-sigh.

"Yes, while it lasts; but of course it may all come to nothing, and then they will have

to pay for their present happiness. In some ways your foreign system is better, no doubt; the girls never get a chance of falling in love, and then having to give up the men they love."

"But you and Ida fell in love with one another?" said Mrs Huntingdon, who had been listening to the above conversation, looking almost as puzzled as her daughter-in-law.

"Ours was an exceptional case," replied Ida, with a short nervous laugh, and a sudden blush, as she felt the old lady's eyes fixed inquiringly upon her; and before the latter could pursue the subject further, Dick Carr called out that the card-table was ready, and they all (with the exception of Emily and Mr Williamson, who were still in the garden) seated themselves round it and played at "old maid," and other similarly exciting round games, till half-past ten, when a tray with wine, cake, and sandwiches was brought into the room by the new Buttons, and they all paused to partake of the refreshments; after which the Carrs took their departure, Dick and Bella walking on well in advance, and leaving Emily to the care of the attentive curate, who insisted on escorting her to her own door.

CHAPTER XII.

AMONG THE VULGARITIES.

THE next morning broke bright and warm as the preceding one, and Ned uttered a mental thanksgiving as he dressed, for he thought that this fine weather would give Ida a good impression of her new home, and he knew how important first impressions are. Breakfast was at half-past nine, and after it Ida took her work and seated herself on a comfortable bench in the garden, where she was speedily joined by Ned, who took her all round the garden, and finally brought her back to her first seat.

"It's a dear old place, isn't it?" he asked, bending forward, with his arms resting on his knees, and gazing up into her face.

"Yes, it is a sweet, funny old garden; I never saw one like it before."

"Rather different to Laurenti, eh?"

"Oh, quite."

"Look here, Ida," said Ned, after a moment's pause, "I think I'd better give you a hint about some of our neighbours. My mother has a good many friends that I shouldn't care for you to be intimate with."

Ida opened her eyes, and her husband continued hurriedly,—

"That Mrs Williamson, for instance, is an odious woman."

"But she said she was a friend of yours."

"Well, my mother knows her, but I don't think she likes her particularly; and as for me, I detest her."

"I see; and you don't wish me to be friends with her?"

"Oh yes, be friendly and civil to her; but don't make a *friend* of her."

"Very well," said Ida slowly, and still looking rather perplexed. "But if she isn't nice, why does your mother know her?"

"We all have to know some disagreeable people in this world," replied Ned, tugging his fair moustache irritably. "There are a good many people in Lynborough whom you will have to know to visit and bow to, but whom I should not like you to make *friends* of."

"Are they friends of your mother's?"

"Yes, that's just it; she likes them, and it would vex her if we weren't civil to them; but

the fact is, dear, they aren't quite in our set in society. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I think so. Are the Carrs some of those people?"

"Well, no; the Carrs are different. They were kind to me when I was a child, you see; and I like the girls and old Carr awfully."

"I liked Miss Bella very much; she is very pretty, though I admired her sister more."

"Did you? I admire Bella much the most. I don't care much for their mother; and as for Dick, he's a regular cad."

"A what?"

"A cad—a snob, you know. I wonder you had the patience to put up with him as you did last night. This is the way he goes;" and Ned threw himself into a graceful attitude, and fingered his imaginary whiskers (for he did not wear any himself) in excellent imitation of Dick.

"He is affected," said Ida, laughing; "but I suppose gentlemen abroad are more *maniéré* than you are in England, for I did not think Mr Carr's manner so remarkable as you seem to do."

Here Mrs Huntingdon was seen coming across the grass towards the young couple; and as soon as she got up to them, she informed Ida that she was going out for a walk,

and asked whether she would like to accompany her.

"I should like very much to go with you," replied Ida. "But don't you think it is very pleasant here? Won't you sit down and talk?"

"But, my dear, oughtn't you to come for a walk? It can't be good for you to sit still all day."

"Oh, I have been all round the garden, and I think it lovely."

"That is no walk at all. However, don't come unless you feel inclined."

"Oh, yes, please; I should like to come," said Ida, rising with secret reluctance, and preparing to follow her mother-in-law back to the house.

Ned did not care to go for a constitutional down Lynborough High Street; so by-and-by the ladies (including Miss Boyd) sallied forth alone, and Ida beheld Lynborough for the first time—for she had been unable to take much note of it yesterday in the close brougham. What she now saw was a long straight street, with hardly two houses in it of the same height or colour. Shops and dwelling-houses were mixed indiscriminately, the former displaying very second-rate articles in their windows; for their trade was spoilt by the Seaville shops, which were only five miles

away, and as good as London shops, the Seavillites proudly affirmed.

Down this street they walked at a pace which considerably astonished Ida, accustomed as she was to the slow Italian mode of progression; and she was immensely relieved when at length Mrs Huntingdon turned into a chemist's shop, and she was able to regain her breath.

"Good morning, Mr Leslie," said Mrs Huntingdon politely.

"Good morning, Mrs Huntingdon," returned a white-bearded, elderly man, who had been reading a paper behind the counter as they entered (for business was slack at Lynborough). "You are out early to-day."

"Yes, it gets hot later in the day; this is much the pleasantest time for being out."

"So it is, so it is," acquiesced Mr Leslie, gazing hard at Ida. "Is this Mrs Ned?" he inquired blandly.

"Yes, this is my daughter-in-law," replied the old lady, smiling benignly.

"Indeed! I am very happy to see her," said the chemist, affably. "I heard you had arrived last night, Mrs Ned; but I didn't think I should have the pleasure of seeing you so soon," he proceeded blandly. "Ah, Mrs Huntingdon, your son always had an eye for the pretty girls; and I see he has displayed

his usual good taste," bowing to Ida, and laughing delightedly at his own joke.

Mrs Huntingdon smiled, and Miss Boyd giggled, while Ida merely bowed quietly.

"How can they say in Italy that the English are so rude to their servants?" she thought to herself. "Why, Mrs Huntingdon speaks to this chemist as if he was her equal!"

Then Mrs Huntingdon began to explain what it was she wanted, and Mr Leslie proceeded slowly to fill and seal up a bottle of some mysterious liquid, chatting away all the time about the weather and the state of the crops in an easy, nonchalant manner, that surprised Ida not a little. It was one thing for her mother-in-law to treat the chemist affably, and another thing for him to behave in this cool, unconcerned manner when speaking to a lady!

At last the bottle was sealed up, and Mr Leslie laid it on the counter, and allowed Mrs Huntingdon to pick it up. While she was doing so, he remarked that his mother would be terribly vexed if she missed seeing "Mrs Ned," and asked whether the ladies would mind stepping upstairs and seeing her. So upstairs they all went, headed by Mr Leslie, to a neat sitting-room above the shop, where a respectable-looking woman was seated darning socks. She rose to receive her guests with respectful cordiality, very different to

the self-asserting, independent air of her son, who, after ostentatiously placing a chair for Ida, returned to the shop, where another customer was waiting to be served. This time Ida perceived that her mother-in-law did *not* treat Mrs Leslie quite like an equal. She chatted to her almost intimately, it is true; but there was a distinct touch of patronism in her tone, which was half-ludicrous and half-oppressive. She sat for some time, but at last it occurred to her that it was growing late, and she accordingly rose to depart. When they found themselves in the street again, Miss Boyd made some remark about Mr Leslie's offhand manner; and Mrs Huntingdon laughed good-naturedly, and replied,—

"No, indeed; he behaves as if he was as good gentry as we. He is a red-hot radical," she added, turning to Ida. "His brother is the editor of *The Patriot*, a dreadful revolutionary thing as I am told; though I never read it myself, not liking that sort of thing. The wife is a most superior woman though, and the brothers are really well-meaning men when you know them."

Ida thought she would rather be excused knowing anything further of them, but she kept her opinions to herself, and only gave a half-mechanical smile in reply to her mother-in-law's words.

On they went down the High Street, and at last found themselves on a plain country road, with green hedges on either side, and behind these green or yellow fields, dotted about with trees.

It was by no means an ugly road, but it was uninteresting, and Ida, who could not understand any one in their senses walking merely for the sake of walking, soon grew weary of the monotony of the road, and breathless with the brisk pace at which they proceeded.

"Dear Mrs Huntingdon, I am so tired," she cried at last. "And—and don't you think we are walking very fast?"

"Fast!" cried both Mrs Huntingdon and Miss Boyd in a breath; why, they were going quite leisurely.

"However, if you are really tired, of course we will go back," said Mrs Huntingdon, though she was rather annoyed at having her walk cut short. "I suppose you have not got over the fatigue of your journey," she added excusingly.

During the entire walk Mrs Huntingdon kept singing her son's praises to Ida, watching jealously the while to see whether the girl responded with a proper amount of warmth. Ida certainly strove to do so, but some of her foreign expressions struck her mother-in-law

as being overstrained and unnatural, and once more a doubt as to the girl's perfect sincerity crossed the old lady's mind.

She also questioned her closely respecting her past life, and displayed more curiosity than delicacy in the persistence with which she pressed some of her inquiries. She learnt where Ida had lived from the day of her birth up to the time of her marriage; how many years she had had a governess, and how long she had been in a convent; she discovered that Count Laurenti had hardly seen his daughter from the hour of his wife's death up to the time when Ida was betrothed to the Marchese Montini; and she was very much surprised, and not overpleased, to hear of this early engagement.

"I thought Ned was your very first lover," she said discontentedly.

"So he was, dear Madam. I do not call the poor Marchese a lover. I never saw him till everything was settled."

"How shocking!" cried Mrs Huntingdon, while Miss Boyd exclaimed that the way they did those things abroad was dreadful. "Do you really mean to say that you never saw this Marquis till you were engaged to him?"

"No; it was all settled before I left my convent."

"And how old were you then?"

"Sixteen and a half. It was just before I met Ned."

"Then why on earth did your father keep Ned waiting a whole year?" cried the mother indignantly.

"It was Aunt Nina who persuaded him that I ought to come out before I married, and that my education wanted perfecting. She was not consulted about my first betrothal, you know."

But Mrs Huntingdon still looked dissatisfied, and she felt annoyed by the business-like way in which Ida spoke of the whole affair.

"She hasn't blushed once!" she thought, disapprovingly. "I like girls to blush when they speak of their love affairs."

"How miserable you must have been all the time you and Mr Ned were separated," said Miss Boyd, with a look of compassion on her round, rosy face.

"Ah, I cannot speak of it!" cried Ida, throwing out her hands tragically, and raising her lovely eyes pathetically to the clouds.

To her, the action was perfectly natural; but Mrs Huntingdon thought it supremely affected and ridiculous, and she glanced hastily round (for they were just re-entering the town) to see if any one they knew happened to be in sight. Yes, there came Mrs William-

son, in her grey dress and bugled mantle, leaning lovingly on the arm of her shrimp of a son. The pair certainly looked very ill-matched, for, as Ned disrespectfully averred, there was sufficient material in Mrs Williamson to make two of her son, or perhaps, economically managed, even three; and now, as she leant on his puny arm, it seemed as if her bulk and weight must crush him completely. She shook hands cordially with the Huntingdons, and asked "Mrs Ned" in her loud, gushing manner, what she thought of Lynborough; to which Ida replied evasively, that she had hardly seen enough of it to judge. At present she was chiefly occupied with watching the curate's ears, which she could not help fancying actually *flapped* in the breeze, so large were they—and so red.

"There's Mrs Elton," cried Mrs Williamson, after walking a short way with her friends. "Good-bye, I'm off; I don't care to meet her," and hooking her arm through her son's, she marched him rapidly off down a bye-street, merely bowing to Mrs Elton, the clergyman's wife, who now came up and spoke to the Huntingdons.

Mrs Elton was a plain, middle-aged woman, with quiet manners, and a kind, good face; but Ida thought her very stupid and uninteresting looking, and considered her manner

simply horrible, as stiff and rigid as if she had been cut out of a block of wood. On the whole she almost thought she preferred Mrs Williamson. And was this Mrs Elton one of the people with whom Ned did not wish her to be friendly? Ida could not tell, and felt puzzled and perplexed; and this, together with the fact of her being tired and dispirited, made her manner towards the clergyman's wife not cold or discourteous — Ida could never be that—but quietly indifferent. She bowed gracefully when she was introduced to her, and answered her politely when she addressed her; but she was not cordial as she had been when she was first introduced to Mrs Williamson. Mrs Elton did not speak much to her, but addressed herself principally to Mrs Huntingdon, while Ida stood silently by, with rather a dreamy look in her dark eyes. She knew that Mrs Elton looked very hard at her once or twice; and when, after a few minutes' conversation, the clergyman's wife bid the Huntingdon's good-bye before proceeding on her way, she looked again into the bride's face with a searching, kindly, and half-pitying expression, that considerably startled the latter. Why did Mrs Elton look at her like that? she wondered uneasily. Had she allowed herself to look weary or sad? If so, she must be careful not to allow her face to betray her

again. Supposing Mrs Huntingdon had noticed that she was not looking perfectly happy! But it was evident that Mrs Huntingdon had seen nothing amiss in her daughter-in-law's bearing, for she talked away to her, and informed her that Mrs Williamson had quarrelled with the Eltons, and that she had caused several disagreements between her son and his rector.

"If Mr Elton wasn't the best man in the world, he'd have sent young Williamson about his business long ago," she added. "I certainly think Mrs Williamson is the most foolish woman I know."

"Very likely," replied Ida, wearily, as they reached their own door, greatly to her relief.

CHAPTER XIII.

A GENTEEL CHAPTER.

MRS HUNTINGDON and Miss Boyd went straight upstairs on entering the house, to remove their walking things, but Ida wandered out into the garden again—the only place in Lynborough where she felt happy or at home. She seated herself languidly on a bench that was well concealed behind some bushes, and fell into a somewhat dismal reverie. What a hideous place Lynborough was, and what horrid people they seemed to be here! Ida's heart sank at the prospect of having to live all her life among them, and for one minute a wish arose in her heart that her father had married her to one of her own countrymen. But then she remembered Ned, and her heart smote her for not being more grateful to him for all his kindness and goodness to her. And

was she not fortunate in having such a nice mother-in-law? Mrs Huntingdon might not have the air of a *grande-dame*, but she seemed kind and good-natured, and she was not so bad-mannered as those dreadful friends of hers. Supposing Mrs Carr or Mrs Williamson had been her mother-in-law! Ida shuddered at the thought, and told herself that she ought to be very thankful to have married into such a nice family; but all the same she felt weary and dispirited, and one or two tears rose to her eyes, and dropped quietly on to her clasped hands.

"Ida! my darling, what is the matter?" cried Ned's voice behind her.

He had approached softly towards her over the grass, and she had not heard his steps, and now she started violently at the sound of his voice.

"It is nothing—nothing," she cried, dashing away her tears, and smiling up at him. "I am tired, that is all."

"It must be more than that, dear," said Ned gravely, seating himself beside her, and taking her hand gently in his. "What has vexed you? Won't you tell me?"

"You will laugh at me, it is such a little thing. I laugh myself when I think of it."

"I will not laugh, Ida; how can you think I would laugh at anything that distressed you, my darling?"

"Well, it is only that I am afraid your mother is not quite pleased with me. All the time we were out she kept praising you, and watching to see that I appreciated you; but when I spoke warmly of you, she got suddenly stiff, as if she thought I was talking nonsense; and when I replied quietly, she looked offended, as if she thought me cold."

"My dear child," cried Ned, relieved to find the mountain dissolved into a mole-hill, "you do not understand my mother. She thinks there is no one like me in the world (poor misguided woman!), and is never satisfied with any one's praise of me. You mustn't mind her, dear; I can see that she is awfully fond of you already, and I'm sure you'll get on together famously."

Ida allowed it to appear that her husband's words had quite pacified her, but she did so principally because she knew that it was impossible for a man to understand or sympathise with these kind of petty feminine vexations; but none the less was she persuaded in her own mind that she had failed entirely to satisfy her mother-in-law. She was not sorry when, just then, the "Buttons," Parsons, came up and informed her that Lady Huntingdon was in the drawing-room, and she had to rise and go into the house. She wondered what sort of person this new relation of Ned's was; some

English ladies were nice, she knew, for Mrs Merivale in Paris was charming, and very much admired there; but somehow she felt hopeless about these Lynborough people; they were nice and good, no doubt, in their way, but they were all so hopelessly stupid.

Lady Huntingdon proved to be a tall, stately lady, with white hair, keen dark eyes, and a handsome, cold face. She looked a *grande-dame*, every inch of her, and Ida felt instinctively that she belonged to quite another order of beings to the Lynborough ladies; yet she was not more drawn towards her than towards them, and felt chilled and awed by her grand, formal manner.

"I have come to carry you and Ned off to Tyndale to lunch," said her ladyship graciously to Ida. "Sir Pomphry is very anxious to make your acquaintance—do you think you can come?"

"Thank you," replied Ida, glancing inquiringly at her husband, who replied for her, that they would be very glad to go to the Court.

"Then, as it is already one o'clock, I think, perhaps, we had better start at once," proceeded Lady Huntingdon, rising; and as Ida had her outdoor things on, they departed without further delay.

The drive was pleasant enough. Lady Huntingdon and Ida did their best to be

agreeable to one another (and well-bred ladies can always contrive to get on well when they have a mind), and Ned was brimming over with happiness and good spirits, and made the whole party feel lively. The road also was tolerably pretty, and Ida was charmed with the beauty of Tyndale park, and the lovely view from the front of the house.

"And yet it's uncommonly different to Laurenti,—isn't it?" said Ned, as they came in sight of the sea.

"This is England, and Laurenti was in Italy," replied Ida, gazing dreamily over the green, white-crested Atlantic, so different to her native Mediterranean.

"Miss L'Estrange and Mr and the Misses Proctor are in the drawing-room, my lady," announced the servant who opened the door to Lady Huntingdon.

"Dear me! how tiresome," she remarked calmly. "I wanted to have you and Ned alone to-day, Ida." She led the way to a handsome drawing-room, with a fine view of the park and sea, and here they found Sir Pomphry doing his best to entertain Miss L'Estrange and Mr Proctor, a tall, dark, stiff-looking man of five-and-forty, who, with his two daughters, had ridden over to lunch at Tyndale. By a strange coincidence Kate L'Estrange had also ridden over for the same purpose; so, instead

of being able to spend a quiet afternoon with Ned's wife, Lady Huntingdon found herself confronted by a large party. She welcomed them politely, however, and kissed Kate affectionately before presenting her to Ida, who was very much prepossessed by the English girl's appearance. Kate always looked well in any costume she might wear (partly, perhaps, because she was so very particular never to wear anything that did not suit her), but she looked particularly well in her habit, which showed her perfect little figure to such advantage, and the dark blue colour of which set off her fair hair and complexion admirably. She shook the bride cordially by the hand, and said one or two pretty things to her; but her smile softened insensibly as she turned towards Ned, for it was an instinct with this young woman to make herself more agreeable to men than to women. She did not waste much of her time on the ladies, but struck up a lively conversation with Ned, while Mr Proctor stood on the hearthrug talking to Sir Pomphry, and scowling at Ned and Miss L'Estrange.

When Lady Huntingdon—who had taken Ida up to her room to remove her bonnet—returned to the drawing-room and saw the state of affairs, she looked considerably annoyed. The Misses Proctor, two pale, lanky

girls of fifteen and seventeen, were sitting quite alone on a sofa, for Kate had turned her back upon them, and was devoting herself to Ned; while Mr Proctor was watching her from the hearthrug, as already described. But just as her ladyship entered the room, luncheon was announced, and they all marched off to the dining-room. Here matters did not improve; Miss L'Estrange continued to chat confidentially to Ned, who, seeing that Ida was not disposed to be jealous, responded readily to her advances. She certainly was an awfully jolly girl—and she looked uncommonly well in her habit, he thought; and now that he was safely married, he was not afraid to amuse himself with her. Kate, on her side, was well pleased that this meeting had come off as it had. She knew that she looked well in her habit, and she saw that the bride was looking pale and tired, and she exerted herself to the utmost to amuse and fascinate Ned, determined to let him see that she—the girl whom he had thrown away—was a very charming young person. She did not want to make Ida unhappy—she had no spite against her—but she did wish to show Ned that she was in nowise inferior to the girl whom he had preferred before her. So she made herself "no end jolly to him," to use her own phraseology, and took

no heed of the warning glances of Lady Huntingdon, or the dark looks of Mr Proctor. But at last, quite at the close of the meal, she saw the Misses Proctor exchange a glance of mutual triumph, and in an instant she had changed her tactics, and turning to Mr Proctor, who was on her other side, she strove to win him back into good-humour with herself. But this was no easy task, and she began to perceive the extent of her imprudence, when she found that it was almost impossible to win a smile from that gentleman, who continued to look determinately stern and morose. At last, after strenuous exertions, she did succeed in thawing him a little; and when, after luncheon, he begged leave to order his horses, she also sent for hers, so that they all came to the door together. She also rose to say good-bye when he and his girls did, and as his road lay past The Folly, it was only natural for them all to ride off together. It was two miles by the high-road to The Folly, and Kate was careful not to go too fast; of course she rode in front with Mr Proctor, and so well did she employ her time that, by the time she reached her home, she had completely restored her companion's good-humour, and even persuaded him to come in and see her mother, and have a cup of afternoon tea. How she had worked this change we cannot

say ; but it is certain that she laughed a good deal at Ned Huntingdon during her homeward ride, and called him a conceited young fop, and perhaps this may have had something to say to Mr Proctor's restored good-humour. But, alas ! on entering The Folly drawing-room they found a couple of young officers from Seaville, whose acquaintance Kate had made at the assembly balls of that place, and who had begged leave to call on her. Of course she had to talk a little to them, and Mr Proctor's face grew dark again, as he noted the exceedingly intimate terms which they appeared to be on with her. He soon rose and took his leave, and on their way home his daughters took occasion to remark that Miss L'Estrange was a dreadful flirt.

"Now, my dear, we can have a nice chat," said Lady Huntingdon, as she and Ida drove off towards Lynborough together, leaving Ned to follow on foot. "I never can make friends with people unless I get them alone."

Ida was leaning back on her seat, looking paler and heavier-eyed than ever, but she smiled gratefully in reply, though she felt chilled and repressed all the while she was talking to her ladyship.

"Let me see, how old are you, my dear ?" proceeded Lady Huntington affably. "Seventeen ?"

"Seventeen and a-half."

"Ah, you are very young to have the cares of life thrust on you. And I am afraid you will find your position a difficult one. You see Mrs Huntingdon is a very good woman, but—I suppose you know who she was before she married?"

"No," replied Ida, looking slightly alarmed.

"Well, I suppose Ned would not care to tell you; but her father was a *wood merchant*—a very respectable man, but still just a common wood merchant. Sir Pomphry was terribly annoyed by his brother's marriage, and Mrs Huntingdon has never been properly received in society. Of course every one will call on her now that you have come to live with her; but you will find your position very difficult, for she has made friends with all the Lynborough people, and it will never do for you to do so."

Ida sighed, and looked rather worried, and her ladyship continued,—

"If you find yourself in any difficulty, be sure you come to me for advice, my dear. Mrs Huntingdon may be a very good woman, but she knows nothing of the world, and is no fit guide for you."

Ida murmured some words of thanks, but in her heart she decided that she liked her mother-in-law much better than her present

companion, and that she would much rather study the former's wishes than the latter's.

"There are some people against whom I particularly wish to warn you—some Carrs; do you know them?"

"Yes; the young ladies are very pretty."

"My dear, they are *not* ladies."

"Not ladies!" echoed Ida in horror.

"No, they certainly are not. Their mother is Mrs Huntingdon's cousin, unfortunately, and as they are near neighbours, a great intimacy has always existed between them and Mrs Huntingdon. They are poor, and she is very good to them in many ways, and at one time she was very anxious that Ned should marry the eldest girl—I forget her name," and here her ladyship paused to note the effect of her words on her companion; but as Ida looked in nowise discomposed by her information, she continued,—"Ned is devoted to his mother, and because she happens to like these people, he thinks it right to be as intimate as she is with them. I actually heard that he allowed the young Carrs to call him their cousin."

"Yes; he told me that he wished me to be friends with them."

"He told you that! But, my dear, you must not become intimate with them, you mustn't indeed. Of course you must be civil to them,

as you meet them so constantly at Mrs Huntingdon's house; but if you allow any intimacy to arise between you, you will find it very awkward by-and-by. It would never do for you to know that sort of people when you are Lady Huntingdon. Of course, they will try all they can to improve their friendship with you now, because they know you will be Lady Huntingdon some day; and for that same reason I consider it my duty to give you this warning. You are so young, and, being a foreigner, you will find your position all the more perplexing."

"You are very kind," murmured Ida again. "What house is that?" she asked presently, partly to break the silence which had fallen upon them, and partly to prevent Lady Huntingdon reverting to the former subject.

"That is The Folly—the L'Estranges' house. They are charming people; I hope you will make great friends with them."

"I thought Miss L'Estrange very pretty."

"Yes; she is a handsome girl. She is my god-daughter, and I am very fond of her. Ah, there is Mr Proctor leaving the house. I suppose he has been paying Mrs L'Estrange a visit. He is a great admirer of Kate's, and I am in great hopes that something will come of it."

"Was it—" began Ida, and then paused.

"Was what?"

"I was afraid that as Miss L'Estrange is your god-daughter, you might be vexed at what I was going to say," laughed Ida. "You see I don't understand English ways, and I was surprised that Miss L'Estrange was allowed to ride home alone with Mr Proctor."

"His daughters were there."

"But no one of Miss L'Estrange's."

"Oh, we think nothing of that in England, my dear," laughed her ladyship, looking amused. "It would not have looked very nice for Kate to ride home alone with Mr Proctor, perhaps; but as his girls were there, no one could object."

"And you think he is going to marry her?"

"I hope so, I'm sure. He is old, but he's enormously rich—made his money in iron, I believe, and bought a fine place near here, called Langley. His wife has been dead some years, and his sister keeps house for him—a horrid woman. She hates Kate, of course, and so do the girls, and they do all they can to make mischief. You see Kate is rather too fond of flirting, and Mr Proctor is very jealous."

"But—but don't you think she would be happier if she married some one she cared for?"

"A very proper view for a young bride

to take, my dear. But I don't believe Kate has it in her to fall seriously in love with any one. She is two-and-twenty now, and has been out five years, and flirted a good deal more than was prudent. It is quite time she married—I don't know what will become of her unless she does marry, for she won't have a penny when her father dies. I am sure she could have Mr Proctor, if only she would be a little more prudent. It was funny your all meeting at Tyndale to-day. Kate told me she saw the Proctors ride past her house on their road here, and guessing where they were going, she ordered her horse (a present from her cousin, Lord Nashville) and followed them."

Ida said nothing in reply to this. She had had an idea that people always married for love in England, and the thought of a girl deliberately running after a man, as Miss L'Estrange seemed to be running after Mr Proctor, was inexpressibly revolting to her.

"It is a pity her parents can't arrange it for her," she said gravely; at which Lady Huntingdon laughed, and said that she thought it a pity too.

"Now remember what I told you about those Carrs," said her ladyship, as they entered Lynborough. "It would be very disagreeable for you to make great friends with

them and then find that you were obliged to throw them over, wouldn't it ?"

"Very," acquiesced Ida.

"Then don't begin by making friends of them, or of any of the townspeople. They are really not ladies, and I think it is extremely wrong of Ned to introduce you to them."

"But his mother knows them."

"My dear, I have told you already that his mother was born in that class ; it is her natural sphere, but it is not yours. I am a woman of the world, and I know what I am talking about. You must know that in your own country there are different classes, and it is the same here."

Here the carriage stopped at Mrs Huntingdon's door, and Lady Huntingdon bid Ida good-bye kindly, and, as she drove away, congratulated herself that Ned had married such a nice wife.

CHAPTER XIV.

BEGINNING OF TROUBLES.

ON entering her mother-in-law's drawing-room, Ida found Mrs Williamson seated there, and was informed that she had come to pay her her first formal visit. Very soon two Miss Bentleys also made their appearance—sharp-featured little old ladies, who both wore curled fronts, and made a point of always dressing exactly alike; and these in their turn were followed by others. In fact, the whole town seemed flocking to see the bride who was one day to be Lady Huntingdon, and it was six o'clock before the last guest took her departure and Ida found herself free to escape to the shelter of her own boudoir. What a set these Lynborough people were! She could well believe that they were not ladies, and she felt indignant with Ned for

introducing them to her; yet as she was his wife, she felt that it would be more important for her to please him than Sir Pomphry and Lady Huntingdon.

Presently, as she was sitting in rather a dejected attitude by her open window, Ned opened the door unceremoniously, and entered. In these early days he did not pause to knock at his wife's door and inquire whether his presence was welcome or not. He thought her looking paler than usual, and was concerned to perceive what dark shadows were lying beneath her eyes; he had often noticed these dark circles since their marriage, and wondered why they were there, and now he taxed her, as he had often taxed her before, with not being well. She acknowledged that she was tired, but declared that she was quite well; and then she told him the names of the people who had called that afternoon.

"Ned," she said suddenly, fixing her eyes full on her husband, "is it true what Lady Huntingdon told me, that the Carrs are not ladies and gentlemen?"

"They may not be in Lady Huntingdon's set," returned Ned in a constrained tone, while a deep, angry flush mounted to his brow. "But there are a good many grades in society."

"Some ladies may be of higher rank than

others, and some may be very poor, but a lady must be a lady all the same," returned Ida gently but firmly; "and what Lady Huntingdon declared was, that the Carrs are *not* ladies."

"I think you ought to be able to judge for yourself," said Ned coldly, for he was deeply hurt at the want of confidence which his wife showed towards him. She saw he was vexed, and answered rather piteously,—

"I cannot judge, Ned. I see that these ladies are different to the ladies I knew in Paris, and I see that they are also different to Lady Huntingdon and Miss L'Estrange; but I cannot tell how far this is owing to the fact of their being English."

"And you do not feel disposed to trust me?"

"Yes, I do. Don't look so vexed, Ned, dear," she said, rising, and passing her arm through his, as he stood by the window with his hands thrust moodily in his pocket. "When Lady Huntingdon said that, it was natural for me to ask you, wasn't it?"

"I suppose it was," he replied. "But you might have trusted me, Ida. The Carrs aren't in high, or even in very good society, but they are very respectable people in the middle class—"

"Bourgeoise?"

"No, not bourgeoise," he said coldly; then added more quietly, "You see now why I didn't wish you to live with my mother. These are her friends, and while you live with her, I choose you to be courteous to her friends. She was born among them; her father—"

"I know."

"Oh, so Lady Huntingdon told you that too? She seems to have taken great pains to enlighten you as to my family affairs. But, of course, you must understand that it would vex my mother terribly if we did not make ourselves agreeable to her friends."

"Yes, of course it would."

"I did not want you to live with her; it was your father who insisted on it."

"But why did you not tell him that—that—"

"That my mother was a wood merchant's daughter and did not mix in county society? He made no inquiries, and I did not feel myself called upon to enlighten him. I was so desperately in love with you, Ida, that I feared to tell him anything that could prejudice him against me. It would have been a terrible thing if he had separated us, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," replied Ida absently, and gazing out of the window over the sweet old

garden, with the old, far-away look in her eyes.

"Not that it could have made any real difference to him, though," continued Ned, stroking the little hand that rested on his arm, for his good-humour was now quite restored.

"Who knows?" said Ida slowly, and with a faint touch of bitterness in her tone, of which she herself was hardly conscious. But Ned detected it, and turned suspiciously upon her.

"Why! do you think it such a terrible disgrace to have a wood merchant's daughter for a mother-in-law?" he demanded quickly.

"I? Oh no! I was thinking of my father."

"And do you think it would have made any difference with him? I should not like to think I had behaved dishonourably in suppressing the fact of my mother's humble birth; and yet I could never be sorry for having won you, by fair means or foul."

"Oh, I don't suppose papa would have minded, really; and then you had Aunt Nina on your side."

"And you too, Ida?"

"My wishes would not have counted for much with him," said Ida, with a short laugh.

"I made him promise to consult your wishes though, my dearest. I could not have been happy unless I had known you were marrying me of your own free-will."

"Did you?" asked Ida, looking up at him curiously.

"Did I? Of course I did. What do you mean, Ida? He did not force you to take me, did he?" cried the young man hoarsely.

"How hasty you are, Ned," replied his wife, smiling up at him, while in her heart she anathematised her own folly in having spoken as she had done. "Surely you know that I love you."

"Why did you frighten me by speaking like that, then?" he asked, kissing her as she crept closer to him and lifted her face to his.

"I forget what it was I did say—you startled it out of my head. I am afraid I have put you into a bad humour by telling you what Lady Huntingdon said to me; but surely it was better for me to do so? I have no one but you to advise me."

So Ida succeeded in dispelling her husband's displeasure, and in restoring him to his usual good temper; but as he dressed for dinner that evening, he thought he would have been better satisfied if Ida had shown herself less ready to listen to Lady Huntingdon's words,

If she believed her ladyship, she could not place much confidence in him, her husband; and the idea that she might think he had behaved unfairly to her, by introducing her into an inferior set of society, irritated him in spite of himself. But he did not allow this to appear, and repeated his former advice to his wife—to be courteous to all his mother's friends, without being too intimate with any of them.

Excellent advice! but, unfortunately, as difficult to follow out as many other very good theories. It was all very well to warn Ida that she should not be over-friendly with the Lynboroughites; but they were determined to force their friendship upon her, and it was impossible for her to repel their advances and yet continue to be courteous to them. Mrs Huntingdon also watched her treatment of them with jealous vigilance, and if she detected the slightest constraint or want of cordiality in her daughter-in-law's manner to her friends, she would bring her to task severely, and complain to Ned that his wife gave herself airs. Ned only laughed, and declined to take any open part in the dispute, though in private he was wont to assure Ida that he sympathised with her; but she felt that he did not half understand her difficulties, and saw that he was secretly disposed to blame

her for not managing her affairs better. It seemed to her that whatever she did was wrong; she was for ever offending her mother-in-law in her endeavours to follow out Ned's instructions, or vexing Ned by allowing the Lynboroughites to "take liberties" with her, as he said.

For instance, one day she was driving down Lynborough High Street with Ned in their "Victoria," and they happened to encounter Lord Nashville's drag, which was passing through Lynborough on its road to Seaville. The Nashvilles had been among the first to call on the bride on her arrival in the county, and now Ned was gratified to see Lady Nashville wave her hand affectionately to his wife as she passed. But as ill-luck would have it, old Mrs Huntingdon and Miss Boyd, who had "stepped out" to a shop, happened to pass at that minute, and her ladyship did not see them, or else affected not to do so. At any rate, she took no notice of them, and Ned, who was always jealous of any disrespect shown to his mother, bit his lip savagely. Just as the drag was passing her, Mrs Huntingdon was pleased to stop and *shake hands* with William Leslie, the white-bearded chemist, and, to add to Ned's vexation, the fellow had the impudence to lift his

hat with a profound bow to Ida—*who returned the salutation.*

"Good heavens! Ida, what did you mean by bowing to that fellow?" he cried impatiently.

It was the first hasty word he had spoken to her since their marriage, and Ida's lip quivered slightly as she replied,—

"Your mother would have been so angry if I hadn't, Ned. I saw her watching to see whether I meant to take any notice of her friend or not."

"You contrive to vex her pretty often as it is," Ned was beginning, when he noticed that his wife's dark eyes were full of tears, and taking her hand kindly, he begged her not to think any more of what he had said, and declared that he had not meant to vex her. "It will all come right, dear," he said. "You will soon find out all the little etiquettes of the country."

"I thought ladies always bowed to their tradesmen here," faltered Ida. "Your mother and the Carrs always do, so I thought it was the custom."

"You have only been here a fortnight as yet, dear, so it is natural you should make mistakes," returned Ned soothingly.

All the rest of that day he was more than

usually kind and gentle to his wife, to atone for having been unkind in the morning; but that same evening she had the ill-luck to offend her mother-in-law deeply, by declining to go and drink tea with a certain Mrs Jones, whose husband was a dissenting minister in town. Mr Jones' father had kept a grocer's establishment in Seaville, and Mrs Jones' parents were farmers, and Ida felt certain that Ned would be angry if she went to a tea party at their house; so when Mrs Jones, who had "stepped in" to speak to Mrs Huntingdon about the character of a servant, took occasion to invite "Mrs Ned" to her house, the latter excused herself as politely as she could.

It would have been easy enough for her to parry the invitation had her mother-in-law not sided with the minister's wife, and tried to make Ida fix a day for her visit to the Joneses, so that the girl found her task a hard one.

"I am afraid I cannot fix a day," she said gently; "my husband requires me to pay so many visits, that I can hardly tell what day I shall be free."

"Nonsense, Ida," said Mrs Huntingdon, who saw through her daughter-in-law's excuses; "I am sure Ned could spare you one afternoon. He is going to Seaville next Monday on business, and will not want you that day. Suppose we say Monday, Mrs Jones."

"I think Ned said he wished to take me with him on Monday," returned Ida firmly.

Mrs Huntingdon was certain this was not true, but she hardly liked to accuse her daughter-in-law of a deliberate falsehood before Mrs Jones, so only inquired coldly,—

"Then what other day do you suppose would suit?"

"If you do not mind, I think I had better consult Ned first," said Ida quietly, and so the matter was dropped for the moment, and Mrs Jones went away, looking decidedly offended. As soon as she was gone, Mrs Huntingdon also flounced out of the room in indignant silence, leaving Ida alone, and feeling very uncomfortable. Presently Ned came in, and Ida explained her difficulty to him, and was relieved to find that he quite approved of her conduct in the matter."

"I want you to go and see my old nurse, Sally Eden," he said, "and if she offers you a cup of tea, take it by all means; but these Joneses are quite different. It would never do for you to go to one of their tea parties; and it was very thoughtless of my mother to think of taking you."

Just then Mrs Huntingdon re-entered the room, and, without taking any notice of Ida, turned to her son and inquired,—

"Ned, did you tell Ida that you wanted her to go with you to Seaville on Monday?"

"No," returned Ned innocently. "I am going on business that would bore Ida."

"Then you told an untruth, Ida," said the old lady, turning severely upon her daughter-in-law.

"One must tell lies sometimes," said Ida in a matter-of-fact tone.

Mrs Huntingdon held up her hands in horror at this rank heresy, and turned an appealing look upon Ned, who said hastily,—

"Ida does not quite mean that. You know abroad it is not thought so dreadful to call anything a lie."

"More shame to them, then," cried the old lady indignantly. "To think that I should live to hear your wife confess that she is in the habit of telling lies; and that you should encourage her, instead of pointing out her fault to her!"

"I am *not* in the habit of telling lies," cried Ida indignantly; but, as usual, Mrs Huntingdon paid no attention to the interruption, and continued,—

"I am ashamed of you, Ned! If people abroad *do* think nothing of telling untruths, as you say, is that any reason why you should be indifferent to your wife's telling them? If she has been badly brought up, it is for you

to try and correct her faults. She's only young yet, and if she loves you, you might be the means of curing her of a very wicked and dangerous habit."

"Mother, I did not think you could be so unjust or unkind," said Ned, who saw that his mother would pay no attention to any arguments he might use, so thought it best to make a counter-attack upon her.

"*I* unkind? Who says I am unkind?" she demanded in an aggrieved tone.

"I think you are both unkind and unjust to Ida. I have never detected her in a falsehood yet, and I am certain she only made use of the word "lie" just now because she does not quite understand its meaning in English."

"She must have known what she was saying when she told me you wished her to go with you to Seaville."

"That was only an excuse to avoid appearing rude in refusing Mrs Jones' invitation point blank."

"And why should she refuse it? Mrs Jones is a very respectable woman, and she will be deeply mortified, poor thing, unless Ida goes to see her."

"Ida did perfectly right. I do not wish her to go to all the tradespeople's tea parties in the town," began Ned rather impatiently. Then, seeing that he had hurt his mother, he

added more gently,—"If they were friends of yours it would be different, dear; but can't you understand that I do not like Ida to visit with tradespeople's children on terms of equality."

"I see how it is," returned the old lady resignedly. "Ida thinks herself too grand for us in Lynborough, and she has persuaded you to look down on us too."

"Ida was merely following my instructions, mother."

"You never *used* to give yourself airs," said Mrs Huntingdon, still in the same quiet, martyr-like tone. "It is only since your marriage that you have changed. However, do not let us say any more about it. I will go to Mrs Jones by myself, and try to prevent her feeling very deeply hurt, poor woman," and, with a profound sigh, the mother seated herself in her arm-chair and took out her knitting.

She said nothing further on the subject to Ida, and indeed tried to think she had forgiven her; but there were two things she could not forget—the fact of her having caused a quarrel (small though it was) between herself and Ned, and her having so coolly admitted that she did tell lies sometimes. There was no open rupture between her and the girl, but she could not prevent her manner appearing painfully stiff and constrained whenever she addressed her; and Ida saw this,

and was uncomfortable and unhappy. She was annoyed and angry with her mother-in-law, but she was also distressed by the difference that had sprung up between them, within a fortnight of her arrival in her new home; and Mrs Huntingdon seeing this, was somewhat softened towards her. She was a kind-hearted old lady, and it was besides painful for her to be on cold terms with her dear boy's wife; so when she saw that her displeasure was making Ida really unhappy, she felt softened towards her, and took her back into favour again. But she could not forget Ida's rash admission that she occasionally told lies (for in that light she regarded the girl's unfortunate speech), and she always regarded her with a slight suspicion in consequence. All Ida's pretty little mannerisms struck her as pure affectation, and whenever she detected her in a polite social fib, she was terribly shocked. The poor child had been dreadfully badly brought up, she said to Ned with a sigh; and when he laughed good-naturedly at her, and told her that her ideas were too simple for the age, and that she did not understand the ways of the world, she wept bitterly, and told herself that Ida was perverting her husband's mind. Still, on the whole, she was very kind to her daughter-in-law (she certainly meant to be so), and it

was only now and then, when the vexed question of how far Ida was to respond to the advance of the Lynborough townsfolk arose, that her sore feeling came to the fore. It was only natural for her to be touchy on this point, as Ned represented to Ida. Hitherto hardly any of the county people had noticed her, and though they all flocked to call on her now, she knew it was only because Ned's wife was living with her, and it must have been mortifying to her to see what a much greater lady her daughter-in-law was than herself. In Lynborough, Mrs Huntingdon was quite an important person, and she was wont to patronise many of the townspeople in a good-natured sort of way; but the county ladies patronised *her*, and naturally she disliked them for doing so. It was a terrible trial to her, having to dine out at all the great houses in the neighbourhood; she was too proud to decline the invitations (and indeed she knew that it would have annoyed Ned terribly had she done so), but she was pitiably nervous whenever she had to accept one.

"What shall I wear, Ned?" she asked anxiously, on receiving an invitation to her first grand dinner at Tyndale Court—for whenever she had dined there hitherto, it had been in a quiet way.

"You always look nice," he replied, smiling. "Dress as you always do, in a high black dress. But here's Ida" (as his wife entered the room); "she'll be able to tell you much better than I can. Ida, my mother wants to consult you about her toilet for Wednesday night."

But this was exactly what the old lady did *not* want. She had no desire to allow her daughter-in-law to dictate to her what she was to wear, and she snubbed Ida's suggestion that "Mrs Huntingdon would look *charming* in black satin and lace" so unmercifully, that the latter saw she was on dangerous ground, and wisely allowed the matter to drop.

On the eventful Wednesday, the old lady made her appearance in a high black silk dress, with white ruffs at the throat and wrists, and a beautiful white lace shawl—a gift from Ned, several years ago—and her white hair gleaming from under her huge widow's cap. She might not look exactly like a picture from a fashion-book, as Ida did, but she looked very sweet and old-lady-like; and Ned kissed her when she came into the drawing-room ready dressed, and told her so.

Other people thought the same at Tyndale that evening, and one or two ladies remarked

that "Really, Ned Huntingdon's mother was very presentable, and not half as dreadful as they had been led to suppose." No doubt it was entirely Sir Pomphry and Lady Huntingdon's fault that she had been tabooed in the way she had been hitherto. Had they taken her up from the first, or had they endeavoured to get their friends to notice her after they *had* taken her up, her position would have been very different to what it was. But the Huntingdons had first cut her, and then contented themselves with merely *acknowledging* her, without attempting to introduce her among their friends. When she dined at the Court, only the clergyman and his wife were asked to meet her; and society, seeing how carefully the Huntingdons kept her in the background, naturally concluded that she must be a kind of monstrosity. No doubt Lady Huntingdon was principally to blame for this; it had been a bitter disappointment to her not having children of her own (people said it was this that made her so hard and bitter now), and she hated the mother of her husband's heir. Ned himself she could not help liking, but she was mortally jealous of his mother, and had it not been for the conviction that the young man would not come to Tyndale unless his mother came too, her

ladyship would probably have continued to cut her sister-in-law to the end.

After that dinner at the Court, invitations came flocking upon Ned and his wife, in most of which his mother was included.

Then there were all the Lynborough parties. Every one in the town gave some sort of party in honour of the bride and bridegroom, and though Ned did not intend Ida to mix much in the town-set, he thought it would be ungracious for her to refuse these first invitations. So they went to a fine dinner at the Dixons' (Mr Dixon was a rival solicitor to Mr Carr), and to tea with the Misses Bentley and the Carrs; and Ida and Mrs Huntingdon attended one of Mrs Williamson's "At Homes." Mrs Williamson had been the first person to introduce the cheap but fashionable entertainment into Lynborough, and was very proud of herself in consequence.

"I can't afford to give regular set-outs, as you do," she would say; "but I have always got a cup of tea for any friend who cares for it on a Saturday. And I *assure* you, my dear, these "At Homes" are quite *the* thing now. They are the fashion in the *highest* circles."

So Mrs Williamson's Saturday afternoons had become a regular institution in Lynborough, and on the day when the bride was expected

to attend, the gay widow's little rooms were crowded to suffocation.

The Dixons had lately established an "At Home" for Wednesdays, but their receptions were not nearly so successful as Mrs Williamson's, though they gave a fine set-out tea, whereas the widow had only tea and thin bread and butter on a little table by her side in the drawing-room. She and Mrs Dixon were the rival "fashionable leaders" of the Lynborough world. The Dixons went abroad for six weeks every spring; and the young ladies had been educated at Boulogne, and attended all the assembly balls at Seaville; and their house (which was a fine large one, standing in its own grounds a little outside the town) was much frequented by the officers from that town,—all of which gave the Dixons a right to claim a leadership in the Lynborough world. But Mrs Williamson outdid them in gossip, and consequently she was more popular. It was a great blow to the Dixons when the bride and bridegroom failed to appear at their "At Home." Ned took Ida to return their call on a Monday, and as they were out, merely left cards for them. He did not wish Ida to attend more of the Lynborough parties than could be helped, and considered that she had shown the Dixons quite sufficient civility by dining with them—you see civility is a relative

term, and big people often consider they do their smaller neighbours a favour by consenting to accept their hospitality.

The Carrs' tea party was a great success, so every one said. It was the bride's first appearance in public at Lynborough (her *débutt*, as Mrs Williamson called it), and every one was charmed with her, and thought her *so* sweet and unaffected; *so* pretty, and beautifully dressed; and *such* a lovely voice. She was very popular just at first; it was not till later that people began to say she gave herself airs.

Of course all these civilities had to be returned, and Ned and Ida gave two large dinners to their own friends (as they considered the county families), and one monster entertainment to all Lynborough. There were a good many disagreements about these parties; old Mrs Huntingdon had never given a dinner in her life, and had to leave all the arrangements to Ned and his wife; but she was continually trying to interfere, and it was difficult to prevent her having her own way in her own house. Ned declared that they must get a cook and waiters from Seaville, and Mrs Huntingdon was miserable at the idea of having her house invaded by a tribe of strange servants, and began to think that perhaps it would have been better if Ned had had

a house of his own—though she would have been miserable to have lost him, really. Then she found that all her Lynborough acquaintances were terribly disappointed and offended because they were only invited to meet one another. They had cherished fond dreams of being presented to Sir Pomphry and Lady Huntingdon, and perhaps others of the same set, and their disgust was great when they found they were only to meet one another. Mrs Huntingdon felt that she had given universal offence, and she laid the whole blame on Ned and Ida, and made them very uncomfortable by her reproaches. She had left the arrangement of the dinner parties almost entirely to them, but she chose to settle everything pertaining to this last party entirely herself. Ned suggested a dinner, but she replied that she had had enough of those "upsetting dinners;" so her friends were invited to a kind of *conversazione*—tea and coffee and music in the drawing-room first, and then a fine supper in the dining-room at ten o'clock. Ida made herself very useful, however, arranging flowers about the drawing-room and supper-table. She certainly had exquisite taste, and Mrs Huntingdon pardoned her interference (which she had not quite liked at first) when she saw how pretty and elegant she had made everything look. Ida further propiti-

ated her mother-in-law by putting on one of her prettiest dresses in honour of this party. Had she worn one of her second-best dresses, the old lady would have been deeply offended by the slight offered to *her* friends; but when Ida made her appearance in a lovely white silk dress, beautifully embroidered with pink and deep-red roses, her satisfaction was so great, that she kissed the girl warmly, and told her she was proud to be able to call her her daughter.

At seven o'clock the guests began to assemble, Mrs Williamson and the two Miss Bentleys being the first to arrive. The former made a dash at the bride, and seated herself close beside her on a sofa, and would even have taken her hand and held it in hers, had Ida not foreseen her intention and stooped to pick up her handkerchief just as the widow was extending her hand to clasp hers. Mrs Huntingdon, who was sitting near, saw the whole of this little by-play, and understood quite well why Ida had dropped her handkerchief, and she wished the girl had pulled her hand honestly away from Mrs Williamson, even at the risk of appearing rude. That little trick of the handkerchief struck her as *cunning*, and she did not like it.

"Ah, my dear, how well I remember the days when *I* was a bride," purred Mrs William-

son, leaning back, and fanning herself with an enormous red fan. She was dressed in a red satin gown (by-the-bye, her fan was of *quite* a different shade of red), with a profusion of coarse white lace about the throat and sleeves, and a jaunty white cap on her head, with a quantity of violet ribbon and lilac in it. She also wore white gloves all over wrinkles, and white kid shoes and red stockings (also of a different shade to her dress), and she was careful to display a good deal of her feet. Now, as she leant back beside the bride, her self-complacency was great, and she opened her mouth wider and purred louder than ever as she talked.

"Ah, how *well* I remember those happy days," she continued. "Poor dear Williamson! he was *exactly* like my Henry there. And yet I think the best time is *before* marriage—don't you, my dear? One gets more of one's own way while one is sweethearting."

"Perhaps in England," replied Ida quietly.

"Ah, I have heard it is altogether different abroad," said Mrs Williamson inquisitively.

"Yes, quite."

"Indeed? And may I ask, *how* do you manage these things abroad?"

"Our girls are not allowed quite so much

liberty as your English ones. Every country has its different customs and amusements," returned Ida evasively.

"Of course. And I have heard that in many foreign countries young ladies are allowed to see next to nothing of a gentleman until they are engaged to him by their parents."

"And very little after that," remarked Ned.

"Do you mean to say they are not allowed to see their lovers *after* they are engaged?"

"Not alone. They are more particular in my country than in France," explained Ida.

"Dear, dear, *how* shocking!" ejaculated Mrs Williamson. "And were *you* never allowed to be alone with Mr Ned, my dear?"

"Not often," said Ida, beginning to feel that she had fallen into a trap.

"But you were sometimes?"

"No indeed," said Ned stupidly. "I don't suppose I was allowed to exchange half-a-dozen words with Ida in private before I married. Awfully hard lines, wasn't it?" he added, laughing, for he was so happy now that he could afford to laugh at the remembrance of his past discomfort.

"Very, indeed," acquiesced Mrs Williamson, while the Misses Bentley exchanged significant glances, and poor Mrs Huntingdon looked scandalised.

None of the other guests had arrived yet, except the Carrs, so Mrs Williamson's loud voice was audible to all, and every one had been listening attentively to the above conversation. But, luckily, the entrance of fresh guests caused a diversion at this minute, and Ida was able to escape from Mrs Williamson's side. But she felt that that foolish admission of Ned's had worked her irreparable mischief. She herself would not have hesitated to tell a fib in such an emergency; for though *she* could see nothing very dreadful in her national system of marriage, yet she had the wit to perceive that these English people would be horrified to hear that there had never been any "sweethearting" (to use Mrs Williamson's expression) between her and Ned previous to their marriage. And in this she was right. Before the evening was over, Mrs Williamson had repeated her conversation with the bride to one-half of the assembled guests, and the Misses Bentley had whispered it to the other half; and people shook their heads and raised their eyebrows, and remarked that certainly the bride did not look particularly happy. Mr Ned was evidently in love with her, but they did not fancy she was quite so devoted to him. People were in a bad humour that evening, which partly accounted for their readiness to speak ill of Mrs Ned. They

were huffed at not meeting any of the county magnates here to-night, and they were beginning to get a little jealous of Ida's grace and beauty, and the superior elegance of her toilettes. And then, too, it was such a delightfully romantic bit of gossip, this idea that she did not care for her husband! What wonder that every one listened eagerly to it, even though they might be loth to believe it in their hearts?

And on poor Mrs Huntingdon the discovery, that Ned and his wife had been almost strangers before their marriage, had a most painful effect. How could Ida care for a man with whom she had "hardly exchanged half-a-dozen words in private before their marriage," as Ned had said? From that evening the old lady began to watch her daughter-in-law narrowly, and she too perceived that the girl did not look very happy. She said nothing to any one on the subject, and indeed she found it hard to believe that any one could help loving her Ned; but she did not altogether trust Ida, and was inclined to suspect her smallest words and actions; and the young wife saw this, and resented it, even while she tried to disarm her mother-in-law's suspicions.

But, alas! when a person suspects the *truth*, it is very difficult to make them re-

linquish their suspicions, and Ida found this to be the case with Mrs Huntingdon. So far the old lady had no just ground to go upon, but Ida trembled lest she should discover something more some day—and tell Ned. Poor Ned! so long as he remained in happy oblivion of the truth, Ida asked for nothing more; but she felt that she was standing over a mine that might any day explode. She could not trust Mrs Huntingdon's discretion; the old lady was devoted to her son, but she was injudicious; and in her zeal to prevent his being further "imposed upon," she was quite capable of hinting her suspicions to him, and thus ruining his peace of mind. Poor Ned, indeed! And yet, perhaps, on the whole, Ida was the most to be pitied of the two.

END OF VOL. I.

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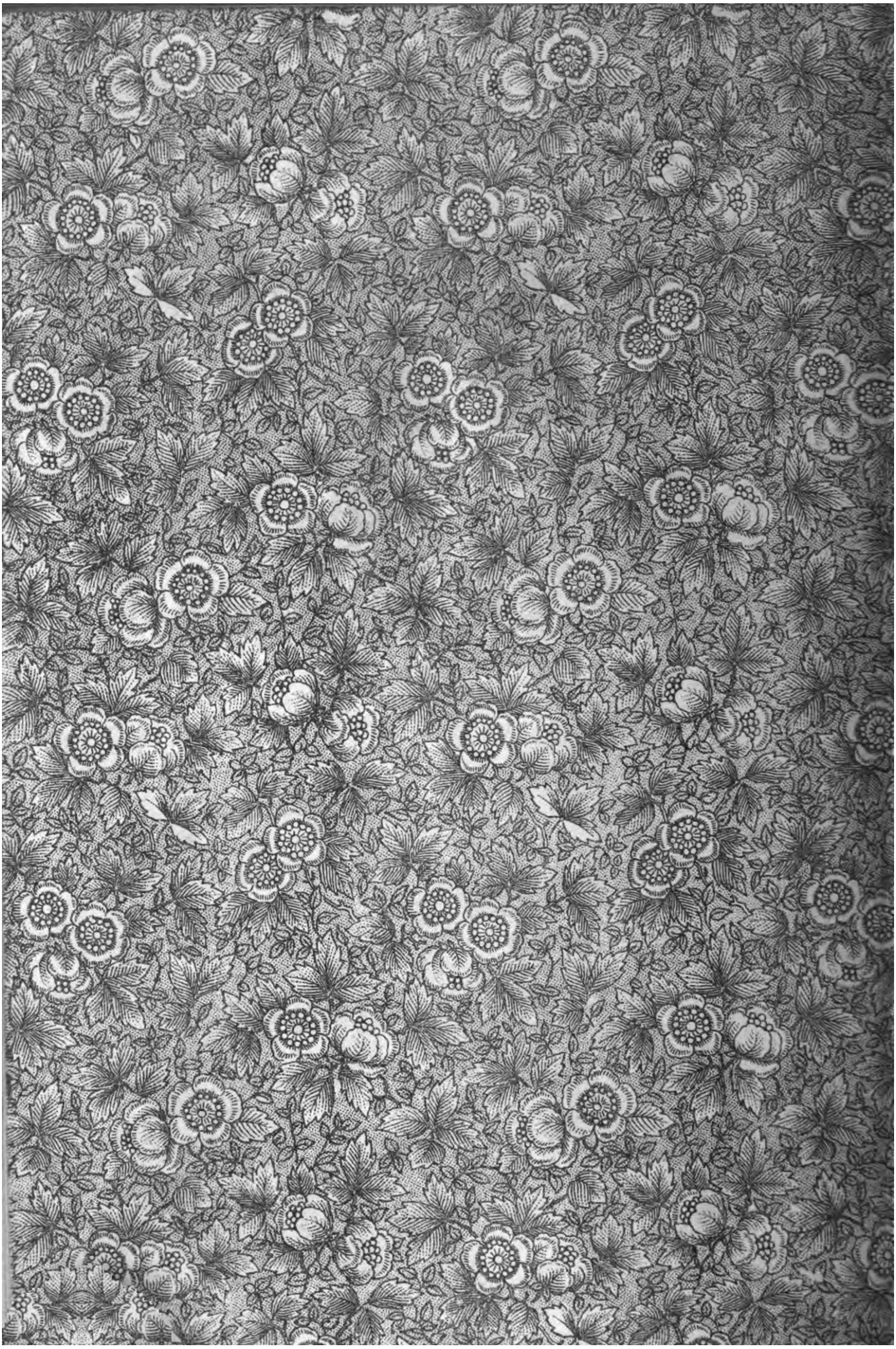

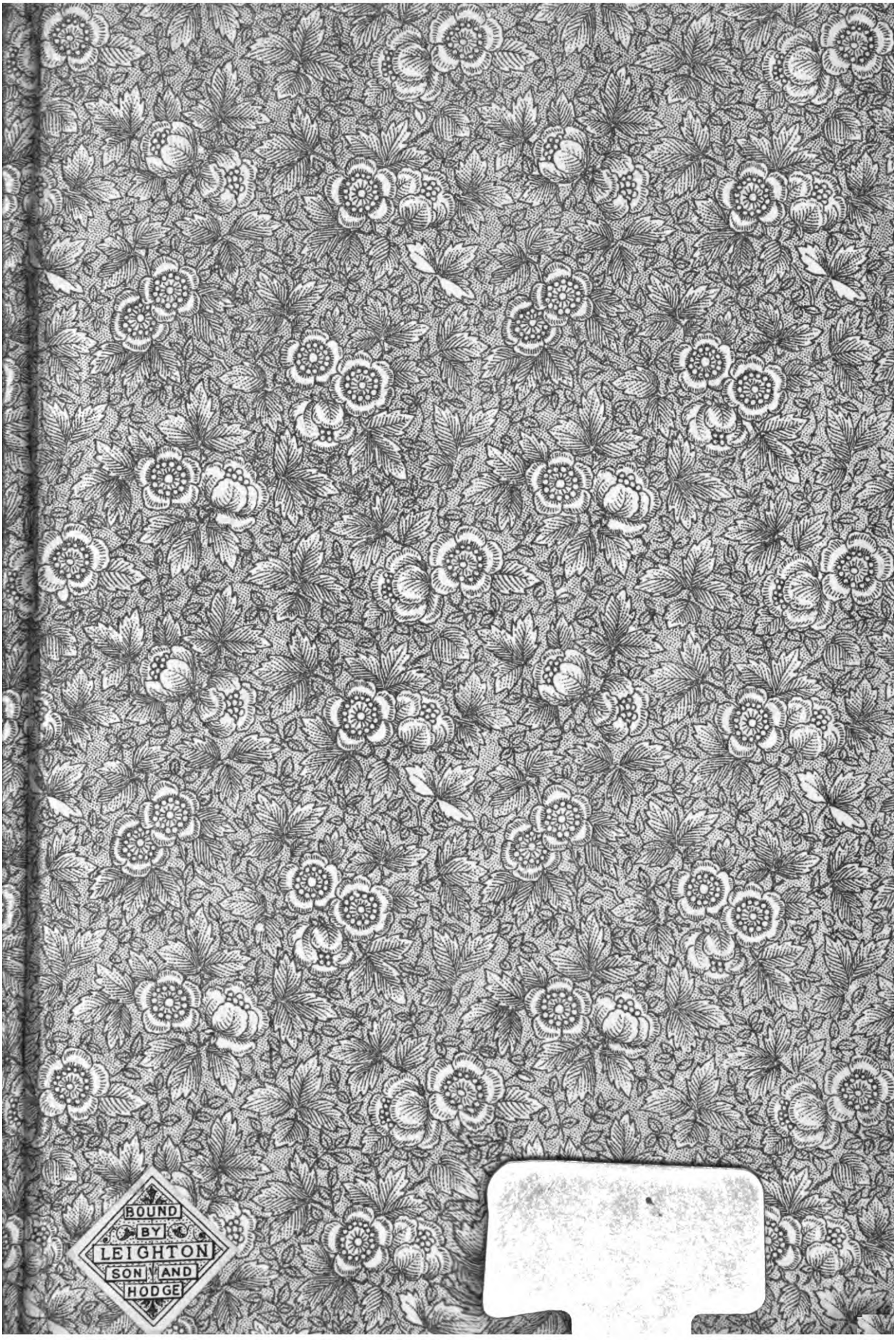
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