

FICTION

Rhoda Broughton

Alas

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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A L A S !

A Novel

BY

RHODA BROUGHTON

AUTHOR OF

'COMETH UP AS A FLOWER,' 'RED AS A ROSE IS SHE,' 'SECOND THOUGHTS,'
'GOOD-BYE, SWEETHEART!,' 'NANCY,' 'DOCTOR CUPID,' ETC.



A NEW EDITION

LONDON

RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON

Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen

1891

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TO
MRS. ANDREW SPOTTISWOODE

CONTENTS

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VII.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAPTER X.

CHAPTER XI.

CHAPTER XII.

CHAPTER XIII.

CHAPTER XIV.

CHAPTER XV.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHAPTER XVII.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CHAPTER XIX.

CHAPTER XX.

CHAPTER XXI.

CHAPTER XXII.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CHAPTER XXV.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CHAPTER XXX.

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VII.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAPTER X.

CHAPTER XI.

CHAPTER XII.

CHAPTER XIII.

CHAPTER XIV.

ALAS!



PART I.

Amelia.

CHAPTER I.

"If you will allow me, I shall have the pleasure of reading aloud to you some passages from 'Mrs. Lirriper's Lodgings,' by Charles Dickens. I do not know much about the book myself, as I have never read it. I dare say that you know more about it than I do; but I am given to understand" (with a glance at the page before him) "that Mrs. Lirriper was a lodging-house-keeper, that she kept lodgings in London. She was a very good sort of woman, I believe" (another hasty glance), "but she sometimes had trouble with her servants. I am told that servants are troublesome sometimes" (a slight nervous laugh, the more nervous because it does not seem to be followed by any echo from the audience). "If you will allow me then, as I say, and if you think it will amuse you, I will read you a little of what she says about these troubles."

The foregoing remarks are uttered in a loud, shy, dogged voice by James Burgoyne to the "Oxford Women's Provident Association." His voice is loud because, being quite unused to public reading, he does not know how to modulate it; it is shy from the same cause of unaccustomedness; it is dogged because he is very much displeased with his present occupation, and has not been successful in concealing that displeasure. When a man runs down to Oxford for a couple of nights, to see how the six years that have passed since he turned his undergraduate back upon the old place have treated her--runs down to a college chum unseen for the same six years--this is certainly not the way in which he expects to spend one of his two evenings.

"I hope you will not mind, Jim"--ominous phrase--the college friend has said; "but I am afraid we shall have to turn out for half an hour after dinner. It is rather a nuisance, particularly as it is such a wet night; but the fact is, I have promised to read to the 'Oxford Women's Provident Association.' Ah, by-the-bye, that is new since you were here--we had no Provident Women in your day!"

"On the other hand, we had a great many improvident men," returns Jim dryly.

"Well, the fact is, my wife is on the committee, and a good deal interested in it, and we give them a sort of entertainment once a month through the winter terms--tea and buns, that kind of thing, sixpence a head; they enjoy it far more than if we gave it them for nothing; and after tea we get people to recite and read and sing to them. I am sure I wish them joy of my reading to-night, for I do not see how I am to make myself audible; I am as hoarse as a crow."

"I know those Oxford colds of old," returns Burgoyne, with that temperate compassion in his voice which we accord to our neighbours' minor diseases. He is sorry that his friend has a cold; but he little knows how much sorrier he will be in the course of the next hour as he adds: "Do not distress yourself about me; I shall be quite happy in your den with a book and a cigarette. Mrs. Brown does not object, does she? And I dare say you will not be very long away."

As he speaks he realizes, with a sort of pang--the pang we pay sometimes to our dead pasts--that, though it is only three hours since he was reunited to his once inseparable Brown, he is already looking forward with relief to the prospect of an hour's freedom from his society--so terribly far apart is it possible to grow in six years. But, before his half-fledged thought has had time to do more than traverse his brain, Brown has broken into it with the eager remonstrances of a mistaken species of hospitality.

"Leave you behind? Could not hear of such a thing! Of course you must come too! It will be a new experience for you; a wholesome change. Ha! ha! and we can talk all the way there and back; we have had no talk worth speaking of yet."

Again it flashes across the other's mind, with the same pensive regret as before, that talk worth speaking of is for ever over between them; but, seeing that further attempts at evasion will seriously hurt the good-natured Brown, he acquiesces, with as fair a grace as he may.

While putting on his own mackintosh, he watches, with a subdued wonder, his friend winding himself into a huge white woollen comforter, and stepping into a pair of goloshes (he had been rather a smart undergraduate in his day), while outside the opened hall door the rain is heard to swish, and the wind to bellow.

"Had not we better have a hansom?" suggests Burgoyne, blinking, as the slant gust sends two or three stinging drops into his eyes.

"A hansom! nonsense!" returns the other, laughing, and with difficulty unfurling an umbrella in the teeth of the blast. "It is all very well for a bloated bachelor like you; but a man whose family is increasing at the rate mine is cannot afford himself such luxuries; come along, you are not sugar or salt."

Burgoyne feels that at this moment he can at all events conscientiously disclaim affinity with the first of the two.

It is indeed a wet night, wet as the one immortalized by Browning in "Christmas Eve and Easter Day;" and who ever brought a wet night and wet umbrellas "wry and flapping" so piercingly home to us as he? The talk so cheerfully promised by Burgoyne's sanguine friend is rendered absolutely impossible by the riot of the elements. It is a good step from the suburban villa, which is the scene of Brown's married joys, to the room in the heart of the town where the Provident Matrons hold their *sabbat*; and by the time that the two men have reached that room there is, despite his mackintosh, little of Burgoyne left dry except his speech. They are under shelter at last, however, have entered the building, added their umbrellas to many other streaming wrecks of whalebone huddled in a corner, and exchanged the dark blustering drench for a flare of gas, a reek of tea, and a sultry stream of wet clothes and humanity. The tea, indeed, is a thing of the past--all its apparatus has been removed. The rows of chairs are all set to face the platform, and on those chairs the Provident Women sit, smiling, if damp, with here and there a little boy, evidently too wicked to be left at home, comfortably wedged between a couple of matronly figures.

The entertainment has already begun, and an undergraduate--damp, like everyone else--is singing, in a booming bass voice, something of a vaguely boastful nature about what he once did "In Bilboa's Bay." Burgoyne has for the moment lost sight of his chaperon, and remains standing near the door, looking upon the scene around him with an eye from which philanthropy is all too criminally absent. About him are grouped a few ladies and gentlemen--more of the former than the latter--who are obviously about to give their services, judging by their rolls of music and the books in their hands. His look passes over them indifferently--he has no acquaintance among them. He had never known many of the Oxford householders, and there is no place where a man becomes superannuated after so short a lapse of years.

Here are new arrivals. He turns his head mechanically as the opening door reveals the advent of more umbrellaed and mackintoshed waterfalls. Two men and a lady. As his eye alights on the woman, he does not start--we Anglo-Saxons are not apt to make our slow grave bodies the indexes of our emotions--but he is conscious of an odd and puzzling sensation. Where has he seen that face before?

"Bilboa's Bay" has come to an end without his perceiving it. He is putting his memory through her paces, trying to find some niche in his three happy Oxford years in which to place that strangely known yet unknown figure. There is no such niche. It is not an Oxford memory at all. What is it then? An earlier or a later one? His eyebrows are drawn together in the effort of recollection, making him look, if possible, crosser than before, when he is made aware of the return of Brown by finding his arm seized, and his friend's voice--a good deal hoarser even than when they left home--in his ear, "Jim, do you feel inclined to do a very good-natured thing?"

"Not in the least," replies Burgoyne promptly; "if anyone wishes to borrow PS5 from me, I should advise him to choose a moment when I am drier about the legs."

Burgoyne has very often stood up to and over his knees in water for hours, watching for ducks among whistling reeds on winter mornings, and never thought himself at all to be pitied; but he is thoroughly vexed now at his moist trousers. Brown, however, is not so easily rebuffed.

"I should be awfully obliged to you," he says croakily; "you would be laying me under a very real obligation if you would----" He stops to cough.

"If I would what?" returns the other curtly, and looking apprehensively at a book which Brown is expanding before his eyes.

"If you would read instead of me."

"I!"

"Why, the fact is"--coughing noisily again as if to show that there is no imposition--"I suppose the fog must have got down my throat; but I find I cannot speak above a whisper. I should not be heard beyond the front row; come, old man, do a good-natured thing for once in your life."

There is a pause; Burgoyne is not very fond of being asked to do a good-natured thing. He can do a big one every now and then, but he is not particularly fond of being asked to do a small one.

"Surely there must be many people here much better suited for it than I am," he says presently, looking uncomfortably round in search of the little group of booked and musicked persons whom he had seen but now standing near him, but it had melted.

"That is just what there are not," rejoins Brown, pressing his point with the more eagerness, as he thinks he sees signs of yielding; "we are very short of hands to-night, and my wife has just heard that the girl upon whom she was counting for a couple of songs is in bed with influenza."

"Happy girl! I wish I too was in bed with influenza," says Jim sardonically, for he sees his fate about to overtake him.

And so it comes to pass that, five minutes later, as described at the opening of this chapter, he is seated on the platform with "Mrs. Lirriper's Lodgings" before him, rows of Provident Matrons' eyes fastened expectantly upon him, and horrid qualms of strange shyness racing over him.

Brown has indicated by a dog's-ear the page at which he is to begin; so he is spared indecision on this head. But has Brown indicated the page at which he is to stop? He is gnawed by a keen anxiety as to this point all through his performance. It is hot upon the platform, the smell of tea potent, and the naked gas-jets close above his head throw an ugly yellow glare upon his book.

Having offered his prefatory observations in the manner I have indicated, he rushes *in media res*. "Girls, as I was beginning to remark, are one of your first and your lasting troubles, being like your teeth, which begin with convulsions, and never cease tormenting you from the time you cut them till they cut you, and then you do not want to part with them, which seems hard, but we must all succumb, or buy artificial." (Do his ears deceive him? Is there already a slight titter? Have the simile of the convulsions and the necessity for a *ratelier* already struck a chord in the matrons' breasts?) "And, even where you get a will, nine times out of ten you get a dirty face with it, and naturally lodgers do not like good society to be shown in with a smear of black across the nose, or a smudgy eyebrow!" (Is he managing his voice alright? Is he mumbling, or is he bellowing? He rather inclines to a suspicion of the latter. Why did not they laugh at the "smudgy eyebrow"? They ought to have done so, and he had paused to give them the opportunity. Perhaps it is among them too familiar a phenomenon to provoke mirth.) "Where they pick the black up is a mystery I cannot solve, as in the case of the willingest girl that ever came into a house, half-starved, poor thing; a girl so willing that I called her 'Willing Sophy;' down upon her knees scrubbing early and late, and ever cheerful, but always with a black face. And I says to Sophy, 'Now, Sophy, my good girl, have a regular day for your stoves, and do not brush your hair with the bottoms of the saucepans, and do not meddle with the snuffs of the candles, and it stands to reason that it cannot be.'" (Ah! what welcome sound is this? "Willing Sophy" has produced an undoubted giggle, which Burgoyne hears spreading and widening through the room. Heartened by this indication, he goes on in a more emphatic and hilarious voice:) "Yet there it was, and always on her nose, which, turning up, and being broad at the end, seemed to boast of it, and caused warning from a steady gentleman, an excellent lodger, with breakfast by the week."

There can be no mistake about it now; the giggle has changed into a universal resonant laugh, which goes on swelling and rising, until, in the final roar of approbation which greets the concluding paragraph, the reader's voice is drowned. The matrons have all along been ready to be amused; it is only that, owing to the gravity of his face and solemnity of his manner, it was some time before they recognised that his intention was comic. As soon as they do so, they reward that intention with more than adequate mirth. Burgoyne has reached the second dog's-ear, that dog's-ear which his eye has been earnestly searching for throughout. His task then is ended. He heaves a deep sigh of relief, and, with a reflection that, after all, he is glad he was obliging, is preparing to shut the volume, when he feels the inevitable Brown's hand on his shoulder, and his husky voice in his ear.

"Capital! you got on capitally! Could not be better; but you will not mind going on a little longer, will you? You have only read for ten minutes. I want you to try something different this time--a little pathos, for a change. I have marked the page. Here!"

What is there to do but acquiesce? Burgoyne, complying, finds himself at once in the middle of a melancholy tale of a poor young woman left ruined and deserted in Mrs. Lirriper's Lodgings, and only rescued from suicide by the efforts of that good lady, who, however, is unable to save her from a tragic and premature death. The reader has reached the point at which Mrs. Lirriper has met the poor creature on her way to the river.

"Mrs. Edson, I says, my dear, take care! However, did you lose your way, and stumble in a dangerous place like this? No wonder you're lost, I'm sure." (What is this sound? Is it possible that the giggle is rising again? the giggle which he was so glad to welcome a little while ago, but which is so disastrously out of place here. He redoubles his efforts to put an unmistakably serious and pathetic tone into his voice.) "She was all in a shiver, and she so continued till I laid her on her own bed, and up to the early morning she held me by the hand and moaned, and moaned, 'Oh, wicked, wicked, wicked!----'"

What can the Provident Matrons be made of? They are laughing unrestrainedly. Too late Burgoyne realizes that he had not made it sufficiently clear that his intention is no longer comic. The idea of his being a funny man has so firmly rooted itself in his hearers' minds, that nothing can now dislodge it. Such being the case, he feels that the best thing he can do is to reach the end as quickly as possible. He begins to read very fast, which is taken for a new stroke of facetiousness, the result of which is that the last sigh of the poor young would-be suicide is drowned in a storm of hilarity even heartier and more prolonged than that which greeted "Willing Sophy's" smudged nose. In much confusion, greatly abashed by the honours so mistakenly heaped upon him, Burgoyne hastily leaves the platform.

Twenty thousand Browns shall not keep him there!



CHAPTER II.

"Tell me now in what hidden way is
Lady Flora the lovely Roman?
Where is Hipparchia, and where is Thais?
Neither of them the fairer woman.
Where is Echo beheld of no one,
Only heard on river and mere?
She whose beauty was more than human,
But where are the snows of yester-year?"

"There is no reason why we should not go home now; are you ready?" cries Brown, bustling up to his friend, who has not waited for this question to make straight, as the needle to the pole, for the corner where the collected umbrellas stand in their little area of lake.

Burgoyne would probably have laughed at the unconscious irony of this inquiry if he had heard it; but he has not, his attention being otherwise directed. On the same umbrella quest as himself, being helped on with her mackintosh by one of the two men who had accompanied her, a pepper-and-salt-haired, sturdy gentleman of an obviously unacademic cut, is the lady whose face had flashed upon him with that puzzling sense of unfamiliar familiarity. Since they are now in close proximity, and both employed alike in struggling into their wraps, there is nothing more natural than that she should turn her eyes full upon him. They are very fine eyes, though far from young ones. Is it a trick of his imagination, or does he see a look of half-recognition dawn in them, such as must have been born in his own when they first alighted on her? At all events, if there is such a look of half-recognition in her eyes, she is determined that it shall not have a chance of becoming a whole one. Either he is mistaken, and she has not recognised him, or she is determined not to acknowledge the acquaintance, for she looks away again at once, nor does she throw another glance in his direction. Indeed, it seems to him that she hurries on her preparations with added speed, and walks out into the night accompanied by her double escort before him.

The weather has changed, and for the better. The rollicking wind has lulled, the pattering rain ceased. Between the ragged, black cloud-sheets star-points shine, and a shimmering moon shows her wet face reflected in the puddles. Talk, which had been impossible on their way to the meeting, is not only possible but easy now, and Brown is evidently greatly inclined for it. Burgoyne, on the other hand, had never felt more disinclined. It is not so much that he is out of humour with his tiresome friend, though he is that too, as that his whole mind is centred on making his memory give up the secret of that face that has come back to him out of some vague cavern of his past.

Who is the woman whom he knows, and who knows him (for on reflection he is sure that that look of hers was one of half--of more than half--recognition), and yet whose place in his history, whose very name, he seeks so vainly? She does not belong to his Oxford days, as he has already ascertained. He has learnt from Brown that she does not belong to the Oxford of to-day, being apparently a stranger, and, with her husband, a visitor to the Warden of ---- College, in whose company they had arrived. He explores the succeeding years of his life. In vain; she has no place there; in vain he dives and plunges into the sea of his memory; he cannot fish up the pearl he seeks. He must hark back to earlier days--his school-time, the six months he spent in Devonshire with a coach before he came up to New. Ah! he has it--he has it at last! just as they have reached Brown's door, while he is fumbling with his latch-key for the keyhole, imprecating the moon for withdrawing her shining at the very instant he most needs her, Burgoyne has come up with the shy object of his chase. It is conjured back into his mind by the word Devonshire.

"I have it," he says to himself; "her hair has turned white, that was why I did not recognise her; it used to be raven-black. But it is she--of course it is she! To think of my not knowing her again! Of course it is Mrs. Le Marchant."

What a door into the distance that name has opened!--a door through which he passes into a Devonshire garden, and romps with rose-faced Devonshire children. The very names of those children are coming back to him. Tom and Charles, those were the schoolboys; Rose and Miriam, and--Elizabeth. He recalls--absurd trick of freakish memory--those children's pets. Tom and Charles had guinea-pigs; Miriam had a white rat; Rose--what had Rose? Rose must have had something; and Elizabeth had a kangaroo. Elizabeth's kangaroo was short-lived, poor beast, and died about hay-time; the guinea-pigs and the white rat have been dead too for ages now, of course. And are Tom and Charles, and Rose and Miriam, and bright Elizabeth dead also? Absurd! Why should they be? Nothing more unlikely! Why, it is only ten years ago, after all.

He is roused from his meditations by Brown's voice, to find himself in Brown's study, where its owner is filling himself a pipe, and festally offering him whisky-and-water. But it is only an abstracted attention that Burgoyne lends, either to the whisky or the whisky's master; and his answers are sometimes inattentively beside the mark, to talk, which indeed is not without some likeness to the boasted exploits in Clement's Inn, and the affectionate inquiries after Jane Nightwork, of a more famous fool than he.

It is a relief to the guest when, earlier than he had expected--a blessing he, no doubt, owes to Mrs. Brown--his host breaks up the seance, and he is free to retire to his own room. At once he is back in that Devonshire garden, he is there almost all night, between sleep and wake. It is strange that persons and circumstances banished from his memory for ten long years should rush back with such tyrannous insistence now.

Such silly recollected trifles crowd back upon his mind. The day on which Tom nearly choked himself by swallowing a barley beard; the day on which the lop-eared rabbit littered--ah, rabbits, of course! those were what Rose had!--the day on which Tom pushed Miriam into the moat, and Elizabeth fell in, too, in trying to fish her out. Elizabeth, the eldest, the almost grown-up one, embarrassed by her newly lengthened petticoats, so harassing at cricket, in races, in climbing apple-trees. Elizabeth was sixteen; he remembers the fact, because her birthday had fallen two days before his own departure. He had given her a gold thimble set with turquoises upon the occasion; it was not a surprise, because he recalls measuring her finger for the size. He can see that small middle finger now. Elizabeth must now be twenty-six years of age. Where is she? What is she--maid, wife, or widow?

And why has Mrs. Le Marchant's hair turned snow-white? Had it been merely gray he would not have complained, though he would have deplored the loss of the fine smooth inky sweep he remembers. She has a fair right to be gray; Mrs. Le Marchant must be about forty-six or forty-seven, *bien sonne*. But white, snow-white--the hue that one connects with a venerable extremity of age. Can it be bleached? He has heard of women bleaching their hair; but not Mrs. Le Marchant, not the Mrs. Le Marchant he remembers. She would have been as incapable of bleach as of dye. Then why is she snow-haired? Because Providence has so willed it is the obvious answer. But somehow Burgoyne cannot bring himself to believe that she has come fairly by that white head.

With the morning light the might of the Devonshire memories grows weaker; and, as the day advances, the Oxford ones resume their sway. How can it be otherwise, when all day long he strays among the unaltered buildings in the sweet sedate college gardens, down the familiar "High," where, six years ago, he could not take two steps without being hailed by a jolly fresh voice, claiming his company for some new pleasure; but where now he walks ungreeted, where the smooth-faced boys he meets, and who strike him as so much more boyish than his own contemporaries had done, pass him by indifferently, unknown to the whole two thousand as he is. He feels a sort of irrational anger with them for not recognising him, though they have never seen him before.

Yes, there is no place where a man is so quickly superannuated as in Oxford. He is saying this to himself all day, is saying it still as he strolls in the afternoon down Mesopotamia, to fill up the time before the hour for college chapel. Yes, there is no place where men so soon turn into ghosts. He has been knocking up against them all day at every street-corner; they have looked out at him from every gray window in the Quad at New--jovial, athletic young ghosts, so much painfuller to meet than rusty, century-worn old ones. They are rather less plentiful in Mesopotamia than elsewhere; perhaps, because in his day, as now, Mesopotamia on Sundays was given over to the mechanic and the perambulator. Oh, that Heaven would put it into the head of some Chancellor of the Exchequer to lay a swingeing tax upon that all-accursed vehicle! But not even mechanic and perambulator can hinder Mesopotamia from being fair on a fine February day, when the beautiful floods are out, the floods that the Thames Conservators and the Oxford authorities have combined to put down, as they have most other beautiful things within their reach. But they have not yet quite succeeded. To-day, for instance, the floods are out in might.

Burgoyne is pacing along a brown walk, like a raised causeway, with a sheet of white water on either hand, rolling strong ripples to the bank. Gnarled willows stand islanded in the coldly argent water. A blackbird is flying out of the bushes, with a surprised look at finding himself turned into a sea-bird. No sun; an even sweep of dull silver to right and left. No sun; and yet as he looks, after days of rain, the "*grand decorateur*," as someone happily called him, rides out in royalty on a cleared sky-field, turning the whole drenched country into mother-of-pearl--a sheet of opal stretched across the drowned meadows; the distance opal too, a delicate, dainty, evanescent loveliness snatched from the ugly brown jaws of winter.

Burgoyne is leaning over the wooden bridge beneath which, in its normal state, the water of the lasher rushes down impetuously; but it is now raised to such a height that it lies level, almost flush with the planking. He is staring across the iridescent water-plain to where, in the poetic atmosphere of sun and mist, dome, and schools and soaring spires stand etherealized.

"Dear old place!" he says, under his breath, "everybody is dead; and I am dead; and Brown is deader than anyone. I

am glad that you, at least, are still alive!"

Are these more ghosts coming round the corner? A man and a woman ghost strolling along, and looking about them as strangers look. When they are within a pace or two of him the woman says something--something about the floods--to her companion, and at the sound Burgoyne starts.

"She did not speak last night; if she had spoken I should have known her at once. She always had such a sweet voice."

He raises his arms from the bridge-top, and, turning, meets them face to face, eye to eye, and in an instant he has seen that both recognise him. At the same instant he is aware of a simultaneous inclination on the part of man and wife to avert their heads, and pass him without claiming his acquaintance. Perhaps, if he had had time to reflect, he would have allowed them to do so, but the impulse of the moment forbids it. Why should they wish to cut him? What has he done to deserve it? Ten years ago, they were his very good friends, and he was the familiar comrade of their children, the daily guest at their table. What has the unavoidable lapse of those years done to make him less fit for their company at twenty-nine than he was at nineteen? There must be some misconception, which a moment will set right.

"I am afraid that you do not remember me, Mrs. Le Marchant," he says, lifting his hat.

This is not quite true, as he is perfectly convinced that they are as much aware of his identity as he is of theirs. But what formula has a man to employ in such a case? They both look back at him with a sort of irresolution. To his astonishment, in their eyes is a velleity of flight, but apparently she--women's minds moving more quickly than men's--is the first to realize that flight is out of the question.

"I am sure that you have no intention of cutting me," Jim goes on, with a smile, seeing that she is apparently struggling with a difficulty in utterance; "at least, you must be very much changed from what you were ten years ago if you have. My name is----"

"I know--I know!" she interrupts, finding speech at last--speech low and hurried. "I remember perfectly. You are Mr. Burgoyne."

Her confusion--she used always to be such a placid, even-mannered woman--is so patent, born of whatever unaccountable feeling it may be, that he now heartily wishes he had let the poor woman pass unmolested. But such repentance is too late. He has arrested her; she is standing on the gravel path before him, and though he feels that her extraordinary shyness--*mauvaise honte*, whatever it may be--has infected himself, he must make some further remark to her. Nothing better occurs to him than the obvious one:

"It is a long time--it is ten years since we met."

"Yes, ten years; it must be quite ten years," she assents, evidently making a great effort to regain composure.

She does not feign the slightest pleasure in the meeting, and Burgoyne feels that the one thought that occupies her mind is how she can soonest end it. But his roused curiosity, together with the difficulty of parting without further observation after having forced his presence upon them, combine to prevent her succeeding.

"And how is the Moat?" he asks, reflecting that this, at least, is a safe question; a brick and mortar house, at all events, cannot be dead. "How is Devonshire?"

Apparently it is not so harmless a question as he had imagined; at least, Mrs. Le Marchant is obviously quite incapable of answering it. Her husband, for the first time, comes to her rescue.

"The Moat is let," he says, in a dry voice; "we have left Devonshire a long while--nine, nine and a half years ago."

The Moat let! Judging by the light of Burgoyne's recollections, it would have seemed less surprising to him to hear that Windsor Castle had been turned into a Joint Stock Company Hotel. It is probably, then, some money trouble that has turned Mrs. Le Marchant's hair white--snow white, as he now sees it to be. But no; he rejects the explanation as insufficient. She is not the woman to have taken a diminished income so much to heart.

Good manners forbid him to ask, "Why is the Moat let?" so all that he says is, "Nine and a half years ago? Why, that must have been very soon after I left Devonshire."

He addresses his remark involuntarily rather to the wife than the husband, but she does not answer it. Her eyes are fixed upon the bubbles sailing so fast upon the swollen river, which is distinguishable only by its current from the sameness of the surrounding water. A lark--there is always a lark in Mesopotamia--a tiny, strong-throated singer, that never seems to have to stop to take breath, fills up the silence, shouting somewhere out of sight among the black clouds, in and out of which the uncertain sun is plunging. Whether of a moneyed nature or not, there is evidently

something very unpleasant connected with their leaving their native county and their immemorial home, so he had better get away from the subject as fast as possible.

"Anyhow," he says, with a rather nervous smile, "I hope that the world has been treating you kindly--that things have gone well with you since those dear old days when you were so good to me."

There is an instant's pause--perhaps he would not have noticed it had not his suspicions been already roused--before the husband, again taking upon him the task of replying, answers, with a sort of laboured carelessness:

"Oh, yes, thanks; we do not complain. It has not been a very rosy time for landlords lately, as you are aware."

"And *you*?" cries the wife, striking in with a species of hurry in her voice--a hurry due, as his instinct tells him, to the fact of her fear of his entering into more detailed inquiries. "And *you*? We must not forget you. Have you been well, flourishing, all this long time? Do you still live with your----"

She stops abruptly. It is apparent that she has entirely forgotten what was the species of relation with whom he lived. There is a little tinge of bitterness in his heart, though not in his tone, as he supplies the missing word "aunt." After all, he had forgotten *her* name; why should not she forget his aunt?

"With my aunt? Well, I never exactly lived with her; I made, and make my headquarters there when I am in England, which is not very often. I have been a rolling stone; I have rolled pretty well round the world since we parted."

They do not care in the least where he has rolled, nor how much nor how little moss he has collected in the process. They are only thinking how they can best get rid of him. But the past is strong upon him; he cannot let them slide out of his life again for another ten--twenty years perhaps, without finding out from them something about his five merry playmates. His inquiry must needs be a vague one. Who dares ask specifically after this or that man, woman, or even child, when ten years have rolled their tides between?

"And you are all well?" he says, with a certain wistfulness lurking in the indifferent *banal* phrase. "Dear me, what a jolly party we used to be! I suppose that--that they are all out in the world now?"

His eyes are fixed apprehensively upon the mother of those young comrades, to whom he thus cautiously alludes. Perhaps, carefully as he has worded his question, he may have touched some terrible raw. Her face is turned aside, presenting only its profile to him, but she answers almost at once:

"Yes; we are all scattered now. Charlie is planting oranges in Florida--he does not mind the heat; you know he always said no weather could be too hot for him; and Tom has an ostrich farm in Australia; and Rose has been married two years--she has a dear little baby; and Miriam is married too; we have just come down from her wedding."

"Miriam married!" repeats Burgoyne in a tone of wonder. "Miriam with a husband instead of a white rat!"

The mother laughs. It is the first time that he has heard her laugh, and she used to laugh so often.

"I think she likes the exchange."

There is another little pause, again filled by the lark's crowding notes. There are two words battering against the gate of Burgoyne's lips for egress--two words that he dares not utter.

"And Elizabeth?" She was the eldest. She would naturally have been mentioned first; but neither first nor last is there any speech of her. She must, then, be dead--dead long ago, too; for there is no trace of mourning in her parents' dress. Elizabeth is dead--bright Elizabeth, the beauty and the pet! Charles Lamb's tender lines come pensively back to him--

"My sprightly neighbour gone before
To that unknown and silent shore,
Shall we not meet as heretofore,
Some summer morning?"

Is it only fancy that he sees in the eye of Elizabeth's mother a dread lest he shall ask tidings of her, as she says, hastily, and with a smile, "Well, I am afraid we must be going; it has been very pleasant meeting you again, but I am afraid that the Warden will be expecting us"?

She adds to her parting hand-shake no wish for a repetition of that meeting, and he watches them down the Willow Walk with a sort of sadness in his heart.

"Elizabeth is dead! Elizabeth is undoubtedly dead!"

CHAPTER III.

"Do you know that Willy has been sent down again?"

Six weeks have passed since Burgoyne's eye followed his quondam friends down Mesopotamia, and he is not in Oxford now. He left it, indeed, twenty-four hours after the rencounter described; left it with something of a determination never to revisit it. This, too, in spite of the good Brown's vociferously reiterated invitation to him to run down for another Sunday, whenever he should feel inclined, and which he accepted civilly, knowing that he should never feel inclined.

At the present moment he is pacing up and down the still wintry, north-windswept walks of a country-house garden in Shropshire, in the company of a lady whom he has known as long as he can remember; a lady who would have been a friend of circumstance, even if she had not been one of choice, since her home has been in the immediate neighbourhood of the only one he has ever had; a lady whose friendship he has tested by letters on thin paper from New Guinea and Central Africa all about himself; at whose feet he has laid on his return more heads, and skins, and claws than she has well known what to do with; whose husband he thought a very good fellow, and to whom he wrote a very nice letter on that husband's death; lastly, concerning whose only child has been made the communication that opens this chapter--"Do you know that Willy has been sent down again?"

"I did not know it; but I am very sorry now that I do know."

"You need not be," returns she cheerfully; "he does not mind it in the least; indeed, happily for him, most of his friends have been sent down too."

"What has he been doing this time? Putting the porter into the fountain? or screwing up the Dean? or what other playful little pleasantry?"

"You need not speak in that nasty sarcastic voice," says she, half laughing and half vexed. "After all, you must know that young men will be young men, or, at least, if you do not know it now, you must have known it once."

"If you take that tone to me," retorts Burgoyne, smiling, "I shall have to souse your gardener in your fountain, to prove my juvenility; but come, what has he done?"

"Absolutely nothing, as far as I can make out," replies she, spreading out her hands as if to emphasize the statement.

"Do you mean to say that the authorities have sent him down *de gaiete de coeur*, without any provocation at all?" asks Burgoyne, in a tone out of which he is unable to keep a shade of incredulity.

"I mean to say," replies she, nettled, "that he had a few men to supper, and I suppose they were making a little noise; did you ever in your day hear of an undergraduate supper where there was not noise? However, in this case, from what he tells me, Willy was taking positively no part in it."

"He was sitting in a corner, with cotton-wool in his ears, reading Aristotle," suggests Burgoyne teasingly.

"And it seems," continued she, not deigning to notice the interruption, "that the Proctor came in, and was very rude, and Willy was told to go to the Dean next morning, and he either was a little late, or mistook the hour, or some trifle of that sort; and when he did go he was told that he was sent down. However"--with some triumph in her voice--"it did not matter in the least--he did not mind; in fact, he was rather glad, as he has long wanted to go to Italy in the spring."

"To Italy? Then perhaps we shall meet; I too am going to Italy."

"Are you?" she says. "Why should you go to Italy? There is nothing to kill there, is there? Is not it at Naples that they go out in full chasseur uniform to shoot tomtits?" Which speech is her revenge for his sarcasms upon her son.

But Burgoyne's face has taken on a rather careworn look; and her little arrow misses its mark.

"You see, Amelia is at Florence," he says explanatorily; "her father, Mr. Wilson, had a clergyman's throat in the autumn, and was obliged to give up duty, so they all went abroad. They have been abroad all the winter; you know that I have not seen her since I came back from the Rockies."

They are now walking in a winding shrubby path, whose laurels protect them from the pinching wind. They have turned several corners, and traversed half a quarter of a mile before either again breaks silence. It is the lady who does

so finally.

"Jim, how long have you been engaged to Amelia?"

There is a sigh mixed with his answer.

"Eight years--eight years this next June; it was the second summer term after I came up."

"And as far as you can see, you are likely to be engaged for another eight years?"

"As far as I can see--yes; but then I cannot see far."

Perhaps his companion is a fanciful woman; but she notices that this time he does not sigh.

"Poor Amelia!" she says, half under her breath.

"Poor Amelia!" repeats he sharply; "why poor?--for being engaged to me? You are not very complimentary, Mrs. Byng."

She looks up friendlyly at him. "For being engaged to you, or being only engaged to you?--which? I leave you a choice of interpretation."

But either Jim is too ruffled by the pity expressed in her tone towards his betrothed, or her remarks have provoked in him a train of thought which does not tend towards loquacity. The loud rooks, balancing themselves on improbably small twigs above their heads, and, hoarsely melodious, calling out their airy vernal news to each other, make for some time the only sound that breaks the silence of the cold spring afternoon. It is again Mrs. Byng who at last infringes it.

"If you and Willy are both going to Italy, why should not you go together?"

Jim does not immediately answer; the project is sprung upon him with such suddenness that he does not at once know whether it is agreeable to him or the reverse.

"You do not like the idea?" continues the mother, trying, not very successfully, to keep out of her tone the surprise she feels at his not having jumped at a plan so obviously to his own advantage.

"I did not say so. I did not even think so."

"Willy is an ideal fellow-traveller," says she, "excepting in the matter of punctuality; I warn you"--laughing--"that you would always have to drag him out of bed."

"But," suggests Jim slowly, "even supposing that I embraced your design with the warmth which I see you think it deserves, how can you tell that it would meet with his approbation? He has probably made up a party with some of the other innocent victims of a corrupt University system."

"No, he has not; the friend with whom he was to have gone has thrown him over; at least, poor man, that is hardly the way to express it, for he has broken his leg; but anyhow he is *hors de combat*. If you went with Willy," she adds, after a pause, and with a rather wistful air, "I should be sure of knowing if anything went wrong."

"I am to dry-nurse him, in fact, only I stipulate that, if he brings you home a Contadina daughter-in-law, or 'commits himself with a countess,' like the commercial gentleman at Todgers's, you are not to hold me responsible."

And so it came to pass that a fortnight later, while April is still young, Burgoyne, *en route* to his Amelia, is standing at a window of the Hotel de Genes at Genoa, noisiest of hotels, though, to be sure, that is its only fault. He is looking out at the gay market that is held in the piazza below--the gay market that is over and gone by nine o'clock.

It seems odd that so many women, so many umbrellas, so many baskets, so many oranges and lemons--each lemon with a glossy green leaf still adhering to its inch of stalk--so many fresh vegetables can be swept away in so short a time. But they are; all the gay kerchiefs are fled, and have been replaced by a row of fiacres with sad droop-headed horses, a good hour before Byng appears--appears radiantly well washed and apologetic.

"How many morning chapels did you attend last term?" asks Burgoyne with some dryness.

"It is a vile habit," replies the other sweetly, sitting down at a little table, and unfolding his breakfast napkin. "I do not mean going to chapel, but being so late; however, I really am improving. I am a quarter of an hour--twenty minutes earlier than I was yesterday, and, thank God, we have no train to catch to-day."

Burgoyne is rather inclined to echo the thanksgiving a little later in the day, as they stroll with the pleasant vagueness with which one strays about a little-known foreign town, not exactly knowing whither, through the streets of the

queenly city, with which neither of them has much acquaintance; Byng's twenty-two years of school and college, of cricket, and grouse, and stalking, having left not much margin for aught else; and Burgoyne being in the case of some widely-wandered shots and explorers, to whom the Nyanza Lake and the Australian Bush are more familiar than Giotto's Campanile or the Lagoons. There is a grayish-looking English sky, with now and then little sprays of rain, and now and then flashes of warm sun.

Neither of the young men knows much Italian, and such as they possess they are ashamed to air before each other in asking their way, so they wander wherever chance or fancy leads them. They look curiously into churches, they walk down deep narrow streets, whose houses have for three centuries been threatening to embrace each other across the strait sky strip far, far above their heads. They glance at palace-fronts, and wonder at the sculptured portals where fresco and fruit garland and fine tracery speak of a time at more leisure for delicate work that has no end but beauty, than this breathless one. Everywhere in the gardens they see budding green, untrained roses making bowers, ripe oranges hanging over the walls. They jostle against women, each made charming, even the ugliest of them, by the black lace kerchief tied about her head.

"Henry James says that an English crowd is the best-looking in the world," says Byng, in a tone of strong dissent, following with his eyes a little tripping figure, and with an expression of pronounced approbation in those eyes, which gives Burgoyne a momentary twinge of misgiving as to his chaperonship. "I should put it the other way up, and say that they are the ugliest."

"All crowds are ugly, and most individuals," replies Burgoyne, misanthropically looking up from his guide-book.

They are sauntering down the Via Garibaldi, street of palaces that deserves an antiquer name than that of the somewhat shoddy and recent hero who has god-fathered it. Noblest Via, down whose stately length great towering bulks succeed each other in solid majesty on either hand; bulks on whose high fronts, lofty-ported, o'errun with fresco, glorified by brush and chisel, strength and beauty take hands in unending wedlock. Into the noblest of all, up the echoing stone stairs, down which the feet of the masters have for ever ceased to tread, they enter. As we all know, it has been given to the city of Genoa--lovely queen-city meriting so great a gift--by the dying hand of its latest possessor, the last of that high and beautiful race--if we may judge of the dead by their pictures--who paced its floors, and went forth in final funeral pomp through its worthy-to-be-imperial portals.

Burgoyne and Byng are standing before the great Vandyke. The custode, opening a shutter, and throwing wider a door, casts a brighter ray of light for the staring Britons--several others have joined themselves to our friends--to gape at it by. What does the stately gentleman on his great white horse, whom Vandyke has made able to set at naught death's effacement, think of them, as the custode slowly swings him forward on his hinges, so that the day-beams may bring out more clearly still the arresting charm of his serious face, his outstretched arm, and grave, gallant bearing? Looking at him, whose heart among us is not besieged by an ache of longing that that "young and princely" gentleman on the brave white charger should ride down to us out of his frame, and bring back his world with him? probably not a better world than ours, but surely, surely a handsomer one.

After awhile the other tourists drift away, but the two men still stand and gaze. Into Burgoyne's mind has come a sense of disgust with the present, a revolt against steam trams and the Cromwell Road--most perfect symbol of that bald, unending, vulgar ugliness, which, in some moods, must seem to everyone the dominant note of nineteenth-century life. The light-hearted Byng, who always takes his colour from his surroundings, is hushed into a silence that is almost reverent too.

"What a difference there is between his Italian and his English pictures," he says presently. "Do you remember the Marchesa Balbi, and those divine Balbi children in the Grosvenor, last year? Oh, no! by-the-bye, you were in America. The fog seemed to get into his brush whenever he painted an Englishwoman, always excepting Henrietta Maria, who was not an Englishwoman, and whom he was obviously rather in love with."

"Is that a piece of scandal of your own invention, or is it founded on fact?" asks Burgoyne, rousing himself, and looking over his shoulder towards the entrance to the next frescoed, mirrored, pictured room, whence he hears the sound of approaching voices. In his eye is an idle and mechanical curiosity, mixed with vexation that his short respite from his fellow-countrymen is ended; in this case, it is fellow-countrywomen, for the tones that are nearing are those of a woman, a woman who is saying in a key of satisfaction, "Oh, here it is! I thought I remembered that it was in this room."

At the same moment the speaker, as well as the person addressed, came into sight; and in an instant out of Burgoyne's eye has raced away the lack-lustre curiosity, and has given way to an expression of something beyond surprise, of something more nearly verging on consternation; and yet, after all, there is nothing very astonishing in the fact that it is Mrs. Le Marchant who is the woman in search of the Vandyke. There is nothing more surprising in her being at

Genoa than in his being there himself. At that mart of nations it can never be matter for wonder to meet anyone; but who is this to whom her observation is addressed? It is not Mr. Le Marchant, it is not a man at all; it is a slight woman--

"White as a lily, and small as a wand"--

like Lance's sister, dressed with that neat, tight, gray-tinted simplicity, severe yet smart, which marks the well-bred Englishwoman on her travels. Is it one of the younger ones, who has grown up so startlingly like her? Miriam? Rose? or is it, can it be, the dead Elizabeth?

CHAPTER IV.

In a ripe civilization such as ours there are formulas provided to meet the requirements of every exigency that may possibly arise; but amongst them there is not one which teaches us how to greet a person come back from the dead, because it is held impossible that such a contingency can occur. Perhaps this is the reason why Jim Burgoyne, usually a docile and obedient member of the society to which he belongs, now flies in the face of all the precepts instilled into him by that society's code. At the sight of Elizabeth Le Marchant entering the room, clad in a very neat tailor gown, instead of the winding-sheet with which he had credited her, he at first stands transfixed, staring at her with a hardness of intensity which is allowed to us in the case of Titian's "Bella," or Botticelli's "Spring," but has never been accounted permissible in the case of a more living loveliness. Then, before he can control, or even question the impulse that drives him, it has carried him to her.

"Elizabeth!" he says, in that sort of awed semi-whisper with which one would salute a being plainly returned from the other side, fearing that the fulness of a living voice might strike too strongly on his disused ear--"is it really Elizabeth?"

Had Burgoyne been quite sure, even now, of that fact; if he had had his wits well about him, he would certainly not have addressed her by her Christian name. But from the dead the small pomps and ceremonies of earth fall off. We think of them by their naked names--must we not then appeal to them by the same when they reappear before us?

The girl--for she does not look much more--thus rudely and startlingly bombarded, drops her Baedeker out of her slim-gloved hand, and with a positive jump at the suddenness of the address, looks back apprehensively at her interlocutor. In her eyes is, at first, only the coldly frightened expression of one discourteously assailed by an insolent stranger; but in a space of time as short as had served him to note the same metamorphosis in the case of her parents, he sees the look of half--three-quarter--whole recognition dawn in her eyes, followed--alas! there can be no mistake about it--by the same aspiration after flight. There is no reason why she should not recognise him again at once. He has fallen a prey neither to hair nor fat--the two main disguisers and disfigurers of humanity. His face is as smooth and his figure as spare as when, ten years ago, he had given the pretty tomboy of sixteen lessons in jumping the ha-ha. And as to her identity, no shadow of doubt any longer lingers in his mind.

The violence and shock of his attack have made her crimson, have matched her cheeks with those long-withered damasks in the Moat garden, with which they used to vie in bloomy vividness. But even yet he does not treat her quite as if she were really and veritably living; he has not yet got back his conventional manners.

"I thought you were dead," he says, his voice not even yet raised to its ordinary key, some vague awe still subduing it.

It must be a trick of his excited imagination that makes it seem to him as if she said under her breath, "So I am!"

But before he has had time to do more than distrust the testimony of his ears, Mrs. Le Marchant strikes in quickly--

"We cannot help what Mr. Burgoyne thinks," says she, with a constrained laugh; "but you are not dead, are you, Elizabeth? We are neither of us dead; on the contrary, we are very much alive. Who can help being alive in this heavenly place? And you? When did you come? What hotel are you at? Have you been here long? Do you make a long stay?"

She pours out her questions with such torrent-force and rapidity, as gives to her auditor the conviction that it is her aim to have a monopoly of them.

After one look of unbounded astonishment at his companion's onslaught, Byng has withdrawn to a discreet distance.

"You never mentioned her when I met you in Oxford," says Burgoyne, disregarding her trivial and conventional questions, and turning his eyes away with difficulty from his old playfellow.

Mrs. Le Marchant laughs again, still constrainedly.

"Probably you never asked after her."

"I was afraid," he says solemnly; "after ten years one is afraid; and as you did not mention her--you know you mentioned all the others--I thought you had lost her!"

A sort of slight shiver passes over the woman's frame.

"No, thank God! No!"

During the foregoing little dialogue about herself, Elizabeth has stood with her eyes on the ground; but at the end of it she lifts them to smile lovingly at her mother. They are very pretty eyes still, but surely they seem to have cried a good deal; and now that the hurrying blood has left her cheek again, Burgoyne sees that she looks more nearly her age than he had imagined at the first glance. He has not heard her voice yet; she has not spoken, unless that first shaken whisper--so much more likely to be the freak of his own heated fancy--could count for speech. He must hear her tones. Do they keep an echo of the other world, as he still imagines that he sees a shade from it lying lingeringly across her face?

"Do you ever climb apple-trees now?" he asks abruptly. She starts slightly, and again, though with a weaker red wave, her rather thin cheeks grow tinged.

"Did I ever climb them?" she says, with a bewildered look, and speaking in a somewhat tremulous voice. "Yes"--slowly, as if with an effort of memory--"I believe I did."

"You have forgotten all about it?" cries Jim, in an accent of absurdly disproportioned disappointment. "Have you forgotten the kangaroo too? have you forgotten everything?"

Perhaps she is putting her memory to the same strain as he had done his in the case of her mother's name on the occasion of their Oxford meeting. At all events, she leaves the question unanswered, and the elder woman again hurries to her help against this persistent claimant of reminiscences.

"You must not expect us all to have such memories as you have," she says with a touch of friendliness in her look.

"I must own that I too had quite forgotten the kangaroo; and so I fear had Robert, until you reminded us of it in Mesopotamia."

"How is Mr. Le Marchant?" inquires Jim, thus reminded to put his tardy query--"is he with you?"

"No, he is not very fond of being abroad; it is not"--smiling--"'dear abroad' to him, but I think that he will very likely come out to Florence to fetch us."

"You are going to Florence?" cries the young man eagerly. "So am I! oh, hurrah! then we shall often meet."

But the touch of friendliness, whose advent he had hailed so joyfully, has vanished out of Mrs. Le Marchant's voice, or, at least, is overlaid with a species of stiffness, as she answers distantly, "We do not intend to go out at all in Florence--I mean into society."

"But I am not society," replies he, chilled, yet resolute. "I wish"--glancing rather wistfully from one to the other--"that I *could* give you a little of my memory. If I could, you would see that, after being so infinitely good to me at the Moat, you cannot expect me to meet you as total strangers now."

In the sense of ill-usage that fills his breast, the fact of how almost entirely oblivious he had been of the persons before him, during the greater part of the long interval that had parted them, has--such is human nature--quite slipped his recollection. It is brought back to him in some degree with a twinge by Mrs. Le Marchant saying in a relenting tone, and with an accent of remorse, "And you have remembered us all these years?"

He cannot, upon reflection, conscientiously say that he has; but is yet disingenuous enough to allow a speaking silence to imply acquiescence.

"And you are on your way to Florence too?" continues she, mistaking the cause of his dumbness; the tide of compunction evidently setting more strongly towards him, in her womanly heart, at the thought of the entire want of interest she has manifested in the case of one whose long faithfulness to her and her family had deserved a better treatment.

"Yes."

His face clouds so perceptibly as he pronounces this monosyllable, that his interlocutor inquires, with a growing kindness:

"Not on any unpleasant errand, I hope?"

He laughs the uneasy laugh of an Anglo-Saxon obliged to tell, or at all events telling, some intimate detail about himself.

"I am going to see my young woman--the girl I am engaged to."

"Well, that is a pleasant errand, surely?" (smiling).

"*C'est salon!*" replies Jim gloomily. "I have a piece of ill-news to tell her;" then, with a half-shy effort to escape into generalities, "which way do you think that ill-news read best--on paper or *viva voce*?"

She shivers a little.

"I do not know. I do not like them either way."

Then, taking out her watch, with the evident determination to be surprised at the lateness of the hour, she cries, "It is actually a quarter to two! Are not you famished, Elizabeth? I am!"

There is such apparent and imminent departure in her eye that Burgoyne feels that there is no time to be lost.

"Have you decided upon your hotel in Florence?" he asks precipitately.

"We have decided against them all," is her answer. "We have taken a little apartment--a poor little *entresol*; but it is such a poor little one, that I should be ashamed to ask any of my friends to come and see me there."

She accompanies the last words, as if to take the sting out of them, with as sweet and friendly a smile as any he remembers in the Devonshire days. But the sting is not taken out, all the same; it lingers, pricking and burning still, after both the tall, thin, black figure, and the slim, little gray one have disappeared.

The moment that this is the case, Byng rejoins his friend; a curiosity and alert interest in his young eyes, which his companion feels no desire to gratify. He is unable, however, to maintain the entire silence he had intended upon the subject, since Byng, after waiting for what, to his impatience, appears a more than decent interval, is constrained to remark--

"Did I hear you tell that lady, when first you spoke to her, that she was dead?"

"I thought she was."

"Had you heard it?"

"No."

"Did you see it in the papers?"

"No."

A pause.

"I wonder why you thought she was dead."

The other makes a rather impatient movement.

"I had no reason--none whatever. It was an idiotic inference."

Byng draws a long breath of satisfaction.

"Well, at all events, I am very glad that she is not."

Jim turns upon him with something of the expression of face worn by Mrs. Sarah Gamp on hearing Mrs. Prig express her belief that it was not by Mrs. Harris that her services would be required. "Why should you be glad of that, Betsy? She is unbeknown to you except by hearing. Why should you be glad?"

As Byng's case is a more aggravated one than Mrs. Prig's, seeing that Elizabeth Le Marchant is 'unbeknown' to him even by hearing, so is the warmth, or rather coldness, with which his friend receives his remark not inferior to that of "Sairey."

"I do not quite see how it affects you. Why are you glad?"

"*Why am I glad?*" replies the younger man, with a lightening eye. "For the same reason that I am glad that Vandyke painted that picture"--pointing to it--"or that Shakespeare wrote *As You Like It*. The world is the richer by them all three."

But to this poetic and flattering analogy, Jim's only answer is a surly "Humph!"

CHAPTER V.

"There are no more by-path meadows where you may innocently linger, but the road lies long and straight and dusty to the grave. You may think you had a conscience and believed in God; but what is conscience to a wife?.... To marry is to domesticate the Recording Angel. Once you are married, there is nothing left for you--not even suicide--but to be good."

There is no particular reason why Burgoyne should not impart to his companion what he knows--after all it is not very much--about their two countrywomen. Upon reflection he had told himself this, and conquered a reluctance, that he cannot account for, to mentioning their name; and to relating the story of those shadowy idyllic two months of his life, which form all of it that has ever come into contact with theirs. So that by the time--some thirty-six hours later--when they reach Florence, the younger man is in possession of as much information about the objects of their common interest as it is in the power of the elder one to impart.

To neither of them, meanwhile, is any second glimpse vouchsafed of those objects, eagerly--though with different degrees of overtness in that eagerness--as they both look out for them among the luggage-piles and the tweed-clad English ladies at the station. It had been the intention of Burgoyne that he and his friend should put up at the same hotel as that inhabited by his betrothed and her family; but, finding that it is full, he orders rooms at the *Minerva*, and in the fallen dusk of a rather chill spring night, finds himself traversing the short distance from the railway to that hotel.

As he and Byng sit over their coffee after dinner in the *salle a manger*, almost its only tenants at that late hour, the younger man remarks matter-of-factly, as if stating a proposition almost too obvious to be worth uttering--

"I suppose you are off to the Anglo-American now."

"I think not," replies Jim slowly; "it is past ten, you see, and they are early people." He adds a moment later, as if suspecting his own excuse of insufficiency, "Mr. Wilson is rather an invalid, and there is also an invalid or semi-invalid sister; I think that I had better not disturb them to-night."

Byng has never been engaged to be married, except in theory, and it is certainly no business of his to blow his friend's flagging ardour into flame, so he contents himself with an acquiescent observation to the effect that the train must have been late. But at all events the next morning finds Burgoyne paying his *fiacre* at the door of the Anglo-American, with the confidence of a person who is certain of finding those he seeks, a confidence justified by the result; for, having followed a waiter across a courtyard, and heard him knock at a door on the ground-floor, that door opens with an instantaneousness which gives the idea of an ear having been pricked to catch the expected rap, and the next moment, the intervening *garcon* having withdrawn, Jim stands face to face with his Amelia. Her features are all alight with pleasure, but her first words are not particularly amorous.

"Would you mind coming into the dining-room? Sybilla is in the drawing-room already this morning. She said she was afraid it was going to be one of her bad days, so I thought" (rather regretfully) "that possibly she would be a little later than usual in coming down; but, on the contrary, she is much earlier."

It is possible that an extremely ardent love may be independent of surroundings; may burn with as fierce a flame, when its owner or victim is seated on a hard horsehair chair beside a dining-room table, in a little dull hotel back room, as when the senses are courted by softly-cushioned lounges, penetrating flower-scents, and cunningly arranged *bric-a-brac*; but perhaps Jim's passion is not of this intense and Spartan quality. At all events a chill steals over him as Amelia leads the way into that small and uncheerful chamber where the Wilson family daily banquet. He is not so lost to all sense of what England and Amelia expect of him as not to take her in his arms and kiss her very kindly and warmly, before they sit down on two hard chairs side by side; and even when they have done so, he still holds her hand, and kisses it now and then. He has a great many things to say to her, but "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" is not invariably true. Sometimes that very abundance clogs the utterance, and, after a ten months' separation, the hinges of even lovers' tongues are apt at first to be somewhat rusty.

"And are you really glad to see me again?" asks the woman--she is scarcely a girl, having the doubtful advantage of being her betrothed's senior by two years. The horsehair chairs are obviously powerless to take the edge off her bliss; and she can scarcely command her voice as she asks the question.

"I decline to answer all such futile inquiries," replies he, smiling not unkindly; but there is no tremor in his voice. "Even if I did not discourage them on principle, I should have no time to answer them to-day; I have so much to say to you

that I do not know where to begin."

"After ten months that is not very surprising," rejoins she, with a stifled sigh. There is no sentimental reproach in her words or tone; but in both lurks a note of wistfulness which gives his conscience a prick.

"Of course not! of course not!" he rejoins hastily; "but it is not really ten months--no, surely----"

"Ten months, one week, two days, four hours and a half!"

Against such exactitude of memory what appeal has he? He attempts none, and only thinks with a faint unjust irritation that she might have spared him the odd hours.

"And how are things going? How are you all getting on?" he asks, precipitating himself upon a fresh subject, since he feels prevented by circumstances from saying anything likely to bring him much distinction upon the old one. "Your father?"

"His throat is better"--with an accent of hesitating filial piety, as if there were something else about him that was not better.

"And Sybilla?"

"Oh, poor Sybilla! she has her bad days now and then."

"And, like the early Christians, she resolves to have all things in common. I expect that her family have their bad days too," says Jim dryly.

"Well, we do sometimes," replies Amelia with reluctant admission; "but she really does try to control herself, poor thing; she is hardly ever unbearable now."

"And Cecilia?"

"She is rather in trouble just now; I fear there is no doubt that the man she was engaged to has thrown her over. You never saw him? Oh no! Of course, the affair came on after you left England."

Burgoyne's eyebrows have gone up, and his face has assumed an expression less of surprise than admiration at this piece of news.

"How many does that make? Four? Well, courage! There is luck in odd numbers; perhaps she will land the fifth."

"She will tell you about it herself," says Amelia; "she tells everybody; she likes talking about it--it is very odd, but she does. When you throw me over"--rubbing his hand which she holds, with shy and deprecating caressingness, against her own cheek--"I shall tell nobody; I shall keep my misfortune very dark."

"When I do!" repeats he with laughing emphasis; but to his own ear both the emphasis and the laughter sound flat. This is perhaps the cause why he, a second time, runs away from his subject; or, more probably, he is really in haste to get to the new one. "Meanwhile," he says, his eyes involuntarily dropping to the carpet, as if he had rather not see the effect of his words upon her; "meanwhile, someone has thrown me over."

"You?"

"Yes, me; I did not write it to you, because I do not see much use in putting down bad news in black and white, and even with this little delay, I am afraid," with a dry smile, "that you will have plenty of time to enjoy it."

He pauses for an instant, and she does not hurry him with any teasing questions; but waits, with meek patience, till he feels inclined to go on.

"My aunt is going to be married."

If he has wished that his news shall produce the effect of a torpedo, he has no cause to complain of his want of success. His placid Amelia vaults to her feet.

"Married!" she repeats with a gasp. "Why, she is quite, quite old!"

"She is sixty-five!"

The colour has flooded all Amelia's face; the blazing colour that means not pleasure, but consternation. It is some moments before she can frame her next query.

"And is he?--do you?--has she chosen wisely, I mean?"

Jim laughs again.

"Can one choose wisely at sixty-five? Well, whether she has or no is a matter of opinion; she has chosen the curate of the parish, who, by reason of his extreme juvenility, is still in deacon's orders."

Miss Wilson's limbs are shaking so that she cannot maintain her standing attitude. She sinks down by the dining-table again in her hard chair. It is a very hard chair on which to receive such ill news.

"And cannot you hinder it, cannot you dissuade her?" she asks falteringly.

"I shall not try; poor old woman! After all, she has a right to pursue her own happiness in her own way, only I wish that she had made up her mind twenty years ago; though, to be sure, how could she?"--with another smile--"since, at that time, her bridegroom was not much more than born."

A dead silence supervenes--a silence of shocked stupefaction on the one side, of rather dismal brooding on the other. At length Amelia nerves herself to put a question upon which it seems to her, not very incorrectly, that her whole future hangs. She does it in such a low voice that none but very sharp ears could have caught it. Jim's ears are so; practised as they are in listening for the stealthy tread of wild animals, and for the indescribable sounds of mountain solitudes at night.

"Will it--will it--make a great difference to you?"

Burgoyne lifts his eyes, which have been idly bent on the floor, and looks straight and full at her across the corner of the table.

"It will make all the difference!" he answers slowly.

Poor Amelia is holding her handkerchief in her hand. She lifts it to her mouth and bites a corner of it to hide the quivering of her lips and chin. She does not wish to add to his pain by any breakdown on her own part. But Jim divines the quivering even under the morsel of cambric, and looks away again.

"Her money is almost entirely in her own power," he continues, in an unemotional voice; "and when she announced her marriage to me, she also announced her intention of settling the whole of it upon her--her"--he pauses a second, as if resolved to keep out of his voice the accent of satire and bitterness that pierces through its calm--"her husband."

Amelia has dropped both shielding hand and handkerchief into her lap. She has forgotten her effort to conceal the blankness of her dismay. Unless she conceals the whole of her face, indeed, the attempt would be in vain, since each feature speaks it equally.

"Her whole fortune?" she repeats, almost inaudibly. "All?"

"What, all my pretty chickens and their dam?"

says Jim, oppressed by her overwhelmed look into an artificial and dreary levity, and in not particularly apt quotation.

"My dear, do not look so broken-hearted. I am not absolutely destitute; I need not become a sandwich man. I have still got my PS800 a year, my very own, which neither man nor mouse, neither curate nor vicar, can take from me. I can still go on rioting upon that; the question is"--his words coming more slowly, and his tone growing graver--"have I any right to ask you to riot on it too?"

Her hand has gone in feverish haste out to his for answer, and her eyes, into which the tears are welling, look with an intense dumb wistfulness into his; but, for the moment, it remains dumb. There is something painful to Burgoyne in that wistfulness, almost more painful than the telling of that news which has produced it. He looks down upon the tablecloth, and, with his disengaged hand, the one not imprisoned in his betrothed's fond hold, draws patterns with a paper-knife accidentally left there.

"The one thing that I blame her for," he continues, not following up the branch of the subject that his last speech had begun to open up, and speaking with a composure which, to the stricken Amelia, appears to evidence his attainment of the highest pinnacle of manly fortitude, "the only thing I blame her for, is her having hindered my adopting any profession. Poor old woman, it was not malice prepense, I know; she had not seen her Jessamey then, probably had not even a prophetic instinct of him, but as things turned out"--stifling a sigh--"it would have been kinder to have put me in the way of earning my own living."

Amelia's head has sunk down upon his hand--he feels her hot tears upon it; but now that the theme has no longer reference to herself, she can speak. She straightens herself, and there is a flash, such as he has very seldom seen there, in her rather colourless orbs.

"It was monstrous of her!" she cries, with the almost exaggerated passion of a usually very self-controlled person. "After having always told you that you were to be her heir!"

"But *had* she told me so?" replies Jim, passing his hand with a perplexed air over his own face. "That is what I have been trying to recall for the last few days. I never remember the time when I did not believe it, so I suppose that someone must have told me so; but I could not swear that she herself had ever put it down in black and white. However," tossing his head back with a gesture as of one who throws off his shoulders a useless burden, "what does that matter now? I am not her heir, I am nobody's heir; we must look facts in the face! Amelia, dear"--in a tone of reluctant tender affection, as of one compelled, yet most unwilling, to give a little child, or some other soft, helpless creature, pain--"we must look facts in the face!" There is something in his voice that makes Amelia's heart stand still; but she attempts no interruption.

"It is very hard for me, dear, after all these"--he pauses a second; he is about to say "weary years' waiting," but his conscience arrests him; to him they have not been weary, so, after a hardly-perceptible break, he goes on--"after all these many years' waiting, to have come to this, is not it?"

He had not calculated on the effect which would be produced by his melancholy words and his caressing tone. She buries her face on his shoulder, sobbing uncontrollably.

"They were not long!" she murmurs brokenly. "Nothing is, nothing can be, long to me as long as I have you, or the hope of you!"



CHAPTER VI.

It is, perhaps, fortunate for Amelia that she cannot see the expression of the face which looks out above her prostrate head into space, with a blankness equal to what has been her own, a blankness streaked, as hers was not, with remorse. He would give anything to be able to answer her in her own key, to tell her that, as long as he can keep her, the going or coming of any lesser good hurts him as little as the brushing past his cheek of a summer moth or windblown feather. But when he tries to frame a sentence of this kind, his tongue cleaves to the roof of his mouth. He can only hold her to him in an affectionate clasp, whose dumbness he hopes that she attributes to silencing emotion. She herself indulges in no very prolonged manifestation of her passion. In a few moments she is again sitting up beside him with wiped eyes, none the handsomer, poor soul, for having cried, and listening with a deep attention to an exposition of her lover's position and prospects, which he is at no pains to tinge with a factitious rose colour.

"Have you realized," he says, "that I shall never be better off than I am now? never! *never!* For though of course I shall try to get work, one knows how successful that quest generally is in the case of a man with no special aptitudes, no technical training, and who starts in the race handicapped by being ten years too late!"

But the dismalness of this panorama raises no answering gloom in the young woman's face. She nods her head gently.

"I realize it."

"And this is what I have brought you to, after all these years' waiting," he continues, in a tone of profound regret. "All I can offer you at the end of them is a not particularly genteel poverty, not even a cottage with a double coach-house!"-
-laughing grimly.

"I do not want a double coach-house, nor even a single one!" replies Amelia stoutly, and laughing too, a little, through returning tears. "Do not you know that I had rather drive a costermonger's barrow with you than go in a coach and six without you!"

This is the highest flight of imagination of which Jim has ever known his matter-of-fact Amelia guilty, and he can pay her his thanks for it only in compunctious kisses. Perhaps it is they, perhaps it is the thought which dictates her next hesitating speech, that bring a light into Amelia's tear-reddened eyes.

"If you will never be better off----" She stops.

"Yes, dear, go on; 'if I shall never be better off--I certainly never shall; I feel sure that you will be able to put my earnings for the next ten years into your eye, and see none the worse for them!"

"If--you--will--never--be--better--off----" she repeats again, more slowly, and breaking off at the same place.

"Well, dear?"

"If you will never be better off"--this time she finishes her sentence; but it is rendered almost inaudible by the fact of her flushed face and quivering lips being pressed against his breast--"why should we wait any longer?"

Why should we wait any longer? To most persons, granted the usual condition of feeling of a betrothed couple, this would seem a very natural and legitimate deduction from the premises; but, strange to say, it comes upon Burgoyne with the shock of a surprise. He has been thinking vaguely of his change of fortune as a cause for unlimited delay, perhaps for the rupture of his engagement, never as a reason for its immediate fulfilment.

He gives a sort of breathless gasp, which is happily too low for Amelia with her still hidden face to hear. To be married at once! To sit down for all time to Amelia and PS800 a year! To forego for ever the thrilling wandering life; the nights under the northern stars, the stealthy tracking of shy forest creatures; the scarce coarse delicious food, the cold, the fatigue, the hourly peril, that, since its probable loss is ever in sight, make life so sweetly worth having--all, in short, that goes to make up so many an Englishman's ideal of felicity; that has certainly hitherto gone to make up Jim's. To renounce it all! There is no doubt that the bitterness of this thought comes first; but presently, supplanting it, chasing it away, there follows another, a self-reproachful light flashing over his past eight years, showing him his own selfishness colossal and complete for the first time. In a paroxysm of remorse, he has lifted Amelia's face, and, framing it with his hands, looks searchingly into it.

"I believe," he says in a shaken voice, "that you would have married me eight years ago, on my pittance, if I had asked you!"

No "Yes" was ever written in larger print than that which he read in her patient pale eyes. Even at this instant there darts across him a wish that they were not quite so pale, but he detests himself for it.

"And I never suspected it!" he cries compunctiously. "I give you my word of honour, I never suspected it! I thought you looked upon my poverty in as prohibitory a light as I did myself."

"I do not call it such great poverty," replies Amelia, her practical mind resuming its habitual sway over her emotions. "Of course, it is an income that would require a little management; but if we cut our coat according to our cloth, and did not want to move about too much, we might live either in a not very fashionable part of London, or in some cheap district in the country very comfortably."

Despite his remorse, a cold shiver runs down Burgoyne's spine at the picture that rises, conjured up with too much distinctness by her words, before his mind's eyes; the picture of a snug Bayswater villa, with a picturesque parlour-maid, or the alternative cottage in some dreary Wiltshire or Dorsetshire village, with a shrubbery of three aucuba bushes, and a kitchen-garden of half an acre. It may be that, her frame being in such close proximity to his, she feels the influence of his shiver, and that it suggests her next sentence, which is in a less sanguine key.

"But it would not be fair; it would be asking you to give up too much."

The meek abnegation of her rather worn voice brings his remorse uppermost again on the revolving wheel of his feelings.

"Is not it my turn to give up something?" he asks tenderly; "and besides, it is time for me to settle! I am--I am tired of wandering!"

As this atrocious lie passes his lips, he catches his breath. Tired of the Sierras! Tired of the bivouacs among the dazzling snow! Tired of the august silence of the ever-lasting hills! Heaven forgive him for saying so! Perhaps there is no great air of veracity in his assertion, for she looks at him distrustfully; so distrustfully that he reshapes his phrase: "At least, if I am not, I ought to be!"

But still she gazes at him with a wistful and doubting intentness.

"If I could only believe that that was true!"

"It is true," replies he, evading her look; "at least, true enough for all working purposes; we all know that life is a series of compromises, a balancing of gain and loss. I shall lose something, I do not deny that, but I gain more--I gain *you*!"

"That is such a mighty gain, is it not?" she says with a melancholy smile, as that intuition of the truth which sometimes comes to unloved or tepidly loved women flashes upon her.

"A matter of taste--a mere matter of taste!" rejoins he hurriedly; aware of the unreal ring in his own words, and trying, with all his might, to feel as well as speak light-heartedly.

She shakes her head in a way which tells him how poorly he has succeeded. In a desperate if not very well-judged attempt to convince her of his sincerity, his next speech is uttered.

"Why should not we be married at once? to-morrow? the day after to-morrow? at the Consulate--of course there *is* a Consulate--or the English church; I suppose there are half a dozen English churches. Why not? We have nothing to wait for, and we are both of age!"

He has had no unkindly intention in the last words, but the moment that these are out of his mouth, a glance at Amelia's unblooming face and unyouthful figure tell him that they were not happily chosen. At the first instant that the suggestion of an immediate marriage reaches the hearer's brain, it sends a dart of joy over her features. To be married at once! To put an end for ever to the interminable waiting, to enter at last--at last upon the possession of the so long deferred Canaan. But in a second, that first bright flash is chased away, and gives place to a look of almost humiliation.

"You must be making fun of me, to suggest such a thing!" she says in a wounded voice; "you know how wildly impossible it would be that I should leave them all--my father--Sybilla--without any preparation."

"Without any preparation!" replies Jim, raising his eyebrows. "Have not you been preparing them for the last eight years?"

He feels a vague unjust irritation with her for opposing his proposition, though deep down in his heart he knows that he would have felt a much greater annoyance had she eagerly closed with it. As she does not answer a question, which the moment that it is uttered he feels to have been rather brutal, he goes on, against his will, in the same sarcastic key:

"I am afraid that you will have to leave them all some day; I am afraid that our Bayswater mansion--by-the-bye, I am sure it will not be a mansion, for I am sure it will not have a back-door--will not be likely to contain all. Your father--Sybilla--Sybilla and her physic bottles take up a good deal of room, do not they?"

It is fortunate for Amelia that she is too preoccupied by the thought of her own next speech to take in the full acerbity of the last remark.

"If you would consent to wait till we get home--father does not mean to stay in Italy beyond the end of next month--we might be married in June; that" (with a pink flush of happiness) "would not be so long to wait."

In a second a sum of the simplest description executes itself in Burgoyne's head. It is now the second week of April; they are to be married in June, he has then eight weeks left. It shocks himself to find that this is the way in which he puts it. All the overt action that he permits himself, however, is to say with a shrug:

"As you will, then, as you will!" adding, since he feels that there is something discourteous even to unchivalry in so bald an acquiescence in his prospective bliss, "Of course, dear, the sooner I get you the better for me!"

No lover could have been overheard giving utterance to a more proper or suitable sentiment; so that it is lucky that this is just the moment that Cecilia chooses for entering.

"Do not be afraid," she says, with a laugh. "I will not stay a minute, but I just wanted to say 'How do you do?' How well you are looking! and how young!"--with an involuntary glance of comparison from him to her sister; a glance of which they are both rather painfully conscious. "Ah!" (sighing) "with all your Rocky Mountain experiences, it is evident that you have been having an easier time than we have!"

"Are you alluding to Sybilla?" asks Jim gravely. "I have no doubt, from what I know of her powers in that line, that she has been extremely trying."

"Yes, partly," replies the girl doubtfully; "but I have had troubles of my own too. I dare say that Amelia has told you, or probably" (with a second and heavier sigh) "you have been more pleasantly employed."

"Amelia did hint at some disaster," replies Jim, struggling to conceal the rather grim smile which is curving his mouth, a feat the more difficult since he has no moustache to aid him; "but I have been waiting to hear all the details from yourself."

"I know that you are apt to think I fancy things," says Cecilia, sitting down on a third hard chair, "but there could be no fancy in this case; I am sure I was as much engaged as any girl ever was. I had chosen the drawing-room paper and bought the dining-room grate!"

"That is further than we ever got, is not it, Amelia?" says Jim, breaking, at the relation of this prosaic fact, into the laugh he has been with difficulty swallowing; "but, Cis, if I were you, I should keep the grate; one does not know how soon its services may be required again!"

"It is all very well for you to joke," returns Cecilia, with an offended air; "it may be play to you, but it is----"

"Not death, not quite death to you!" interrupts Burgoyne, glancing with an expressive smile at her buxom outline. "I think you will live to fight another day, will not you? But I really am extremely sorry; tell me all about it."

"He was perfectly right when we left England," says Cecilia, mollified at once, and apparently relieved by the invitation to unbosom herself of her woes; "nobody could have been more so; he came to see us off at Folkestone, and the tears were in his eyes; they were really, it was not my imagination, was it, Amelia? And at first he wrote all right, and said all the usual things; but then his letters gradually grew fewer and fewer, and after I had written and telegraphed a great many times--I do not know how many times I did not telegraph to ask whether he was ill, and you know how expensive foreign telegrams are--he sent me a few lines, oh, such cruel lines, were not they, Amelia? to say that, on reflection, he feared that the feeling he had for me was not such as to justify his entering on so sacred an engagement as marriage with me; but he ought to have thought of that before, ought not he?"

"Undoubtedly!"

"I will never engage myself to a clergyman again," says Cecilia pensively.

Burgoyne's thoughts have strayed at the mention of the cloth of his sister-in-law elect's truant admirer, to that member of the same profession who has lately robbed him of his heritage, and he replies with a good deal of feeling:

"They do play one dirty turns now and then, do not they? Yes, Cis, stick to laymen for the future!"

Cecilia receives this counsel with a melancholy sigh, fixing her large eyes on the carpet, but presently resumes the conversation in a livelier key.

"Let us talk about something pleasanter," she says. "Had you a good journey? Do you like your travelling companion? Why did not you bring him with you? Is he nice?"

"At all events, he is not a clergyman," replies Jim, with a rather malicious smile; "but no, my dear, do not let your thoughts turn in that direction! You must look at him as poor women look at diamonds!"

"I am sure I do not know what you mean!" replies Cecilia, reddening. "I have not the slightest wish to look at him! I am not in spirits to 'look,' as you call it, at anyone!"

A moment later, she adds, with a suspicion of malice in her tone:

"We are certainly an unlucky family in our loves! I, heartlessly thrown over, and Amelia engaged for eight years!"

Burgoyne smiles. "Amelia is not going to be engaged any longer," he says, putting his arm round his betrothed. "Amelia is going to be married at once!"



CHAPTER VII.

It would seem natural that, after so long a separation, Burgoyne should dine and spend the evening with his betrothed; but such is not the case. For this, however, he is not to blame; he is quite prepared to stay with her until she turns him out. Had he not better school himself to domestic habits, since he is so soon to assume them for life? But in consideration for Sybilla he is dismissed undined. It is not that she ever shares the family dinner at their table *a part* in the *salle a manger*, but the thought of their entertaining a guest with a conviviality far greater in her imagination than would be the case in reality, while she herself lies lonely on her couch of suffering, preys upon her spirits so much that her family have to abandon the idea. So, towards sunset, Jim is dismissed. He has no opportunity for any parting endearments to his lady-love, as the whole family are in the room, and it is Cecilia, not Amelia, who volunteers to walk across the hotel courtyard with him, for the advantage of a last word. What that last word is he is not slow to learn.

"You will take us some excursions, will not you?" she says, with a persuasive air, putting her arm through his. "Father is so unenterprising, we have really seen scarcely anything; but you will take us some excursions now, will not you?"

"Are you sure that your spirits are equal to them?" inquires Burgoyne unkindly.

"I do not know about that, I am sure," replies she, growing pink at his tone; "but one must make an exertion sometime, and I think a little distraction would do me good, and so I am sure it would to poor Amelia!"

"Poor Amelia will shortly have the distraction of being married," rejoins the young man, who feels as if he could not repeat the statement of this fact too often to himself and others.

"And I think it would be only civil," continues Cecilia persistently, "in fact, I do not see how you could avoid it, if you invited your friend to join us."

But Jim escapes without having committed himself to this promise, and wanders about the town in the lovely, lowering light; finds himself on the Lung Arno, strolling along with the leisurely loiterers, among whom, for every two soft Tuscan voices, there is a loud metallic Anglo-Saxon one. He watches the carriages rolling back from their drive on the Cascine; the river falling over the weir; the river yellow as Tiber yesterday, and to day shot with blue and green and silver, as it tumbles with a pleasant noise. The houses on either side of the Arno, the domes and roofs, are all clothed in a strange serenity of yellow light; a golden air so transparent and line and crystal clear, so free from the soft blur of mist--lovely too--through which we see objects in our wet green home, that Jim feels as if he could stretch out his hand and touch the hill that backs gold towers and bridges, and see whether it really is made out of one whole amethyst, as it looks. The beauty of the world has always been very much to Burgoyne, though hitherto it has been chiefly in the austerity of her high and desert places that he has bowed the knee before the Universal Mother. This little gold evening city, sunset clad in the colours of the New Jerusalem, lifting her heavenly campanile to as heavenly a sky, is to him a new and wonderful thing. Her loveliness sinks into his soul, and with it a companion sadness as deep. From henceforth the sight of earth's fair shows will be, for the most part, forbidden him. He has always loved to look and adore in silence and alone; henceforth he will never have the right to be alone; henceforth he will never have the right to go anywhere without his wife. Strange and terrible word to which he tries in vain to accustom his mental ears; and, thanks to the narrowness of their means, neither of them will be able to stir from the strait precincts of their pinched home.

He comes back to his hotel, through the Piazza of the Duomo. All the infinite richness of cupola and arch, high up, are still wrapped in the fiery rose cloak of sunset, while below the body of the great church, with all its marbles and trceries and carved wonders, is clad in the sobriety of twilight.

On reaching the Minerva, he finds that Byng has not yet returned, or rather that he has been in and gone out again. He waits dinner half-an-hour for him, and then dines without him; dines in solitude, since it is not till his cup of coffee is before him, and his cigarette between his lips, that his young friend appears. It is evidently no unpleasant errand that has detained him, for he arrives beaming, and too excited even to perceive the *menu* which a waiter offers him.

"They have arrived!" he cries. Oddly enough it never occurs to Burgoyne to inquire who "they" may be; it seems as much a matter-of-course to him as to the handsome pink and white boy before him, that the pronoun must relate to Elizabeth Le Marchant and her mother.

His only answer, however, is an "Oh!" whose tone is rather more eagerly interested than he could have wished.

"I thought that they could not stay more than another day in Genoa," continues Byng, at length becoming aware of the

menu at his elbow; but only to wave it impatiently away. "So I thought I would just run down to the station to meet the evening train, the one we came by last night; however, it must have been more punctual than yesterday, for before I reached the station, I met them; I mean they passed me in a fiacre. I only caught a glimpse of her face, but I saw her hand; it was lying on the carriage door like a snow-flake."

"Like my grandmother!" cries Burgoyne in a rage, for which he cannot quite account to himself, at this ingenious and novel simile.

Byng laughs; the laugh of a thoroughly sweet-natured person, who, in addition, has some special cause for good-humour.

"I do not know what colour your grandmother was; but she must have been very unlike most people's if she was like a snow-flake."

Jim's cross mouth unbends into a reluctant smile. It is not the first time that he has discovered how useless, and also impossible, it is to be out of humour with Byng.

"I had a good mind to tell my fiacre man to follow them," continued Byng, in an excited voice; "but, in the first place, I did not know how to say it--really, Jim, we must get up a little of the lingo--and, in the second place, I thought it would perhaps be rather too much in the private detective line."

"I think it would have been extremely ungentlemanlike!" rejoins Jim severely.

Byng reddens; but still without losing his temper.

"That is coming it rather strong, is not it? but anyhow, I did not do it." And then, by tacit agreement, they both drop the subject.

During the next three or four days it is not named between them, nor indeed do they see much of each other. Burgoyne spends the greater part of his days with Amelia. Whatever cause for the accusation he may have given during the previous eight years, nobody can say that he neglects her now. He passes long hours at her side, on the same hard chair that had supported him on their first interview, in the little dismal dining-room; going into calculations of house-rent and taxes, drawing up lists of necessary furniture. He even makes a bid for Cecilia's drawing-room grate; but that young lady, whose forecasting mind can look beyond present grief to future sunshine, refuses to part with it. The lovers are not always, however, studying Maple's and Oetzmann's lists. Sometimes Jim varies the diversion by taking his future wife to picture-galleries and churches, to the Uffizi, the Accademia, San Lorenzo. It is doubtful whether Amelia enjoys these excursions as much as she does the selection of bedsteads and saucepans, her pleasure being in some degree marred by a feverish anxiety to say what she thinks her lover expects of her as they stand before each immortal canvas. In her heart she thinks the great statues in the Medici Chapel frightful, a heresy in which she is kept in countenance by no less a light than George Eliot, who in one of her letters dares to say of them, "they remained to us as affected and exaggerated in the original, as in copies and casts." To Amelia many of the frescoes appear lamentably washed out, nor are her efforts to hide these sentiments attended with any conspicuous success, since nothing is more hopeless than for one utterly destitute of a feeling for works of art to feign it, without having the imposture at once detected.

Burgoyne's mind during these expeditions is a battle-ground for pity and rage; pity at the pathos of his poor love's endeavours; rage at their glaring failure. Cecilia sometimes accompanies the lovers, but this does not make matters much better. Cecilia devotes but a very cursory notice to the pictures; her attention being almost wholly centred on the visitors, and on finding resemblances for them among the inhabitants of her own village at home, for the accuracy of which she appeals at every moment to her sister. Every day she asks Burgoyne to fulfil his promise--a promise which he as punctually assures her that he never made--to introduce his friend to her. He has a strangely strong reluctance to comply with this simple request, which yet, he knows, will have to be complied with some day. When Amelia is his wife, Byng will have to know Cecilia, for she will probably spend a great deal of her time with them--make their house a second home, in fact.

And meanwhile Jim is keenly, and for some reason sorely, conscious of the fact that, during the hours in which he is stooping his weary head over catalogues of fenders and fire-irons, carving-knives and fish-slices, blankets and ticking, Byng is searching Florence through her length and breadth for their two countrywomen. It is not indeed necessary to credit his friend with any special quest to account for his wanderings through the "adorable little city," as Henry James most truly calls it, since he is a young man of a wide and alert curiosity, with a large appetite for pleasure both intellectual and the reverse. Jim, whose acquaintance with him has chiefly been with his rowdy undergraduate side, bear-fighting, and proctor-defying, is astonished at his almost tremulous appreciation of the Ghirlandajos, the Lorenzo di Credis, the Giotto's, that in a hundred chapels, from a hundred walls, shine down in their mixed glory of naive piety

and blinding colour upon him.

One day the elder man is sitting in his bedroom with a despatch-box and a sheet of paper before him. He is embarked upon a dreary calculation as to what his guns will fetch. He has made up his mind to sell them. Of what further use can they be to him? He will not be allowed to shoot at the Bayswater omnibuses, which will be the only game henceforth within his reach. While he is thus employed upon an occupation akin to, and about as cheerful as, that of Rawdon Crawley before Waterloo, Byng enters.

"You look as if you had a headache, old chap," he says, sitting down upon his friend's bed.

"If you had been going through as many kitchen-ranges as I have this morning, perhaps you would have a headache," replies Jim gravely. "You know that I am going to be married as soon as I get home."

Byng nods; and Burgoyne, while inwardly blessing the fact that spares him any congratulations, takes himself to task for having made the announcement so lugubriously as to render felicitation obviously inapplicable.

"When are you going to introduce me to Miss Wilson?" asks Byng presently. "If you shirk it much longer, I shall think that you are ashamed of me."

Jim glances affectionately, yet not quite comfortably, at his young friend, and the thought dashes across his mind that, in his last remark, the latter has put the saddle on the wrong horse.

"You have so large an acquaintance in Florence already," he says, with some stiffness, "that I did not know that you would care to add to it."

"One cannot have too much of a good thing," replies the other joyously. "You know I love my fellow-creatures; and in this case," he adds civilly, "I do care very much."

Burgoyne's eyes are bent on the paper before him, which contains the melancholy enumeration of his firearms--"A 500 double-barrelled express, by Henry, of Edinburgh; a 450 single-barrelled ditto, by same maker," etc., etc.--as he says slowly:

"I shall be very happy."

His acceptance of the proposition can hardly be called eager; but of this Byng appears unawares.

"When shall it be, then? To-day--this afternoon?"

"No-o-o; not to-day, I think. It has been arranged that we are to go to San Miniato--Amelia, her sister, and I."

"Three of you?" cries Byng, raising his eyebrows. "Then why not four? Why may not I come too?"

There being, in point of fact, no reason why he should not, and Cecilia's morning prayer being still ringing in her future brother-in-law's ears, he gives a dull and lagging assent; so that at about three o'clock the two men present themselves at the door of the Wilsons' apartment at the Anglo-American Hotel. That Sybilla is not expecting visitors is evident by the fact that, at the moment of their entrance, she is taking her own temperature--a very favourite relaxation of hers--with a clinical thermometer. She removes the instrument from her mouth without indecent haste, and holds out a languid white hand to Byng.

"So you are going off on a long afternoon's pleasuring?" she says, with a pathetic smile. "I am so glad that neither of my sisters is going to stay at home with me. We invalids must guard against growing selfish, though I think that is perhaps more the danger with *malades imaginaires*; we real ones have learnt our lesson of suffering better, I hope."

"You do not look so very ill," replies Byng, in his sympathetic voice, letting his eyes rest caressingly on the prostrate figure, which has yet no smallest sign of emaciation about it.

"Ah, that is because of my colour," replies Sybilla, with an animation slightly tinged with resentment. "You, too, fall into that common error. My London doctor tells me that there is no such unerring indication of radical delicacy of constitution as a fixed pink colour like mine; the more feverish I am, the deeper it grows. It is very hard"--smiling again sadly--"for one gets no pity!"

"Where is Cecilia?" cries Jim brusquely, and fidgeting in his chair. "Why is not she ready?"

As he speaks, the young lady in question enters--so obviously arrayed for conquest, in so patently new a hat, and such immaculate pale gloves, that across Burgoyne's mind there flashes, in vexed mirth, the recollection of the immortal caution addressed by Major O'Dowd to his friend and comrade, "Moind your oi, Dob, my boy!" Would he not do well to repeat it to his friend?

CHAPTER VIII.

They are off now, there being nothing further to retard them, leaving Sybilla *tete-a-tete* with her thermometer. They are off, sociably packed in one fiacre--

"Four precious souls, and all agog
To dash thro' thick and thin."

Not, indeed, that there is much dash about the Florentine cab-horses--saddest among God's many sad creatures--with not a sound leg among them, with staring coats and starting ribs, and poor broken knees; and with their sadness emphasized by the feathers stuck in their tired heads, as if to mock their wretchedness by a sort of melancholy smartness! Sad as they are, it must be owned that they are the only sad things in the cheerful Florentine streets, where no one seems over-busy, where, out of the deep-eaved, green-shuttered houses, people lean, talking to acquaintances on the shadowed pavement below. All the narrow thorough-fares are full of bustling life; but there is no haggard squalor apparently, no dreadful gin-palace gaiety. It does not follow here that a man must be drunk because he sings. And down the strait, colourful streets one looks--down a vista of houses diversely tall, each with its cream-yellow face and its green shutters, varied here and there by the towering bulk of some giant-blocked mountain-palace, through whose grim, barred windows a woman peeps, or a little dog shows his pointed nose--looks to where, in dwindling perspective, the view is closed by a narrow picture of lucent purple hill, Fiesole or Bellosguardo--names to which the tongue cleaves lovingly. Through the gay streets, over bridge and blue Arno, our travellers go; their driver cracking a prodigious whip, and with a tiny red dog, absurdly shaven, and with nothing but a small woolly head and tail left of the original design, seated gravely beside him. Away they go, pleasuring; but pleasure and pleasuring are not always identical.

Burgoyne sits opposite Amelia; and as for Cecilia, it is to be supposed that her heartache is for the moment dulled, since the same carriage-rug covers her knees and those of Byng. Burgoyne does not look at Amelia; nor, though his eyes are fixed upon the passing objects, does he at first see aught of them. His vision is turned inwards, and to his own soul he is mechanically repeating in dismal recitative, "A double-barrelled, central fire, breech-loading gun, by Lancaster; made strong enough at the breech to shoot a spherical bullet."

As for Amelia, her features are not of a build to express any emotion with much brilliancy; but over them lies a deep and brooding content. Amelia has not had much undiluted happiness in her life, but she is exceedingly happy to-day. She is even strangely free from the carking fear which usually assails her, of praising mistakenly, of being enthusiastic in the wrong places, and passing over the right ones unnoticed. If she keep to a vague generality of handsome adjectives, she will surely do well enough, and, on this high holiday that her heart is holding, he cannot be cross to her.

As to Byng, he is emphatically of the school of divinity taught by Tommy Moore, nor was he ever known, when lacking "the lips that he loved," to fail to make love to "the lips that are near." His taste is too good for him to have chosen Cecilia as a companion; but, since fate has allotted her to him for the afternoon, he finds no difficulty in making the best of her. Nor, to do her justice, is she destitute of charms of a certain kind, though her face has the inevitable air of commonness incident upon a very short nose and a very long upper lip. But she has a good deal of bloom, and of crisp, showy-coloured hair, and a very considerable eye-power. Byng's attachment to the fair sex being of far too stout a quality to be blunted by such trifles as an inch too much or too little of nose or lip, he also, like Amelia, is thoroughly prepared to enjoy himself.

Up the turning Via Galileo they climb, to the Basilica at the top--stock-drive of all tourists--hackneyed as only Yankeedom and Cockneydom, rushing hand in hand through all earth's sacredness, can hackney. But even hackneying is powerless to take off the freshness to the eye that sees it for the first time, of that view when he beholds the Lily City lying close at his feet, so close that it seems he could throw a stone into her Arno.

They have left their fiacre, and, as naturally happens in a *partie carree*--more especially when one couple are betrothed lovers--have broken into pairs. Burgoyne leans pensively on the terrace parapet, and his sombre eyes rest on the band of sister hills, joining hands in perpetual watch round valley and town; hills over which, in this late spring, there is more a promise than a performance of that green and many-coloured wealth of verdure and blossom that one associates with Firenze's fair name. But it is a promise that is plainly on the verge of a bounteous fulfilment. Then his look drops slowly to the city herself. In what a little space comparatively does the Florence that is immortal lie! The Duomo, the lily Campanile "made up of dew and sunshine," the Baptistery, Santa Croce, the Palazzo Vecchio; he could compass them in a ten minutes' walk. And around this small nucleus of the undying dead and their work, what a nation of gleaming villas

of the polyglot living--a nation of every tongue, and people, and language! All over the hills is the sheen of white walls, the verdure of tended gardens; they stretch away almost to where the Apennines raise their cold white fronts against the sky.

He rouses himself to remember that Amelia is beside him, and that he ought to say something to her. So he makes a rather *banal* observation upon the smallness of the *enceinte* that encloses so much loveliness.

"Yes, is not it tiny?" replies she, with the eager pleasure of having a remark made to her which she cannot go wrong in answering. "Think of London! Why, the whole thing is not as big as South Kensington or Bayswater!"

He shudders. Must the accursed suburb pursue him even here?

"Let us go into the church," he says, in a tone that a little dulls his companion's buoyancy.

She follows him crestfallenly, asking herself whether she has answered amiss here also. She does not trust herself to any comment upon the interior.

Byng and Cecilia are standing before the high altar, from over which a mosaic Madonna stiffly beams upon them; and as the other couple approach them, Burgoyne hears the words "drawing-room grate" issue from his future sister-in-law's lips.

"Bravo, Cis!" he says in a dry aside; "you are getting on nicely! I did not think that you would have reached the drawing-room grate till to-morrow."

To avoid intruding further on her delicate confidences, and also to escape from two Americans, who are nasally twanging Hare and Horner at each other, varied by trips into Baedeker, he passes into a side chapel made famous by one of the loveliest tombs that ever feigned to simulate in marble death's ugliness. The Yankee voices are high and shrill, but they had need to be higher and shriller still before they could break the slumber of him whose resting-place Jim has invaded in his flight from Cecilia and New York. Was ever rest so beautiful as this of the young sleeper? A priest he was, nay cardinal, and youthful and lovely and chaste! and now in how divine a slumber is he lapt! But how should that four hundred years' slumber not be divine, watched by such a gentle Mary-mother as is watching his; smiling as if to tell him that he does well to sleep, that sleep is better than waking, that death is better than life! There is a sunken look about his fair eyelids, as if he had gone through suffering to his rest; and his reposeful hands are thin; but below him, as he lies in his spotless marble tranquillity, upon his sarcophagus, the rose garlands wave in lovely frieze, and the riotous horses rear and plunge in fulness of life.

Burgoyne has not perceived that Amelia did not follow him. She has, in point of fact, remained in the body of the church, immersed in her guide-book, steadily working through the marble screen and pulpit, and still five good minutes off the side chapel, in which her lover stands in so deeply brown a study, that he is not aware of the intrusion upon his solitude of two women, until he is roused with a leap by the voice of one of them addressing--not him, of whose presence she is obviously as unaware as was he of hers, until this moment--but her companion.

"Oh, mother! am I not a fool, at my age, too? but I cannot help it, it makes me cry so!"

Burgoyne does not need the evidence of his eyes. His ears and his startled heart have enough assured him whose are the tears called forth by that indeed most touching effigy at which he himself has been so pensively staring.

The mother's answer is inaudible; and then again comes the voice of Elizabeth Le Marchant, tearful and vibrating.

"You know I have seen so few beautiful things in my life, I shall get used to them presently; it is only sheer happiness that makes me----"

She stops abruptly, having evidently discovered for herself, or been made aware by her mother of his vicinity; and even if she had not done so, he feels that he must lose no time in announcing himself.

"Florence is a place that does make one often choky," he says, eagerly taking the hand which she hesitatingly, and with some confusion, offers him.

It is not quite true; Florence has never made him feel choky; and, if he is experiencing that sensation now, it is certainly not the dead cardinal of Portugal who is giving it to him.

"I am a fool, a perfect fool!" replies Elizabeth, hastily and shamefacedly wiping away her tears.

To give her time to recover herself, and also because he has not yet greeted the girl's mother, Jim turns to her.

"Did not I tell you that we should meet here?"

There is such undisguised joy and triumph in his tone, that perhaps Mrs. Le Marchant has not the heart to dash his elation; at all events, he is conscious in her tone of a less resolute determination to keep him at arm's-length, than on their two last meetings.

"I do not think that I contradicted you," she answers, smiling.

He may steal another look at Elizabeth now. She is not crying any longer. Indeed, despite the real moisture on her cheeks, she strikes him as looking happier than at their last meeting; and though the interval between now and then is too short for any such alteration to have taken place in reality, yet he cannot help imagining that the hollows in those very cheeks are less deep than when they stood together before the great Vandyke in the Brignoli Sala Palace.

"And the *entresol*? is it all your fancy painted it?" he asks quickly, feeling a sort of panic fear, that if he stops putting questions for one minute they will slip out of his grasp again, as they did in the Genoese Palace.

Elizabeth's face breaks into a soft bright smile. She has a dimple in one cheek and not in the other. She must have had it ten years ago; how comes he to have forgotten so sweet and strange a peculiarity?

"It is delightful--perfectly delightful!"

"Large enough to receive your friends in, after all?"

But the moment that the words are out of his mouth, he perceives that he has made a false step, and is somehow treading dangerous ground. Elizabeth's smile goes out, like a light blown into nothingness by a sudden wind.

"We have not many friends," she murmurs; "we--we are not going out at all."

He hastens to change his cue.

"Byng and I are at the Minerva," he says, beginning to talk very fast; "I wonder if, by any chance, you are in our neighbourhood; have I forgotten, or did you never tell me where the *entresol* lies? Where is it, by-the-bye?"

Ensnared by the wily and brazen suddenness of this demand, Miss Le Marchant has evidently no evasion ready, and, after an almost imperceptible pause of hesitation, answers:

"We are at 12 bis, Piazza d'Azeglio."

She is looking doubtfully and half uneasily in his face, as she gives this answer, but he has scarcely time for a flash of self-congratulation at having obtained the information, which he had never realized the eagerness of his desire for until this moment, before he becomes aware that his interlocutor's eyes are no longer meeting his, but have wandered to some object over his shoulder. What that object is he is not long left in doubt. Whether it is a genuine accident, or one of those spurious ones, of which those who profit by them are the artificers, Jim does not know; and, as he is at the time, and will be when he thinks of the circumstance to the end of his life, too angry to question Byng on the subject, it is pretty certain that he never *will* know; but so it is that at this moment the voice of his *protege* breaks upon his ear:

"You are not going to give us the slip like this, old chap--oh! I beg your pardon!"

But begging pardon ever so sweetly does not alter the fact that he has rushed, like a bull in a china shop, into the middle of the dialogue. All four look at each other for a second; then, since there is no help for it, Jim presents his disciple, and the next moment the latter has slid into talk with Elizabeth, and she is responding with an ease and freedom from embarrassment such as had never marked her sparse and hardly won utterances to the elder man.

Byng has the advantage of him, as he somewhat bitterly thinks. Byng has no connection with "old times;" those poor old times which she and her mother have so unaccountably taken *en grippe*. He seems suddenly relegated, as by some natural affinity, to the mother. On their two last meetings the eagerness to converse has been all on his side; yet now he has nothing to say to her. It is she who addresses him.

"I hope that you found your young lady flourishing," she says civilly.

He gives a slight inward start, though--as he is thankful to feel--his body is quiet. "His young lady!" Yes, of course he has a young lady! Has there been any danger during the last five minutes of his forgetting that fact? and has Mrs. Le Marchant done him an unnecessary service in recalling it?

"Oh, yes, thanks, she is all right!"

"Is she still in Florence?"

"Yes, she is here; by-the-bye"--looking round with a sudden sense that he ought to have missed her--"what has

become of her? Oh, here she is!"

For even while the words are on his lips, Amelia and Cecilia come into sight. Amelia with a shut Baedeker, and the serene look of an easy conscience and a thoroughly performed duty on her amiable face; Cecilia with a something of search and disquiet in her large rolling eye, which would have made him laugh at another time.

A sudden instinct, with which his will has nothing to do, makes him flash a look back at Mrs. Le Marchant, as if to gauge the effect produced upon her by his betrothed; and, following her glance, he finds that it is resting on Cecilia. She thinks that he is engaged to Cecilia. The mistake is intolerable to him, and yet a second's reflection tells him that it is a natural one. In a second he sees his Amelia as she presents herself to a strange eye. Miss Wilson is only thirty-one, but upon her has already come that set solid look of middle age, which overtakes some women before they are well over the borders of youth, and which other women manage to stave off till they are within near hail of forty. Yes; the mistake is quite a natural one. Most people would suppose that the showy Cecilia, still fairly youthful, and with so many obvious and well-produced "points," must be his choice; and yet, as I have said, the idea that anyone should credit him with her ownership is intolerable to him.

"Here she is!" he cries precipitately. "The one to the right side, the other is her sister; may I--may I present them to you?"

Perhaps it is his irritated fancy that dictates the idea, but it seems to him as if he detected a sort of surprise in Mrs. Le Marchant's face, when he effects the introduction he has proposed, and to which she accedes courteously, after a pause of hesitation about as long as had followed his inquiry of Elizabeth as to their address.

Five minutes later they have all sauntered out again on the terrace, and Burgoyne is again leaning on the wall; but this time he has no fear of hearing of Bayswater, for it is Elizabeth who is beside him. Since last he looked at it half an hour ago, a sort of glorification has passed over the divine view. Down where the river twists through the plain country, there is a light, dainty mist, but the mountains have put on their fullest glory. They are not green, or brown, or purple, or blue; but clad in that ineffable raiment woven by the sun, that defies our weak vocabulary to provide it with a name. A little snow-chain lies on the sun-warmed neck of Morello, and along the tops of the further Apennines, right against the acute blue of the heavens, lies a line of snow, that looks like a fleece-soft cloud resting from its journeyings on their crests; but it is no cloud, nor is there any speck upon the gigantic complete arch that over-vaults town and valley and radiant mountains. In the folds of these last, the shadows slumber; but over all the city is the great gold glory of spring. The one thing in Florence that frowns among so many smiles is the scowling Pitti, and that, from here, is invisible. Nearer to him, against the azure, stand the solemn flame-shaped cypresses arow, and beside them--as unlike as life to death--a band of quivering poplars, a sort of transparent gold-green in their young spring livery. The air is so clear that one can go nigh to counting the marbles on the Duomo walls. In a more transparent amber light, fuller of joy and gaiety, cannot the saved be dancing around, as in Fra Angelico's divine picture? cannot they be walking in the New Jerusalem of St. John's great dream? Only in the New Jerusalem there are no galled and trembling-kneed fiacre horses.

Elizabeth is sitting on the wall, her light figure--is it possible that it has been in the world only four years less than Amelia's solid one?--half-supported by one small gray hand outspread on the stone; her little fine features all tremulous with emotion, and half a tear gathered again in each sweet eye. As Jim looks at her, a sort of cold covetous gripe pinches his heart.

"What a woman with whom to look at all earth's loveliness--with whom to converse without speech!"

Even as he so thinks, she turns her head towards him, and, drawing in her breath with a long low sigh, says:

"Oh, how glad I am I did not die before to-day!"

Her eyes are turned towards him, and yet, as once before, he realizes that it is not to him that either her look or her thoughts are directed. Both are aimed at an object over his shoulder, and, as before, that object is Byng. Byng, too, has been gazing at the view. There are tears in Byng's eyes also. Stevenson says that some women like a man who cries. Byng cries easily and genuinely, and enjoys it; and, as he is a remarkably fine young man, there is something piquant in the contrast between his wet blue orbs and his shoulders.

As Burgoyne rolls home that afternoon in his fiacre, as before, placed opposite Amelia, his mental vision is no longer fixed upon a "double-barrelled, central fire, breech-loading gun;" it is fixed with a teasing tenacity upon the figure of a smallish woman, perennially looking, through brilliant tears, over his shoulder at somebody else.

CHAPTER IX.

"Was it 12, or 12 bis, Piazza d'Azeglio?"

There are no tears in Byng's eyes as he asks this question next morning--asks it of his friend, as the latter sits in the Fumoir, with an English paper in his hands, and a good cigar between his clean-shaven lips. It has struck him several times lately that he will have to give up good cigars, and take to a churchwarden pipe and shag instead. But, so far, the churchwarden and the shag remain in the future.

"12, or 12 bis, Piazza d'Azeglio?" inquires Byng.

"Was *what* 12 or 12 bis?" replies his friend, with a somewhat obviously intentional obtuseness; but Byng is far too thoroughly healthy and happy a young animal this morning to take offence easily.

"I mean Miss Le Marchant's address," he answers, explaining as amiably as if he had not been perfectly aware that it was only "cussedness" that had dictated the query.

There is a slight pause. Burgoyne would like to answer that he does not remember--would like still more to answer that he does not see what business it can be of Byng's; but, since he is not destitute of common-sense, a second's reflection shows him that he has no good reason for either the lie or the incivility, so he replies, pretty calmly, with his eyes still on his leading article:

"I believe Miss Le Marchant said 12 bis."

Having obtained the information he wanted, and finding his companion not conversationally disposed, Byng is moving away again, when he is arrested by Jim's voice, adding to the intelligence he has just given the monosyllable:

"Why?"

"Why what?" asks Byng, returning readily, and laughingly mimicking the intentional obtuseness so lately practised on himself by the other.

"Why did you ask?"

"I am thinking of paying my respects there this afternoon, and I did not want to ring at the wrong bell."

A short silence. Jim's head is partly hidden by his *Galignani*.

"Did Miss or Mrs. Le Marchant ask you to call?"

Byng laughs.

"Both of them are as innocent of it as the babe unborn!"

"You asked yourself then?" (in a snubbing voice).

Byng nods.

"And she said yes?"

The plural pronoun has dropped out of sight, but neither of them perceives it. The younger man shakes his sleek head. Jim lays down his paper with an air of decision.

"If she did not say 'Yes'--if she said 'No,'" he begins, with an accent of severity, "I fail to understand----"

"She did not say 'No,'" interrupts Byng, still half laughing, and yet reddening as well. "She began to say it; but I suppose that I looked so broken-hearted--I am sure I felt it--that she stopped."

As Jim makes no rejoinder, he continues by-and-by:

"After all, she can but send me away. One is always being sent away" (Jim wishes he could think this truer than he does); "but now and again one is not sent, and those are the times that pay for the others! I'll risk it."

There is a hopeful ring in his voice as he ends, and again a pause comes, broken a third time by the younger man.

"Come now, Jim"--looking with a straight and disarming good humour into his friend's overcast countenance--"speak up! Do you know of any cause or impediment why I should not?"

Thus handsomely and fairly appealed to, Burgoyne, who is by nature a just man, begins to put his conscience through her paces as to the real source of his dislike to the idea of his companion's taking advantage of that introduction which he himself has been the means--however unwillingly--of procuring for him. It is true that Byng's mother had adjured him, with tears in her eyes, to preserve her boy from undesirable acquaintances; but can he, Burgoyne, honestly say that he looks upon Elizabeth Le Marchant as an undesirable acquaintance for anyone? The result of his investigations is the discovery of how infinitesimal a share in his motives regard for his young friend's welfare has had. The discovery is no sooner made than he acts upon it.

"My dear boy," he says--and to his credit says it heartily--"I see no earthly reason why you should not go; you could not make nicer friends."

"Then why will not you come too?" asks Byng, with boyish generosity.

The other shakes his head. "They had much rather I stayed away; they have taken me *en grippe*."

"Pooh! Nonsense! You fancy it."

"I think not"--speaking slowly and thoughtfully--"I am not a fanciful person, nor apt to imagine that my acquaintances bother their heads about me one way or another; but when people try their best, in the first instance, to avoid recognising you at all, and on every subsequent occasion endeavour to disappear as soon as you come in sight, it is not a very forced assumption that they are not exactly greedy for your society."

This reasoning is so close that Byng is for the moment silenced; and it is the other who shortly resumes:

"I think it is because I remind them of the past; they have evidently some unpleasant association of ideas with that past. I wonder what it is."

The latter clause is addressed more to himself than to Byng.

"Perhaps some of them have died, or come to grief, and they are afraid of your asking after them," suggests the younger man.

"On the contrary--they are all--one more flourishing than another."

"Well, I would give them one more trial, anyhow; I am sure they would come round. Give them time, and I am sure they would come round!" cries Byng sanguinely; adding, "What could have been pleasanter than Mrs. Le Marchant's manner when you presented her to Miss Wilson?"

The mention of Miss Wilson recalls to Jim the extremely unpleasant moment of that presentation, thus brought back to him--the moment when Amelia had looked so middle-aged, and Cecilia so flashy; recalls to him also the conviction that has been growing upon him since yesterday, of the more than wisdom, the absolute imperative duty on his part, of avoiding a repetition of that comparison which had forced itself upon his notice in the church of San Miniato.

"You had better come," persists Byng still, like a magnanimous child, holding out half his cake to his friend; whether, like the same child, with a semi-hope that it may be refused, or whether, on the other hand, it may have crossed his mind that, where there are two visitees, the chances of a *tete-a-tete* are improved by there being also two visitors.

"My dear boy," returns Jim, this time with a testiness handsomely streaked with irony, "you are really too obliging; but, even if I wished it--which I do not--or even if *they* wished it--which they do *not*--it is in this case quite impossible, as I am engaged to go shopping with Amelia."

Probably the blow is not a knockdown one to Byng; at all events, he bears the rebuff with his habitual healthy good temper, and goes off to put on a smarter tie. Burgoyne, thinking no such improvement in his toilette necessary, strolls away to the Anglo-American. It is true that he has covenanted to escort Amelia to the shop for Cantagalli ware, though there is no particular reason why, had he so wished it, the purchase of the dinner-service that is to grace their Bayswater symposia might not have been deferred for twenty-four hours; and indeed, as things turn out, it has to be so deferred.

As he opens the door of the Wilson sitting-room his future father-in-law brushes past him, with evident signs of discomposure all over his clerical figure and spectacled face; and, on entering, he finds equal, if not superior, marks of upset equanimity on the countenances of the three women that are the room's occupants. Over the wood fire--Sybilla alternately roasts and freezes her family, and this is one of her roasting days--Cecilia is stooping, in evident search for

some object that has been committed, or tried to be committed, to the flames. The other two are looking on with an air of vexed interest. Sybilla is the first to address him.

"You have appeared at a not very happy moment," she says, with a sigh; "we have been having a family breeze; it has sent my temperature up nicely! It is 100, 100, Point 2."

The mention of Sybilla's temperature is always enough to put Jim in a rage. It is therefore in no very feeling tone that he returns:

"If it were 1,000, Point 99, I should not be surprised, in this atmosphere! Good Heavens, Cis, are not you hot enough already?"

The young lady thus apostrophised rises, with some precipitation, and with a very heated complexion, from her knees, holding in her hand, however, the object of her quest--a rather charred small parcel, done up in white paper, and with a fragment of white ribbon still adhering here and there to it.

"Father behaves so childishly," she says, with irritated undutifulness.

"You must own that it was enough to provoke him," strikes in Amelia's mild voice.

"What was enough to provoke him? How has he shown his childishness? For Heaven's sake, some of you explain!" cries Jim impatiently, looking from one to the other.

But with this request none of the three appears in any hurry to comply. There is a distinct pause before Cecilia, seeing neither of her seniors shows any signs of relieving her of the burden of explanation, takes that burden upon herself.

"The fact is," she says, setting her little rescued packet on the table beside her, and beginning to fan herself, "that Mr. Dashwood, the man to whom I was engaged, has chosen to marry. I am sure"--with a shrug--"no one has the least desire to deny his perfect right to do so; and this morning there arrived by post a bit of his wedding-cake! I suppose he meant it civilly; but father chose to take it as an insult to himself, and though it was addressed to me, he threw it into the fire. I am very fond of wedding-cake; so, as soon as father's back was turned, I fished it out again!"

Jim laughs, with more vigour perhaps than heartfelt amusement.

"Bravo, Cis! You are a real philosopher! We might all learn a lesson from you."

"What have you done with your nice friend?" asked Sybilla languidly. "Amelia, dear, this *couvre-pied* is slipping off me again. What a sympathetic voice he has! I am sure he has been a great deal with sick people."

"I left him putting on his best tie to go out calling. No, calm yourself, Cecilia, not on you; it is not your turn to-day."

"Whose turn is it then?" asks the girl, with an interest not at all blunted by the mortifying incident of the cake, which, indeed, she has begun to nibble with apparent relish.

Jim hesitates a second--a second during which it strikes him with a shock that he already finds a difficulty in pronouncing Elizabeth Le Marchant's name. He manages to evade the necessity even now by a circumlocution.

"I believe it is the Piazza d'Azeglio upon which that luminary is to shine."

"Is he going to see that lovely creature to whom you introduced me yesterday?" cries Amelia, with good-natured enthusiasm. "I heard her telling him that she lived in the Piazza d'Azeglio. Oh, Jim, how pretty she is! One ought to pay for being allowed to look at her."

Many women, whose plainness is incontestable, are able to be just to their better favoured sisters; but Amelia is more than just--she is lavishly generous.

Burgoyne rewards her with an affectionate look--a look such as would make her swear that, beside Miss Le Marchant, as beside Dumain's fair love,

"Juno but an Ethiop were!"

"She looks as if she had had a history; that always improves a woman's appearance," says Cecilia pensively, holding a fragment of the fateful cake suspended in air, and regarding it with a melancholy eye. "Has she?"

"I never asked her."

"Why did not you go too?" inquires Amelia, judiciously striking in, as is her habit, as often as she perceives that her

younger sister is beginning to get too obviously upon her own *fiance's* nerves; a catastrophe which something in the tone of his last remark tells her--though she does not quite understand why it should--is imminent. "They are old friends of yours, are not they? They may be hurt if they find that a perfect stranger like Mr. Byng is in a greater hurry to visit them than you are."

Before Burgoyne's mental vision rises a picture of Elizabeth's heavenly eye wandering indifferently over the dear old friend's shoulder to find its home in that of the perfect stranger. But he says kindly, and even playfully:

"Why did not I go too? Because I was under the impression that I was engaged to go with another lovely being to choose crockery, was I not? Am I not?"

Amelia's answer is conveyed by a series of nods and winks executed behind her sisters' backs, which he presently understands to imply that she desires a private interview. It is not immediately that he grasps what she is driving at, since dumb-show is often puzzling to the person at whom it is aimed, though clear as day to the dumb-shower. As soon, however, as he masters what her wish is, he hastens to comply with it; and five minutes later finds them *tete-a-tete* in the hideous little dining-room which had been the scene of their reunion, and of many after-meetings.

"I could not say so, of course, before *her*," remarks Miss Wilson, as soon as they are out of earshot, "or she might have insisted upon my going. She is very unselfish sometimes; but the fact is, I do not think I ought to leave Sybilla again to-day. You see, she was alone the whole of yesterday afternoon; and when we came back we found her in a very low way. She had been reading her book of prescriptions--you know the book; all the prescriptions which she has had for the last ten years bound up together--and we rather dread her bringing it out, as she always fancies that she is going to have the disease prescribed for."

"Humph!"

"And, after all, happiness ought not to make one selfish, ought it?" says Amelia, with a gentle sigh of abnegation, as she ruffles her pale-haired head against his coat-sleeve. "I have so much of you now--oh, so much!--not to speak of---"

"Cecilia, of course, is incapacitated by grief?" interrupts Jim brusquely. "She will be going up and down upon the mountains like another unfortunate fair one. But your father? He will be at home, will he not?"

"Yes, he will be at home," replies Amelia, slowly and doubtfully, as if not finding a very satisfactory solution in this suggested arrangement; "but, as you know, it never answers to leave father and Sybilla alone together for long. You see, he does not believe that there is anything the matter with her; he thinks that she is as well as you or I" (a gush of warm feeling towards his father-in-law rushes over Jim's heart); "and though he tries to prevent himself from showing it to her, yet I am afraid, poor dear, that he is not very successful."

Jim laughs.

"And to-day," continues Amelia, "he is naturally a good deal upset about Cecilia and that wedding-cake; it *was* very impertinent to send it--was not it?--though she does not seem to see it. I hope"--with a wistful smile, and a repetition of the fond friction of her head against his sleeve--"that when *you* throw *me* over----"

This is a hypothesis, suggested with perhaps unwise frequency by poor Miss Wilson, which never fails to exasperate Jim.

"If we are going to talk nonsense," he breaks in brusquely, and with no attempt to return or reward her caressing gesture, "I may as well go."

"Go to the Piazza d'Azeglio," says she coaxingly, her spirits raised by the harshness of tone of his interruption of her speech, and half-persuading herself that it owes its birth to the supposition being too painful to be faced by him.

He looks at her strangely for a moment, then--"Why do you wish me to go to the Piazza d'Azeglio?" he asks, in a tone that is no longer overtly cross, only constrained and odd. "Why are you driving me there?"

"Because I think you would like it," she answers; "because"--taking his hand and passing her lips, which he feels to be trembling a little, very gently over the back of it--"because all through your life I want you to have exactly what you like, always."

He draws his hand away; not unkindly, but as if shocked at the humility of her action.

"That is so likely," he says mournfully.

CHAPTER X.

There is no particular mirth in Burgoyne's mind as he mounts the stone stairs of the house which announces itself as 12 bis, in the commonplace new square of the Piazza d'Azeglio. But yet it is evident that, if he wishes to be in tune with the mood of the family to whom he is going to pay his respects, he must be not only mirthful, but musical. As the door of the *entresol*, to which he is directed by the porter, opens in answer to his ring, bursts of laughter, among which he can plainly detect the voice of Byng, assail his ear, mingled with music, or rather noise of a sort, but what sort his ear, without fuller evidence than is yet before it, is unable to decide. The person who has admitted him is an elderly Englishwoman, whose features at once strike him as familiar--so familiar that it needs scarcely one reaching back of memory's hand to capture the fact of her having filled the office of nurse at the Moat, at the period when the nursery there had been the scene of those frantic romps in which he himself had taken a prominent part, and in which Elizabeth had been to him by turns so able a second, or so vigorous an adversary. He would like to claim acquaintance with her, and, perhaps, if she had made any difficulty as to admitting him, might have screwed up his courage to do so; but as she lets him in without delay or hesitation, he follows her in silence along the passage of a by no means imposing little *entresol*--they are not so well off as they used to be, is his passing thought--is ushered into a small sitting-room, and, entering behind his own name, which has been completely drowned by the din issuing from within, has time, before the consciousness of his own appearance has disturbed it, to take in the details of a group which his entry naturally breaks up. Set slantwise across one angle of the room is an open cottage-piano, and beside it stands Elizabeth, her elbow resting on the top, and all her pensive face convulsed with helpless laughter. Upon the music-stool is seated a large collie dog, supported from behind in an upright position by Byng. Before him is a score of music, from which he is obviously supposed to be playing, as indeed he is doing in a sense--that is to say, he is bringing down first one large paw and then another heavily on the keys, accompanying each crash with a short howl to express the agony inflicted upon his nerves by his own performance. The scene is so entirely different a one from what he had expected: the immoderately laughing Elizabeth has so much more kinship with the sweet hoyden of the Moat than with the pale woman with a history of his two last meetings, that for a second or two Burgoyne stands in the doorway as if stunned. It is not till Mrs. Le Marchant, coming out of an inner room, advances to greet him, that he recovers himself.

"How do you do?" she says, smiling, and with less constraint than he has of late learnt to expect. "Are you fond of music?" (putting, as she speaks, her hands up to her ears). "I hope so! Did you ever hear such a shocking noise?"

"I do not know which I admire most, the vocal or the instrumental part of the performance," replies he, laughing; but even as he speaks both cease.

Elizabeth lifts her elbow from the piano, and Byng removes his hands from under the dog's arms, who at once, joyful and released, jumps down, upsetting his music-stool with the impetus of his descent, and yet immediately, with all a dog's real good-heartedness, begins to swing a handsome tail, to show that he bears no real malice for the odious practical joke that has been played upon him. The clamorous fall of dog and music-stool reveals an object which had been hidden behind both, in the shape of a little boy, in whose behalf, as it darts across Jim's mind, the eccentric concert, for which he has come in, must have been got up.

"Oh, *do* go on!" cries the child shrilly. "Oh, *do* make him do it again! Oh, why do you stop?"

And indeed through the whole of the ensuing conversation this cry recurs at short intervals with the iteration of a guinea-hen. But none of the three performers seems disposed to comply with this request. Two of them sit down decorously on chairs, and the third throws himself upon the floor panting, showing a fine red tongue, and dragging himself luxuriously along on his stomach to show his relief at his *corvee* being ended. The child has followed Elizabeth, and now stands beside her, tiresomely pulling at her white hands.

"Bertie has come to spend the day with us," she says, looking explanatorily up at Jim, but speaking with a formality very different, as he feels, from the exuberant ease and mirth that had marked her intercourse with Byng.

Jim had already had a flash of speculation about the child, as to whether he might be a late-come little brother, arrived on the scene at a period subsequent to his own connection with the family; since plainly the span of his small life did not stretch to a decade.

"Bertie is a new friend," he says kindly. "I do not know Bertie."

"His mother, Mrs. Roche, is a cousin of ours; she has a villa on Bellosguardo. Perhaps you know her?"

"I am going to a party at her house on Wednesday," cries Jim, in a tone of eager pleasure at the discovery of this fresh link, and of the vista of probable meetings which it opens up. "I shall meet you there?"

Elizabeth turns her head slightly aside and shakes it as slightly.

"No?"

"We are not going out."

The formula implies mourning, and yet the clothes both of Elizabeth and her mother are unmistakably coloured ones, and give no indication of an even moderately recent loss. But it is so clear that Miss Le Marchant means to add no explanation that he has to change the subject.

"Though Bertie is not an old friend," he says, smiling, "yet I have come across one here to-day--she opened the door to me; I should have liked to shake hands with her, only she looked so haughty--she never used to look haughty at the Moat."

"Do you mean nurse?" she asks.

"Yes, I knew her in an instant; she is not in the least changed, less even"--hesitating a little, as if doubtful whether the stiffness of their new relations warranted a personality--"less even than you."

She snatches a hasty look at him, a look upon which he sees, to his surprise, imprinted a character of almost fear.

"You must be laughing at me," she says, in a voice in which he detects an undoubted tremor; "I am very much changed."

There is such obvious apprehension in her whole manner, that his one thought--after a first flash of astonishment--is to reassure her.

"Of course I was only speaking of externals," he says quickly; "ten years could hardly be expected to leave any of us quite where we were as to our inner selves;" then, seeing her still look flurried, and becoming himself nervous, he adds, rather stupidly, the hackneyed Swinburnian couplet--

"Time turns the old days to derision,
Our loves into corpses or wives!"

though I never could see that that was quite a necessary alternative!"

Ere the words are out of his mouth she has risen with precipitation, and begun hurriedly to re-arrange the branches of lilac in a scaldino on the table near her. She is apparently so awkward about it that one odorous white bough falls out on the floor. Before Jim can stoop to pick it up, Byng has rushed to the rescue. In eagerly thanking him, in receiving it back from him, and accepting his services in replacing it among its perfumed brothers, the girl, perhaps involuntarily, turns her back upon her former interlocutor, who sits for a moment staring rather blankly at her, and wondering what sting there could have lurked in his apparently harmless words to drive her away so abruptly. Whatever may have driven her away, there is certainly no doubt as to her being gone. Nor as Jim sees her moving about the room, followed by Byng, and showing him her treasures--the little wild red and yellow tulips she plucked in the field this morning; the chicken-skin box she bought at Ciampolini's yesterday, and mixing all that she shows with her delicate light laughter--can he buoy himself up with any reasonable hope of her ever, with her own good will, returning. He must be looking more blank than he is conscious of, for Mrs. Le Marchant's voice sounds quite apologetic in his ears, when, having been, like himself, deserted by her companion, she takes a seat near him.

"Elizabeth is so proud of her bargains," she says, glancing with a lenient smile towards her daughter; "she must show them to everybody."

"She never offered to show them to me," replies Jim, rather morosely; then, becoming aware of the almost puerile jealousy evidenced by his last remark, he adds:

"I am afraid I said something that annoyed Miss Le Marchant; I cannot think what it could have been. I told her how wonderfully little changed I thought her in the last ten years; but it could not have been that, could it?"

The mother's eye is still following her child, and, if it were not an absurd assumption, Burgoyne could have fancied that there was a sudden moisture in it.

"She is very sensitive," Mrs. Le Marchant answers slowly; "perhaps it would be safer not to say anything about herself to her."

"Perhaps it would be safer," rejoins Jim, with some ill-humour, "if you were to draw up a list of subjects for me to avoid; I have no wish to play the part of bull in a china shop; and yet I seem to be always doing it; *imprimis*" (striking the forefinger of his left hand with the right), "*imprimis* the Moat."

He pauses, as if expecting a disclaimer, but none such comes--"The past generally" (moving on to the second finger and again halting; but with no more result than before). "Yourselves" (reaching the third finger). Still that silence, which, if it mean anything, must mean assent. He looks impatiently in her face, to seek the response which her lips refuse him.

"On your own showing," she says gently, though in a rather troubled voice, "you have the whole field of the present and the future left you; are not they wide enough for you?"

His brows draw together into a painful frown.

"Perhaps I have as little cause to be fond of them as you have of the past."

It is a random shot, a bow drawn at a venture; but it could not have hit more true apparently had it been levelled with the nicest aim.

As her daughter had done before her, Mrs. Le Marchant rises hastily, and leaves him--leaves him to reflect ironically upon how wisely Amelia had acted in insisting upon his visiting these "dear old friends," upon whom the effect of his conversation is so obviously exhilarating.

"I wish I had not come; I wish it was time to go home!"

The small fractious voice that wails the two preceding sentences seems to be Jim's own mouthpiece. It is, in point of fact, the voice of Bertie, who, tired of uttering his unregarded request for the repetition of the concert which had filled him with such delight, has of late been trying the effect of his unassisted powers to bring about the desired consummation, by putting his arms as far as he can round the dog's body, and endeavouring to lug him towards the music-stool. The collie has been enduring this treatment for five minutes--enduring it with an expression of magnanimous patience, which seems to say, that, though it is undoubtedly an unpleasant experience, yet, as it is inflicted upon him by one of his own family, he must of course put up with it, when Elizabeth goes to the rescue. Elizabeth goes alone, since Byng is held in converse by her mother at the other side of the room. Verbal persuasions having entirely failed, she tries to loosen the child's arms; but his grasp, though puny, is obstinate, and the only perceptible result of her endeavours is the utterance by her young friend of the two polite aspirations above recorded.

"He does not want to sing any more to-day," Jim hears her saying in her gentle voice; "you really are hurting him; he is too polite to say so; but you are squeezing him so tight that you really *are* hurting him. Why now" (with a little accent of pain), "you are hurting *me*."

Jim has been looking with a lack-lustre eye out of the open window at the young plane trees exchanging their frowsy buds for infant leaves; at the one Judas tree pranking in its purple blossoms in the Piazza; but at that low complaint he makes one step across the room, and, whipping off Master Bertie alike from long-enduring dog and plaintive woman, stoops over the latter as she sits upon the floor, passing one hand over the other, upon which the child's angry fingers, transferred from his first victim, have left rosy prints of pain.

"I wish I had not come; I wish it was time to go home!" whimpers the little boy.

"Since he is so anxious to go home, I will take him, if you like," says Jim in a stiff voice; "I must be going myself."

She looks up at him from her lowly posture, a charming, half-apologetic, wholly peace-making smile fleeting across her small face, while she still chafes her hand--that little pinched hand which makes him feel so ridiculously tender.

"Are you, too, sorry that you came?" she asks.

The question takes him by surprise. He is not prepared for so friendly and almost intimate a sequel to her short, shy answers, and her abrupt quitting of him. He hesitates how to answer it; and as he hesitates, she rises and stands beside him. It is not easy for a grown person to rise gracefully from a seat on the floor. Jim catches himself thinking with what a roll and a flounder Cecilia would have executed the same manoeuvre; but Elizabeth, supple and light, rises as smoothly as an exhalation from a summer meadow.

"If I was rude to you just now," she says, rather tremulously; "if I am ever rude to you in the future, I hope you will understand--I hope you will put it down to the fact that I--I--am very ignorant of--that I know very little of the world."

The two men are gone; so is the child; so is the dog; and Elizabeth is shutting up the piano and removing the score.

"What a noise we made!" she says, smiling at the recollection.

"If you make such a shocking noise again, the signora and the other lodgers will infallibly interfere."

Mrs. Le Marchant has followed her daughter, and now throws one arm about her slight neck, with a gesture of passionate affection.

"If you knew," she says, in a voice of deep and happy agitation, "what it was to me to hear you laugh as you did to-day!"

"I have a good many arrears in that way to make up, have not I, mammy? And so have you too," answers the younger woman, laying her sleek head down caressingly on her mother's shoulder; then, in a changed and restless voice: "Oh, if we could stop that man talking about the Moat! Why does he go on hammering about it?"

"Why indeed?" replies Mrs. Le Marchant with a shrug. "Men are so thick-skinned; but it is rather touching, his having remembered us all these years, is not it? For my part, I had almost entirely forgotten his existence--had not you?"

"Absolutely!" replies Elizabeth, with emphasis; "and if he will only let me, I am more than willing to forget it over again. Oh, mammy" (turning her face round, and burying it on her mother's breast), "why can't we forget everything? begin everything afresh from now--this delightful *now*?"



CHAPTER XI.

A reconciliation is seldom effected without some price being paid for it. Jim's with Elizabeth, if it can be called such, is bought at the cost of a small sacrifice of principle on his part. No later than this morning he had laid it down as a Median rule that he should avoid opportunities of finding himself in Miss Le Marchant's company; and yet, not only has he spent the major part of the afternoon in her society, but, as he walks away from her door, he finds that he has engaged himself to help Byng, on no distant day, in doing the honours of the Certosa Monastery to her and her mother. On reflection, he cannot quite explain to himself how the arrangement has come about. The proposal certainly did not originate with him, and still less with the two ladies so strangely shy of all society. The three have somehow been swept into it by Byng, who, either with the noblest altruism, or because he feels justly confident that he has no cause for jealousy of his friend (Jim's cynical reflection is that the latter is the much more probable reason), has insisted on drawing him into the project.

Jim Burgoyne is not a man whom, as a rule, it is easy either to wile or cudgel into any course that does not recommend itself to his own judgment or taste--a fact of which he himself is perfectly aware, and which makes him remorsefully acknowledge that there must indeed have been a traitor in the citadel of his own heart before he could have so weakly yielded at the first push to what his reason sincerely disapproves. But yet it is not true that remorse is the leading feature of his thoughts, as he walks silently beside his friend down the Via di Servi. It ought to be, perhaps; but it is not. The picture that holds the foreground of his memory is that of Elizabeth sitting on the floor, and sending him peace-offerings from her pathetic eyes and across her sensitive lips. It was very sweet of her to think it necessary to make him amends at all for her trifling incivility, and nothing could be sweeter than the manner of it. How gladly would he buy some little rudeness from her every day at such a price! But yet, as he thinks it over, the manner of it, the ground on which she rested her excuse, is surely a strange one. That she should attribute her light lapse from courtesy to want of knowledge of the world comes strangely from the mouth of a woman of six-and-twenty. If it be true--and there was a naive veracity in lip and eye as she spoke--how is it to be accounted for? Has her mind, has her experience of life, remained absolutely stationary during the last ten years? Her tell-tale face, over which some pensive story is so plainly written, forbids the inference. It is no business of his, of course. Amelia, thank Heaven! has no story; but, oh! if someone would tell him what that history is! And yet, three days later, he voluntarily puts away from himself the opportunity of hearing it.

During those three days he sees no more of her. He does not again seek her out, and accident does not throw her in his way. He buys his Cantagalli dinner-service in company with Amelia; chooses the soup-tureen out of which he is to ladle mutton broth for the inhabitants of Westbourne Grove; he tastes of the wedding-cake that has cost Cecilia so dear, and he avoids Byng. On the third day he can no longer avoid him, since he is to occupy, as on the San Miniato occasion, the fourth seat in the fiacre which conveys himself and the Misses Wilson to the garden-party at the villa in Bellosguardo inhabited by Mrs. Roche, the mother of the amiable Bertie. The Wilsons' acquaintances in Florence are few, and, as far as Burgoyne has at present had the opportunity of judging, evil. It is, therefore, with a proportionate elation that Cecilia dresses for a party at which she will meet the bulk, or at least the cream, of the English society. It is to Byng's good nature that she and her sister owe the introduction to a hostess whose acquaintance is already too large to make her eager for any causeless addition to it; but whose hand has been forced by Byng, in the mistaken idea that he is doing a service to his friend Jim.

They are late in setting off, as Amelia is delayed by the necessity of soothing Sybilla, who has been reduced to bitter tears by a *tete-a-tete* with her father, in which that well-intentioned but incautious gentleman has been betrayed into suggesting to her that she may possibly be suffering from biliousness. The administering of bromide, to calm her nerves under such a shock; the reiterated assurances that every member of the family except its head realizes the monstrosity of the suggestion, take up so much time that Amelia herself has to reduce to a minimum the moments allotted to her own toilette. She has cried a little with Sybilla, for company partly, and partly out of weariness of spirit. That and hurry have swollen her eyelids, and painted her cheeks with a hard, tired red, so that it is an even more homespun figure and a homelier face than usual, that seat themselves opposite Burgoyne, when at length they get under weigh.

He, Burgoyne, has been impatient of the delay, impatient to set off and to arrive; yet he would be puzzled to say why. He knows, on no less authority than her own word, that he shall not meet Elizabeth; and yet the mere feeling that the mistress of the house to which he is going is of the same blood as she; that he shall see the rude, spoilt child, whose ill-tempered pinch made her utter that low cry of pain, suffice to give a tartness to his tone, as he inquires the cause of her lagging, of the panting, flushed, apologetic Amelia. Byng and Cecilia have been sitting waiting for some time in the

salon, from which Sybilla has removed her prostrate figure and tear-stained face; but they have been entertaining each other so well--she in paying him a series of marked attentions, and he in civilly and pleasantly accepting them--that the half-hour has not seemed long to either. But the party, in motion at last, has passed the Roman Gate, and is climbing up and up between the high walls, each step giving it a greater vantage ground over the Flower City, before Burgoyne recovers his equanimity.

The spring comes on apace. In the gardens above their heads laurestinus bushes, with all their flowers out (as they are never seen in England, where always the east wind nips half the little round buds before they can expand into blossom), stand in white and green; rosemary trees, covered with gray bloom, hang down; and against the azure of the high heaven purple irides stand up arow. It is one of those days on which one can with bodily eyes see the Great Mother at her quickening work; can see her flushing the apple-boughs, unfolding the fig-leaves, and driving the lusty green blood through the sappy vines. And in the slow creeping of the fiacre up the twisting white road, each turn lays the divine Tuscan city before them in some new aspect of arresting loveliness.

At Florence, one is like Balaam with the Israelites. One is taken to see her from one point after another, each point seeming fairer than the last; but the likeness ends there, for no wish to curse the sweet town could ever arise in even the morosest heart. The hills have put on their summer look of dreamy warmth and distance. Before they have reached the hilltop the boon Italian air has kissed most of the creases out of Jim's temper, and the brick-red from Amelia's cheek-bones. He looks remorsefully from the triumphant beauty around, into the poor, fond face opposite to him--looks at her with a sort of compassion for being so unlovely, mixed with a compunctious admiration and tenderness for her gentle qualities. He may touch her hand without fear of observation, so wholly is Byng enveloped in the mantle of Cecilia's voluble tenderness.

"Have you forgiven me?" he asks, smiling; "I will make any apologies, eat any dirt, say anything, short of allowing that Sybilla is not bilious."

They have reached the villa, and turned out of the dusty highway into a great cool courtyard, that has a Moorish look, with its high arches, over which the Banksia roses tumble in cascades of yellow and white. It seems wrong that the voices which come from the tea-tables under the Loggia should be chattering English or Yankee, instead of cooing that "sweet bastard Latin" that better suits place and day.

The hostess shakes hands absently with Burgoyne, offers his fair charges iced coffee, and then, having discharged her conscience towards them, draws Byng away for an intimate chat. From her hands he passes into those of several other willing matrons and maids, and it seems likely that the party who brought him will see him no more. Amelia, unused to, and unexpectant of attention, is perfectly content to sit silent, sipping her cold coffee; but Cecilia is championing her bit in a way which frightens her future brother-in-law so much that he cowardly takes the opportunity of her looking in another direction to lure his docile *fiancee* on to the broad terrace, whence all the young green glory of the Arno's plain, and the emurpled slopes and dreamful breast of Morello, are to be seen by the looker's beauty-drunk eye. Upon this terrace many people are walking and sitting in twos and threes, and in one of the little groups Amelia presently discovers a female acquaintance, who at once fastens upon her, and happening to be afflicted with a relative visited by a disorder of something the same nature as Sybilla's, subjects her to a searching and exhaustive catechism as to the nature of her sister's symptoms. Sybilla's symptoms, whether at first or second hand, have invariably the property of driving Jim into desert places; and, in the present instance, seeing no likelihood of an end to the relation of them, he turns impatiently away, and, without much thought of where he is going, follows a steep downward path that ends in a descent of old stone steps, between whose crevices green plants and little hawkweed blow-balls flourish undisturbed, to a large square well, framed by a low broad parapet, with flower-beds set around it, and the whole closed in by rugged stone walls. No one apparently has had the same impulse as he, for, at first, he has the cool solitude to himself. He sits down on the parapet of the still well, and drops in pebbles to see how deep the water is; and anon lifts his idle look to the empty niches in the crumbling wall--niches where once wood-god, or water-nymph, or rural Pan stood in stone, now empty and forsaken. Out of the wall two ilexes grow, and lift themselves against the sapphire arch, which yet is no sapphire, nor of any name that belongs to cold stone; a blue by which all other blues are but feeble colourless ghosts of that divinest tint.

He is roused from the vague reverie into which the cool silence and the brooding beauty around have lulled him, by the sound of approaching voices. He is not to have his well any longer to himself. He looks up with that scarcely latent hostility in his eye with which one regards the sudden intruder into a railway carriage, when--counting on keeping it to one's self for a long night journey--one has diffused limbs and parcels over its whole area. The owners of the voices, having descended, as he had done, the age-worn steps, come into sight. They are both men, and one of them he recognises at once as a Mr. Greenock, a well-known stock figure in Florentine society, a mature bachelor diner-out, a not ill-natured retailer of news, collector of *bons-mots*, and harmless appendage of pretty women. Of the other, at whom he scarcely glances, all he grasps is the fact that he is dressed in clerical attire, and that the first words audible of his

speech, as he comes within hearing, is the name of an English county--Devonshire. The answer comes in a tone of keen interest:

"Ah, I thought there must be a screw loose!"

As the new arrivals become aware of the presence of a third person, they pause in their talk; but presently, Mr. Greenock having recognised Jim and greeted him with a friendly nod and a trivial remark upon the splendour of the day, they resume their interrupted theme, standing together a few yards distant from him on the walk--resume it in a rather lower but still perfectly audible key.

"I thought there must be some reason for their shutting themselves up so resolutely," continues Mr. Greenock in the gratified tone of one who has at length solved a long-puzzling riddle. "I thought that there must be a screw loose, in fact; but are you quite sure of it?"

The other gives a sigh and a shrug.

"Unfortunately there can be no doubt on that head; the whole lamentable occurrence took place under my own eyes; the Moat is in my parish."

"Devonshire!" "A screw loose!" "The Moat!" Burgoyne is still sitting on the well-brim; but he no longer sees the lapis vault above, nor the placid dark water below. A sort of horrible mist is swimming before his eyes; it is of Elizabeth Le Marchant that they are speaking. Through that mist he snatches a scared look at the speaker; at him whom but two minutes ago he had glanced at with such a cursory carelessness. Does he recognise him? Alas! yes. Though changed by the acquisition of a bald head and a grizzled beard, he sees him at once to be the man who, at the time of his own acquaintance with the Le Marchant family, had filled the office of vicar of their parish; under whom he had sat on several drowsy summer Sunday mornings, trembling at the boys' perilous antics in the great curtained pew, and laughing inwardly at Elizabeth's mirth-struggling efforts to control them.

"And you say that they never held up their heads again afterwards?" pursues Mr. Greenock in a tone of good-natured compassion, that is yet largely tinged with gratified curiosity.

"They left the neighbourhood at once," returns the clergyman. "Dear me, how time flies! it must be ten years ago now, and I never saw them again until I met the unhappy girl and her mother yesterday, driving in the Via Tornabuoni; but"--lowering his voice a little more--"you will understand that this is strictly *entre nous*; that it must not go any further."

"What do you think I am made of?" cries Mr. Greenock in a burst of generous indignation; "but"--stepping a pace or two nearer to his interlocutor--"I am not quite sure that I have got the details of the story right; would you mind just running it over to me again?"

Jim has been sitting in such a stunned stillness that it is perhaps no wonder that they have forgotten his neighbourhood. At all events, the clergyman is evidently about to comply with his companion's request and recapitulate the tale. If Jim preserves his motionless attitude but five minutes longer, he will be put into possession of that story whose existence he has already heavily conjectured, and the imagining of which has made him often, within the last week or two, turn with nausea from his food, and toss restlessly upon his bed. Without any trouble on his part, without any possible blame attaching to him, he will learn the poor soul's secret. Never! If the devil wish to tempt him with a prospect of success, it must be with a less unhandsome bait. Almost before the two startled scandalmongers have recalled the fact of his existence by the abrupt noise of his departure, he is half-way back to the terrace, that mist still before his eyes, and a singing in his ears.

CHAPTER XII.

"A merry going out bringeth often a mournful return home; and a joyful evening makes many times a sad morning."

The return drive, as it is quicker, being all downhill, so is it a more silent one than that to the villa had been. Byng, indeed, is as gaily willing to be fondled by Cecilia as he was on his way up; but there is a mixture of maidenly reserve and sub-tender reproach in her manner which makes their relations somewhat strained. The afternoon's pleasuring has had a jading effect upon Amelia's spirits, as, after having been sucked dry on the subject of Sybilla's maladies, and afterwards at once shaken off, by her female acquaintance, she has not been fortunate enough to meet with anyone else to exchange talk with, and has sat in disconsolate yet patient loneliness on a stone bench, afraid to stir from the spot where he had left her, lest she might miss her lover, of whom, however, she has unaccountably seen nothing, until when the Angelus is ringing, and the shadows spreading, he has come to give her curt notice, with half-averted face, that the fiacre is at the door. In point of fact, he has been too conscious of the disorder of his features to dare to expose them sooner than he can help to her fond scrutiny. He would give anything to be able to sit beside, instead of opposite to her during their drive home, as a profile is a much less tell-tale and more governable thing than a full face; and he is painfully conscious that as often as she imagines she can do it without being detected by him, she is stealing looks of inquiring anxiety at him. He tries to put her off the scent by spasmodic comments upon the entertainment that they have just quitted; and she does her best to keep up the ball of conversation, since she sees that it is his wish. But in vain. Each forced remark falls still-born, leading to nothing. It is Cecilia who at last succeeds in giving a fillip to the languid talk.

"I did not know that Mrs. Roche was a cousin of your beauty, Miss Le Marchant," she says suddenly, growing tired of her pensive attitude, and addressing herself to Jim.

He starts guiltily. "Did not you?"

He must look odd; for even Cecilia's large and preoccupied cow eyes rest upon him with an expression of surprise.

"I wonder why she was not there to-day."

It is not exactly a question, yet her great shallow orbs do not seem to be going to leave his face until he makes some response. He forces himself to do so.

"I understood Miss Le Marchant to say that they are not going out just now."

"And why are not they, pray?" inquires Cecilia, in an injured voice, as if the retirement from the world of the two ladies in question were a personal injury to herself; "they are not in mourning, all their gowns are coloured ones, and they do not look as if they had bad health--perhaps, however" (after a moment's thoughtful attempt to find a solution)--"perhaps, however, they may have something--one never knows--people have such unexpected diseases nowadays--hysteria, perhaps, or fits."

At this ingenious suggestion Jim is conscious of a writhing motion passing over the stalwart form of Byng beside him. In his own brain, if there is room for anything but the desire to evade Amelia's eyes, is a dim sense of relief at a suggestion so grotesquely wide of the mark as that made by the younger Miss Wilson. In perfect innocence of the effect produced upon her companions by her bright hypothesis, Cecilia goes on to remind her sister of the parallel case of a very handsome girl whom they had once reckoned among their acquaintance, and who was periodically being found by her family with her head under the fender. But Amelia rises but faintly to the reminiscence, and the remainder of the drive is accomplished in a general silence.

The next day is the one which had been fixed upon for the expedition to Certosa. It was only with a very large admixture of wormwood in his prospective pleasure that Jim had ever looked forward to this party, but now he anticipates it with absolute dread. How can he face Elizabeth and her mother, with that ominous phrase of the "screw loose" still ringing in his ears? He feels a traitor towards them, in that he has, however unwillingly, overheard it. To add to his mental uneasiness is the fact of his having as yet not broken to Amelia his intentions with regard to the disposal of his afternoon. Amelia's eyes have for years had the habit of covertly watching him to read his wishes almost before they rose; but in their gaze yesterday he had, unless misled by his guilty conscience, detected a new quality, a quality of alarm and enlightenment. He will get over the communication of his piece of news as early in the day as may be; so, having finished breakfast before Byng has put in his, as usual, tardy appearance, he takes his hasty way to the Anglo-

American. He finds the family there in a more placid frame of mind than that which they had presented on one or two of his recent visits. Sybilla is expecting her doctor, on which occasions she always likes to have a more lacy coverlet than usual thrown over her languid feet; a greater efflorescence of pink ribbons about her thin throat, and a disposition of pots of lilies about her wan head. Amelia, active and long-suffering as usual, is moving about in patient execution of her vain and tiresome whimsies. Cecilia sits tranquilly in the window, knitting an elaborate pair of men's woollen gloves, not indeed--to do her justice--for anyone in particular, but with a wise forethought for the accidents and possibilities of life. Since, on this occasion, his sweetheart shows no inclination to draw him away into the dining-room for a *tete-a-tete*, Jim has to take the bull by the horns, and rush into his subject in a more public manner than he had intended. But the one desire to get it over outbalances all minor considerations.

"Amelia," he begins suddenly, and even to himself his voice sounds discourteous and abrupt, "shall you want me this afternoon?"

The moment that the words are out of his mouth it strikes him that the form into which he has thrown his question is more than necessarily untender. She stops in the patting of Sybilla's smart pillows, and perhaps there is something a little abrupt too in her monosyllabic "Why?"

"Because," standing before the fireplace, with his back to the three women, and throwing the words over his shoulder, "because, if you do not, Byng and I were thinking of going to Certosa."

There is a pause. He hears that Cecilia's needles have stopped clicking; her work has dropped into her lap. In another moment she will have proposed to come too. "With the Le Marchants," he goes on, shooting out the fateful words like bullets; "a *partie carree*."

Still silence behind him. He cannot go on staring for ever at the billets of wood of the unlit fire. He has to turn round and face his companions. The only one of them whose pleasure or displeasure in his announcement he at all heeds--Amelia--is stooping over Sybilla, rearranging in a high, picturesque tier behind the invalid's long back, three cushions, and her face is almost entirely hidden from him by her attitude.

"Of course if it is in the least inconvenient, if you have made any other plans for me--if, in fact, you want me," he continues in a tone that is at once apologetic and dogged.

"But I do not," cries she, answering at last, and with a distinct laugh in her voice, a laugh into whose quality he is not anxious too curiously to inquire. "You must not be so conceited as to think that I always want you! In point of fact, you could not have hit upon a day that suited me better. I am really rather 'throng' to-day, as they say in Yorkshire. I have quite a hundred things to do, and father wants me to help him to correct the proofs of his sermon, the sermon he preached at Mr. Moffat's church on the Holy Innocents' Day. He has been asked to publish it--is not that flattering? Poor father, I believe he will end by being a popular preacher--in fact" (laughing again), "the whole family is going up in the world!"

There is such a forced mirth in her tone that Jim feels much more guiltily uncomfortable than if she had treated him to hysterics or sulks. Nor does his satisfaction with himself increase, when, upon his rising to depart, she runs out of the room after him, to say to him, while her homely face twitches against her will, how much she hopes that he will enjoy himself; how perfectly happy she shall be without him; and how eagerly she shall look forward to hearing all about it from him to-morrow. "It will be almost better than going to Certosa herself," she ends.

But against the unnatural altitude of this last flight of abnegation nature revolts, and, becoming conscious of a break in her voice, she hastily retreats and gets back into the *salon*, in time to see Cecilia shaking her elaborate head, and to hear her remarking with slow emphasis, "Mark my words! There is something odd about those people, and it is not hysteria!"

With spirits sensibly worsened by his interview, Burgoyne returns to the Minerva, and, mounting to Byng's bedroom, finds that young gentleman stretched upon his bed, gloom in his usually jocund eye, and an open letter lying on the floor beside him. But Jim is far too preoccupied to notice anybody's gloom but his own.

"I came to ask at what hour we are to set off this afternoon?" he says with a sort of flat moroseness in his tone.

"*We*, indeed!" rejoins the other with a groan, and rolling over with a sort of petulance on the bed, dishevelled the neatly-smoothed pillow by burrowing his ruffled head in it--"we!"

There is such a heart-rent woe in the accent with which the last monosyllable is pronounced that for a moment Burgoyne has no other idea but that his young friend, too, has become aware of the "screw loose," has heard, perhaps in detail, that story from before whose ominous opening he himself had fled. The thought sends his heart into his throat, so as to render him incapable of asking an explanation of the other's affliction.

"We!" repeats Byng for the third time, and very indistinctly, as he is now lying entirely on his face.

"Why do you go on saying 'we' in that idiotic way?" asks Jim at last, recovering his voice--recovering it only to employ it in imitating the younger man's accents, in a manner which displays more exasperation than natural talent for mimicry. It is not a politely-worded inquiry, but it has the desired result of acting as a tonic on him at whom it is aimed, making him not only roll over once again, but actually sit up.

"Why do I say *we*?" repeats he, his young eyes looking lamentably out from under the fall of his tumbled hair--"because it is not *we*! it is *you*! You lucky dog, you will have her all to yourself!"

Jim heaves an inaudible sigh of relief. Whatever may be the cause of his companion's enigmatical conduct, it is evidently not what he had feared. There is, however, no evidence of relief or any other mild quality in his next remark.

"If you would talk less like an ass, I should have a better chance of knowing what you are driving at!"

The query seems only to renew and deepen the other's tribulation. He falls back into his former attitude.

"You will hold the white wonder of dear Juliet's hand!" he groans. "No, do not go" (with a sudden and startling change of tone, springing off the bed, as he becomes aware that his friend is making for the door, unable to bear those rhapsodies, whose full distastefulness to their hearer the utterer little conjectures). "I'll tell you! I'll explain. Why are you in such a deuce of a hurry? I cannot go to Certosa because I have just heard from my mother that she is to arrive to-day. She will be here in another hour."

Jim's fingers are already on the door handle, but this piece of news arrests him.

"Your mother? I did not know that she was coming abroad."

"No more did I!"

"It must have been a very sudden thought!"

"Very!"

"What a delightful surprise for you!"

"Delightful!" There is so ludicrous a discrepancy between the adjective and the accent with which it is rendered that Jim bursts into a bitter laugh.

"She would be flattered if she could see your elation at the prospect of meeting her!"

Byng's blood rushes up under his clear smooth skin at his friend's jeer, but he answers, with some dignity:

"I do not think you have any right to imply that I am not always glad to see my mother; I do not deny that, if it had been equally convenient to her, I had rather she should have come twenty-four hours later."

Jim feels ashamed of himself, though, being an Anglo-Saxon, he has far too much false shame to confess it directly, and what he means for an *amende*, when it comes, is of an oblique nature.

"I think far the best plan will be to put off the excursion altogether; I am sure that I am not particularly keen about it."

The indignant red has rapidly died out of Byng's face; his placability being only to be surpassed by his slowness to take offence.

"Is it possible?" he asks in a tone of stupefaction; then, with a sudden tardy recollection of the rosy fetters in which his friend is held by another lady, he adds--"But, of course, you are not--I was forgetting!"

Jim winces.

"As it is your party, you had better send up a note at once to the Piazza d'Azeglio."

"No, do not let us both throw them over!" cries Byng eagerly. "Heaven knows it was hard enough to persuade them to accept in the first instance. If you go we shall at all events keep our communications open; and you--you will say something to her for me?"

"What kind of something?" inquires the older man carpingly. "Am I to tell her only what a fine fellow you are in general, or anything more circumstantial?"

"Tell her----" begins Byng in a rapt voice; but apparently the sight of his companion, who has somewhat ostentatiously pulled out a note-book and pencil, and assumed the patient air of one about to write to dictation, dries the stream of his

young eloquence; "tell her--*nothing*."

"Nothing speaks our grief like to speak nothing!"

replies Jim, leaving the room with this quotation on his lips, rather hastily, for fear lest the other should change his mind.



CHAPTER XIII.

It is five o'clock, the hour fixed for the expedition to Certosa, and in the *entresol* of 12 bis, Piazza d'Azeglio, Mrs. and Miss Le Marchant are sitting--hatted, gloved, and *en-tout-cas-ed*--in expectation of the arrival of their double escort. Elizabeth's afternoon has, so far, not been a lazy one, as her little cousin Bertie and his dog have again been good enough to pay her a lengthy visit, and the former has insisted upon a repetition of the musical performance of the other day, though with truncated rites. Without the powerful aid of Byng, Elizabeth has found it a task considerably beyond her strength to hold a large collie, poised on his hind-legs, on a music-stool. He has jumped down repeatedly, and now lies on his back--an attitude in which experience has taught him he is less attackable than in any other--sawing the air with his fore-paws, and lifting his lip in a deprecating grin.

"Where is Mr. Byng?" cries Bertie fretfully, baulked in his efforts to make his wily victim resume the perpendicular. "I want Mr. Byng! Why does not Mr. Byng come?"

"Perhaps if you went to the window," suggests Mrs. Le Marchant, in that patiently coaxing voice in which we are wont to address a tiresome child on a visit, instead of the buffet which we should bestow upon it were it resident--"perhaps if you went to the window and looked out, you would see him coming round the corner of the Piazza."

The suggestion is at once accepted, and the child, balancing his fidgety body on a chair, and craning his neck over the window-ledge, is shouting shrill pieces of information as to the passers-by to his friends within the room. Presently he shrieks out in triumph:

"I see him! He is just coming into sight! He is walking so fast! No!"--a moment later, with a changed and disgusted note, as a nearer view corrects the first impression--"it is not he at all! It is only the other one!"

"*Only the other one!*" It is quite impossible that the sound of the child's voice can reach down to the open portal of No. 12 bis, at which Jim has now arrived, and it is also certain that neither of the ladies whom he has come to visit is likely to word her surprise at his having arrived alone with the frank brutality which is confined to the utterances of infancy; and yet Jim, as he presents himself, announced by Annunziata, the hard-featured possessor of a lovely name, is quite as conscious, as if he had overheard the boy's slighting remark, of being "only the other one!"

Before he can begin his apologies, the eager little boy has run up to him.

"Where is Mr. Byng? I want Mr. Byng! Why has not he come? Elizabeth wants Mr. Byng!"

At this last clause Burgoyne is conscious of a dark, hot flush rising to his face, and, partly to hide it, partly to avoid seeing what the effect of his communication may be upon her for whom it is meant, he stoops over the child, addressing his answer to him:

"Mr. Byng is very sorry, very sorry indeed, but he cannot come."

"Cannot come! Why cannot he come?"

"Because he has gone to meet his mammy," replies Jim, trying to speak in a light and playful voice; "she is to arrive unexpectedly in Florence to-day; no good boy would leave his mammy when she had come all the way from England to see him, would he?"

But to this fustian and copy-book generality the young gentleman addressed is too angry to reply.

"It is a great disappointment to Byng; he bid me tell you what a great disappointment it is to him!" says Jim, turning to the two ladies, and looking apologetically from one to the other.

Elizabeth's head is averted; but on her mother's features he sees, or fancies he sees, slight evidences of a feeling not unlike relief.

"It is not of the least consequence," she says cheerfully; "we can go any other day just as well."

Burgoyne's heart sinks. In these last sentences he too surely traces signs of the evasive and would-be-retrograde nature which has all along characterized Mrs. Le Marchant's relations with him. It has seemed to him that he has been looking forward to the expedition with sensations of almost unmixed dread, and yet, now that he seems to be going to be delivered from it, what he experiences certainly does not come under the head of elation.

"You wish to give up the excursion?" he asks, in a tone which he honestly tries to make as neutral and colourless as he can.

"Well, I thought so--we thought so, did not we, Elizabeth?"

The person thus addressed lifts her head, and all over her features he, eagerly scanning them, sees written a warm acquiescence in her motherly decision, an acquiescence which, as her eyes meet his--his, in which his disappointment is written a good deal more plainly than he is aware--changes slowly and sweetly into indecision.

"I do not know," she answers, her gentle look clouded a little, and yet kindly interrogating his; "if Mr. Burgoyne is willing to burden himself with us; and Bertie must play at being a grown-up gentleman, and help to take care of us! Bertie, will you play at being a grown-up gentleman?"

To this proposition Bertie assents warmly, and begins thrasonically to recount to inattentive ears the high and singular deeds with which he will celebrate his arrival at maturity. But, as Mrs. Le Marchant puts a strenuous veto upon his adoption as escort, and as his nurse appears at the same juncture to fetch him, he and his dog are presently removed; and the other three set off without him.

Burgoyne has chartered a fiacre, with a horse as little lame as is ever to be found in Florence, and in this vehicle they are presently rolling along. None of them are in very exuberant spirits. Burgoyne is as well aware as if her sensitive lips had put the fact into words, that for Elizabeth the pleasure of the outing has evaporated with the absence of Byng, and that it is only the soft-hearted shrinking of a sweet nature from inflicting mortification on a fellow-creature that has set her opposite to him in her white gown. He has never seen her dressed in white before, and says to himself that it was for Byng's sake that she has made herself so summer-fine. But even if it be so, it is not Byng who is profiting by it. It is for him, not Byng, that the large Italian light is glorifying its thin fabric. Lily-pure, snow-clean she looks, sitting under her sunshade; and he sits over against her in a stupid silence. It seems to him as if his only safety were in silence, as if, did he speak at all, he must put into brutal words the brutal questions that are dinging in his head, that seem knocking for utterance against the gate of his set teeth.

"What is the 'screw loose'? How is she an 'unfortunate girl'? Why have they 'never held up their heads since'? Since what?" He looks, in a fierce perplexity, from one to the other of those delicately poised heads, held aloft with such modest dignity. Surely it is beyond the bounds of possibility that any heavily hideous shame or leaden disgrace can ever have weighed upon them! Probably the intensity of his thought has given an intensity to his look, of which he is unaware; for he presently finds the soft veiled voice of Elizabeth--Elizabeth who has hitherto been as mute as himself--addressing him:

"How very grave you look! I wonder what you are thinking of?"

The question, striking in so strangely pat, brings him back with a start. For a second an almost overpowering temptation assails him to tell her what is the object of his thought, to answer her with that whole and naked truth which we can so seldom employ in our intercourse with our fellow-men. But one glance at her innocent face, which has a vague trouble in it, chases the lunatic impulse, though he dallies with the temptation to the extent of saying:

"Would you really like to know? Do you really wish me to tell you?"

He looks at her penetratingly as he puts the question. Before either his eyes or his manner she shrinks.

"Oh, no--no!" she cries with tremulous haste, "of course not! I was only joking. What business have I with your thoughts? I never wish to know people's thoughts; if their looks and words are kind, that is all that concerns me!"

He relapses into silence; but her words, and still more the agitated manner in which they are pronounced, make a vague yet definite addition to the disquiet of his soul.

By setting off at so judiciously late an hour as five o'clock, they have avoided the greater part of the flood of tourists which daily sets towards Certosa, and which they meet, tightly packed in crowded vehicles, sweeping Florence-wards in a choking cloud of white dust; so that on reaching the Certosa Monastery, sitting so grandly on its hilltop, they have the satisfaction of finding that it is temporarily all their own--all their own but for the few white-froked figures and tonsured heads which an economico-democratic Government has left to hint what in its palmy days was the state of that which is now only a Government museum.

A burly monk receives them. He does not look at all a prey to the pensive sorrow one would expect at the desecration of his holy things and the dispersion of his fraternity. Probably, in his slow peasant mind there is room for nothing but self-congratulation at his being one of the few--only fifteen in all--left to end their days in the old home. He leads them stolidly through chapels and refectory--the now too roomy refectory, where the poor remnant of Carthusians dine

together only on Sundays--through meagrely furnished cells, in one of which he matter-of-factly lets down the front flap of a cupboard to show what forms his daily dining-table except on the happy Sunday, to which he must look forward so warmly.

"Must not he love Sunday!" cries Elizabeth, with sparkling eyes. "Do not you long to know what they have for dinner on Sundays? Do you think he would mind telling us?"

Elizabeth's spirits are going up like quicksilver. It is evident, despite the delicate melancholy of her face, that she is naturally of an extremely joyous and enjoying nature, and gifted with a freshness of sensation which belongs ordinarily rather to the green age at which Jim first remembers her, than to the mature one which he knows for a certainty that she has now reached. She is filled with such a lively and surprised delight at all the little details of arrangement of the monastic life that he is at last impelled to say to her, something wonderingly:

"But you must have seen hundreds of monasteries before?"

"Not one."

"But there are, or were, such swarms of them all over Italy."

"I dare say. I was never in Italy before."

"Not really?"

She lifts up her hand, and waves it at him with an air of hasty deprecation of further question, growing suddenly grave.

"Don't ask me whether I have been here or there, or whether I have done this or that. I have never been anywhere or done anything."

Her desire for a cessation of all inquiries as to her doings is obviously so earnest that Jim of course complies with it. Once or twice before he has been struck by her strange want of acquaintance with facts and phenomena, which would have come as a matter of course within the range of observation of every woman of her age and station. Against his will, a horrid recollection flashes upon him of a novel he had once read, in which the hero exhibits a singular ignorance of any events or incidents that had occurred within the ten years preceding the opening of the story--an ignorance which towards the end of the third volume was accounted for by its transpiring that he has spent the intervening period in a convict prison! He drives the grotesque and monstrous idea with scourges out of his mind; but it recurs, and recurs to be displaced by another hardly less painful, if in some degree more probable. Can it be possible that the crushing blow which has fallen upon the Le Marchant family, and upon Elizabeth in particular, whitening the mother's hair, and giving that tear-washed look to the daughter's sweet eyes--can it be possible that that heavy stroke was insanity? Can Elizabeth have been out of her mind? Can she have spent in confinement any of that past, from all allusion to which she shies away with a sensitiveness more shrinking than that of

"The tender horns of cockled snails"?

He is so much absorbed in his tormenting speculations about her that for the moment he forgets her bodily presence; and it is only her voice, her soft sane voice, that brings him back to a consciousness of it. They have been led into a *salon*, in which, as their guide tells them, the confraternity used to receive any "personage" that came to visit them. Alas, no personage ever visits the poor frocked remnant now! It is a charming lightsome room, that gives one no monastic idea, with pretty airy fancies of flower-wreaths and arabesques, and dainty dancing figures painted on wall and ceiling and doors. One of these latter is half open, and through it comes an exquisite sudden view of the hills, with their sharp-cut shadows and their sunlit slopes; of shining Florence at their feet, of the laugh of young verdure, and the wedded gloom and glory of cypress and poplar filling the foreground. Upon Elizabeth's small face, turned suddenly towards him, seems reflected some of the ineffable radiance of the Tuscan light.

"When next I dream of heaven," she says, in her tender, vibrating voice, "it will be like this. Do you ever dream of heaven? I often do, and I always wake crying because it is not true; but"--with a joyful change of key--"I will not cry any more without better cause. Since I came here I have found earth beautiful and delightful enough for me!"

He looks back at her, hardly hearing her words, but chiding himself fiercely for the disloyal thought which he has entertained, however unwillingly; the thought that the foul fiend of madness could ever, even temporarily, have defiled the temple of those eyes whence reason and feeling, so sweetly wedded, are shining out upon him, unworthy as he is of their rays.

"Since you came here?" he repeats in a sort of dreamy interrogation; "only since you came here?"

"You must not take me up so sharply!" she cries in a voice of playful remonstrance, in which there is a lilt of young

gaiety. "I warn you that I will not be taken up so sharply! I did not say, '*only* since I came here!' I said, 'Since I came here!'"



CHAPTER XIV.

Presently they pass into the still, cloistered garden, in whose unmown grass-squares gray-blue flowers are blowing, beside whose walks pale pink peonies are flushing, and round whose well the grave rosemary bushes are set. Through the whole place is an atmosphere of deep peace, of silence, leisure, dignity. It is virtually a *tete-a-tete*, as their tonsured guide, seeing their evident harmlessness, has left them to their own devices; and Mrs. Le Marchant has sat down to rest upon a camp-stool which Elizabeth has been carrying ever since they left the carriage. It has fidgeted Jim to see her burdened with it; for let a man be ever so little in love with a woman, his tendency always is to think her as brittle as spun glass, to believe that any weight, however light, will bruise her arm--any pebble, however tiny, wound her tender foot. He has offered to relieve her of it, but she has refused--playfully at first--telling him she is sure that he will lose it; and afterwards, when he insists, more gravely, though with gentle gratitude, saying that it would never do for her to get into the habit of being waited upon, and that she always carries mammy's things. It is perhaps absurd that a woman of six-and-twenty should speak of her mother as "mammy," yet the homely and childish abbreviation seems to him to come "most fair and featorously" from her lips.

They stay a long time in the sun-kissed garden, considering that there is after all not very much to see there. But Elizabeth's light steps, that to-day seem set to some innocent dancing-tune, are loath to leave it; she must smell the great new peonies, monthly-rose-coloured, faintly perfumed; she must steal a sprig of rosemary "to put into her coffin when she dies," at which he catches his breath, shuddering; she must peep into the well. He insists on her holding his hand for safety as she leans over to do so; her little fingers grip his tight as she cranes her neck and bends her lissom body. But what a small handful they are, compared to those other fingers--those kind, useful, but undoubtedly solid fingers--which he has held perfunctorily through many a matter-of-fact hour. By-and-by they stray away together out of the bounteous air of the hilltop into a semi-underground church, to see the fifteenth and sixteenth century monuments, which look as fresh as if their marble had left its home in Carrara but yesterday. They stand looking down at those three kin who lie side by side before the high altar, each with head dropped a little sideways on the shoulder, as if overcome by sudden sleep. They step on into the side chapel, where that yet nobler mitred figure, fashioned by Donatello's hand, stretches his prone length above his border of fruit and flowers, among which lies a carved skull, through whose empty eye-holes--strange and grisly fancy contrasting with so much beauty--a mocking ribbon runs. Elizabeth is perfectly silent the whole time, but no flood of talk could make Jim half so conscious of her presence, palpitating with sympathy and feeling, could give half the confidence he enjoys that she will introduce no allusion to either Kensal Green or Woking, as it is but too probable that the excellent companion of most of his Florentine rambles would have done.

Elizabeth has been perfectly silent, yet at last she speaks. It is in the Chapter House, where, as most of us have done, they have suddenly come upon another tomb, the tomb of one lying full-length on the pavement before the altar, with no separating edge of marble or wrought-iron railing to keep him from the foot of the passer-by. He lies there, portrayed with such an extraordinary vividness of life about his prostrate figure and his severe, powerful face, that one feels inclined to speak low, lest he should lift his white lids and look rebuke at us. In the lines about his mouth there is a hint of sardonic mirth. Is he--hearing our foolish chatter--touched with a grave contemptuous amusement at it? Or is he keeping in his sleep the memory of some four hundred years old jest? Elizabeth has involuntarily crept close to Burgoyne's side, with the gesture of a frightened child.

"Are you sure that he did not stir?" she asks tremulously under her breath. Her next thought is that her mother must see him too, this wonderful living dead man, and they presently set forth to return to the garden to fetch her. But apparently she has grown tired of waiting for them, for, as they enter the cloistered *enceinte*, they see her advancing to meet them.

"I would not be left alone with him at night for the wealth of the Indies," Elizabeth is saying, with a half-nervous laugh. "Oh, mammy, you would never have forgiven me if I had let you go without seeing him! Why, what is this?"--with a sudden change of key--"what has happened?" For as they draw near to Mrs. Le Marchant they see that her walk is a staggering one, and that the usually healthy, clear pallor of her face is exchanged for a livid whiteness. "What is it, darling?" cries Elizabeth in an accent of terror. "Oh, Jim, she is going to faint!" In the agitation of the moment she has unconsciously returned to the familiar address which she used always to employ towards him in their boy-and-girl days. "Put your arm round her on that side, I can hold her up on this. Let us get her back to the camp-stool."

A camp-stool is neither an easy nor a luxurious seat upon which to deposit a half-swooning woman, but the joint exertions of her daughter and of Burgoyne presently succeed in replacing her on her rickety resting-place; their arms

interlace each other behind her back, and their anxious eyes look interrogation at one another above her head, half dropped on Elizabeth's slight shoulder.

"Does she often faint? Is she apt to do it?" asks Jim, in a whisper.

"Never--never!" replies the girl in a heart-rent voice, raining kisses on her mother's white face. "Oh, darling, darling, what has happened to you?"

Perhaps it is through the vivifying rain of those warm kisses, but a little colour is certainly beginning to steal back into the elder woman's cheek, and she draws a long breath.

"Oh, if she could have a glass of water!" cries Elizabeth, greedily verifying these slight signs of returning consciousness. "Get her a glass of water! Oh, please get her a glass of water--quick! quick!"

Burgoyne complies, though it is not without reluctant misgivings that he withdraws the efficacious support of his own solid arm, and leaves Elizabeth's poor little limb to bear the whole weight of her mother's inert body.

Their guide has, as before mentioned, disappeared; and Jim has not the slightest idea in which direction to seek him. It is five good minutes before he discovers him, standing near the door of the monastery, in conversation with a visitor who is apparently just in the act of departure. The stranger is in clerical dress; and, as he turns to nod farewell to the monk, Jim recognises in his features those of the Devonshire clergyman, whom he had last seen, and so unwillingly heard, by the well-brim of the Bellosguardo villa. In a second a light has flashed into his mind. Mrs. Le Marchant, too, has seen that stranger--has seen him for the first time for ten years, since it is evident that the recognition of mother and daughter in the Via Tornabuoni, to which the Moat's late rector had referred, could not have been reciprocal. It is to the fact of her having been brought suddenly and unpreparedly face to face with that mysterious past, which seems to be always blocking his own path to her friendship, that is to be attributed the poor woman's collapse. A rush of puzzled compassion flows over him as he realizes the fact, and his one impatient wish is to return with all the speed he may to the forlorn couple he has left, to reassure them as to the removal (even though it may only be a temporary one) out of their path of the object of their unexplained terror. Will the mother have imparted to her child the cause of her fainting, or will she have tried to keep it from her?

The first glimpse he gets when, having at length procured the desired glass of water, he comes into sight of them, answers the question for him. Mrs. Le Marchant is evidently partially recovered. She is sitting up, no longer supported by her daughter's arm, and that daughter is lying on her knees, with her head buried in her mother's lap. As he nears them, he sees the elder woman hurriedly pressing her daughter's arm to warn her of his approach, and Elizabeth obediently lifts her face. But such a face! He can scarcely believe it is the same that laid itself--hardly less bloomily fair than they--against the faint peony buds half an hour ago; a face out of which the innocent glad shining has been blown by some gust of brutal wind--scared, blanched, miserable.

"Oh, yes, I am better, much better--quite well, in fact," says Mrs. Le Marchant, pushing away the offered glass, and speaking with a ghastly shadow of her former even cheerfulness. "Give it to Elizabeth, she needs it more than I do! You see, I gave her a terrible fright!"

He silently holds out the water to Elizabeth, and she, without attempting to take the tumbler into her own trembling hand, drinks. He looks with impotent pity from the bent blonde head to the prematurely snow-white one. How can he word his reassurance to them without appearing to thrust himself with officious insolence into their confidence? It seems to himself that he solves the problem very clumsily.

"I am afraid you must have thought me but slow," he says, feeling that he is dragging in the piece of information he is anxious to give them with an awkward head-and-shoulder-ness: "but at first I couldn't find our monk, and when I did, he was engaged--he was talking to a visitor--a clergyman."

He pauses, conscious that at the last word a tremulous shiver has passed over the kneeling figure.

"Yes, a clergyman," he goes on with nervous haste, hurrying to put them out of their pain; "an elderly, gray-haired, English clergyman, who was just in the act of going away; indeed, before I left, he had gone. I saw him drive off!"

Ere he has finished his sentence, he is seized by the apprehension that there must appear to his listeners something suspicious in the laboured details into which he is entering; presupposing, as they do, that he is aware of there being for them an interest attaching to the fact of the stranger's departure. And indeed, as he speaks, he is conscious that Mrs. Le Marchant's frightened eyes, which have been taking surreptitious trips round the peaceful garden, now come home with a no less alarmed look to his face.

"Was he--was he--an acquaintance of yours?" she asks, with an attempt at a laugh--"this clergyman, I think you said

he was--that you noticed him so particularly?"

"An acquaintance?" repeats Jim doubtfully; "what is an acquaintance? a man whom one knew very little, and disliked a good deal, ten years ago; and who passes one by without a gleam of recognition now--is that an acquaintance?"

Elizabeth's hat has fallen on the ground, and hitherto she has seemed unconscious of the evening sunbeams smiting her uncovered head; now she stoops and picks it up.

"And you did not make yourself known to him then?" continues Mrs. Le Marchant, still with that painful effort at lightness of tone. "You let him drive off without telling him who you were? or asking him where he was staying? or how long his visit to Florence is to last? or--or anything?"

Jim's eyes are fixed on her as she speaks with a compassionate steadiness, under which hers quail waveringly. Is it possible that she can imagine that she is deceiving him by this miserable pretence of indifference?

"I have no doubt that I shall be able to find out if you wish to know," he answers gravely; "for I think he must be as much an acquaintance of yours as of mine, since it was only at the Moat that I ever met him."

He had thought that Mrs. Le Marchant was already as colourless as a woman could be; but as he speaks, he sees her face take on a new degree of pallor. She struggles unsteadily to her feet.

"It is--it is getting late!" she says indistinctly; "we--ought--to be--going home!"

Even as she speaks she makes an uncertain step forward, but it is so uncertain that he catches her by the arm.

"You are not fit to move yet," he says with kind imperativeness; "rest five minutes longer; it is not late, really--the sun is quite high still."

Convinced, either by the young man's eloquence, or, as is more likely, by the shaking of her own limbs, Mrs. Le Marchant sits down again. Elizabeth has risen to her feet, and now stands beside her mother. She has said nothing, but he can see her trembling from head to heel. He hears her voice now addressing him, but in so subdued a key that her words are almost lost in the low blowing of the faint south wind that is fondling the blades of the unshorn grass.

"Did you say that he was gone? Are you sure of it?"

"Yes, yes, quite sure! I saw him go."

"Did you--did you happen to hear where he was staying?"

"No, but"--with the greatest eagerness--"I can easily find out; nothing can be simpler."

Elizabeth is standing quite close to him, so close that he can see her poor little heart leaping under the thin white gown, whose simple finery had piqued him earlier in the day. She has apparently, in her new terror, forgotten that there is any cause for concealing from him the occasion of it. She turns instinctively to him, as a hurt child to the nearest bystander. It seems to him the most natural thing in the world that she should. They are both recalled to themselves by her mother's voice.

"You must think that we have lost our wits," she says with a sickly smile; "but even if we have, I do not know what right we have to impose upon a--a comparative stranger like you, the task of helping us to gratify our--our idle curiosity."

"But I am not a comparative stranger!" cries Jim vehemently; by this time--he does not know how--he is holding a hand of each of the trembling women in his. "I am not a stranger at all! I am a friend! Why will not you treat me as one? Why will not you let me help you?"

He glances with pitying, affectionate eagerness from one to other of the woebegone faces on either side of him. The tears have come in sudden flood to the elder woman, and are pouring over her white cheeks, stopping the passage of her voice; but Elizabeth's fair eyes are drearily dry, and speech comes clear and hopeless from her.

"You are very good to us!" she says, giving the hand that holds hers a little pressure, which he feels to be as cold as it is grateful; "at least, I see that you want to be very good to us if we would let you; but as to helping us"--with a slight despairing shrug--"no one can do that; no one but God, and sometimes"--drawing a long, half-sobbing breath--"I think that it would pass even His power."

CHAPTER XV.

There are few things more difficult than when one's mind is full of the interests, cares, and sorrows of one set of friends, to have to empty it suddenly of them, and refill it as suddenly with the entirely different, and perhaps discrepant interests, cares, and sorrows of an altogether alien set.

Seldom in the course of their old and tried friendship has Jim Burgoyne felt less disposed for the company and conversation of his valued ally, Mrs. Byng, than when he knocks at the door of her sitting-room on the morning following the excursion to Certosa. He cannot talk to her about the Le Marchants, seeing that she has never even heard of their existence; and if out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh, his talk upon any other topic must be scant and jejune indeed. The only cheerful side which his prospective visit turns to him is, that if he were not with Mrs. Byng, he would be with Amelia; and that the friendly indifferent eyes of the former will, at all events, be less likely than the hungrily loving ones of the latter to detect that he has not slept a wink, and that he has not the remotest idea what he is talking about. If he were to follow his inclination, he would be bestowing his company this morning upon neither friend nor sweetheart, but would be ransacking Florence for the piece of information he had yesterday promised those two woebegone women to procure for them. Even into the very midst of his heartfelt sore compassion for them, there pierces a shamed unwilling flash of elation at the thought of what a stride to intimacy his being entrusted with this commission implies, of what an opening to indefinitely numerous future visits it affords. His determination to conduct the search is at present a good deal more clearly defined than the method in which that search is to be effected. He can consult *Galignani* as to the names and whereabouts of new arrivals; but they could do that much for themselves. He could examine the visitors' books of the different hotels; but Florence, though a little city, is rich in hostelries, and this course would take time. He could consult Mr. Greenock, the head and fount of all Florentine gossip, and who, since he had seen him in conversation with the object of his inquiries, would probably be able to satisfy them; but his acquaintance with the good-natured newsmonger is not sufficiently intimate for him to be able to pay him a morning visit with any air of probability of having been impelled thereto by a desire for his company; and, moreover, he shrinks with a morbid fear from any action which may lead, however obliquely, to his being himself apprised of the terrible secret which--it is no longer mere matter of conjecture--lies couched somewhere in those two poor creatures' past.

And meanwhile he knocks at Mrs. Byng's door, and is quickly bidden enter by a cheerful English voice, the welcoming alacrity of whose tones shames his own want of pleasure in the meeting. But he is too unfortunately honest to express a joy he does not experience, and only says, with a slight accent of reproach as he takes her ready hand, heartily held out:

"You should not spring these surprises upon us."

She laughs a little guiltily.

"It--it was a sudden thought; you see I--I had never seen Perugia."

He laughs too. "Poor Perugia! I think it would have blushed unseen for a good many more years if you had not begun to doubt the efficiency of my chaperonage. Confess! you have come to look after the precious baby-boy, have not you?"

His tone is, as he himself feels, not quite a pleasant one; but the mother is scarcely more prone to take offence than the son; and she answers with an amiably hasty disclaimer:

"It was not that I felt the least want of confidence in you--you must not think that; but--but I had one of my presentiments! you know that I am always a little superstitious; and three nights running an owl came and hooted quite close under my window!"

"As long as I have known your wood, it has had owls; and as long as I have known them, they have hooted."

"In the wood, yes, of course, and I like to hear them; but this one was close under my window."

Jim's only answer is to lift his hands and shoulders in protest against his friend's weak-mindedness.

"I had quite made up my mind that something had happened," continues she, not much abashed by his scorn; "and it was the greatest relief when I first caught sight of him at the station yesterday, looking just as usual, a little thinner perhaps--does not he strike you as a little thin? Has he been weighed lately? He gives me the idea of having lost a

pound or two since I last saw him. Is there a weighing-machine in the hotel?"

"It will be very easy to ascertain."

"And how is Amelia?"--her cheerful eyes resting in friendly and half-inquisitive interest on his sombre face.

"Amelia is very well, thank you."

"Amelia Wilson still?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"--laughing--"another ten years, I suppose?"

"For three months, I believe; we are to be married as soon as they return to England."

"You do not say so?"--with an accent of lively and delighted incredulity--"hurrah! poor Amelia! *Tout vient a point a qui sait attendre*;' and she has *su attendre* with a vengeance, has not she?"

"She is not going to *attendre* any more," replies Jim dryly.

"Then I shall have to give you a present, I suppose!" cries Mrs. Byng, still with that delighted accent. "Something useful, I have no doubt. I feel sure that Amelia would like something useful; why should not we choose it to-day? Florence is an ideal place for buying presents; do you think that Amelia would spare you to me for a whole morning?"

Jim hesitates. It is not that he has any doubt as to Amelia's cheerful renunciation of any portion of his time that he may see fit to abstract from her; but the occupation suggested--that of squiring Mrs. Byng--is not that to which he had purposed devoting his forenoon. She sees his unreadiness to answer, and attributes it to a wrong cause.

"Amelia will not?" cries she in a tone of surprise and disappointment. "Well, I could not have believed it of her! Not even if you told her that it is on purpose to buy her a present?"

Jim breaks into an unavoidable smile. "How frightfully quickly your mind moves! It leaps like a kangaroo! I never said that she would not resign the precious boon of my society; on the contrary, I am sure that nothing would give her greater pleasure, but--but--what will Willy say to my monopolizing you?"

At the excessive disingenuousness of this speech his conscience gives him a severe prick, recalling to his mind the attitude of prostrate affliction--stretched face downwards on his bed--in which his young friend had received the news of his parent's prospective approach. A light cloud passes over that parent's sunny face.

"Willy has an engagement this morning," she answers more slowly, and with less radiance than has hitherto marked her utterances; "nothing could be sweeter and dearer than he was, and he is going to take me somewhere this afternoon--to Fiesole or Petraia, or somewhere else delightful; but this morning he has an engagement. He did not tell me what it was, and I did not like to tease him with questions. You"--with a rather wistful glance of interrogation at her companion--"do not happen to know what it is?"

Jim shakes his head, while a rather deeper shade than habitually lies upon it settles on his careworn forehead. It is perfectly true that he knows nothing of young Byng's engagement, but yet he has a shrewd suspicion to what quarter of the town that engagement will lead him.

"So that I rather counted upon you," continues Mrs. Byng, turning with a somewhat crestfallen air to the window.

"And you did not count in vain," replies Burgoyne, with a sort of forced gallantry. It has flashed upon him that he will have to consent under penalty of giving a detailed account of the reasons for his inability, and that therefore he had better make a virtue of necessity, and do it with a good grace. After all, the deferring for a couple of hours of his researches cannot be of any great consequence to the persons in whose behalf those researches are set on foot. To a suspicious ear there might be something dubious in the sudden and galvanized alacrity of his assent; but not a shadow of doubt crosses Mrs. Byng's mind as to her old and tried ally being as pleased to avail himself of an opportunity for enjoying her society as he has always showed himself during the twenty years and more of their acquaintance.

Protected by this happy misconception, she sets off, all smiles, though at the outset of the expedition she finds that she has to modify her project; and that Burgoyne shows himself restive as to *bric-a-brac* shops, and declines peremptorily to be any party to buying himself a wedding present. He puts his objection upon the semi-jocose ground that he shall be unable to avoid overhearing the price of her intended gift, and that his modesty could not stand the strain of helping her to haggle over it. Perhaps, however, deep in his heart is an unconscious feeling that to receive nuptial offerings gives an almost greater body and certainty to his on-striding fate than even the buying of dinner-

services and saucepans. So they go to the Accademia delle Belli Arti instead, it having occurred to Jim that in a picture-gallery there will be less opportunity for conversation, less opening for interested inquiries on his companion's part as to Amelia and the minutiae of his future life with her, than there would be in the green walks of the Cascine, or on the slopes of Fiesole.

To Mrs. Byng, who is of almost as enjoying a nature as her son, and whose spirits have been raised to a pitch even higher than their usual one, by the disproof of her presentiments, it is all one where she goes, so that she is taken somewhere, to see something. They stare up at the big young David, and stand before Fra Angelico's ineffably happy Paradiso, which yet brings the tears to the looker's eyes, perhaps out of sheer envy of the little blissful saints dancing and frolicking so gaily, or pacing so softly in the assured joy of the heavenly country. They look at Botticelli's "Spring," fantastic wanton, with her wildly-flowered gown, and her lapful of roses. The room in which she and her joyous mates stand, with their odd smiles, is one of the smaller of the gallery. It is rather a narrow one, and has an open window, giving upon a little court, where, in a neglected garden-close, wallflowers are growing, and sending in their familiar perfume. The sweet Francia saints in the picture hung on the wall directly opposite, and the rapt Madonna, must surely smell them. If they do not, it must be because a young couple, he and she, who are leaning out in their eagerness to enjoy it, have intercepted all the homely fragrance. Jim's eyes are still on the "Spring," and he is thinking half absently how little kinship she has with the goitred green women, whom his nineteenth-century disciples present to the confiding British public as representatives of Sandro Botticelli's manner, when his attention is diverted by hearing the voice of Mrs. Byng at his elbow addressing him in an excited tone:

"Why, there's Willy! Do not you see? There! leaning out of that window, and who--who is the lady whom he has with him?"

Jim looks quickly in the direction indicated, and at once recognises a slender gray figure which to-day has not assumed its white holiday gown. Elizabeth, whom he had been pitifully picturing lying heart-struck on a sofa in the seclusion of her own little *entresol*, probably with lowered blinds and tear-smarting eyes, is leaning on the window-ledge with her back to the pictures--she whom he had always credited with so delicate a sensibility for Art, with her back to the pictures, as if the live picture which Byng's eager face presents to her pleases her better. A sense of indignation at having been tricked out of his compassion--who had ever seemed to need it less than the suave little figure about whose blonde head a Tuscan sunbeam, stolen through the easement, is amorously playing?--makes him forget to answer the question addressed to him, until it is repeated in a still more urgent key.

"Who *is* she? Who *can* she be? Have not you an idea? He has not seen us! Had not we better creep quietly away? Most likely he would rather not meet me; I could not bear to make him look foolish!"

The suggestion that there can be anything calculated to put Willy to the blush in being discovered in conversation with Miss Le Marchant has the effect of giving Burgoyne rapidly back his power of speech.

"What nonsense!" he cries almost rudely; "I wish you would not let your imagination run away with you so, and of course I know who she is; she is an--an acquaintance of mine. I--I presented Willy to her; she is Miss Le Marchant."

"Miss Le Who?" repeats the mother eagerly, catching the name imperfectly, as we usually do a name that is unfamiliar to us, proving how much of imagination and memory must go to eke out all our hearing--"an acquaintance of yours, is she? Oh, then, of course" (drawing a long breath of relief), "she is all right."

"All right!" echoes Jim, with an unconscious snappishness of tone, greater than he would have employed in defence of the reputation of any other lady of his acquaintance, probably because, ever since the day when he stood an unwilling eaves-dropper by that well on Bellosguardo, a hideous low voice has been whispering to his own sick heart that perhaps she is not "all right!" "All right! of course she is all right."

"But she is lovely!" cries Mrs. Byng, not paying much heed to the testy emphasis of her companion's asseveration, and continuing to stare at the unwitting girl; "what a dear little face! but," the alarm returning again into her voice, "is it possible that she is here alone with him? If so, of course she is American. Oh! do not say that she is American."

"Of course she is not," answers Burgoyne, half laughing at the plaintive intensity of this last appeal; "of course she is all that there is of most English, and there is her mother, as large as life, within a yard and a half of her; there, do not you see? looking at the Ghirlandajo."

Mrs. Byng removes her eyes from the daughter, and fixes them with a scarcely less degree of interest upon the then indicated parent.

"So that is the mother, is it? a very nice-looking woman, and what beautiful white hair! Mrs. Le----what did you say their name was? Ah! Willy has seen us, poor boy!"--laughing--"how guilty he looks! here he comes!"

And in point of fact the young man, having given a very indubitable start and said something hurried to his companion, is seen advancing quasi-carelessly to meet the two persons, the object of whose observation he has for some minutes so unconsciously been.

"Is not this a coincidence?" cries Mrs. Byng, with a rather nervously-playful accent; "it *is* a coincidence, though it may not look like one! But do not be afraid; we know our places, we are not going to offer to join you!"

"What should I be afraid of?" replies the young man, the colour--always as ready as a school miss's to put him to shame--mantling in his handsome smooth cheeks. "I am like the Spanish hidalgo, who never knew what fear was till he snuffed a candle with his fingers. So you and Jim are having a happy day among the pictures. Do not you like 'Spring'? I love her, though I am sure she was a real baggage!"

But this ingenious attempt to divert the current of his parents' ideas into another channel is scarcely so successful as it deserves.

"Will not you introduce me to her?" she asks eagerly, and not heeding, evidently not even hearing, the empty question contained in the last half of his speech; "does she know that I am your mother? Will not you introduce me to her?"

It seems a simple and natural request enough, and yet the young man perceptibly hesitates. He even tries to turn it off by a clumsy and entirely pointless jest.

"Introduce you to her? to whom? to 'Spring'? I am really afraid that my acquaintance with her scarcely justifies such a liberty!"

A look of surprise and of natural annoyance clouds the cheerful eagerness of Mrs. Byng's face.

"Is that a joke, dear?" she asks, with a rather vexed smile; "it is not a very good one, is it? Well, Jim, I must apply to you then; *you* can have no objection to presenting me to your friends?"

"Of course not, of course not," replies he, with a stammering unreadiness, which contrasts somewhat ludicrously with the acquiescence conveyed by his words, "I shall be delighted, only----"

"Only what? Ah, here they come! they save us the trouble of going after them."

As she speaks, indeed, Mrs. Le Marchant and Elizabeth are seen nearing the little group; but it is soon apparent that this movement on their part is by no means owing to any wish or even willingness to make Mrs. Byng's acquaintance. It is indeed solely due to there being no egress from the room at that end of it where they have been standing, so that, if they wish to leave it, they must necessarily retrace their steps and pass the three persons who are so busily discussing them. They do this so quickly and with so resolute an air of not wishing to be delayed in their exit, bestowing a couple of such smileless and formal bows upon the two men, that it would have needed a much more determined obstruction than either of those gentlemen is prepared to offer to arrest their progress. In a moment they are through the doorway and out of sight. Mrs. Byng looks after them, with her mouth open.

"They--they--are obliged to go home, they--they are in a great hurry!" says the younger man, observing the displeased astonishment expressed by his mother's countenance, and with a lame effort at explanation.

"So they seemed when first we caught sight of them," retorts she dryly.

"They--they are not going out at all at present, they--they do not wish to make any fresh acquaintance: oh, by-the-bye, I forgot something I had to say to--I will be back in a moment!"

So saying, he shoots off in pursuit of the retreated figures, and Mrs. Byng and her escort are again left *tete-a-tete*.

"Are you quite sure that she is all right?" asks the lady, looking at Jim with a penetrating glance that he does not enjoy; "because, if so, why was she so determined not to know me?"

"How can I tell?" answers he testily. "Perhaps--who knows?"--laughing unmirthfully--"perhaps she was not sure that *you* were all right!"

CHAPTER XVI.

"Tous les hommes se haissent naturellement. Je mets en fait que s'ils savaient exactement ce qu'ils disent, les uns des autres, il n'y aurait pas quatre amis dans le monde."

Although Mrs. Byng always speaks of Miss Wilson as "Amelia," and is acquainted with every detail of that young lady's uneventful history--thanks to a long series of direct and interested questions, addressed through a considerable number of years, to her friend Jim, as to his betrothed--she has no personal acquaintance with the latter. She is so determined, however, to repair this omission, now that so highly favourable an opportunity is presented as their common stay in the same small city, that Jim is powerless to hinder her from arranging a joint expedition of the two parties--herself and her son on the one side, and Jim with his future wife and sister-in-law on the other, to Careggi, on the afternoon of the same day as he had witnessed her abortive attempt to add Elizabeth Le Marchant and her mother to the list of her acquaintances.

Amelia, is, for a wonder, free from home claims, Sybilla being more than usually bright, a kind friend having lately provided her with a number of the *Lancet*, containing a detailed account of an operation, which it seems not over-sanguine to expect she may herself be able to undergo. We all have our Blue Roses, and to "undergo operation," as she technically phrases it, is Sybilla Wilson's Blue Rose. Cecilia is likewise disengaged. The latter circumstance is matter for not unmixed rejoicing to Jim, Cecilia's future connection with himself being too close for him to relish the thought of her somewhat pronounced wooing of Byng being exposed in all its *naivete* to the clear if good-humoured eyes of Byng's mother. But in this he wrongs Cecilia. The garden-party at the villa on Bellosguardo had proved to her that the fruit is hung too high for her fingers to reach, and that philosophy, which had enabled her genuinely to relish the wedding-cake of the man who had jilted her, now teaches her to lay to heart the sarcastic advice offered her by Jim, to look at the young man as poor women look at diamonds. Beyond one or two trifling gallantries, for which no one can judge her harshly, she leaves him alone, even though out of good-nature, and from inveterate force of habit, he gives her several openings to make love to him.

The day is one of even Italy's best, an air as soft as feathers, and full of April odours--a bright gay sun. The vines are rushing into leaf; they that ten days ago looked such hopeless sticks; little juicy leaves uncurling and spreading on each, and the mulberry trees, round which they twine, are rushing out too, at the triumphant call of the spring.

The party being of the unmanageable number five, has to be divided between two fiacres, whereof Mrs. Byng, in pursuance of her determination to know Amelia, insists upon occupying the first in *tete-a-tete* with Miss Wilson, while Cecilia and the two men fill the other. The latter makes but a silent load. Byng is, for him, out of spirits, and finding that Cecilia has virtually abandoned her suit, is glad to lapse into his own reflections. His example is followed by Jim, whose temper is ruffled by being again obliged to defer the quest he is still feverishly anxious to pursue, despite the shock of the morning's meeting at the Accademia.

They reach the villa, and leave their vehicles, glad to think that two of the perennially tired Florentine cab-horses will have a pause of rest, and, having shaken off a tiresome would-be *laquais de place*, desirous to embitter for them the sweet day and place, they stray at will through the garden among the clipped laurels, the cypresses, the gorgeous red rhododendrons, while beds of mignonette send forth such a steady wave of poignant sweetness as makes the sense ache with ecstasy of pleasure; and over the conservatory hangs a wistaria so old, so magnificent, with such a Niagara of giant flower bunches, as takes an English breath away. They go over the villa itself, pass through the room, and by the bed where Lorenzo, with the grotesque grim face, Lorenzo the Magnificent, gave his last sigh. It would make Death even more difficult to face than he is already, if one thought one should have to meet him under such a catafalque.

As they issue out again from the house's shadow into the sun-drenched garden, Mrs. Byng joins Burgoyne, who is walking a little apart.

"I like Amelia," she says confidentially, "such a nice *pillowy* sort of woman; not too clever, and oh, Jim, poor soul, how fond she is of you!"

It must always be pleasant to hear that the one absolutely good thing which this life has to offer is lavishly heaped upon us by the person with whom we are to pass that life; and perhaps pleasure is the emotion evidenced by the silent writhe with which Jim receives this piece of information.

"Not, of course, that she told me so in so many words," continues his friend, perceiving that her speech is received in a

silence that may mean disapproval of any intrusion into the sanctuary of his affections; "but one can see with half an eye: poor Amelia, she beamed all over when I said one or two little civil things about you! She worships the very ground you tread on!"

He writhes again. "I hope that that is one of your figures of speech," he answers constrainedly.

The not unnatural result of the tone in which he utters this sentence, no less than the words themselves, is to quench the fire of Mrs. Byng's benevolent eulogies; and, as she cannot at once hit upon another topic, and is by no means sure that her countenance does not betray the rather snubbed dismay produced by the reception of her amenities, she is not sorry when Jim presently leaves her. Being, however, of a very sanguine disposition, and seeing him a little later sitting peacefully on a garden-seat beside his *fiancee*, she hopes that her words, though not very handsomely received at the time, may bear fruit later for Amelia's benefit. "And he always was very undemonstrative," she adds to herself consolatorily. "Nobody would have guessed that he was delighted to see me this morning; and yet, of course, he was."

The sun is growing visibly lower, and the Ave Maria comes ringing solemnly from the city. The seat to which Jim has somewhat remorsefully led his lady-love is a stone bench, shaded by a honeysuckle bower, close to a fountain. The fountain is not playing now; but round about it first a marten wheels, dipping in the water the end of her fleet wings; then a little bat prematurely flits, for it is still broad daylight. Broad indeed and bounteous is the daylight of Italy. Around them is the lush unmown grass; full of homely field-flowers, buttercups, catch-flies, daisies, ragged robins, while from some bush near by a nightingale is pouring out all the infinite variety of her ravishing song. She says so many different things that one never can feel sure that one has heard all that she has to say. Jim leans back listening, with his hands behind his head, steeped in a half-voluptuous sadness. He is oppressed by the thought of Amelia's great love. Is the nightingale's splendid eloquence really the voice of the poor dumb passion beside him, lent to Amelia to plead her cause? The high-flown poetry of the idea fills his heart with an imaginative yearning kindness towards her. He is in the act of turning to face her, with a more lover-like speech on his lips than has hovered there for years, when Amelia herself anticipates him.

"And to think that it is only April!" she says, with an air of prosaic astonishment. "Last April we had four inches of snow on the front drive. It was when Cecilia had the mumps."

"When Cecilia had the mumps?" repeats Burgoyne in a rather dazed voice. "I did not know that Cecilia had ever had the mumps."

This is the form into which are frozen the love-words that the nightingale and the perfume of the Tuscan flowers and the Ave Maria had so nearly brought to his tongue. Had Amelia known what an unwonted burst of tenderness her unlucky reminiscence had choked, she would have regretted it probably with a good deal deeper bitterness than would many a woman with a happier gift of utterance. But she is blessedly ignorant of what Cecilia's mumps have robbed her, and presently again strikes athwart the nightingale's song with the placid remark:

"I like your friend very much; I think that she is a very nice woman."

This time Burgoyne has no difficulty in responding immediately. Miss Wilson's first speech had so effectually chased his dreams that he can now reply with commonplace kindness:

"She has just been button-holing me to make the same confidence about you."

"And she is so fond of you," continues Amelia.

He laughs.

"She has just confided to me that so are you;" then, with a hurried change of tone, in dread lest the last speech shall call out some expression of the mute pent passion always lurking in her patient eyes, he adds lightly, "I seem to be very generally beloved!"

What effect the flat fatuity, as it seems to Jim himself, of this last observation has upon Amelia, does not appear, since she receives it in silence; and again the Ave Maria and the bird divide between them the province of sound.

As the great sun droops, the honeysuckle above their heads seems to give out more generously its strong clean sweetness. The rest of the party have drifted away out of sight and hearing; but by-and-by their voices are again heard and their returning forms seen. As they draw near, it appears that their original number of three has been augmented by the addition of two men; and a still nearer approach reveals who the two men are. Mrs. Byng leads the way, talking animatedly to Mr. Greenock, who is evidently an old acquaintance. Byng trails after them by himself, and the rear is brought up by Cecilia and a portly clerically-dressed figure, whom Jim at once recognises as the Devonshire clergyman, his failure in obtaining information about whom has embittered and fidgeted his whole day. Here then is the

opportunity he has sought brought to his very hand. And yet his first feeling, as he sees the complacent priestly face, and the deliberate black legs pacing beside Cecilia, is one of dismay. There is nothing unlikely in the supposition that he may have been presented to her at the garden-party at the Bellosguardo villa; and yet he now realizes with a shock of surprise that they are acquainted, and, if acquainted, then at liberty to converse upon whatever subject may best recommend itself to them. He is absolutely powerless to put any check upon their talk, and yet at this very moment he may be narrating to her that story which his own loyalty had forbidden him to overhear. The first couple has passed, so absorbed in eager question and answer that they do not even see Burgoyne and his betrothed. Mrs. Byng left London only three days ago, and Mr. Greenock might return thither at any moment that he chooses; and yet they are talking of it with a wistful fondness that might have beseeemed Dante questioning some chance wayfarer to Ravenna as to the prosperity of his Florence. The second pair's voices are lower pitched, and their topics therefore less easy to ascertain; yet by Cecilia's gratified and even hopeful air they are evidently agreeable ones. But though agreeable, there is no evidence of their being, by their riveting ear and eye, of the nature he dreads. They also are so absorbed in each other as to have no attention to spare for the quiet silent persons sitting on the stone bench.

Amelia looks after them with a benevolent smile. Her sense of humour is neither keen nor quick, but there is a touch of very mild sarcasm in her voice, as she says, watching her sister's retreating figure:

"Cecilia has found a new friend, a clergyman again; do you know what his name is?"

"I believe it is Burton or Bruton, or something of the sort," replies Jim reluctantly, feeling as if even in admitting knowledge of the stranger's surname he were letting out a dangerous secret. "I should have thought that she had had enough of the Church," he adds with a very much more pronounced accent of satire than Miss Wilson's. "She has not taken my advice of sticking to the laity. Shall we--shall we follow them?"

This last suggestion is the result of a vague, uneasy feeling that, by keeping within earshot, he may exercise some check upon their conversation.

"Why should we?" replies Amelia, for once in her life running counter to a proposition of her lover's, and turning her meek eyes affectionately upon him; "we are so well here, are not we? and"--laughing--"we should spoil sport."

As Jim can allege no adequate reason for pursuing Cecilia and her latest spoil, he has unwillingly to acquiesce, and to content himself with following them with his eyes, to gain what reassurance he can from the expression of their backs. But the peaceful if melancholy restfulness that had marked the first part of his abode on the stone seat is gone, past recall. He moves his feet fidgetily on the gravel; he gets up, and throws pebbles into the fountain; he snubs an officious little Italian boy who brings Amelia a small handful of flowers plucked out of the emerald grass.

Amelia does not share her lover's uneasiness, as indeed why should she? She puts the expected tip into the young Tuscan's dirty brown hand, and leans her head enjoyingly on the back of the stone seat.

"I think I like to come to these sort of places with you even better than to picture-galleries," she says with an intonation of extreme content.

"Do you, dear?" replies he absently, with his uneasy eyes still searching the spot at which Cecilia and her escort had disappeared. "Of course you are quite right: 'God made the country, and man made the----' Ah!"

The substitution of this ejaculation for the noun which usually concludes the proverb is due to the fact of the couple he is interested in having come back into sight, retracing their steps, and again approaching. It is clear as they come near that the desire to explore the villa grounds has given way, in this case, to the absorption of conversation. With a pang of dread, Jim's sharpened faculties realize, before they are within earshot, that they have exchanged the light and *banal* civilities which had at first employed them for talk of a much more intimate and interesting character. Cecilia is generally but an indifferent listener, greatly preferring to take the lion's share in any dialogue; but now she is all silent attention, only putting in, now and again, a short eager question, while her companion is obviously narrating--narrating gravely, and yet with a marked relish. Narrating what? Jim tells himself angrily that there are more stories than one in the world; that there is no reason why, because Cecilia's clerical friend is relating to her something, it must necessarily be that particular something which he dreads so inexpressibly; but he strains his ears as they pass to catch a sentence which may relieve or confirm his apprehensions. He has not to strain them long. It is Cecilia who is speaking, and in her eagerness she has raised her voice.

"You may depend upon me; I assure you I am as safe as a church; if I had chosen I might have made a great deal of mischief in my day, but I never did. I always said that she had a history. I do not pretend to be a physiognomist, but I said so the first time I saw her. I knew that they came from Devonshire. I assure you I am as safe as a church!"

It is clear that the clergyman's hesitation, already perhaps more coy than real, is unable to withstand the earnestness of

Cecilia's asseverations of her own trustworthiness. He has already opened his mouth to respond when an unexpected interruption arrests the stream of his eloquence. Jim has sprung from his bench, and thrust himself unceremoniously between the two interlocutors.

"Come and see the wistaria," he says, brusquely addressing the girl; "you were not with us when we were looking at it, were you? You were maintaining the other day that wistaria has no scent; come and smell it!"

It is in vain that Cecilia protests that she has already seen quite as much of the wistaria as she wishes; that she had never denied the potency of its perfume; that her legs are giving way beneath her from fatigue. Jim marches her relentlessly away, nor does he again quit her side until he sees her safely seated in the fiacre which is to carry her home. It is indeed his portion to have a *tete-a-tete* drive back to Florence with her, Byng having absently stepped into the vehicle which bears the other ladies. He draws a long breath as they jog slowly away from the villa, leaving the clergyman taking off his tall hat, with a baffled and offended air of farewell. He is conscious that Cecilia is swelling beside him with feelings no less wounded, even for some moments before she speaks.

"You rather cut your own throat," she says, in an affronted voice, "when you interrupted me and Mr. Burton so rudely; he was on the point of telling me something very interesting about your dear friends the Le Marchants; he knows all about them; he has known Elizabeth ever since she was a child."

Even across Jim's alarm and anxiety there comes a flash of indignation and distaste at the familiar employment of the name that even to himself he only pronounces on his heart's knees.

"Who is Elizabeth? Do you mean Miss Le Marchant?"

"Mr. Burton talked of her as 'Elizabeth,'" replies Cecilia, with a still more offended accent at the rebuke implied in his words; "one naturally would of a person whom one had known in short frocks."

"And he--he told you something very interesting about her?"

"No, he did not," returns Cecilia snappishly, "he had not the chance; he was just beginning when you rushed in like a bull in a china shop, and now"--in a key of excessive vexation--"I shall probably never have another chance of hearing, as he leaves Florence to-morrow."

Jim's heart gives a bound. "Leaves Florence to-morrow, does he?" he repeats eagerly.

"I do not know why you should seem so delighted to hear it," rejoins Cecilia, looking at him from under her smart hat with a mixture of surprise and resentment. "I do not see anything particularly exhilarating in losing an agreeable acquaintance almost as soon as one has made it!"

"Perhaps--perhaps it was a false alarm," says Jim, set, to some extent, on his guard by her evident astonishment at the keenness of his interest in the subject; "perhaps"--beginning to laugh--"he only said it to frighten you; why do you think that he is leaving Florence to-morrow?"

"Because he told me so," answers she impatiently; "he is at the Grande Bretagne, and he was complaining of not being comfortable there, and I was advising him to move to another hotel, and he said, 'Oh no, it was not worth while, as he was leaving Florence to-morrow.'"

Jim draws a long breath, and leans back in his corner of the fiacre. He has gained the information he sought. It has come to his hand at the very time he was chafing most at his inability to go in quest of it.

"So your interruption was the more provoking," continues Cecilia, her indignation puffing out and ruffling its feathers at the recollection of her wrongs, "as it was our last chance of meeting; however, you cut your own throat, as he evidently knew something very interesting about your dear friends; something which he does not generally tell people, and which he would not have told me only that he saw at once I was no blab."

Jim shivers. He had only just been in time then--only just in time to stop the mouth of this blatant backbiter in priest's raiment. His companion looks at him curiously.

"Are you cold," she asks, "or did a goose walk over your grave? Why did you shiver?"

He pulls himself together. "I was shivering," he says, compelling himself to assume the rallying tone in which he is apt to address the girl beside him, "at the thought of the peril I had saved you from. My poor Cis, have not you and I suffered enough already at the hands of the Church?"

She reddens. "Though I do not pretend to any great sensitiveness on the subject, I think you have worn that old joke nearly off its legs."

But during the rest of the drive she utters no further lament over her lost clergyman.



CHAPTER XVII.

It is past seven o'clock by the time that the party breaks up at the door of the Anglo-American, and the dusk is gaining even upon the red west that, in the upper sky, is insensibly melted into that strange faint green that speaks, in so plain a language, of past and future fine weather.

"Are you coming to look in upon us to-night?" asks Amelia, with a rather wistful diffidence, as her lover holds out his hand in farewell to her.

He hesitates. In his own mind he had planned another disposition of his evening hours to that suggested by her.

"What do you advise?" he asks. "Shall you spend the evening in the usual way?"

"I suppose so," she answers. "I suppose we shall read aloud; you know father likes to make our evenings as like our home ones as possible, and Sybilla----"

"Then it is no use my coming," interrupts he hastily. "I should have no good of you;" then, seeing her face fall at his alacrity in seizing a pretence for escape, he adds, "but, of course, if you wish it, dear--if it would give you any satisfaction----"

"But it would not," cries she precipitately, anxious as usual to be, if possible, beforehand with his lightest wish; "when you are by, I always lose my place"--laughing tremulously--"and father scolds me! No, you had far better not come. I must not be greedy"--in a lower key. "I had quite half an hour, nearly three-quarters, of you this afternoon."

Without trusting herself to any further speech, she disappears, and he, with a sigh that is only half of relief, turns away from the hotel door, and, after a moment's hesitation, a moment's glance at the suave darkening sky, and another at his watch, begins to walk briskly--not in the direction of the Minerva. It is really not late, not much beyond canonical calling hours, and he is almost sure that they dine at eight. His face is set in the direction of the Piazza d'Azeglio, as he addresses these reassuring remarks to himself. This is no case of self-indulgence, or even of friendly civility. It is a question of common humanity. Why should he leave them to endure their suspense for a whole night longer than they need, merely to save himself the trouble of a walk beneath the darkly splendid sky-arch, through the cheerful streets, still full of leisurely foot-passengers, of the sound of cracking whips and rolling carriages?

He reaches No. 12 bis, and finds the porter's wife sitting at the door of her *loge*, and smiling at him with all her white teeth, as if she knew that he had come on some pleasant errand. He climbs the naked stone stairs, and rings the bell. It is answered by Annunziata, who, smiling too, as if she were saying something very agreeable, conveys to him that the signora and the signorina are out.

The intelligence baffles him, as he had not at all expected it. Probably his disconcertment is written not illegibly on his features, as Annunziata begins at once to inform him that the signore are gone to drive in the Cascine, and that she expects them back every moment. It is a good while before he quite masters her glib explanation, his Italian being still at that stage when, if the careful phrase-book question does not receive exactly the phrase-book answer, the questioner is at fault. But the smiling invitation of the amiable ugly face, and the hospitably open door--so different a reception from what the old bull-dog of an English nurse would have accorded him--need no interpreter. After a moment's hesitation he enters. He will wait for them.

It is not until he has been left alone for a quarter of an hour in the little *salon* that he has time to ask himself nervously whether the amount of his acquaintance with them, or the importance of the tidings he brings, justifies his thus thrusting himself upon their evening privacy. The table--since they have obviously but one sitting-room--is spread for their simple supper--a coarse white cloth, a wicker-covered bottle of rough Chian wine, and a copper pot full of delicately odorous Freesias. He wanders restlessly about the room, looking at the photographs.

Tom--can it be Tom?--with a moustache, Charles with a beard and a bowie-knife, Rose dandling her baby, Miriam hanging over her new husband--all his little playfellows! How far the wave of time has rolled them away from him! He strolls to the window whence, at sunset, the green shutters have been thrown back, and stares out at the Piazza garden, where the twilight is taking all the colour out of the Judas flowers, thence to the piano upon which Schubert's "Trockne Blumen" stands open. Absently he repeats aloud the song's joyous words:

"Der Lenz wird kommen, der Winter ist aus!"

Is her "Winter aus"? Judging by the look in her eyes, it has been a long and cruel one. If he wishes to put the question to her, she comes in just in time to answer it--enters laggingly, as one tired, blinking a little from the sudden crude lamplight after the soft feather-handed dusk. She is evidently unprepared to find anyone in the room, and gives a frightened jump when she sees a man's figure approaching her. Even when she recognises him the scared look lingers. It is clear that in her sad experience surprises have been always synonymous with bad news. The white apprehension written on her small face makes him so cordially repent of his intrusion, that his explanation of his presence is at first perfectly unintelligible.

"I hope you will excuse my taking such a liberty. I know that I had no business to come in when I was told you were out," he says incoherently, "but--I thought--I hoped--I had an idea--that you might be glad to hear----"

He stops, puzzled how to word his piece of intelligence, whether or not to name the person whose presence, whose very existence had yesterday seemed to inspire with such terror the woman before him. She has sunk down upon a chair, holding her hat, which she had taken off on entering the room, nervously clutched in her hands, the little waves of her hair, straightened out by the night wind, invading her forehead more than their wont and giving her an unfamiliar look.

"To hear what?" asks Mrs. Le Marchant, who, following her daughter more leisurely, has come in just in time to catch the last few words of Burgoyne's speech dissevered from their context. He begins that speech again, still more stammeringly than before.

"I thought you might be glad to hear that the--the inquiries you asked me--I mean that I promised to make--that the person relating to whom I--I made inquiries, leaves Florence to-morrow."

He hears a long sighing breath that may mean relief that may mean only distress at the introduction of the subject, from the chair beside him, while the elder woman says in a low abrupt voice:

"To-morrow? Are you sure? How do you know?"

"He said so himself to-day."

"Have you met him? Have you been talking to him?"

It seems to Jim as if there were a sharp apprehension mixed with the abruptness of her tone, as she puts the two last questions. He makes a gesture of eager denial.

"Heaven forbid! I have taken great care to avoid recalling myself to his memory. I have no desire to renew my acquaintance with him. I--I--hate the sight of him!"

To an uninterested bystander there would have been something ludicrous in the boyish virulence of the expression of hatred coming from so composed and mature a man's mouth as Jim's. But neither of the two persons who now hear it is in a position of mind to see anything ridiculous in it.

"Then how do you know that it is true?"

"He told an--an acquaintance of mine; he was complaining of the discomfort of his hotel, and, on her recommending him to change it, he answered that it was not worth while, as he was leaving Florence to-morrow."

Again from the chair beside him comes that long low sigh. This time there can be no question as to its quality. It is as of a spirit lifting itself from under a leaden load. For a few moments no other sound breaks the stillness. Then Mrs. Le Marchant speaks again in a constrained voice:

"We are extremely obliged to you for having taken so much trouble for us, and it must seem very strange to you that we should be so anxious to hear that this--this person has left Florence; but in so small a place one is sure to be always coming into collision with those whom one would rather avoid, and there are reasons which--which make it very--painful to us to meet him."

So saying, she turns away precipitately, and leaves the room hastily, by another door from that by which they both entered, and which evidently communicates with an adjoining bedroom. Elizabeth remains lying back in her chair, looking as white as the tablecloth. She is always white, but usually it is a creamy white, like meadow-sweet. Out of her eyes, however, has gone the distressed look of fear, and in them is dawning instead a little friendly smile.

"You must have thought us rather impostors when you saw us at the Accademia this morning, after leaving us apparently so shattered overnight," she says, with a somewhat deprecating air.

"I was very glad to find you so perfectly recovered," he replies, but he does not say it naturally. When a person,

habitually truthful, slides into a speech not completely true, he does it in a bungling journeyman fashion; nor is Burgoyne any exception to this rule.

"I think we are a little like india-rubber balls, mammy and I," continues Elizabeth; "we have great recovering powers; if we had not" (stopped for a second by a small patient sigh) "I suppose that we should not be alive now."

He does not interrupt her. She must be a much less finely-strung instrument than he takes her for if she does not divine the sympathy of his silence, and sympathy so much in the dark as to what it sympathizes with as his, must needs walk gropingly, if it would escape gins and pitfalls.

"But we should not have gone out sight-seeing this morning--we were not at all in a junketing mood--if it had not been for Mr. Byng; he came in and took us both by storm. It is difficult," her face dimpling and brightening with a much more confirmed smile than the tiny hovering one which is all that Jim has been able to call forth--"it is difficult to resist a person who brings so much sunshine with him--do not you find it so? He is so very sunshiny, your Mr. Byng. We like sunshine; we--we have not had a great deal of it."

It is on the very edge of his lip to tell her that when he had known her she had had and been nothing but sunshine. But he recollects in time her prohibition as to the past, and restrains himself.

"When you look so kind and interested," she cries impulsively, sitting up in her chair, with a transparent little hand on each arm of it, "I feel a fraud."

She stops.

"I look interested because I feel interested," returns he doggedly; "fraud or not--but" (in a distressed voice) "do not, even in joke, call yourself ugly names--fraud or not, you cannot hinder me."

"Do not be interested in me," says she, in her plaintive cooing voice; "we are very bad people to get interested in, we are not repaying people to be interested in. I think--that perhaps" (slowly and dreamily) "under other circumstances we might have been pleasant enough. Mammy has naturally excellent spirits, and so have I; it does not take much to make us happy, and even now I often feel like poor little Prince Arthur--"

"By my Christendom,
So I were out of prison and kept sheep,
I should be as merry as the day is long."

But then," sighing profoundly, "the moment that we begin to feel a little cheerful, something comes and knocks us down again."

There is such a blank hopelessness in the tone with which she pronounces the last words, and, in his almost total ignorance of the origin of her despair, it is so impossible to put his compassion into fit words, that he can think of nothing better than to pull his chair two inches nearer her, to assure her by this dumb protest of how little inclined he is to accept her warning.

"Are you sure that he is really gone--going, I mean," she asks, in an excited low voice, "going to-morrow morning, as you say? Oh, I wish it were to-morrow morning! But perhaps when to-morrow morning comes, he will have changed his mind. Was he quite, quite sure about it?"

"He said he was going to-morrow morning," replies Jim, repeating Cecilia's quotation from her new friend's conversation with conscientious exactness; "that it was not worth while to change his hotel, as he was leaving Florence to-morrow morning."

"He will not go," she says, shaking her head with restless dejection; "nobody but would be loth to leave this heavenly place"--glancing out affectionately through the open window, even at the commonplace and now almost night-shaded Piazza garden--"we shall find that he is not gone after all."

"Nothing will be easier to ascertain than that fact," says Burgoyne, eagerly catching at so easy an opportunity for help and service; "now that I know which is his hotel, I can inquire there to-morrow morning, and bring you word at once."

"Could you, would you?" cries she, life and light springing back into her dejected eyes at his proposal; "but no," with an accent of remorse, "why should you? Why should we keep you running upon our errands? What right have we to take up your time?"

"*My time*," repeats he ironically. "I am like the German Prince mentioned by Heine, who spent his leisure hours--hours of which he had twenty-four every day--in----"

"But if we do not rob you," interrupts Elizabeth, looking at him in some surprise, "we rob Miss--Miss Wilson. What will she say to us?"

"She will be only too glad," replies he stiffly, a douche of cold water thrown on his foolish heart by the little hesitation which had preceded her pronounciation of Amelia's name, showing that her interest in him had not had keenness enough even to induce her to master his betrothed's appellation.

"Will she?" rejoins Elizabeth, quite ignorant of having given offence, and with her eyes fixed rather wistfully upon his. "How good of her! and how unlike most very happy people! Happy people are generally rather exacting; but she looks good. She has a dear face!"

He is silent. To hear the one woman's innocent and unconscious encomiums of the other fills him with an emotion that ties his never ready tongue. She mistakes the cause of his muteness.

"I am afraid I have vexed you," she says, sweetly and humbly. "I had no business to praise her to you; it was like praising a person to himself; but do not be angry with me--I did not mean to be impertinent!"

One small fragile hand is hanging over the arm of her hard lodging-house arm-chair, and before he has an idea of what his own intentions are, it is lying, without any asking of its consent, in his.

"I will not--I will not let you say such things," he says, trembling. "She *is* good: she *has* a dear face: and I love to hear you say so! May I--may I bring her to see you?"

As he makes this request, he feels the little fingers that are lying in his palm give a nervous start; and at once, quietly but determinedly, the captive hand is withdrawn. It and its fellow fly up to her face, and together quite cover it from his view. Though, as I have said, they are small, yet, it being small too to match them, they conceal it entirely.

"You will not say no?" he cries anxiously. "I am sure you will not say no. I shall feel very much snubbed if you do."

Still no answer. Still that shielded face, and the ominous silence behind it. He rises, a dark red spreading over his features.

"I must apologize for having made the suggestion. I can only beg you to forget that it was ever made. Good-bye!"

He has nearly reached the door, when he hears the *frou-frou* of her gown, and turning, sees that her unsteady feet have carried her after him, and that her face is changing from crimson to white and back again with startling rapidity.

"I thought you would have understood," she says faintly. "I thought that you were the one person who would not have misunderstood."

His conscience pricks him, but he is never very quick to be able to own himself in the wrong, and before he can bring himself to frame any sentence that smacks of apology and regret, she resumes, with a little more composure and in a conventional voice:

"You know--we told you--even at Genoa--that--that we are not going out, that we do not wish to make any new acquaintances!"

"I know," replies he, with some indignation, "that that is the hollow formal bulletin you issue to the world in general, but I thought--I hoped----"

"Do not bring her to see me," she interrupts, abandoning her effort for composure, and speaking in a broken voice, while her eyes swim in tears. "She--she might be sorry--she--she might not like it--afterwards!"

He looks back at her with an almost terrified air. Is the answer to her sad riddle coming to him thus? Has he had the brutality to force her into giving it?

"You have been so kind in not asking me any questions, you have even given up alluding to old times since you saw that it hurt me; but you must see--of course you do--that--that there is something--in me--not like other people; something that--that prevents--my--having any friends! I have not a friend in the world" (with a low sob) "except my mother--except mammy! Do you think" (breaking into a watery smile) "that it is very silly of me, at my age, to call her 'mammy' still?"

"I think," he says, "that I am one of the greatest brutes out, and that I should be thankful if someone would kick me downstairs."

And with this robust expression of self-depreciation, he takes his hat and departs.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Ihr Blumen alle, Heraus! Heraus!"

It was to German flowers that the above hest was addressed. If they obey it, with how much more alacrity do the Italian ones comply with its glad command. It is a week later, and now no one can say that "the spring comes slowly up this way." Vines, figs, and mulberries, all are emulously racing out, and the corn has added two emerald inches to its juicy blades. The young plane-trees in the Piazza d'Azeglio, so skimpily robed when first Jim had rung the *entresol* bell of No. 12, are exchanging their "unhandsome thrift" for an apparel of plenteous green, and a wonderful Paulownia is beginning to hold up her clusters of gloccinia bells.

Jim has watched the daily progress of the plane-leaves from the low window of No. 12's *entresol*. The daily progress? Is it possible that he has been there every day during the past week? He asks himself this, with a species of shock; and it is with a sense of relief that he finds that one whole day has intervened, during which he had not heard the sound of the electric bell thrilling through the apartment under the touch of his own fingers. What can have taken him there, every day but one? He runs over, in his mind, with a misgiving as to their insufficiency, the reasons of his visit. For the first he had had an excellent excuse. Surely it would have been barbarous not to have imparted to the anxiously-watching pair the good news that the object of their mysterious terror had really and authentically gone! On the second day it seemed quite worth while to take the walk, in order to tell them that he had accidentally learned the clergyman's destination to be Venice, and his intention to return *via* Milan and the St. Gothard. On the third day, being as near to them as San Annunziata, it had seemed unfriendly not to inquire after Mrs. Le Marchant's neuralgia. On the fourth---- He is pulled up short in his reminiscences. Why had he gone on the fourth day? He can give no answer to the question, and slides off from it to another. Which was the fourth day? Was it--yes, it was the one on which the wind blew as coldly east as it might have done across Salisbury Plain's naked expanse, and he had found Elizabeth sitting on a milking-stool shivering over a poor little fire of green wood, and blowing it with a pair of bellows. He had helped her to blow, and between them they had blown the fire entirely away, as often happens in the case of unskilled handlers of bellows, and Elizabeth had laughed till she cried.

And meanwhile, how many times has he been within the portals of the Anglo-American? With all his arithmetic he cannot make it more than twice. This neglect of his betrothed, however, is not of quite so monstrous a cast as at the first blush it may appear. It is she herself who, true to her life-long principle of shielding him from all disagreeable experiences, has forbidden him her door. He can aid her neither to bandage her father's swollen foot in the severe gout-fit under which he is groaning, nor to allay Sybilla's mysterious sufferings, which always display a marked increase in acuteness whenever any other member of the family shows a disposition to set up claims as an invalid. Cecilia, indeed, is ready enough to give her help in nursing her father, but she has on former occasions shown such an unhappy aptitude for tumbling over his swathed and extended leg, and upsetting his physic all over him, that she is received with such objurgations as his cloth will permit, so often as she shows her short nose within his sick-room. Only twice in a whole week. Can Amelia have wished to be taken quite so literally when she had bidden him stay away? There is only one answer possible to this question, and he shows his consciousness of it by at once raising himself out of the chair in which he is sunk, and turning his steps hastily towards her.

It is morning. The east wind is clean gone, and the streets are full of the scent of the innumerable lilies of the valley, of which everybody's hands are full. He stops a minute and buys a great sheaf for a miraculously small sum, from one of the unnumbered sellers. It shall make his peace for him, if indeed it needs making, which it has never done yet. He almost smiles at the absurdity of the suggestion. He finds Cecilia alone in the sitting-room, Cecilia sitting by the window reading the *Queen*. Upon her large pink face there is a puzzled expression, which is perhaps to be accounted for by the fact that the portion of the journal which she is perusing is that entitled "Etiquette," and under it are the answers to last week's questions, upon nice points of social law, which, if you do not happen to have read the questions, have undoubtedly an enigmatical air, as in the following instances: "Your husband takes the Baronet's daughter, and you follow with the Prince."--"We do not understand your question--babies never dine out," etc.

Upon Jim's entrance Cecilia lays down her paper, and at once offers to go in search of her sister, with whom she shortly returns. He had been quite right. There is no peace to make. Amelia greets him with her usual patient and perfectly unrancorous smile, but his second glance at her tells him that she is looking old and fagged. It is only in very early youth that vigils and worries and self-denials do not write their names upon the skin.

"How--how pale you are!" he says. If he had given utterance to the word that hovered on his lips, he would have cried,

"how yellow!"

"It would be very odd if she did not," says Cecilia with a shrug, looking up from her "Etiquette," to which she has returned; "she has sat up three nights with father, and last evening Sybilla bid us all good-bye. You know she never can bear anybody else to be ill, and when father has the gout she bids us all good-bye--and Amelia is always taken in and sheds torrents of tears--do not you, Amelia?"

Amelia has subsided rather wearily into a chair. "She really thinks that she is dying," says she apologetically--"and who knows? some day perhaps it may come true."

"Not it," rejoins her sister, with an exasperated sniff "she will see us all out--will not she, Jim?"

"I have not the remotest doubt of it," replies he heartily; and then his conscience-struck eyes revert to his betrothed's wan face, all the plainer for its wanness. "No sleep, no fresh air," in an injured tone, checking off the items on his fingers.

"But I have had fresh air," smiling at him with pale affection; "one day Mrs. Byng took me out for a drive. Mrs. Byng has been very kind to me."

She does not lay the faintest invidious accent on the name, as if contrasting it with another whose owner had been so far less kind; it is his own guilty heart that supplies the emphasis. His only resource is an anger which--so curiously perverse is human nature--is not even feigned.

"You can go out driving with Mrs. Byng then, though you could not spare time to come out with me," he says in a surly voice.

She does not defend herself but her lower lip trembles.

"Come out with me now," he cries, remorse giving a harshness even to the tone of the sincerely-meant invitation. "You look like a geranium in a cellar; it is a divine day, a day to make the old feel young, and the young immortal; come out and stay out with me all day. I will take you wherever you like. I will----"

The genuine eagerness of his proposal has tinged her sickly-coloured cheek with a healthier hue for the moment, but she shakes her head.

"I could not leave father this morning; he will not take his medicine from anyone else, and he likes me to sit with him while he eats his arrowroot."

The only sign of approval of this instance of filial piety given by Jim is that he rises and begins to stamp irritably about the room.

"He is really not at all exacting," continues Amelia in anxious deprecation; "he was quite pleased just now when I told him that Mrs. Byng was going to take me to a party at the Villa Schiavone this afternoon. He said----"

"Mrs. Byng! Mrs. Byng again!"

This is not what Mr. Wilson said, but is the expression of the unjust wrath which Burgoyne, feeling it much pleasanter to be angry with someone else than himself is artificially and not unsuccessfully fostering. Again Amelia's lip quivers.

"I thought," she says gently, "if--if you have no other engagement this afternoon; if--if you are free----"

Nothing can be milder than the form which this suggestion takes, and yet there is something in its shape that provokes him.

"Free!" he interrupts tartly, "of course I am free! Have I a gouty father and a hysteric sister? Why should not I be free?"

"I am very glad to hear it," rejoins she--the light that his first proposal to take her out had brought into her face growing brighter and more established--"because in that case there is nothing to prevent your meeting us at the villa, and----"

"And seeing you and Mrs. Byng walking about with your arms round each other's necks, like a couple of schoolgirls," cries he, with a sort of spurious grumpiness.

"I can't think why you should object to Amelia walking about with her arm round *Mrs.* Byng's neck," says Cecilia, whose attention to her "Etiquette" is apparently not so absorbing but that she has some to spare for the conversation going on in her neighbourhood.

They all laugh a little; and harmony being restored, and Jim graciously vouchsafing to forgive Amelia for having ignored her for a sennight, she returns to her patient, and he to his hotel, where he is at once, contrary to his wish, pounced upon by Byng.

For some reason, which he would be puzzled to explain to himself, he has for the last week rather avoided his friend's company--a task rendered easier by the disposition manifested by the young man's mother to monopolize him, a disposition to which Burgoyne has felt no inclination to run counter. It is without enthusiasm that he receives Byng's expressions of pleasure in their accidental meeting.

"I have been searching for you, high and low."

"Have you?"

"Where have you been?"

"I have been to the Anglo-American"--with a flash of inward self-congratulation at this query having been put to-day, instead of yesterday, or the day before. The other looks disappointed.

"To the Anglo-American? I thought--I hoped; have you--seen *them* lately?"

Burgoyne has ceased to feign lack of understanding to whom the personal pronoun refers, and he answers with as much carelessness as at a moment's notice he can put on: "Why, yes, I have, once or twice."

"Do they--do not they think it strange of me not to have been near them all this time?"

"They may do"--dryly.

"They did not say so?"

"They did not; perhaps"--sarcastically--"the subject was too acutely painful for them to allude to."

Frequently as he has exposed himself to them, his Mentor's sneers never fail to send the crimson racing into Byng's face, and it finds its way there now. It does not, however, prevent his proceeding, after a confused moment or two, with his anxious catechism.

"She--she has not referred to the subject?"

"What subject?"

"To--to me?"

"She has never mentioned your name. Stay"--his veracity winning a reluctant victory over his ill-nature--"one day she said that you were sunshiny, and that she liked sunshine."

As he speaks he looks down at his boots, too unaffectedly annoyed at the justification of Elizabeth's epithet which its retailing has worked on Byng's countenance to be able to contemplate him with any decent patience. But there is enough evidence in the boy's voice of the effect wrought upon him by Miss Le Marchant's adjective to make his comrade repent very heartily of having repeated it.

"I should have been over," says Byng in a low eager way, "every day, every hour, as often as they would have received me, only that I could not leave my mother; and she--she has taken them *en grippe!*"

"*En grippe?* Your mother?" repeats Jim, too honestly and disagreeably startled by this piece of news to be able any longer to maintain his ironical manner; "why?"

The other shrugs his shoulders dispiritedly.

"I have not an idea; it cannot be because they did not seem to wish to be introduced to her at the Accademia the other day; she is quite incapable of such pettiness, and she admired HER so tremendously at first, did not she? You heard her; but since then she has taken it into her head that there is something--I cannot bear even to say it"--dashing his hat and gloves vehemently upon the table--"something *louche*, as she calls it, about her. Mother thinks that she--she--she"--sinking his voice to an indistinct half-whisper--"has--has gone off the rails some time or other. Can you conceive?"--raising his tone again to one of the acutest pain and indignation--"that anyone--any human being could look in her face and harbour such a notion for a single instant?"

He stares with eyes ablaze with wrathful pity at his friend's face, expecting an answering outbreak to his own; but none such comes. Burgoyne only says, in a not much more assured key than that which the young man had employed:

"How--how can such an idea have got into your mother's head?"

"I do not know, but it is there; and what I wanted you, what I have been searching everywhere for you for, is to ask you to--to set her right, at once, without any delay. It is unbearable that she should go on thinking such things, and nothing could be easier for you, who know them so well, who know all about them!"

Burgoyne is at first too much stupefied by this appeal, and by the impossibility of answering it in a satisfactory manner, to make any response at all; but at length:

"Know all about them?" he says, in a voice whose surface impatience hides a much profounder feeling. "Who dares ever say that he knows all about any other living soul? How many times must I tell you that, until we met at Genoa, I had not set eyes on Miss Le Marchant for ten good years?"

At the tone of this speech, so widely different from the eager acceptance of the suggested task which he had expected, Byng's face takes on a crestfallen, almost frightened look.

"But when you knew them," he says, "in Devonshire, they--they were all right then, were not they? they were well thought of?--there was nothing against them?"

"Good Heavens--no!" replies Jim heartily, thankful that the appeal is now so worded as to enable him to give a warm testimony in favour of his poor friends. "There was not a family in all the neighbourhood that stood so high. Everybody loved them; everybody had a good word for them."

Byng's countenance clears a little.

"And there is no reason--you have no reason for supposing anything different now?"

Jim stirs uneasily in his chair. Can he truthfully give the same convinced affirmative to this question as to the last? It is a second or two before he answers it at all.

"The facts of life are enough for me; I do not trouble myself with its suppositions."

He gets up and walks towards the door as he speaks, resolved to bring to an end this to him intolerable catechism.

"But you must have an opinion--you must think," cries the other's voice, persistently pursuing him. He turns at bay, with the door-handle in his hand, his eyes lightening.

"I asked her permission to bring Amelia to see her," he says, in a low moved voice; "if I had thought as ill of her as your mother does, do you think I should have done that?"

CHAPTER XIX.

CAMILLE.--"Que me conseilleriez-vous de faire le jour ou je verrais que vous ne m'aimez plus?"

There is no greater fiction than that for time to go quickly implies that it must needs go pleasantly. Jim has seldom spent a more disagreeable period than the hours which follow his conversation with Byng, and which he passes in his own bedroom, with his elbows on the window-ledge, looking blankly out at the Piazza, and at the great "Bride" of Amolpo's planning, the church of Santa Maria Novella. And yet, when the city clocks, which have chimed unnoticed by him several times, at length convey to his inattentive ear what the hour is, he starts up, shocked and confused at its lateness. He had meant to have reached the Villa Schiavone in time to receive Amelia, and now she must have long preceded him, and be attributing his tardiness to some fresh neglect and indifference. In five minutes he has rearranged his dress, and jumped into a fiacre. Through the Porta Romana, and up between the straight row of still and inky cypresses, up and up to where the villa door, promising so little and performing so much, opens as so many do, straight upon the road.

The day has changed its ravishing blue gaiety for a pensive cloudy gloom, and the guests at the villa are walking about without any sunshades. They are numerous, though few indeed in comparison of the Banksia roses on the laden wall, over which, too, a great wistaria--put in, as the host with a just pride relates, only last year--is hanging and flinging its lilac abundance. And seen above its clusters, and above the wall, what a view from this raised terrace! Jim is really in a hurry to find Amelia, and yet he cannot choose but stop to look at it--from Galileo's tower on the right, to where, far down the plain of the Arno, Carrara loses itself in mist. It is all dark at first, sullen, purple-gray, without variation or stir--city, Duomo, Arno, Fiesole, and all her chain of sister-hills--one universal frown over every slope and jag, over street and spire, over Campanile with its marbles, and Santa Croce with its dead. But now, as it draws on towards sun-setting, in the western sky there comes a beginning of light, a faint pale tint at first, but quickly broadening across the firmament, while the whole huge cloud canopy is drawn aside like a curtain, and, as a great bright eye from under bent brows, the lowering sun sends arrows of radiance over plain, and river, and city. All of a sudden there is a vertical rain of dazzling white rays on the plain, and the olive shadows, merged all the afternoon in the universal gray, fall long and soft upon the blinding green of the young corn. He has forgotten Amelia. Oh, that that other, that creature herself made out of sun-rays and sweet rain-drops, were beside him, her pulses beating, as they so surely would, to his tune, her whole tender being quivering with delicate joy at this heavenly spectacle.

Someone touches him on the shoulder, and he starts violently. Has the intensity of his invocation called her spirit out of her light body, and is she indeed beside him?

"What a bad conscience you must have! Did you think that I was a bailiff?" cries Mrs. Byng, laughing.

"Where is Amelia?" he asks, rather curtly, the memory of Byng's communication about his mother being too fresh in his mind to make it possible for him to answer her in her own rallying key. "What have you done with Amelia?"

"What a 'Stand-and-deliver' tone!" says she, laughing still, but looking not unnaturally surprised. "Well, where is she?" glancing round. "She was here five minutes ago with Willy. Poor Amelia!" lowering her voice to a more confidential key. "I am so glad you have come at last; she is patience personified. I must congratulate you upon the excellent training into which you have got her, but I think that she was beginning to look a little anxious."

"And I think that you have been giving the reins to your imagination, as usual," replies he, walking off in a huff.

There is another delightful garden at the back of the villa, and there, having failed to find her in the first, he now with growing irritation at her for not being more immediately conspicuous, seeks Amelia. It is a sheltered leisurely paradise, where white rose-trees, with millions of bursting buds, are careering over the walls in leafy luxuriance, where double wallflowers--bloody warriors, one should call them, if one could connect any warlike idea with this Eden of scented peace--stocks in fragrant row are flowering as we Britons never see them flower in our chary isle, save in the plates of a Gardeners' Chronicle. But among them he finds no trace of his homely English blossom. He finds, indeed, him who had been named as her late companion, Byng; but it is not with Amelia, but with one of the pretty young daughters of the house that he is pacing the straight walk in lively dialogue. Jim accosts him formally:

"I understood that Miss Wilson was with you? Do you happen to know where she is?"

Byng stops short in his leisurely pacing.

"Why, where is she?" he says, looking round, as his mother had done, but with a more guilty air. "She was here five minutes ago. Where can she have disappeared to?"

It is but too obvious that in greeting and being greeted by their numerous acquaintances, both poor Amelia's chaperon and that chaperon's son have completely forgotten her existence. Always nervously afraid of being burdensome, Jim feels convinced from what he knows of her character that she is going about in unobtrusive forlornness, the extreme smallness of her Florentine acquaintances making it unlikely that she has found anyone to supply the place of the friends who have become so entirely oblivious of her. The conviction, pricking his conscience as he hastens contritely away from the vainly-repentant Byng, lends speed and keenness to his search. But thorough and earnest as it is, it is for some time quite unsuccessful. She makes one of no group, she loiters under no Banksia rose-bower, she is no gazer from the terrace at gold-misted valley or aureoled town, she is to be found neither in hidden nook, nor evident path. She is not beneath the loggia, she is nowhere out-of-doors. She must then, in her loneliness, have taken refuge in the house. He finds himself in a long, noble room, with a frescoed ceiling, a room full of signs of recent habitation and recent tea, but which has apparently been deserted for the sunset splendours on the terrace. He can see no single occupant. He walks slowly down it to assure himself of the fact of its entire emptiness.

By a singular and unaccountable freak of the builders, the windows are set so high in the wall that each has had to have a little raised dais erected before it to enable the inmates to look comfortably out. Upon each small platform stands a chair or two, and low over them the curtains sweep. As he passes one recess, he notices that the drapery is stirring a little, and examining more closely, sees the tail of a well-known gown--of that gown which has met with his nearest approach to approval among Amelia's rather scanty stock--peeping from beneath the stiff rich folds of the old Italian brocade. It is the work of a second to sweep the latter aside, and discover his poor *fiancee* all alone, and crouching desolately in a low arm-chair. There is something so unlike her in the attitude, something so different from her usual uncomplaining, unpretending fortitude, something so disproportioned to the cause--his own careless but not criminal delay, as he supposes--in the despair evidenced by her whole pose, that he feels at once terrified and angry. In a second he, too, has stepped up on to the little platform beside her.

"Amelia!" he cries. "Amelia! What are you doing up here? With whom are you playing hide-and-seek?"

Her words and her smiles are apt to be prompt enough, Heaven knows, to spring out, answering his least hint; but now she neither speaks nor moves a muscle of her face. She scarcely starts at all at his sudden apparition and address, and no light comes across her features--those features which, now that he looks at them more closely, he sees to be set in a much more pinched pallor than even three watching nights and a week of airless worry can account for.

"Are you ill?"

"No; I am not ill."

The sting of irritation which, mixed with genuine alarm, had besieged Jim's mind on his first realizing her crouched and unnatural attitude, now entirely supersedes any other feeling. Is the accidental delay of half an hour, an hour, say even an hour and a half, enough to justify such a parade of anguish as this?

"Is it possible," he inquires, in a tone of cold displeasure, "that I am to attribute this--this state of things--to my being accidentally late? It was a mere accident: it is not like you to make a scene. I do not recognise you; I am very sorry that I was late, and that I have made you angry."

The chill reproach of his words seems to rouse her to a state more akin to her natural one, to the humble and unexact one which is habitual to her.

"Angry!" she repeats: "angry with you for being late? Oh, you are quite mistaken! In all these years how often have I been angry with you?"

There is such a meek upbraiding in her tone that his ill-humour gives way to a vague apprehension.

"Then what is it?" he cries brusquely; "what is it all about? I think I have a right to ask you that; since I saw you last something must have happened to you to produce this extraordinary change."

She heaves a long dragging sigh.

"Something has happened to me; yes, something has happened!"

"But what--what kind of a something? I have a right to know--I insist upon knowing; tell me!"

He has grasped both her hands, whose unnatural coldness he feels even through her rather ill-fitting gloves. So strange and mean a thing is human nature that even at this moment it flashes across him, with a sense of annoyance,

what bad gloves Amelia always wears. However, he is not troubled with them long, for she takes them and her cold hands quietly back.

"I will tell you, there is no question of insisting. I should have told you anyhow; but not *here*"--glancing nervously round the dropped curtains--"not now!"

"Why not here? Why not now?"

Her face quivers.

"I could not," she says piteously. "I do not quite know how I shall get through telling it; it must be somewhere-- somewhere where it will not matter if I do break down!"

He stares at her in an unfeigned bewilderment, again slightly streaked with wrath.

"Have you gone mad, Amelia? or are you taking a leaf out of Sybilla's book? If you do not clear up this extraordinary mystification at once, I shall be compelled to believe either the one or the other."

Again her face contracts with pain.

"Oh, if it were only a mystification!" she says, with a low cry. "I cannot tell you here; it is physically impossible to me. But do not be afraid"--with an accent of bitterness, which he is quite at a loss to account for--"you shall not have long to wait; I will tell you, without fail, to-morrow; to-morrow morning, if you like. Come as early as you please, I shall be ready to tell you; and now would you mind leaving me? I want to have a few moments to myself before I see anybody-- before I see Mrs. Byng; will you please leave me?"

It is so apparent that she is in deadly earnest, and resolute to have her request complied with, that he can do nothing but step dizzily down off the little dais, feeling as if the world were turning round with him.

A quarter of an hour later he sees her leaving the party with Mrs. Byng, looking as simple, as collected, and not very perceptibly paler than usual.



CHAPTER XX.

There is always something in the nature of a mountain in a night that is interposed between us and either any promised pleasure or any threatened pain. In the case of pleasure, we are naturally in a hurry to scale it, in order to see how full of sunshine and flowers is the happy valley on the other side; and in the case of pain, we are all scarcely less eager to ascertain how deep is the abyss, how choking the swamp, how angry the waves that wait us beyond the dusty hill.

Burgoyne has no expectation of finding anything agreeable on the further slope of his mountain, and yet the time seems long to him, till he has climbed its crest, and slid down its other side. Early and splendid as is the new light that takes possession of him and his shutterless bedroom, he upbraids it as a laggard; and the hours that pace by till the one appointed for the explanation of yesterday's mystery seem to him to hobble on crutches. What can Amelia have to say to him that needs such a pomp of preparation? What can have turned Amelia into a Tragedy Queen? What miracle can have made her take the imperative mood? For it was the imperative mood unquestionably which, contrary to all precedent, she had made use of when she had commanded him, most gently it is true, since, being by her nature gentle, she can do nothing ungently, to leave her. He absolutely laughs at the topsy-turviness of the idea. What can she have to say that requires so carefully selected a spot to say it in?--a spot where "it does not matter if she does break down." What, in Heaven's name, can she be going to say that inspires her with such a cold-blooded intention beforehand of breaking down?

Jim's state of mind is something that of the Baron's in "On ne badine pas avec l'amour," on hearing that his daughter's governess had been turning somersaults in a field of luzerne. "Non, en verite, non, mon ami, je n'y comprends absolument rien. Tout cela me parait une conduite desordonnee, il est vrai, mais sans motif comme sans excuse." If she were any other woman, he should ascribe her behaviour to some tiresome but passing tantrum, evoked by his delay in appearing? But in the past eight years how many hundred times has he kept her waiting? and has she ever failed to meet him with the same meek good-humour that has not had even a tinge of reproachful forgiveness in it. As she herself had said, "In all these years how often have I been angry with you?" He has been angry with her times out of mind, angry with her on a thousand unjust and unkind counts; angry with her for her slowness, her bad complexion, her want of a sense of humour; for a hundred things that she cannot help, that she would have altered--oh, how gladly!--if she could! But how often has she been angry with him? In vain he searches his memory, hoping to overtake some instance of ill-humour, or even pettishness, that may make the balance between them hang a little more equal. But in vain. She has never been angry with him. And even now neither her face nor her manner--whatever else of strange and unparalleled they may have conveyed--have conveyed the idea of anger.

But if not anger, what then can be the cause that has produced a change so startling in one so little given to impulsive action or eccentricities of emotion? Can she have heard anything about him? anything to his discredit? He searches his conscience, but whether it be that that organ is not a particularly sensitive one, or that it really has no damaging facts to give up, it is silent, or almost so. He has perhaps been rather slack in his attendance upon her of late, but at her own bidding. At his visits to the Le Marchants' no one could take exception, dictated as they so obviously have been by philanthropy, and his conversations with Elizabeth--how few and scant! his heart heaves a rebellious sigh at their paucity--might be proclaimed without excision at the market cross. Our thoughts are our own, and are, moreover, so safely padlocked in our minds that he does not think it worth while to inquire whether, if his future wife could have looked in and seen the restive fancies capering, saddleless and bridleless, there, she might have been justified in assuming a crouching attitude and a sorrowfully commanding manner.

He is as far as ever from solving the problem, when--for once in his life before his time at the rendezvous--he presents himself at the familiar door. It is opened to him by Amelia herself. She has often done it before, seeming to know by instinct his ring from that of any other person, but to-day the familiar action disconcerts him. He had expected to be received with a formality and pomp of woe such as yesterday had seemed to threaten; and here is Amelia looking exactly like her ordinary self, except that she is perhaps rather more carefully dressed than usual; but that may be due to the fact of her having, for the first time, assumed the fresh calico gown, which the high summer of the Italian April morning seems to justify. Whether it be due to the calico gown or not, there is an indisputable air of gala about her, and she is smiling. A revulsion of feeling comes over the man, to whom her tragic semi-swooning airs had given a wakeful night. It was a tantrum after all, then; a storm in a teacup. And now her common sense has come to the rescue, and she has seen the folly of quarrelling with her bread and butter. These reflections naturally do not translate themselves into responsive smiles on his face, but she does not seem to notice his dour looks.

"I have a proposal to make to you," she says, still smiling. "Father is so well this morning, quite easy, and he has been

wheeled into the sitting-room to see Sybilla. She has been very good about him this time, and quite believes that he has been really bad."

"How good of her!" comments Jim grimly; "it would be so easy and so amusing to play at having a swollen toe, would not it?"

"And so," continues Miss Wilson, wisely ignoring his leer at her sister; "I am perfectly free, and I want you to take me somewhere, some little drive or expedition; you see," with a conciliatory glance at her own modest finery, "I counted upon your saying 'yes'; I dressed so as not to keep you waiting."

Every word of this sentence confirms Burgoyne in the idea implanted by her first address. This is her *amende*, and she is quite right to make it. But she would have been more right still if her conduct had not rendered it necessary.

Amelia is not the type of woman who through life will gain much by pouts. Perhaps, by-and-by, very kindly and delicately, he may obliquely hint this to her. But all that he says aloud is the rather stiff acquiescence conveyed in the words:

"By all means. I am quite at your service."

"And now where shall we go?" continues Amelia, shutting the door behind her and beginning to cross the hotel courtyard at his side; "that is the next thing--not to any gallery or church, I think, if you do not mind; I say such stupid things about Art, and the more I try, the stupider they are; let us go somewhere into the country--I can understand the country. I am not afraid of saying stupid things about it."

Into Burgoyne's mind comes the odious thought that he would not put it past his betrothed to say stupid things even about the Tuscan landscape, but he only awaits her decision in a respectful silence while helping her into a fiacre.

"It would be a sin to be under any roof to-day but this one," she says, looking up to the immeasurable azure bridge above her head; "would you mind--could you spare time to go to Fiesole?"

His only answer is to repeat the word Fiesole to the driver, who, with the inevitable tiny poodle-shaven dog beside him, is awaiting the order as to his destination. It is but a little way to Fiesole, as we all know, but yet, as the slow hired vehicle crawls up the steep ascent, with the driver walking alongside, or even lagging behind, there would be time and opportunity to say a good deal. But Amelia says next to nothing. Perhaps the heat makes her sleepy, for it is so hot, so hot between the garden walls, where the rose hedges are beginning to show a pale flush of plenteous pink among their multitude of green buds. Young, indeed, just born as the roses are, the highway dust has already powdered them with its ash-toned white. He does not know it at the time, but those dust-filmed rosebuds have found a home in his memory from which no after-sights, however numerous, will dislodge them. They have reached the village, and left their carriage, and begun, silently still, to ascend the steep lane up which the feet of most of Europe and America have in turn climbed to see the famous view that rewards the little effort. Past the cottages, whose inmates, tranquilly sitting in their doorways, or leaning idly against their door-posts, have probably seen all that is illustrious, notorious, history-making of the day, pass pantingly. Is there a prime minister, a princess, a poet, a prima donna, of the time, that has not toiled up the steep path to the welcome rest of the bench on the high plateau, on the hillside? Jim and Amelia are certainly not likely to figure in the annals of their time, but the peasants look at them with as much or as little interest as if they were. An immortal, unless his immortality is printed on his back in letters as large as those that announce Colman's mustard to the world, has, to the vulgar, very much the air of one of themselves.

Our friends have reached the haven of the stone seat, and, thanks to the earliness of the hour, have it all to themselves, save for a trio of sunburnt women of the people, with handkerchiefs tied over their tanned heads, who tease them to buy straw hand-screens. And when they have bought a couple, and made it kindly but distinctly evident that no amount of worrying will induce them to buy any more, even these leave them in peace and descend the hill again, in search of newer victims. They are alone under the sky's warm azure. Beneath their eyes spreads one of those nobly lovely spectacles that Italy and spring, hand in hand, alone can offer. To some, indeed, it may seem that the prospect from the Bellosguardo side of the valley is even more beautiful, since Fiesole, sitting so high as she does, dwarfs the opposite hills, and makes the looker lose their wavy line. They seem flat in comparison, the plain appears wider, the beloved city more distant, and does not show the same exquisite distinctness of separate tower and spire and palace. But yet such comparison is mere carping. Who can wish for a sight more divinely suave and fair than this from the bench above Fiesole? Not a breath of smoke dares to hang about the glorious old town, dimming its lustre, and between them and it what a spread of manifold colour, of more "mingled hue" than the rainbow's "purpled scarf doth show!" The moon-tinted olives, twilight and ghostly, even in the dazzling radiance of this superb morning hour, with the blinding green of the young corn about their gray feet, the cypress taper-flames, the gay white houses, terrace gardened, and, above all, the vast smile of the Tuscan heaven.

At first Amelia's muteness seems natural and grateful to Jim, as the outcome of the awe and hush that exceeding beauty breathes on the human heart, but by-and-by, as it is prolonged beyond the limits that seem to him fit or agreeable, it begins to get on his nerves. After having so genuinely and wantonly alarmed him, has she brought him here, without any expressions of regret or remorse, simply to steep herself in a silent luxury of selfish enjoyment? After brooding resentfully on this idea for a considerable time, he translates it into speech.

"I thought that you had something to say to me?"

It seems as if her soul had gone out into the sun and April-painted champaign country, and that it is only with an effort and a sigh that she fetches it home again:

"So I have."

"And how much longer am I to wait for it?"

There is no indication of any capacity for patience in his tone.

She brings her look back from the shining morning city, and fixes it wistfully upon him.

"Are you in such a hurry to hear?"

The pathetic streak in her voice, instead of conciliating, chafes him. What is the sense of this paraphernalia of preliminaries? Why not come to the point at once? if indeed there is a point--a fact of which he begins to entertain grave doubts.

"I do not know what you call hurry," he replies drily; "I have been awaiting this mystic utterance for sixteen or seventeen hours."

Her sallow cheek takes on a pinky tinge of mortification at his accent.

"You are quite right," she answers quickly; "I have no business to keep you waiting. I meant to tell you as soon as we got here; I asked you to bring me here on purpose, only----"

"You told me that you must make the communication at some place where it would not matter if you did break down," says he, rather harshly helping her memory; "you must allow that that was not an encouraging exordium. Do you look upon this"--glancing ironically round--"as a particularly suitable place for breaking down?"

Again that pain-evidencing wave of colour flows into her face. There is such an unloving mockery in his displeased voice.

"I shall not break down," she replies, forcing herself to speak with quiet composure; "you need not be afraid that I shall. I know that yesterday I was foolish enough to say the very words you quote, but I was not quite myself then; I did not quite know what I was saying; I had only just heard it."

"It? What IT? Is this a new riddle? For Heaven's sake let us hear the answer to the first before we embark on any fresh one!"

"It is no riddle," replies she, her low patient tones contrasting with his exasperated ones, "nothing could be plainer; it was only that I happened to overhear something rather--rather painful--something that was not intended for me."

His angry cheek blanches as his thought flies arrow-quick to the one subject of his perennial apprehension. Someone has been poisoning her ear with cowardly libels, or yet more dreadful truths about Elizabeth Le Marchant. For a moment or two his tongue cleaves to the roof of his mouth, then he says in a tone which he uselessly tries to make one of calm contempt alone:

"If you had lived longer in Florence, you would know how much importance to attach to its tittle-tattle and *cancans*."

She shakes her head with a sorrowful obstinacy.

"This was no tittle-tattle--no *cancan*."

Her answer seems but to confirm him in this first horrible suspicion.

"It is astonishing," he says, in a strangled voice, "how ready even the best women are to believe evil; what--what evidence have you of the truth of--of these precious stories?"

"What evidence?" she repeats, fastening her sad eyes upon him--"the evidence of my own heart. I realize now that I have known it all along."

Read by the light of his fears, this response is so enigmatic that it dawns upon him with a flash of inexpressible solace that perhaps he may be on the wrong track after all. His ideas are precipitated into such a state of confusion by this blessed possibility that he can only echo in a stupefied tone:

"Have known what all along?"

She has turned round on the stone bench upon which they have hitherto been sitting side by side, and, as he in the eagerness of his listening has done the same thing, they are now opposite to one another, and he feels as well as sees her hungry eyes devouring his face.

"That you are sick of me," she answers, in a heart-wrung whisper, "sick to death of me--that was what she said."

It is impossible to deny that Burgoyne's first impulse is one of relief. He has been mistaken, then. Elizabeth's secret is in the same state of precarious safety as her enemy's departure from Florence had left it in. His second impulse--our second impulses are mostly our best ones, equally free from the headlongness of our first, and the cold worldly wisdom of our third--is one of genuine indignation, concern, and amazement.

"What who said?"

"Mrs. Byng."

His stupefaction deepens.

"Mrs. Byng--Mrs. Byng told you that I was sick of you? Sick to death of you?"

"Oh, no," she cries, even her emotion giving way to her eagerness to correct this misapprehension, "she did not tell *me* so! How could you imagine such a thing? She is far, far too kind-hearted; she would not hurt a fly intentionally, and would be exceedingly pained if she thought I had overheard her."

He shrugs his shoulders despairingly.

"*Je m'y perds!* She told you, and she did not tell you; you heard, and you did not hear."

"I am telling it very stupidly, I know," she says apologetically, "very confusedly; and of course I can't expect you to understand by instinct how it was." She sighs profoundly, and then goes on quickly, and no longer looking at him. "You know she took me to the party, but when we reached the villa, I found that she knew so many people, and I so few, that I should only be a burden to her if I kept continually by her side, and as I was rather tired--you know that I had not been in bed for two or three nights--I thought I would go into the house and rest, so as to be quite fresh by the time you came. I fancied it was not unlikely you might be a little late."

His conscience, at the unintentional reproach of this patient supposition, reminds him of its existence by a sharp prick. How many times has her poor vanity suffered the bruise of being long first at the rendezvous?

"I discovered that chair by the window under the curtain, the one where you found me."

"Well?"

"It was so quiet there, as everybody was in the garden, that I suppose I fell asleep; at least I remember nothing more until suddenly I heard Mrs. Byng's voice saying----"

"Saying what?"

"Her son was with her--he had brought her in to have some tea; it was to him that she was speaking; she was asking him about me, where I was? where he had left me? whether he had seen me lately? And then she said, 'Poor Amelia, Jim really does neglect her shamefully; and yet one cannot help being sorry for him, too; it was such child-stealing in the first instance, and he is evidently dead-sick of her! It is so astonishing that she does not see it!'"

There is something almost terrible in the calm distinctness with which Amelia repeats the sentences that had laid the card-house of her happiness in the dust. Certainly she keeps her promise to him to the letter; she gives no lightest sign of breaking down. There is not a tear in her eye, not a quiver in her voice. After a moment's pause, she continues:

"And then he, Mr. Byng, answered, 'Poor soul, it--it *is* odd! She must have the hide of a hippopotamus.'"

Amelia has finished her narrative, repeating the young man's galling comment, with the same composure as his mother's humiliatingly compassionate ones; and for a space her sole auditor is absolutely incapable of making any criticism upon it. He is forbidden, if he had wished it, to offer her even the mute amends of a dumb endearment, by the reappearance on the scene of a couple of the sun-scorched peasant torments with their straw hand-screens. It is not

likely that those so lately bought should have worn out already; but yet they renew their importunities with such a determined obstinacy, as if they knew this to be the case; and it is not until they are lightened of two more, that they consent once again to retire, leaving the warm bright plateau to the lovers--if indeed they can be called such.



CHAPTER XXI.

"True, be it said, whatever man it said,
That love with gall and honey doth abound;
But if the one be with the other way'd,
For every dram of honey therein found
A pound of gall doth over it redound."

"She was perfectly right," says Amelia, still speaking quite quietly; "it is astonishing that I should not have seen it; and it *was* child-stealing; you were barely twenty-one, and I--I was not very young for a woman even then--I was twenty-three. I ought to have known better."

For once in his life Burgoyne is absolutely bereft of speech. It is always a difficult matter to rebut a charge of being dead sick of a woman without conveying an insult in the very denial; and when there lies a horrid substratum of truth under the exaggeration of the accusation, the difficulty becomes an impossibility.

"However, it might have been much worse," continues Miss Wilson; "just think if I had overheard it only after I had married you, when I knew that there was nothing but death that could rid you of me. I thank God I have heard it in time."

His throat is still too dry for him to speak; but he stretches out his arm to encircle her in a mute protest at that thanksgiving over her own shipwreck; but, for the first time in her life, she eludes his caress.

"Child-stealing," she repeats, under her breath; "and yet"--with a touching impulse of apology and deprecation--"you seemed old for your age; you seemed so much in earnest; I think you really were;"--a wistful pause--"and afterwards, though of course I could not help seeing that I was not to you what you were to me, yet I thought--I hoped that if I waited--if I was patient--if no one else--no one more worthy of you came between us"--another and still wistfuller delay in her halting speech--"you might grow a little fond of me, out of long habit; I never expected you to be more than a little fond of me!"

He has entirely hidden his face in his two hands, so that she is without that index to guide her as to the effect produced by her words, and he continues completely silent. Whether, even after her rude awakening, she still, deep in her heart, cherishes some pale hope of a denial, an explaining away of the reported utterances, who shall say? It is with a half-choked sigh that she goes on:

"But you could not; I am not so unjust as not to know that you tried your best. Poor fellow! it must have been uphill work for you"--with a first touch of bitterness--"*labouring* to love me, for eight years; is it any wonder that you failed? and I was so thick-skinned I did not see it--the '*hide of a hippopotamus*' indeed! There could not be a juster comparison; and now all I can do is to beg your pardon for having spoilt eight of your best years--*your best years*"--with slow iteration; "but come"--more lightly--"you have some very good ones left too; you are still quite young; for a man you are quite young; the harm I have done you is not irreparable; I think"--with an accent of reproach--"you might ease my mind by telling me that the harm I have done you is not irreparable!"

Thus appealed to, it is impossible for him any longer to maintain his attitude of disguise and concealment. His hands must needs be withdrawn from before his face; and, as he turns that face towards her, she perceives with astonishment, almost consternation, that there is an undoubted tear in each of his hard gray eyes.

"And what about the harm I have done to you?" he asks under his breath, as if having no confidence in his voice; "what about the eight best years of *your* life?"

A look of affection, so high and tender and selfless, as to seem to remove her love out of the category of the mortal and the transitory, dawns and grows in her wan face.

"Do not fret about them," she answers soothingly, "they were--they always will have been--the eight best years of my life. They were full of good and pleasant things. Do not forget--I would not for worlds have you forget--I shall never forget myself--that they all came to me through you!"

At her words, most innocent as they are of any intention of producing such an effect, a hot flush of shame rises to his very forehead, as his memory presents to him the successive eras into which these eight good years had divided themselves: six months of headlong boyish passion; six months of cooling fever; and seven years of careless,

intermittent, matter-of-course, half-tenderness.

"Through *me*?" he repeats, with an accent of the deepest self-abasement; "you do not mean to be ironical, dear; you were never such a thing in your life; you could not be if you tried; but if you knew what a *sweep* you make me feel when you say the sort of thing you have just said!--and so it is all to come to an end, is it? Good as these eight years have been, you have had enough of them? You do not want any more like them?"

She says neither yes nor no. He remains unanswered, unless the faint smile in her weary eyes and about her drooped mouth can count for a reply.

"And all because you have heard some fool say that I was tired of you?"

The tight smile spreads a little wider, and invades her pale cheeks.

"Worse than tired! *sick! sick to death!*"

She is looking straight before her, at the landscape simmering in the climbing sun, the divine landscape new and young as it was before duomo and bell-tower sprang and towered heavenwards. Why should her gaze dwell any more upon him? She has renounced him, her eyes must fain renounce him too. As he hears her words, as he watches her patient profile, the sole suffering thing in the universal morning joy, a great revulsion of feeling, a great compassion mixed with as large a remorse pours in torrent over his heart. These emotions are so strong that they make him deceive even himself as to their nature. It seems to him as if scales had suddenly fallen from his eyes, showing him how profoundly he prizes the now departing good, telling him that life can neither ask nor give anything better than the undemanding, selfless, boundless love about to withdraw its shelter from him. His arm steals round her waist, and not once does it flash across his mind--as, to his shame be it spoken, it has often flashed before--what a long way it has to steal!

"Am I sick of you, Amelia?"

She makes no effort to release herself. It does him no harm that she should once more rest within his clasp. But she still looks straight before her at lucent Firenze and her olives, and says three times, accompanying each repetition of the word with a sorrowful little head-shake:

"Yes! *yes!* YES!"

He will compel her to look at him, his own Amelia. Have not all her tender looks been his for eight long years? He puts out his disengaged hand, and with it determinately turns her poor quivering face round so as to meet his gaze.

"Am I sick of you, Amelia?"

In the emotion of the moment, it appears to him as if there were something almost ludicrously improbable and lying about that accusation, in which, when first brought against him, his guilty soul had admitted more than a grain of truth. Her faded eyes turn to his, like flowers to their sun; the veracity of his voice and of his eager gray orbs--still softened from their habitual severity by the tears that had so lately wet them--making such a hope, as, five minutes ago, she had thought never again to cherish, leap into splendid life in her sick heart.

"Is it possible?" she murmurs, almost inaudibly, "do you mean--that you are *not*?"

They go down the hill, past the cottages, and the incurious peasants, hand in hand, her soul running over with a deep joy; and his occupied by an unfamiliar calm, that is yet backed by an ache of remorse, and by--what else? That "else" he himself neither could nor would define. He spends the whole of that day with Amelia, both lunching and dining with her and her family; a course which calls forth expressions of unaffected surprise, not at all tinctured with malice--unless it be in the case of Sybilla, who has never been partial to him--from each of them.

"We have been thinking that Jim was going to jilt you, Amelia!" Cecilia has said with graceful badinage; nor, strange to say, has she been at all offended when Jim has retorted, with equal grace and much superior ill-nature, that on such a subject no one could speak with more authority than she.

The large white stars are making the nightly sky almost as gorgeous as the day's departed majesty had done, ere Jim finds himself back at his hotel. His intention of quietly retreating to his own room is traversed by Byng, who, having evidently been on the watch for him, springs up the stairs, three steps at a time, after him.

"Where have you been all day?" he inquires impatiently.

"At the Anglo-American. I wonder you are not tired of always asking the same question and receiving the same answer to it."

"I am not so sure that I should always receive the same answer," replies the other, with a forced laugh--"but stop a bit!"--seeing a decided quickening of speed in his friend's upward movements--"my mother is asking for you; she has been asking for you all the afternoon; she wants to speak to you before she goes."

"Goes?"

"Yes, she is off at seven o'clock to-morrow morning--back to England: she had a telegram to-day to say that her old aunt, the one who brought her up, has had a second stroke. No!"--seeing Jim begin to arrange his features in that decorous shape of grave sympathy which we naturally assume on such occasions--"it is no case of great grief; the poor old woman has been quite silly ever since her last attack; but mother thinks that she ought to be there, at--at the end; to look after things, and so forth."

There is an alertness, a something that expresses the reverse of regret in the tone employed by Mrs. Byng's son in this detailed account of the causes of her imminent departure, which, even if his thoughts had not already sprung in that direction, would have set Burgoyne thinking as to the mode in which the young man before him is likely to employ the liberty that his parent's absence will restore to him.

"I offered to go with her," says Byng, perhaps discerning a portion at least of his companion's disapprobation.

"And she refused?"

Byng looks down, and begins to kick the banisters--they are still on the stairs--idly with one foot.

"Mother is so unselfish that it is always difficult to make out what she really wishes; but--but I do not quite see of what use I should be to her if I did go."

There is a moment's pause; then Burgoyne speaks, in a dry, hortatory elder brother's voice:

"If you take my advice you will go home."

The disinterested counsel of wise elder brothers is not always taken in the spirit it merits; and there is no trace of docile and unquestioning acquiescence in Byng's monosyllabic--

"Why?"

"Because, if you stay here, I think you will most likely get into mischief."

The young man's usually good-humoured eyes give out a blue spark that looks rather like fight.

"The same kind of mischief that you have been getting into during the past week?" he inquires slowly.

The acquaintance with his movements evidenced by this last sentence, no less than the light they throw upon his own motives, stagger Jim, to the extent of making him accept the sneer in total silence. Is not it a richly deserved one? But the sweet-natured Byng is already repenting it; and there is something conciliatory and almost entreating in the spirit of his last remark:

"I do not know what has happened to my mother," he says, lowering his voice; "there is no one less of a *mauvaise langue* than she, as you know; but in the case of---"--he breaks off and begins his sentence afresh; "she has been warning me against *them* again; I can't find that she has any reason to go upon; but she has taken a violent prejudice against *her*. She says that it is one of her instincts; and you--you have done nothing towards setting her right?"

Perhaps it may be that his young friend's reported metaphor of the "hippopotamus hide" has not served to render him any dearer to Jim; but there is certainly no great suavity in his reply:

"Why should I?--it is no concern of mine."

"No concern of yours to stand by and see an angel's white robe besmirched by the foul mire of slander?" cries Byng indignantly, and lapsing into that high-flown mood which never fails to make his more work-a-day companion "see blood."

"When I come across such a disagreeable sight it will be time enough to decide whether I will interfere or not. At present I have not met with anything of the kind," returns he, resolutely putting an end to the dialogue by knocking at Mrs. Byng's portal, within which he is at once admitted.

The door of the bedroom communicating with the *salon* is open, and through it he sees the lady he has come to visit standing surrounded by gaping dress-baskets, strewn raiment, and scattered papers; all the uncomfortable litter that speaks of an imminent departure. She joins him at once, and, shutting the door behind her, sits down with a fagged air.

"I hear," he begins--"Willy tells me--I am very sorry to hear----"

"Oh, there is no great cause for sorrow," rejoins she quickly, as if anxious to disclaim a grief which might be supposed to check or limit her conversation--"poor dear old auntie!--the people who love her best could not wish to keep her in the state she has been in for the last year; oh, dear!"--sighing--"how very dismal the dregs of life are! do not you hope, Jim, that we shall die before we come to be 'happy releases'?"

"I do indeed," replies he gravely; "I expect to be sick--dead-sick of life long before I reach that stage of it."

He looks at her resentfully as she speaks, but she has so entirely forgotten her own application of the accented adjectives to his feelings for Amelia, that she replies only by a rather puzzled but perfectly innocent glance.

"I never was so unwilling to leave any place in my life," she goes on presently, pursuing her own train of thought; "I do not know how to describe it--a sort of presentiment."

He smiles.

"And yet I do not think that there are any owls in the Piazza to hoot under your windows!"

"Perhaps not," rejoins she, with some warmth; "but what is still more unlucky than that happened to me last night; they passed the wine the wrong way round the table at the MacIvors. I was on thorns!"

"And you think that the wine going the wrong way round the table gave your aunt a stroke?" inquires Jim, with an irritating air of asking for information.

Mrs. Byng reddens slightly.

"I think nothing of the kind; I draw no inference; I only state a fact; it *is* a very unlucky thing to send the wine round the wrong way: if you had not spent your life among grizzly bears and cannibals you would have known it too!"

"There are no cannibals in the Rocky Mountains," corrects Jim quietly; and then they both laugh, and recommence their talk on a more friendly footing.

"I am not at all happy about Willy."

"No?"

"It is not his health so much--his colour is good, and his appetite not bad."

"Except the Fat Boy in 'Pickwick,' I never heard of anyone who had a better."

"But he is not himself; there is something odd about him!"

"Indeed!"

"Have not you noticed it yourself?--do not you think that there is something odd about him? Does not he strike you as odd?"

"*Odd?*" repeats Burgoyne slowly, reflecting in how extremely commonplace a light both the virtues and vices of his fellow-traveller have always presented themselves to him; "it would never have occurred to me that Willy was *odd*; I cannot"--smiling--"encourage you in the idea that you have added one to the number of the world's eccentrics."

She sighs rather impatiently at his apparently intentional misunderstanding of her drift.

"'Children are avenues to misfortune,' as somebody said, and I think that, whoever he was, he was right. 'If Jacob take a wife of the daughters of Heth, such as are those in the land, what good shall my life do to me?'"

"Why should you credit Jacob with any such intention?"

"I do not half like leaving him here by himself."

"*By himself?* You count me as no one then?"

"Oh yes, I do--I count you as a great deal; that is why I was so anxious to speak to you before I went; of course I do not expect you to take upon yourself the whole responsibility of him, but you might keep an eye upon him."

He shrugs his shoulders.

"As I have to keep the other eye upon myself, I am afraid that the effort would but make me squint."

"It is his own generosity that I am afraid of--his self-sacrificing impulses; I am always in terror of his marrying someone out of pure good-nature, just to oblige her, just because she looked as if she wished it."

"Stevenson thinks that it does not much matter whom we marry, whether 'noisy scullions,' or 'acidulous vestals.'"

"I do not care what Stevenson thinks: ever since Willy was in Eton jackets, I have had a nightmare of his bringing me home as daughter-in-law some poor little governess with her nose through her veil, and her fingers through her gloves!"

Burgoyne smiles involuntarily as a vision of Elizabeth's daintily-clad hands flashes before his mental eye.

"I think you overrate his magnanimity; I never saw him at all tender to anyone whose gloves were not beyond suspicion."

Mrs. Byng laughs constrainedly.

"Well, if she has not holes in her gloves, she may have holes in her reputation, which is worse."

Jim draws in his breath hard. The tug of war is coming, as the preceding leading remark, lugged in by the head and shoulders, sufficiently evidences. At all events he will do nothing to make its approach easier or quicker. He awaits it in silence.

"These Le Marchants--as they are friends of yours--I suppose that I ought not to say anything against them?"

"I am sure that you are too well-bred to do anything of the kind," replies he precipitately, with a determined effort to stop her mouth with a compliment, which she is equally determined not to deserve.

"I do not think I am; I am only well-bred now and then, when it suits me; I am not going to be well-bred to-night."

"I am sorry to hear it."

"Whether they are friends of yours or not, I do not like them."

"I do not think that that matters much, either to you or to them."

"I have an instinct that they are adventuresses."

"I know for a certainty"--with growing warmth--"that they are nothing of the kind."

"Then why do not they go out anywhere?"

"Because they do not choose."

"Because no one asks them, more likely! Why were they so determined not to be introduced to me?"

"How can I tell? Perhaps"--with a wrathful laugh--"they did not like your looks!"

She echoes his false mirth with no inferior exasperation.

"Who is ill-bred now?"

Her tone calls him back to a sense of the ungentleman-likeness and puerility of his conduct.

"I!"--he replies contritely--"undoubtedly I! but----"

"Do not apologize," interrupts she, recovering her equanimity with that ease which she has transmitted to her son; "I like you for standing up for them if they *are* your friends; and I hope that you will do the same good office for me when someone sticks pins into me behind my back; but come now, let us be rational; surely we may talk quietly about them without insulting each other, may not we?"

"I do not know; we can try."

"I suppose"--a little ironically--"that you are not so sensitive about them but that you can bear me to ask a few perfectly harmless questions?"

He writhes. "Of course! of course! what are they to me?--they are nothing to me!"

A look of incredulity, which she perhaps does not take any very great pains to conceal, spreads over her face.

"Then you really will be doing me a great service if you tell me just exactly all you know about them, good and bad."

"All I know about them," replies Jim in a rapid parrot-voice, as if he were rattling over some disagreeable lesson--"is that they were extremely kind to me ten years ago; that they had a beautiful place in Devonshire, and were universally loved and respected: I hear that they have let their place; so no doubt they are not so much loved and respected as they were; and now you know as much about the matter as I do!"



CHAPTER XXII.

"Welcome ever smiles; and Farewell goes out sighing."

This last clause is not always true. For example, there is very little sighing in the farewells made to Mrs. Byng by the two young men who see her off at the Florence Railway Station. And Mrs. Byng herself has been too much occupied in manoeuvring to get a few last private words with each of her escort to have much time for sighing either.

She would have been wounded if her old friend Jim had not come to see the last of her, and she would have been broken-hearted if her son had not paid her this final attention; and yet each necessarily destroys the *tete-a-tete* she is burning to have with the other. It is indelicate to implore your adored child not to go to the devil in the presence of an intimate friend, and it would give a not unnatural umbrage to that child if you urged the guardian friend to check his downward tendency while he himself is standing by. Nor do her two companions at all aid her in her strategy; rather, they show a tendency to unite in baffling her, hanging together round her like a bodyguard, and effectually hindering the last words which she is pining to administer. Only once for a very few minutes does she succeed in outwitting them, when she despatches Willy to the bookstall to buy papers for her--an errand from which he returns with an exasperating celerity. The instant that his back is turned, Mrs. Byng addresses her companion in an eager voice of hurry and prayer:

"You will keep an eye upon him?"

Silence.

"You will keep an eye upon him--promise?"

"I do not know what 'keeping an eye upon him' means in your vocabulary; often you and I do not use the same dictionary; until I know, I will not promise."

"You will look after him; *do*, Jim!"

"My dear madam"--with irritation--"let me go and buy your papers; and meanwhile urge *him* to look after *me*; I assure you that it is quite as necessary."

"Fiddlesticks, with your unimaginative, unemotional nature----"

"H'm!"

"Your head will always take care of your heart."

"Will it?"

"While he--promise me at least that, if you see him rushing to his ruin, you will telegraph to me?"

"Certainly, if you wish it; I will telegraph, 'Willy rushing Ruin.' At five-and-twenty centimes a word, it will cost you sevenpence halfpenny; not dear at the price, is it?"

The mother reddens.

"You have become a very *mauvais plaisant* of late, Jim; oh dear me! here he is back again, tiresome boy!"

It is with feelings tied into a knot of complications, which he scarcely seeks to unravel, that Burgoyne walks away from the station, and from the good-natured staunch woman, whose last few moments in fair Firenze he has done his best to embitter. He is glad that she is gone, and he is sorry that she is gone. He is remorseful at his gladness, and he is ashamed of his sorrow, knowing and acknowledging that it results from no regret for her companionship, which he had been wont to prize; but to the consciousness that she had stood like an angel with a drawn sword between her son and the Piazza d'Azeglio. Both angel and drawn sword are steaming away now, covered by a handsome travelling cloak down to the heels in a *coupe toilette*, and the road to the Piazza lies naked and undefended, open to the light feet that are so buoyantly treading the flags beside him.

The step of youth is always light, but there is something aggressively springy in Byng's this morning; and though he does not *say* anything offensively cheerful, there is a ring in his voice that makes his kind friend long to hit him. He, the kind friend, is thankful when their ways part, without his having done him any bodily violence.

"You are late to-day," says Cecilia, as he enters the *salon*, giving him a nod of indifferent friendliness, while Sybilla crossly asks him to shut the door more quietly, and Amelia lays her hand lingeringly in his, with a silent smile of rapture; "we began to think you had had a relapse. I was just telling Amelia that the pace had been too good to last--ha, ha!"

Burgoyne has always found it difficult to laugh at Cecilia's jokes, and his now perfect intimacy with her relieves him from the necessity of even feigning to do so.

"I have been seeing Mrs. Byng off," he replies, with that slight shade of awkwardness in his tone which has accompanied his every mention of the mother or son since his explanation with his betrothed.

"You let her go without getting that wedding present out of her, after all?" cries Cecilia, who is in a rather tryingly playful mood.

"Gone, is she?" says Sybilla, with a somewhat ostentatious sigh of resentful relief; "well, I, for one, shall not cry. I am afraid that she was not very *simpatica* to me; she was so dreadfully robust. Perhaps, now that she is no longer here to monopolise him, we shall be allowed to see something more of that nice boy."

No one answers. Not one of her three listeners is at the moment disposed to chant or even echo praises of the "nice boy." Sybilla perversely pursues the subject.

"I dare say that he has a delicacy about coming without a special invitation," she says, "where there is an invalid; but you might tell him that on my good days no one is more pleased to see their friends than I; it does not even send my temperature up; you might tell him that on my good days Dr. Coldstream says it does not even send my temperature up!"

Again no one answers.

"You do not seem to be listening to what I am saying," cries Sybilla fractiously; "will you please tell him, Jim?"

Jim lifts his heavy eyes from the ugly carpet on which they have been resting, and looks distastefully back at her.

"I do not think that I will, Sybilla," he replies slowly; "I do not think he cares a straw whether your temperature goes up or down. I think that he does not come here because--because he has found metal more attractive elsewhere."

He makes this statement for no other reason than because it is so intensely unpleasant to him, because he realizes that he must have to face the fact it embodies, and to present it not only to himself, but to others. And each day that passes proves to him more and more conclusively that it *is* a fact. He asks Byng no question as to the disposition of his day. He sees but little of him, having, indeed, changed the hours of his own breakfast and dinner in order to avoid having his appetite spoiled by the sight of so much unnecessary radiance opposite him; but he knocks up against him, flower-laden, at the Strozzi steps; he notes the splendour of his ties and waistcoats; he grows to know the *Elizabeth-look* on his face, when he comes singing home at evening, as one knows the look of the western clouds that the sun's red lips have only just ceased to kiss, though no sun is any longer in sight; and yet he does not interfere. He has received from the young man's mother a hasty letter, pencilled in the train, not an hour after she had quitted him; another more leisurely, yet as anxious, from Turin; a third from Paris, and lastly a telegram from Charing Cross. All bear the same purport.

"Write; keep an eye upon him!" "Write; keep an eye upon him! Write!"

And yet, though a full week has passed, though he sees the son of his old ally drifting, faster than ever autumn leaf drifted on a flush October river, to the whirlpool she had dreaded for him, yet he sends her never a word. He writes her long letters, it is true, covers telegram-forms with pregnant messages, but they all find their ultimate home in the wood fire. When the moment comes, he finds it impossible to send them, since, upon searching his heart for the motives that have dictated them, he finds those motives to be no fidelity to an ancient friendship, no care for the boy's welfare, but, simply and nakedly, the satisfaction of his own spite, the easing of his own bitter jealousy.

So the Florentine post goes out daily, bearing no tale of Byng's backslidings to his native land, and Jim, brushing past him, answering him curtly, never going nearer to the Piazza d'Azeglio than the Innocenti--a good long street off--devotes himself to the frantic prosecution of a suit long since won, to the conquest of a heart for eight weary years hopelessly, irrecoverably, pitifully his. His presence at the Anglo-American is so incessant, and his monopolizing of Amelia so unreasonable, that Sybilla--for the first time in her life really a little neglected--alternately runs up her pulse to 170 and drops it to 40.

"And then you wonder that I am anxious to be married," says Cecilia, accompanying her future brother-in-law to the door, on the day on which the latter phenomenon has occurred, and wiping the angry tears from her plump cheeks. "I

make no secret of it, I *am* madly anxious, I would marry anyone, I am desperate. Just think what my life will be when Amelia is gone; and though of course I shall be a great deal with her--she has promised that I shall be almost always with her" (Jim winces)--"yet of course it can't be the same thing as having a home of your own."

"We will do our best for you," replies he, with a rather rueful smile and a sense of degradation; "but you know, my dear Cis, anybody can lead a horse to the water, but it is not so easy to make him drink."

"That is quite true," replies Cecilia, one of whose most salient merits is an extreme unreadiness to be affronted, wiping her eyes as she speaks, "and I have no luck; such promising things turn up, and then come to nothing. Now, that clergyman the other day, whom we met at the Villa Careggi--such a pleasant gentlemanlike man--he was on the look-out for a wife, he told me so himself, and I know so much about the working of a parish, and next day he was off, Heaven knows where!"

Jim gives a slight shudder.

"I do not think you had any great loss in him," he says hastily; then, seeing her surprised air, "I mean, you know, that it is always said that a man is a better judge of another man than a woman is, and I did not like his looks; give us time, and we will do better for you than that."

Cecilia can no longer accuse her future relation of any slackness in the matter of expeditions. There is something of fever in the way in which he arrives each morning, armed with some new plan for the day, giving no one any peace until his project is carried out. It seems as if he must crowd into the last fortnight of Amelia's stay in Florence all the sight-seeing, all the junkets, all the enjoyment which ought to have been temperately spread over the eight years of their engagement.

One day--all nearer excursions being exhausted--they drive to Monte Senario, that sweet and silent spot, happily too far from Florence for the swarm of tourists to invade, where earth-weary men have set up a rest scarcely less dumb than the grave in a lonely monastery of the Order of La Trappe. Through the Porta San Gallo, along the Bologna Road they go. It is a soft summer morning, with not much sun. Up, past the villas and gardens, where the Banksia roses and wistarias are rioting over wall, and berceau and pergola, climbing even the tall trees. Round the very head of one young poplar two rose-trees--a yellow and a white one--are flinging their arms; flowered so lavishly that hardly a pin's point could be put between the blossoms. Up and up, a white wall on either hand. The dust lies a foot thick on the road; thick too on the monthly roses, just breaking into full pink flush; thick on themselves as the endless mulecarts come jingling down the hill with bells and red tassels, and a general air of what would be jollity were not that feeling so given the lie to by the poor jaded, suffering beasts. Up and up, till they leave stone walls and villas and oliveyards behind them, and are away among the mountains. At a very humble little house that has no air of an inn they leave the carriage, and climb up a rocky road, and through a perfumed pine-wood, to where the Trappist Monastery stands, in its perfect silence and isolation, on its hilltop, looking over its fir-woods at the ranges of the Apennines, lying one behind the other in the stillness of the summer-day; looking to distant Florence, misty and indistinct in her Arno plain; looking to Fiesole, dwarfed to a molehill's dimensions.

"I am told that one of the brothers is an Englishman; I did not hear his name, but he is certainly English," says Cecilia, as they mount the shallow, grass-grown steps to the monastery door. "If I send up word that I am a fellow-countrywoman, perhaps he will come out and speak to me; I am sure that it would be a very nice change for him, poor fellow!"

And it is the measure of the amount of Cecilia's acquaintance with the rules of the Order, that it is only half in jest that she makes the suggestion. But she does not repeat it to the lay-brother who stands, civil yet prohibitory, at the top of the flight, and who, in answer to Burgoyne's halting questions as to where they may go, politely answers that they may go anywhere--anywhere, *bien entendu*, outside. So they wander aimlessly away. They push open a rickety gate, and passing an old dog, barking angry remonstrances at them from the retirement of a barrel, step along a grassy path that leads they know not whither. Two more young lay-brothers meet them, with their hands full of leopard's-bane flowers, which they have been gathering, probably to deck their altar with.

Amelia has passed her hand through Jim's arm--since his late increased kindness to her she has been led to many more little freedoms with him than she had hitherto permitted herself--and though she is very careful not to lean heavily or troublesomely upon him, yet the slight contact of her fingers keeps him reminded that she is there. Perhaps it is as well, since to-day he is conscious of such a strange tendency to forget everything, past, present, and to come. Has one of the monks' numb hands been laid upon his heart to lull it into so frozen a quiet? To-day he feels as if it were absolutely impossible to him to experience either pleasure or pain; as if to hold Elizabeth in his own arms, or see her in Byng's, would be to him equally indifferent. His apathy in this latter respect is to be put to the test sooner than he expects. Not indeed that Elizabeth is lying in Byng's arms--it would be a gross misrepresentation to say so, she being, on the

contrary, most decorously poised on a camp-stool--least romantic of human resting places--when they come suddenly upon her and him in the course of their prowling round the inhospitable walls. She is sitting on her camp-stool, and he is lying on his face in the grass, just not touching her slim feet.

The advancing party perceive the couple advanced upon before the latter are aware of their nearness; long enough for the former to realize how very much *de trop* they will be, yet not long enough to enable them to escape unnoticed. Jim becomes aware of the very second at which Amelia recognises the unconscious pair, by an involuntary pinch of her fingers upon his arm, which a moment later she hastily drops. His own first feeling on catching sight of them--no, not his *very* first--his very first is as if someone had run a darning-needle into his heart--but almost his first is to shout out to them in loud warning:

"Be on your guard! we are close to you!"

He will never forgive either himself or them if they ignorantly indulge in any endearment under his very eyes. But they do not. There are no interlacing arms to disentwine, nothing to make them spring apart, when at length they look up and take in the fact--an unwelcome fact it must needs be--of their invasion.

On hearing approaching footsteps, Byng rolls over on his back in the grass; on perceiving that most of the footsteps are those of ladies, he springs to his feet. Elizabeth remains sitting on her camp-stool.

"What a coincidence!" cries Cecilia, breaking into a laugh.

They are all grateful to her for the remark, though it is rather a silly one, as there is no particular coincidence in the case. Burgoyne is irritatedly conscious that Amelia is covertly observing him, and before he can check himself he has thrown over his shoulder at her one of those snubbing glances from which, for the last ten days, he has painstakingly and remorsefully refrained. It is not a happy moment to look at poor Amelia, as she has not yet cooled down from the heat of her climb through the fir-wood--a heat that translates itself into patchy flushes all over her face, not sparing even her forehead. Elizabeth is flushed too. She has not met Miss Wilson since she had declined Burgoyne's offer of bringing his betrothed to see her, and in her deprecating eyes there is a guilty and tremulous recollection of this fact. But below the guilt and the deprecation and the tremor, what else is there in Elizabeth's eyes? What of splendid and startling, and that comes but once in a lifetime? Rather than be obliged to give a name to that vague radiance, Jim turns his look back upon his own too glowing dear one.

"Did you come here all alone? You two all alone? What fun!" asks Cecilia, with an air of delighted curiosity.

Again her companions inwardly thank her. It is the question that both--though with different degrees of eagerness--have been thirsting to ask.

"Alone?--oh no!" replies Elizabeth, with that uneasy, frightened look that Burgoyne has always noticed on her face when she has been brought into unwilling relation with strangers. "My mother is here--she came with us; why, where is she?"--looking round with a startled air--"she was here a moment ago."

A grim smile curves Jim's mouth. It is evident that the unhappy Mrs. Le Marchant, worn out with her *role* of duenna, has slipped away without being missed by either of her companions. Would they have even discovered her absence but for Cecilia's query?

"Mrs. Le Marchant was here a moment ago," echoes Byng, addressing the company generally; "but"--dodging his friend's eyes--"she said she was a little stiff from sitting so long; she must be quite close by."

"I will go and look for her," says Elizabeth, confused, and rising from her rickety seat as she speaks; but Amelia, who is nearest to her, puts out a friendly hand in prohibition.

"Oh, do not stir!" she cries, smiling kindly and admiringly. "You look so comfortable. Let *me* go and search for Mrs. Le Marchant; I--I--should be afraid to sit down, I am so hot. I should like to find her; Cecilia will help me, and Mr. Byng will show us the way."

It is not always that generous actions meet their meed of gratitude from those for whose sake they are performed; and, though Burgoyne recognises the magnanimity of his *fiancee's* line of conduct, thankfulness to her for it is not the feeling uppermost in his mind when, a few moments later, he finds himself standing in uneasy *tete-a-tete* over the seated Elizabeth.

"Will not you sit down?" she asks presently, adding, with a low, timid laugh, "I do not know why I should invite you, as if"--glancing round at the sun-steeped panorama--"this were my drawing-room."

He complies, taking care to occupy a quite different six feet of herbage from that which still bears the imprint of Byng's

lengthy limbs. The grass grows cool and fresh, full of buttercups and tall blue bugle; out of them the gray monastery wall rises, in its utter lifeless silence, with its small barred windows. Was ever any building, within which is human life, so unutterably still? As he leans his elbow among the king-cups, Jim says to himself that the lovers had chosen their place well and wisely--that the consciousness of the austere, denied lives going on so close behind them, in their entire joylessness, must have given an added point, a keener edge to the poignancy of their own enjoyment of the sweet summer day outside.

"You have not been to see us for a long time," says Elizabeth presently, in a small and diffident voice, after having waited until the probability of his speaking first has become a mere possibility, and even that a faint one.

He replies baldly, "No."

His look is fixed on a knoll, whence the monks must have gathered their leopard's bane. They cannot have gathered much, so bounteously do the gay yellow flowers still wave on the hillock. Nearer stands a colony of purple orchises, and from them the eye travels away to the silent fir-wood, to the range of misty hills and the distant plain, touched now and again by a vague hint of sunshine, that makes one for the moment feel sure that one has detected Duomo or Campanile. How many hill ranges there are! One can count six or seven, like the ridges in a gigantic ploughed field, one behind another--all solemnly beautiful on this windless day of grave and ungaudy sweetness. Has the young man been reckoning the ranks of the Apennines, that it is so long before he adds a low-voiced, mocking question to his monosyllable?

"Have you missed me very much?"

The woman addressed seems in no hurry to answer. She has drawn her narrow brown brows together, as if in the effort to hit truth in her nicest shade in her answer. Then she speaks with a sort of soft self-remonstrance:

"Oh, surely! I *must* have missed you--you were so extraordinarily, so unaccountably kind to us!"

There is not one of us who would not rather be loved for what we *are* than for what we *do*; so it is perhaps no wonder if the young woman's reply strikes with an unreasonable chill upon the asker's heart.

"You must have been very little used to kindness all your life," he says, with some brusqueness, "to be so disproportionately grateful for my trumpery civilities."

She hesitates a moment, then:

"You are right," she replies; "I have not received any great kindness in my life--justice, well, yes, I suppose so--but no, not very much mercy."

Her candid and composed admission of a need for mercy whets yet farther that pained curiosity which has always been one of the strongest elements in his uncomfortable interest in her. But the very sharpness of that interest makes him shy away awkwardly from the subject of her past.

"I always think," he says, "that there is something fatuous in a man's apologizing to a lady for not having been to see her, as if the loss were hers, and not his."

"Is there? All the same, I am sorry that you did not come."

This simple and unsophisticated implication of a liking for him would have warmed again the uneasy heart that her former speech had chilled had not he, under the superficial though genuine regret of her face, seen, still shining with steady lustre, that radiance which has as little been called forth by, as it can be dimmed by him or anything relating to him. And so he passes by in silence the expression of that sorrow which he bitterly knows to be so supportable.

The still spirit of the day seems to have touched the very birds. They sing a few low notes in veiled, chastened voices from the fir-wood, and again are silent. The clock tells the hours in quarters to the doomed lives inside the monastery, self-doomed to suffering and penance and incarceration, even with the winning blue of the Tuscan sky above their tonsured heads, with the forget-me-nots pressing their feet, and the nightingales singing endless love-songs to them from the little dark forest nigh at hand.

"I suppose," says Elizabeth presently, in a reflective tone, "that the fact is, when people are in your position--I mean on the brink of a great deep happiness--they forget all lesser things?"

He snatches a hasty glance of suspicion at her. Is this her revenge for his neglect of her? But nothing can look more innocent or less ironical than her small profile, bent towards the gigantic forget-me-nots and the pulmonaria, azure as gentians.

"Perhaps."

"The big fish"--her little face breaking into one of her lovely smiles, which, by a turn of her head from side to full, she offers in its completeness to his gaze--"swallows up all the little gudgeons! Poor little gudgeons."

"Poor little gudgeons!" he echoes stupidly, and then begins to laugh at his own wool-gathering.

"And now I suppose you will be going directly--going home?" pursues she, looking at him and his laughter with a soft surprise.

"I hope so; and--and--you too?"

She gives a start, and the sky-coloured nosegay in her hand drops into her lap.

"We--we? Why should *we* go home? We have nothing pleasant to go to, and"--looking round with a passionate relish at mountain, and suffused far plain, and sappy spring grass--"we are so well--so infinitely well here!" Then, pulling herself together, and speaking in a more composed key, "But yes, of course we, too, shall go by-and-by; this cannot last for ever--nothing lasts for ever. That is the one thought that has kept me alive all these years; but now----"

She breaks off.

"But now?"

Even as he watches her, putting this echoed interrogation, he sees the radiance breaking through the cloud his question had gathered, as a very strong sun breaks through a very translucent exhalation.

"But now?" she repeats vaguely, and smiling to herself, forgetful of his very presence beside her--"But now? Did I say 'But now?' Ah, here they are back again!"



CHAPTER XXIII.

"I am going to turn the tables on you," says Amelia next morning to her lover, after the usual endearments, which of late he has been conscientiously anxious not to scant or slur, have passed between them, very fairly executed by him, and adoringly accepted and returned by her; "you are always arranging treats for me; now I have planned one for you!"

She looks so beaming with benevolent joy as she makes this statement, that Jim stoops and drops an extra kiss--not in the bond--upon her lifted face. "Indeed, dear!" he answers kindly, "I do not quite know what I have done to deserve it; but I hope it is a nice one."

"It is very nice--delightful."

"Delightful, eh?" echoes he, raising his brows, while a transient wonder crosses his mind as to what project she or anyone else could suggest to him that, at this juncture of his affairs, could merit that epithet; "well, am I to guess what it is? or are you going to tell me?"

Amelia's face still wears that smile of complacent confidence in having something pleasant to communicate which has puzzled her companion.

"We have never been at Vallombrosa, have we?" asks she.

"Never."

"Well, we are going there to-morrow."

"Are we? is that your treat?" inquires he, wondering what of peculiarly and distinctively festal for him this expedition may be supposed to have above all their former ones.

"And we are not going alone."

"There is nothing very exceptional in that; Cecilia is mostly good enough to lend us her company."

"I am not thinking of Cecilia; I have persuaded"--the benevolent smile broadening across her cheeks--"I have persuaded some friends of yours to join us."

It does not for an instant cross his mind either to doubt or to affect uncertainty as to who the friends of whom she speaks may be; but the suggestion is so profoundly unwelcome to him, that not even the certainty of mortifying the unselfish creature before him can hinder him from showing it. Her countenance falls.

"You are not glad?" she asks crestfallenly, "you are not pleased?"

It is impossible for him to say that he is, and all that is left to him is to put his vexation into words that may be as little as possible fraught with disappointment to his poor hearer's ear.

"I--I--had rather have had you to myself."

"Would you really?" she asks, in the almost awed tones of one who, from being quite destitute, has had the Koh-i-Noor put into his hand, and whose fingers are afraid to close over the mighty jewel; "would you really? then I am sorry I asked them; but"--with intense wistfulness--"if you only knew how I long to give you a little pleasure, a little enjoyment--you who have given me so infinitely much."

If Miss Wilson were ever addicted to the figure of speech called irony, she might be supposed to be employing it now; but one glance at her simple face would show that it expressed nothing but adoring gratitude. Her one good fortnight has spread its radiant veil backwards over her eight barren years.

He takes her hand, and passes the fingers across his lips, murmuring indistinctly and guiltily behind them:

"Do I really make you happy?"

"Do you?"--echoes she, while the transfiguring tears well into her glorified pale eyes--"I should not have thought it possible that so much joy could have been packed into any fortnight as I have had crammed into mine!"

They have to set off to Vallombrosa at seven o'clock in the morning, an hour at which few of us are at our cleverest, handsomest, or our best tempered; nor is the party of six, either in its proportion of women to men--four to two--or in its component parts, a very well adjusted one. They are too numerous to be contained in one carriage, and are therefore divided into two separate bands--three and three. Whether by some manoeuvre of the well-meaning Amelia, or by some scarcely fortunate accident, Burgoyne finds himself seated opposite to his betrothed and to Elizabeth; while Byng follows in the second vehicle as *vis-a-vis* to Cecilia and Mrs. Le Marchant. There is a general feeling of wrongness about the whole arrangement--a sense of mental discomfort equivalent to that physical one of having put on your clothes inside out, or buttoned your buttons into unanswering buttonholes.

Mrs. Le Marchant's face, as Burgoyne catches sight of it now and then, as some turn in the road reveals the inmates of the closely-following second carriage to his view, wears that uneasy and disquieted look which always disfigures it when there is any question of her being brought into personal relation with strangers. And Elizabeth, of whom he has naturally a much nearer and more continuous view, is plainly ill-at-ease. Miss Wilson has not thought it necessary to mention to her lover how strong had been the opposition to her plan on the part of the objects of it; nor, that it was only because her proposal was made *viva voce*, and therefore unescapable, that it had been reluctantly accepted at last. At first Burgoyne had attributed Elizabeth's evident ill-at-easiness to her separation from Byng; but he presently discovers that it is what she possesses, and not what she lacks, that is the chief source of her *malaise*. During the latter part of his own personal intercourse with her she had been, when in his company, sometimes sad, sometimes wildly merry; but always entirely natural. Strange as it may seem, it is obviously the presence of Amelia that puts constraint upon her. Before the spirit of that most unterrifying of God's creatures, Elizabeth's "stands rebuked." Once or twice he sees her inborn gaiety--that gaiety whose existence he has so often noted as it struggles up from under the mysterious weight of sorrow laid upon it--spurt into life, only to be instantly killed by the reassumption of that nervous formal manner which not all Amelia's gentle efforts can break through.

A very grave trio they drive along through the grave day. For it is, alas! a grave day--overcast, now turning to rain, now growing fair again awhile. Not a grain of Italy's summer curse, her choking white dust, assails their nostrils. It must have rained all night. Through the suburbs by the river, crossing and recrossing that ugly iron interloper the railway; by the river flowing at the foot of the fair green hills, so green, so green on this day of ripe accomplished spring. The whole country is one giant green garland, of young wheat below and endless vine necklaces above--necklaces of new juicy, just-born, yet vigorous vine-leaves. The very river runs green with the reflection of the endless verdure on its banks. The road is level as far as Pontassieve, the town through which they roll, and then it begins to mount--mounts between garden-like hills, dressed in vine leaves and iris-flowers, and the dull fire of red clover; while the stream twists in flowing companionship at the valley bottom, until they turn abruptly away from it, up into a steep and narrow valley, almost a gorge, and climb up and up one side of it, turning and winding continually to break the steepness of the ascent. However broken, it is steep still. But who would wish to pass at more than a foot's pace through this great sheet of lilac irises wrapping the mountain side, past this bean-field that greets the nostrils with its homely familiar perfume, along this wealthy bit of hedge, framed wholly of honeysuckle in flower? At sight of the latter Elizabeth gives a little cry.

"Oh, what honeysuckle! I must have some! I must get out! Tell him to stop!"

In a moment her commands are obeyed; in another moment Byng has sprung out of the second carriage and is standing beside her. The door of Byng's vehicle is stiff apparently, and a sardonic smile breaks over the elder man's face as he hears the noise of the resounding kicks administered to it by the younger one's impatient foot. But he need not have been in such a hurry--no one interferes with his office of rifling the hedge of its creamy and coral bugles.

Burgoyne gets out of the carriage; but it is only to walk to the other one and assume Byng's vacated seat.

"Are you going to change places?" Amelia has asked rather chapfallenly as he leaves her; and he has given her hand a hasty pressure, and answered affectionately--

"It will not be for long, dear; but you know"--with an expressive glance, and what he rather too sanguinely hopes looks like a smile in the direction of the flower-gatherers--"fair play is a jewel!"

If his departure from the one vehicle is deplored, it is not welcomed at the other. Cecilia asks the same question as her sister had put, though the intonation is different.

"Are you going to change places?"--adding--"do not you think we did very well as we were?"

But probably he is too much occupied in wrestling with the stiff door to hear her, for he makes no answer beyond getting in. The only reward that he receives for his piece of self-sacrifice is a rapturous look of gratitude from Byng, when he perceives the changed position of his affairs, and that recompense Jim had far rather have been without.

They are off again. Being now second in the little procession, Burgoyne has but meagre and difficult views of the first; but now and again, when the road describes an acuter angle than usual, he can by turning his whole body, under pretext of admiring the view, snatch a glimpse of all three occupants leaning their heads sociably together, evidently in bright light talk. After all, he had deceived himself. It is he and not Amelia who had made her shy. Even when he cannot see her, there come to his ears little wafts of laughter, in which her voice is mixed. He catches himself trying to recall whether she had laughed even once during the period of his being her companion. There is not much mirth in his own carriage. What a kill-joy he has grown! Cecilia, though her heart is as pure as the babe unborn of any serious designs on Byng, of which indeed she has long seen the fruitlessness, yet thinks a sulky brother-in-law-elect but a poor exchange for a handsome young acquaintance, whom neither his good manners nor the amount of his intimacy allow to sit opposite to her in grumpy silence. Mrs. Le Marchant is obviously as ill at ease as was her daughter when in his fellowship, though in this case a little observation shows him that he counts for nothing in her discomfort of mind, but that she is watching the other half of the party with an anxiety as keen, if almost as covert, as his own. She is too well-bred indeed not to endeavour to keep up a decent show of conversation, but as neither of her companions makes any effort to second her, an ever-deepening silence falls upon them as they advance, nor, as the day grows older, is the weather calculated to exhilarate their spirits.

The sky's frown becomes more and more pronounced the higher they mount. Through a village nobly seated on its hilltop, but, like most Italian townlets, squalid enough on a nearer view--up and up--up and up--till they reach what were once groves of stately chestnuts, but where the hungry Tuscan axe has left nothing but twigs and saplings, but never a spreading tree; then on into the fir-woods, which are woods indeed, though even here the hatchet's cruel tooth has begun to bite. No sooner is their dark umbrage reached than the mist, that has been hanging with threatening lowness above the travellers' heads, comes down close, blinding, clinging like wet flannel, and as thick.

"Perhaps it will lift," Jim says, with a sort of dismal unlikely hopefulness as he strains his eyes, trying to look down the straight solemn fir aisles, with their files upon files of tall stems, that seem to be seen only as if through a thick gauze. Neither of his companions has the spirit necessary to echo the supposition. The road winds endlessly, steeper and steeper up through the mist. The tired horses step wearily, and the unfortunate pleasure-seekers are beginning to think that the muffled monotony of firs, of winding road, of painfully labouring horses, will never end, when the vetturino turns round with a smile on his fog-wet face, and says, "Vallombrosa!"

Under other circumstances, the announcement might have been cheering, might have excited a poetic curiosity; but as it is, the hood of the vehicle--necessarily raised some miles back--is so far poked forward that nothing is to be seen but a pour of rain--the rain has begun to descend in torrents--a glass-door in a house-wall opening to admit them, and a waiter holding up a green umbrella to protect their descent. Neither he nor the landlord, nor yet the chambermaid, show any signs of mirth or wonder at their arrival among the clouds on such a day. They are used to mad Inglese. And amongst the mad Inglese themselves there is certainly no temptation to mad merriment. On such an occasion there is nothing to do but eat, so they lunch dismally in a long, bare dining-room, with a carpetless floor, a table laid for a grossly improbable number of guests, and a feeling of searching cold. Having spun out their scanty meal to the utmost limits of possibility, and washed it down with the weakest red wine that ever lived in a wicker bottle, they pass into a funereal *salon*, to which the waiter invites them. Someone makes the cheering announcement that they have as yet been here only half an hour, and that the horses must have two full hours to bait before there can be any question of beginning the return journey. And then they amble about the room, looking at the dreadful lithographs of Italy's plain King and fair Queen on the walls; at the venerable journals and gaudy English storybook, so dull as to have been forgotten by its owner, on the table. Their spirits are not heightened by a pervading sense as of being in a cellar, minus the wine. The equipment of this pleasant apartment is completed by a half-dead nosegay of what must once have been charming mountain blossoms. The sight decides them. They must go out. Perhaps even through this opaque cloud they may dimly see the mountain flowers growing, the mountain brooks dashing, which John Milton has told them that--

"the Etrurian shades,
High over-arch'd imbower."

They all catch at the suggestion, when made by Byng, and presently sally forth to see as much of Vallombrosa as a fog that would not have disgraced the Strand, as a close blanket of almost *confluent* rain, and as umbrellas held well down over their cold noses, will let them; Mrs. Le Marchant alone declines to be one of the party, and is left sitting, swaddled in all the superfluous wraps, on a horsehair chair in the *salon*, to stare at the wall and at King Humbert's ugly face, until such time as her companions see fit to release her. It is no wonder that Burgoyne overhears her eagerly whispering to Elizabeth a request that she will not stay too long away. And Elizabeth, whose spirits have gone up like a rocket at the prospect of a taste of the fresh air, and who knows what else, lays her little face, crowned with a deer-stalking cap, against her mother's, and promises, and skips away.

At first they all five keep together, wet but sociable. They ask their way to the Paradiso--the name sounds ironical--and set off climbing up through the fir-wood in the direction indicated; along a path which in fair weather must be heavenly with piny odours, but which is now only a miry alternative of dripping stones and muddy puddles. Through the mist they see indeed fair flowers gleaming, yellow anemones, unfamiliar and lovely, but they are too drenched to pluck. The sound of falling water guides them to where the clear brook--clear even to-day--falls in little cascades down the hill's face between the pines. How delicious to sit on its flat stones some hot summer's noon, with your hands coolly straying among its grasses, or dabbling in its bright water; but to-day they can but look at it sadly from the low bridge, saying sighingly, "If!"

They reach the goal, some cross, and all floundering, the ladies with draggled skirts and cold, dank ankles. The Paradiso is a little house, a *dependance* apparently of the hotel below--apparently also tenantless and empty. It is built on the bare rock, looking sheer down on--what? on a blanket of fog. What does, what can, that maddening blanket conceal? Oh, if they could but tear it in pieces, rend it asunder, hack it with knives, by any means abolish its unsightly veil from over the lovely face they will now, with all their climbing, all their early rising, never see! But will not they? Even as they look, despairingly straining their eyes, in the vain effort to pierce that obscure and baffling veil, there is a movement in it, a stirring of the inert mass of vapour; a wind has risen, and is blowing coldly on their brows, and in a moment, as it seems, the maddening wet curtain is swept away and up, as by some God-hand, the hand of some spirit that has heard their lament and has pitied them and said, "They have come from afar; it is their only chance; let us show it to them." The curtain has rolled up and up, the sombre fir-wood starts out, and the emerald meadows, the lowest and nearest range of hills, then the next, and then the next, and then the furthest and highest of all. There they stand revealed, even the city, Florence, far away. They can make out her Duomo, small and dim with distance, yet certainly there; in the sudden effulgence all the valley alight and radiant. Range behind range stand the hills; belated vapour wreaths floating, thin as lawn, up their flanks; wonderful dreamy patches of radiance on the far slopes; marvellous amethysts starring their breasts. Mystery and beauty, colour and space, sky and lovely land, where, five minutes ago, there was nothing but choking fog. Burgoyne stands as in a trance, vaguely conscious--trance-wise too--that Elizabeth is near him; all his soul passed into his eyes; stands--how long? He hardly knows. Before that fair sight time seems dead; but even as he yet looks, smiling as one smiles at anything surpassingly lovely, the cloud-wreaths float downwards again, wreaths at first, then great volumes, then one universal sheet of vapour, impenetrably dense as before. Vanished are the Apennine slopes, sun-kissed and dreamy; vanished the distant Arno plain; vanished even the near pines. He can scarce see his hand before him. And yet he can see Elizabeth's face transfigured and quivering, lifted to his--yes, to *his*--though Byng is on her other side; her eyes full of tender tears of ravishment, while her low voice says sighingly:

"It is gone; but we have seen it! Nothing can ever take that from us! nothing! nothing!"

And although the next moment she is reabsorbed into the fog and Byng, though for the rest of the deplorable walk he scarce catches sight again of the little brown head and the soaked deer-stalking cap, yet it makes a gentle warmth about his chilled heart to think that, in her moments of highest emotion, it is her impulse to turn to him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"Oh, gentle Proteus, Love's a mighty lord,
And hath so humbled me that I confess
There is no grief to his correction
Nor to his service no such joy on earth.
Now no discourse except it be of Love;
Now can I break my fast, dine, sup and sleep
Upon the very naked name of Love."

Not once again, so long as they remain at Vallombrosa, does the envious cloud-blanket lift; and, after slopping about for some time longer, in the vain hope that it will, Burgoyne and his two female relatives-elect return to the inn, all fallen very silent. The other two members of the party have disappeared into the fog. At the door of the hotel they find Mrs. Le Marchant, who has broken from her cerements, and is looking anxiously out. As she catches sight of them the look of tension on her face lessens.

"Oh, here you are!" says she. "I am so glad; and the others--no doubt the others are close behind."

"We know nothing about the others," replies Cecilia, with some ill-humour, taking upon her the office of spokeswoman, which neither of her companions seems in any hurry to assume; "the others took French leave of us an hour ago. Oh dear, how wet I am! What a horrible excursion! How I detest Vallombrosa!"

Amelia is to the full as wet as her sister; nothing can well be more lamentable than the appearance of either; and upon Amelia's face there is, in addition to a handsome share of splashes of rain, a look of mortification and crestfallenness; but she now puts in her word, with her usual patience and thoughtful good-temper.

"I do not think you need be in the least anxious about them," she says, observing the immediate relapse into what seems an exaggerated concern following instantly upon Cecilia's remark on Mrs. Le Marchant's features; "they were with us not long ago. We were certainly all together not so long ago; they were with us at the Paradiso--they were certainly with us at the Paradiso?" turning with an interrogative air to Burgoyne.

"Yes, they were certainly with us at the Paradiso," he assents, not thinking it necessary to add why he is so very certain as to this fact.

"They must have so much inducement to loiter this charming weather," cries Cecilia, with an exasperated laugh. "Oh, how wet I am! I do not expect that we shall any of us forget Vallombrosa in a hurry! I shall go and ask the chambermaid to lend me some dry shoes and stockings."

With these words she walks towards the staircase and climbs it, leaving a muddy imprint on each step to mark her progress as she mounts.

Amelia does not at once follow her example. She remains standing where she was, her arms hanging listlessly by her sides, and the expression of crestfallenness deepened on her fagged face. Her lover is touched by her look, and, going up to her, lays his hand kindly and solicitously on her shoulder.

"Umbrellas are not what they were in my days," he says, trying to smile. "You are quite as wet as Cis, though you do not proclaim your sufferings nearly so loudly. Had not you better go and see whether the chambermaid owns two pairs of dry stockings?"

She lifts her eyes with wistful gratitude to his. "This is my treat," she says slowly; "my first treat to you; oh, poor Jim!"

There is a depth of compassion in her tone as disproportioned to the apparent cause as had been Mrs. Le Marchant's anxiety for her daughter's return, and beneath it he winces.

"Why do you pity me?" he inquires half indignantly.

"Am I--

"A milksop; one that never in his life
Felt so much cold as over shoes in snow?"

What do I care for a little rain?" Adding cheerfully, "You shall give me a second treat, dear; we will come here again by ourselves when the sun shines."

"By ourselves--when the sun shines!" echoes she, as if repeating a lesson; and then she goes off docilely, in obedience to his suggestion, in search of dry raiment.

He rejoins Mrs. Le Marchant, whose unaccountable fears have led her beyond the house's shelter out into the rain, where she stands looking down that river of mud which represents the road by which she hopes to see the truants reappear.

"I think you are unnecessarily alarmed," he says, in a reassuring and remonstrating tone. "What harm could have happened to them?"

She does not answer, her eyes, into which the rain is beating under her umbrella brim, still fixed upon the empty road.

"Is she--is she apt to take cold?" he asks, his own tone catching the infection of her vague and nameless disquiet.

"Yes--no--not particularly, I think. Oh, it is not that!"--her composure breaking down into an unaffected outburst of distress. "It is not that! Do not you understand? Oh, how unwilling I was to come here to-day! It is--do not you see? Oh, I should not mind in the least if it had been you that were with her!"

"If it had been I that was with her?" repeats Jim slowly, not at the first instant comprehending, nor even at the second quite taking in the full, though unintentional, uncomplimentariness of this speech; which, however, before his companion again takes up her parable, has tinglingly reached--what? His heart, or only his vanity? They lie very close together.

"Why did not he go home with his mother?" pursues Mrs. Le Marchant, still in that voice of intense vexation. "It would have been so much more natural that he should, and I am sure that she wished it."

"You are making me feel extremely uncomfortable," says Burgoyne gravely; "when I remember that it was I who introduced him to you."

"Oh, I am not blaming you!" replies she, with an obvious effort to resume her usual courteous manner. "Please do not think that I am blaming you. How could you help it?"

"I thought you liked him."

"Oh, so I do--so we both do!" cries the poor woman agitatedly. "That is the worst of it! If I did not like him, I should not mind; at least, I should not mind half so much."

"I am very sorry," he begins; but she interrupts him.

"Do not be sorry," she says remorsefully; "you have nothing to say to it. I do not know, I am sure"--looking gratefully at him through the rain--"why I am always regaling you with my worries; but you are so dependable--we both feel that you are so dependable."

"Am I?" says he, with a melancholy air that does not argue much gratification at the compliment. "Do not be too sure of that."

But she does not heed his disclaimer.

"We have been so happy here," she goes on; "I do not mean *here*"--looking round with an involuntary smile at the envelope of wet vapour that encases them both--"but at Florence; so peacefully, blessedly happy, she and I--you do not know"--with an appealing touch of pathos--"what a dear little companion she is!--so happy that I naturally do not want our memory of the place to be spoilt by any painful *contretemps*. You can understand that, cannot you?"

It is senseless of him; but yet, little as he can comprehend why it should be so, the idea of Byng's love being described as a "painful *contretemps*" presents itself not disagreeably to his mind. For whatever mysterious reason, it is apparent that even Byng's own mother cannot be much more adverse to his suit than is the lady before him.

"I can perfectly enter into your feelings," he answers, with sympathetic gravity; "but do not you know that 'a watched pot never boils'? As long as you are looking for them, they will never appear; but the moment that your back is turned they will probably come round the corner at once."

"I think it is the truest proverb in the world," she says, with an impatient sigh; but she allows him to guide her and her umbrella back to the inn.

Burgoyne's prediction is not verified; probably he had no very great faith in it himself. Mrs. Le Marchant's back has, for the best part of an hour, been turned upon the mountain road, and the stragglers have not yet rejoined the main body. There has been plenty of time for Cecilia to be thoroughly dried, warmed, comforted, and restored to good humour; for the *vetturino* to send in and ask whether he shall not put the horses to; for Amelia to exhaust all her little repertory of soothing hypotheses; for Mrs. Le Marchant to stray in restless misery from *salon* to *salle-a-manger* and back again, and for Burgoyne to pull gloomily at a large cigar in the hall by himself before at length the voices of the truants are heard.

Burgoyne being, as I have said, in the hall, and therefore nearest the door of entrance, has the earliest sight of them. His first glance tells him that the blow apprehended by Mrs. Le Marchant has fallen. Of Elizabeth, indeed, he scarcely catches a glimpse, as she passes him precipitately, hurrying to meet her mother, who, at the sound of her voice, has come running into the outer room. But Byng! Byng has not experienced so many very strong emotions in his short life as to have had much practice in veiling them from the eyes of others when they come, and the gauze now drawn over his intolerable radiance is of the thinnest description. Again that earnest desire to hit him *hard* assails the elder friend.

"Why, you are back before us!" cries the young man.

"Yes, we are back before you," replies Burgoyne; and if the penalty had been death, he could not at that moment have added one syllable to the acrid assent.

"Are we late?" asks Elizabeth tremulously; "I am afraid we are late--I am afraid we have kept you waiting! Oh, I am so sorry!"

She looks with an engaging timidity of apology from one to other of the sulky countenances around her; and Burgoyne stealing a look at her, their eyes meet. He is startled by the singularity of expression in hers. Whatever it denotes, it certainly is not the stupid simplicity of rapture to be read, in print as big as a poster's, in Byng's. And yet, among the many ingredients that go to make up that shy fevered beam, rapture is undoubtedly one.

"Did you lose yourselves? Did you go further into the wood?" asks Cecilia, with a curiosity that is, considering the provocation given, not unjustifiable.

They both reply vaguely that they had lost themselves, that they had gone deeper into the wood. It is obvious to the meanest intelligence that neither of them has the slightest idea where they have been.

"I may as well tell the driver to put the horses in," says Burgoyne, in a matter-of-fact voice, glad of an excuse to absent himself.

When he comes back, he finds the Le Marchants standing together in the window, talking in a low voice, and Byng hovering near them. It is evident to Jim that the elder woman has no wish for converse with the young man; but in his present condition of dizzy exhilaration, he is quite unaware of that fact. He approaches her indeed (as the unobserved watcher notes) with a dreadful air of filial piety, and addresses her in a tone of apology it is true, but with a twang of intimacy that had never appeared in his voice before.

"You must not blame her; indeed you must not! it was entirely my fault. I am awfully sorry that you were alarmed, but indeed there was no cause. What did you think had happened? Did you think"--with an excited laugh of triumph and a bright blush--"that I had run off with her?"

The speech is in extremely bad taste, since, whatever may be the posture of affairs between himself and Elizabeth, it is morally impossible that her mother can yet be enlightened as to it; the familiarity of it is therefore premature and the jocosity ill-placed. No one can be more disposed to judge it severely than its unintended auditor; but even he is startled by the effect it produces.

Without making the smallest attempt at an answer, Mrs. Le Marchant instantly turns her shoulder upon the young man--a snub of which Jim would have thought so gentle-mannered a person quite incapable, and walks away from him with so determined an air that not even a person in the seventh heaven of drunkenness can mistake her meaning. Nor does Elizabeth's conduct offer him any indemnification. She follows her mother a little more slowly; and, as she passes Jim, he sees that she is shaking violently, and that her face is as white as chalk. A sort of generous indignation against the mother for spoiling the poor little soul's first moments of bliss mixes curiously in his mind with a less noble satisfaction at the reflection that there are undoubtedly breakers ahead of Byng.

"How--how are we to divide?" cries Cecilia, as they all stand at the door while the two carriages drive up.

No one answers. The arrangement seems planned by no one in particular, and yet, as he drives down the hill, Burgoyne finds himself sitting opposite the two Misses Wilson. He is thankful that the raised hood and unfurled umbrellas of the

second equipage prevent his having any ocular evidence of the ecstasy that that wet leather and that dripping silk veil. But even this consolation is not long left him. As they leave the fir-wood, they come out of the clouds too, into clear, lower air. Hoods are pushed back and umbrellas shut. The horses, in good heart, with homeward-turned heads, pricked with emulation by another carriage ahead of them, trot cheerfully down the road--the road with all its bent-elbow turnings--down, down, into the valley beneath. But the clouds that have rolled away off the evening sky seem to have settled down with double density upon the spirit of Burgoyne and his companions. Even the fountain of Cecilia's chatter is dried. Once she says suddenly *a propos de bottes*:

"She must be years older than he!" To which Amelia quickly rejoins--

"But she does not look it."

It is almost the only remark she makes during the long drive, and Burgoyne is thankful to her for her silence. Conscious of and grateful for her magnanimity as he is, there is yet something that jars upon him in her intuition of his thoughts, and in her eager championship of that other woman. He looks out blankly at the flowers, wetly smiling from field and bank, at the endless garden of embracing vines and embraced mulberries, joining their young leafage; at the stealing river and the verdurous hill-sides. In vain for him Italy's spring laughter broadens across the eternal youth of her face.

On reaching Florence and the Anglo-American, he would fain enter and spend the evening with his betrothed. He has a feverish horror of being left alone with his own thoughts, but she gently forbids him.

"It would not be fair upon father and Sybilla," she says. "I am afraid they have not been getting on very well *tete-a-tete* together all this wet day, and I should not be much good to you in any case. I feel stupid. You will say"--smiling--"that there is nothing very new in that; but I am quite beyond even my usual mark to-night. Good-night, dear; I humbly beg your pardon for having caused you to spend such a wretched day. I will never give you another treat--never, *never!* it was my first and last attempt."

She turns from him dejectedly, and he is himself too dejected to attempt any reassuring falsities. She would not have believed him if he had told her that it had not been a wretched day to him, and the publicity of their place of parting forbids him to administer even the silent consolation of a kiss. And yet he feels a sort of remorse at having said nothing, as the door closes upon her depressed back. Backs can look quite as depressed as faces. The lateness of their start home has thrown their return late. Burgoyne reflects that he may as well dine at once, and then trudge through his solitary evening as best he may. Heaven knows at what hour Byng may return. Shall he await his coming, and so get over the announcement of his bliss to-night, or put the dark hours between himself and it?

He decides in favour of getting it over to-night, up to whatever small hour he may be obliged to attend his friend's arrival. But he has not to wait nearly so long as he expects. He has not to wait at all, hardly. Before he has left his own room, while he is still making such toilette for his own company as self-respect requires, the person whom he had not thought to behold for another four or five hours enters--enters with head held high, with joy-tinged, smooth cheeks, and with a superb lamp of love and triumph lit in each young eye. A passing movement of involuntary admiration traverses the other's heart as he looks at him. This is how the human animal ought to--was originally intended to--look! How very far the average specimen has departed from the type! There is not much trace of admiration, however, in the tone which he employs for his one brief word of interrogation:

"Already?"

"I was sent away," replies Byng, in a voice whose intoxication pierces even through the first four small words; "they sent me away--they would not let me go further than the house-door. I say 'they,' but of course *she* had no hand in it--*she*, not *she*. *She* would not have sent me away, God bless her! it was her mother, of course--how could she have had the heart?"

Burgoyne would no doubt have made some answer in time; though the "she," the implication of Elizabeth's willingness for an indefinite amount of her lover's company, the "God bless her," gave him a sense of choking.

"But I do not blame Mrs. Le Marchant," pursues Byng, in a rapt, half-absent key. "Who would not wish to monopolize her? Who would not grudge the earth leave to kiss her sweet foot?"

"All I can is nothing
To her whose worth makes other worthies nothing.
She is alone!"

"That at least is not your fault," replies Burgoyne dryly; "you have done your best to avert that catastrophe."

But to speak to the young man now is of as much avail as to address questions or remonstrances to one walking in his

sleep.

"If she had allowed me, I would have lain on her threshold all night; I would have been the first thing that her heavenly eye lit on; I would--"

But Burgoyne's phial of patience is for the present emptied to the dregs.

"You would have made a very great fool of yourself, I have not the least doubt. Why try to persuade a person of what he is already fully convinced? But as Miss Le Marchant happily did not wish for you as a doormat, perhaps it is hardly worth while telling me what you would have done if she had."

The sarcastic words, ill-natured and unsympathetic as they sound in their own speaker's ears, yet avail to bring the young dreamer but a very few steps lower down his ladder of bliss.

"I beg your pardon," he says sweet-temperedly; "I suppose I am a hideous bore to-night; I suppose one must always be a bore to other people when one is tremendously happy."

"It is not your being tremendously happy that I quarrel with," growls Burgoyne, struggling to conquer, or at least tone down, the intense irritability of nerves that his friend's flights provoke. "You are perfectly right to be that if you can manage to compass it; but what I should be glad to arrive at is your particular ground for it in the present case."

The question, sobering in its tendency, has yet for sole effect the setting Byng off again with spread pinions into the empyrean.

"What particular ground I have?" he repeats, in a dreamy tone of ecstasy. "You ask what particular ground I have? Had ever anyone cause to be so royally happy as I?"

He pauses a moment or two, steeped in a rapture of oblivious reverie, then goes on, still as one only half waked from a beatific vision:

"I had a prognostic that to-day would be the culminating day--something told me that to-day would be the day; and when you gave me up your seat in her carriage--how could you be so magnificently generous? How can I ever adequately show you my gratitude?"

"Yes, yes; never mind that."

"Then, later on, in the wood"--his voice sinking, as that of one who approaches a Holy of Holies--"when that blessed mist wrapped her round, wrapped her lovely body round, so that I was able to withdraw her from you, so that you did not perceive that she was gone--were not you really aware of it? Did not it seem to you as if the light had gone out of the day? When we stood under those dripping trees, as much alone as if--"

"I do not think that there is any need to go into those details," interrupts Burgoyne, in a hard voice; "I imagine that in these cases history repeats itself with very trifling variations; what I should be glad if you would tell me is, whether I am to understand that you have to-day asked Miss Le Marchant to marry you?"

Byng brings his eyes, which have been lifted in a sort of trance to the ceiling, down to the prosaic level of his Mentor's severe and tight-lipped face.

"When you put it in that way," he says, in an awed half-whisper, "it does seem an inconceivable audacity on my part that I, who but a few days ago was crawling at her feet, should dare to-day to reach up to the heaven of her love."

Burgoyne had known perfectly well that it was coming; but yet how much worse is it than he had expected!

"Then you *did* ask her to marry you?"

But Byng has apparently fled back on the wings of fantasy into the wet woods of Vallombrosa, for he makes no verbal answer.

"She said yes?" asks Burgoyne, raising his voice, as if he were addressing someone deaf. "Am I to understand that she said yes?"

At the sound of that hard naked query the dreamer comes out of his enchanted forest again.

"I do not know what she said; I do not think she said anything," he answers, murmuring the words laggingly; while, as he goes on, the fire of his madness spires high in his flashing eyes. "We have got beyond speech, she and I! We have reached that region where hearts and intelligences meet without the need of those vulgar go-betweens--words."

There is a moment's pause, broken only by the commonplace sound of an electric bell rung by some inmate of the hotel.

"And has Mrs. Le Marchant reached that region too?" inquires Jim presently, with an irony he cannot restrain. "Does she, too, understand without words, or have you been obliged, in her case, to employ those vulgar go-betweens?"

"She *must* understand--she *does*--undoubtedly she does!" cries Byng, whose drunkenness shares with the more ordinary kind the peculiarity of believing whatever he wishes to be not only probable but inevitable. "Who could see us together and be in uncertainty for a moment? And her mother has some of her fine instincts, her delicate intuitions; not, of course, to the miraculous extent that *she* possesses them. In *her* they amount to genius!"

"No doubt, no doubt; but did you trust entirely to Mrs. Le Marchant's instincts, or did you broach the subject to her at all? You must have had time, plenty of time, during that long drive home."

"Well, no," answers Byng slowly, and with a slight diminution of radiance. "I meant to have approached it; I tried to do so once or twice; but I thought, I fancied--probably it was only fancy--that she wished to avoid it."

"To avoid it?"

"Oh, not in any offensive, obvious way; it was probably only in my imagination that she shirked it at all--and I did not make any great efforts. It was all so perfect"--the intoxication getting the upper hand again--"driving along in that balmy flood of evening radiance--did you see how even the tardy sun came out for us?--with that divine face opposite to me! Such a little face!"--his voice breaking into a tremor. "Is not it inconceivable, Jim, how so much beauty can be packed into so tiny a compass?"

Burgoyne has all the time had his brushes in his hand, the brushes with which he has been preparing himself for his solitary dinner. He bangs them down now on the table. How can he put a period to the ravings of this maniac? And yet not so maniac either. What gives the sharpest point to his present suffering is the consciousness that he would have made quite as good a maniac himself if he had had the chance. This consciousness instils a few drops of angry patience into his voice, as, disregarding the other's high-flown question, he puts one that is not at all high-flown himself.

"Then you have not told Mrs. Le Marchant yet?"

But the smile that the memory--so fresh, only half an hour old--of Elizabeth's loveliness has laid upon Byng's lips still lingers there; and makes his response dreamy and vague.

"No, not yet; not yet! *She* had taken one of her gloves off; her little hand lay, palm upward, on her knees almost all the way; once or twice I thought of taking it, of taking possession of it, of telling her mother in that way; but I did not. It seemed--out in the sunshine, no longer in the sacred mist of that blessed wood--too high an audacity, and I did not!"

He stops, his words dying away into a whisper, his throat's too narrow passage choked by the rushing ocean of his immense felicity.

Burgoyne looks at him in silence, again with a sort of admiration mixed with wrath. How has this commonplace, pink-and-white boy managed to scale such an altitude, while he himself, in all his life, though with a better intelligence, and, as he had thought, with a deeper heart, had but prowled around the foot? Why should he try to drag him down? On the peak of that great Jungfrau of rapture no human foot can long stand.

"As I told you, Mrs. Le Marchant turned me away from their door," pursues Byng. "It struck me--I could not pay much attention to the fact, for was not I bidding *her* good-night--taking farewell of those heavenly eyes?--did you ever see such astonishing eyes?--for four colossal hours--but it struck me that her mother's manner was a little colder to me than it usually is. It had been a little cold all day--at least, so I fancied. Had the same idea occurred to you?"

Burgoyne hesitates.

"But even if it were so," continues Byng, his sun breaking out again in full brilliancy from the very little cloud that, during his last sentence or two, had dimmed its lustre, "how can I blame her? Does one throw one's self into the arms of the burglar who has broken open one's safe and stolen one's diamonds?"

Burgoyne still hesitates. Shall he tell the young ranter before him what excellent reasons he has for knowing that any filial disposition on his part to throw himself on Mrs. Le Marchant's neck will be met by a very distinct resistance on that lady's part, or shall he leave him poised on

"The jag
Of his mountain crag"

till morning? The morning light will certainly see him tumbling at the least some few kilometres down. He decides generously to leave him in present possession of his peak; but yet, so inconsistent is human nature, his next speech can have no drift but that of giving a slight jog to his friend's towering confidence.

"And your own mother?"

It may generally be concluded that a person has not a very pertinent response to give to a question if his only answer to that question be to repeat it in the same words.

"My own mother?"

"Yes; you will write at once to tell her, I suppose?"

For a second the young man's forehead clouds, then he breaks into an excited laugh.

"Tell her? I should rather think I should! Do you suppose that I shall lose a moment in telling everybody I know--everybody I ever heard of? I want you to tell everybody too--every single soul of your acquaintance!"

"I?"

"Tell Amelia; tell Cecilia"--quite unaware, in his excitement, of the freedom he is taking, for the first time in his life, with those young ladies' Christian names--"tell the other one--the sick one; tell them all! I want *her* to feel that all my friends, everybody I know, welcome her--hold out their arms to her. I want them all to tell her they are glad--you most of all, of course, old chap; she will not think it is all right till you have given your consent!"--laughing again with that bubbling-over of superfluous joy. "Do you know--it seems incomprehensible now--but there was a moment when I was madly jealous of you? I was telling *her* about it to-day; we were laughing over it together in the wood."

Burgoyne feels that one more mention of that wood will convert him into a lunatic, quite as indisputable as his companion, only very much more dangerous.

"Indeed!" he says grimly. "I should have thought you might have found a more interesting subject of conversation."

"Perhaps I was not so very far out either"--possibly dimly perceiving, even through the golden haze of his own glory, the lack of enjoyment of his last piece of news conveyed by Jim's tone--"for she has an immense opinion of you. I do not know anyone of whom she has so high an opinion; she says you are so dependable."

The adjective, as applied to himself by Elizabeth and her mother, has not the merit of novelty in the hearer's ears, which is perhaps the reason why the elation that he must naturally feel on hearing it does not translate itself into words.

"So dependable," repeats Byng, apparently pleased with the epithet. "She says you give her the idea of being a sort of rock; you will come to-morrow, and wish her joy, will not you?"

"I am afraid that my wishing it her will not help her much to it," answers Burgoyne, rather sadly; "but I do not think you need much doubt that I do wish it. Joy"--repeating the word over reflectively--"it is a big thing to wish anyone."

The extreme dampness of his tone arrests for a few minutes Byng's jubilant paean.

"You do not think that my mother will be pleased with the news?" he asks presently, in a changed and hesitating key.

"I do not think about it; I know she will not!"

"I suppose not; and yet"--with an accent of stupefaction--"it is inconceivable that she, who has always shown such a tender sympathy for me in any paltry little bit of luck that has happened to me, should not rejoice with me when all heaven ope----"

"Yes, yes; of course."

"Do you think"--with a gleam of hope--"that my mother may have tried to dissuade me because she thought I was only laying up disappointment for myself--because she thought it so unlikely that *she* should deign to stoop to me?"

Burgoyne shakes his head.

"Perhaps," he says, with the slowness of a man who is saying what he himself does not believe, "a part of your mother's dislike to the idea may be in the fact of Miss Le Marchant's being older than you."

"Older!" cries Byng, with almost a shout of angry derision at the suggestion. "What have creatures like *her* to do with age? I neither know nor care what her age is! If you know, do not tell me! I will not listen! Upon that exquisite body time and change are powerless to work their hideous metamorphoses!"

"Fiddlesticks!" replies Burgoyne gruffly. "If she live long enough, she will be an old woman, and will look like one, I suppose!" though, even as he speaks, he realizes that to him this is almost as incredible as to the young madman whom he is so pitilessly snubbing. "But, however that may be, I think you had better make up your mind to meeting the most resolved opposition on the part of your mother."

"I believe you are right," replies Byng, out of whose voice his kind Mentor has at last succeeded in momentarily conjuring the exaltation. "Her prejudice against them, against *her*, always filled me with stupefaction. I never dared trust myself to discuss it with her; I was afraid that if I did I might be led into saying something to her, something I should be sorry for afterwards. Thank God, I have never spoken unkindly to her in all my life!"

"You would have been a sweep if you had!" interjects Jim.

"I never heard her give any reason for it, did you? It was as baseless as it was senseless." After a pause, his voice taking on again its inflection of confident, soaring triumph: "But it cannot last--it is absolutely beyond the wildest bounds of possibility that it can last! After five minutes' talk mother will be at her feet; I know my mother so well! Not one of her exquisite ways will be lost upon her, and *she* will do her very best to win her! Jim, I ask you--I put it to you quietly and plainly--I know you think I am mad, but I am not--I am speaking quite rationally and coolly--but I ask you--*you*, an impartial bystander--do you think that any human being, anything made of flesh and blood, could resist *her*--*her* when she puts herself out to please--*her* at her very best?"

As Burgoyne is conscious of not being in a position to answer this question with much satisfaction to himself, he leaves it unanswered.

CHAPTER XXV.

"Some say the genius so
Cries 'Come' to him that instantly must die."

A new day has awaked, and Firenze, fresh-washed after yesterday's rain, smelling through all her streets of lilies, laughs up, wistaria-hung, to a fleckless sky. If poor Amelia had but deferred her treat for twenty-four hours, what a different Vallombrosa would she and her companions have carried home in their memories! Amelia's treat!

"I shall not forget Amelia's treat in a hurry!" Burgoyne says to himself, as he sits appetiteless over his solitary breakfast. "I had better go and tell her the result of it."

As he makes this reflection, he rises with some alacrity, and, leaving his scarcely-tasted coffee and his not-at-all-tasted omelette, walks out of the *salle-a-manger*. His motive for so early a visit to the Anglo-American is less an excessive eagerness to proclaim his piece of news than the thought that by so doing he will, at least for a few hours, escape the necessity of being in his young friend's company. As to where that young friend at present is, whether, after having wandered about the town all night, he is now sleeping late, or whether he is already off to persecute poor Mrs. Le Marchant for that maternal blessing which she has so little inclination to give, Jim is ignorant. All he knows is that such another dose of Byng's erotic eloquence as he had to swallow last night will leave him (Burgoyne) either a murderer or suicide.

Owing to his arrival at the Anglo-American so much sooner than usual, he finds himself coming in for the ceremony of Sybilla's installation for the day in the drawing-room. There is always a little pomp and fussy bustle about this rite. Sybilla totters in (grave doubts have occasionally crossed the minds of her family as to whether she does not in reality possess a pair of excellent and thoroughly dependable legs), supported on one side by Amelia and on the other by her maid. Cecilia goes before with an air cushion, and Mr. Wilson follows, when he does not turn restive--which is sometimes the case--with a duvet. To-day, as I have said, this rite is in full celebration when Jim arrives, but it is being performed with mutilated glories. The rite is going forward, but the high priest is absent. That ministrant, upon whose arm the sufferer is wont to lean far the most heavily; she upon whom devolves the whole responsibility of arranging the three cushions behind the long limp back; the properly covering the languid feet; the nice administering of the reviving cordial drops that are to repair the fatigue of the transit from bedroom to sitting-room--that most important and unflinching ministrant is nowhere to be seen. No artist wishes his picture to be viewed in an inchoate, unfinished stage, nor is Sybilla at all anxious to have the public admitted to the sight of that eminent work of art herself until she is stretched in faint, moribund, graceful completeness on her day-bed. At the moment of Burgoyne's entry she has just reached that unbecoming point, where she is sitting sideways on her sofa, before her wasted limbs--Burgoyne is one of those heretics who have never believed that they are wasted--have been carefully lifted into their final posture of extension upon the Austrian blanket. It is, of all moments, the one at which interruption is least welcome; nor is the intruder at all surprised at being greeted by the invalid with a more than sub-acid accent.

"My dear Jim, *already!* Why you become more *matinale* every day! you *are* the early bird indeed! You do not"--with an annoyed laugh--"give us poor worms a chance of being beforehand with you."

"I am very sorry if I am too soon," replies he, his eyes wandering away from the fretful features before him in search of others upon which he knows he shall find written no complaint of his prematureness--"but I came to---Where's Amelia?"

"You may well ask," replies Sybilla, with a sort of hysterical laugh. "It is pretty evident that she is not *here!* My dear Cis, would you mind remembering that my head is not made of mahogany? you gave it such a bang with that cushion. I am very sorry to trouble you. The heaviest load a sick person has to bear is the feeling that she is such a burden to those around her; and certainly, my dear, you do not help me to forget it."

"Where is she?" repeats Burgoyne hastily, both because he wants to know, and because he is anxious to strangle in its infancy one of those ignoble family bickerings, to assist at many of which has been the privilege or penalty of his state of intimacy.

"She is not well," replies Cecilia shortly, her rosy face rosier than usual, either with the joy of imminent battle, or with the exertion of swaddling, under protest, the invalid's now elevated legs.

"Not well! Amelia not well," echoes he, in a tone of incredulity.

During all the years of their acquaintance not once has he heard his patient sweetheart complain of ache or pain. Manlike, he has therefore concluded that she can never have felt either.

"It is very thoughtless of her," says Cecilia, with a not altogether amiable laugh, and giving a final irritated slap to Sybilla's coverlet--"considering how much illness we already have in the house; ha! ha! but it is true all the same: she is not well, not at all well; she is in bed."

"In bed!"

"She must have caught a chill yesterday on that disgusting excursion; driving home that long distance in wet shoes and stockings."

"But I thought, I hoped that--I asked her to change them."

"She had them dried in a sort of way; but I could see when she put them on again that they were really wringing wet still. I told her so, but she only answered that even if they were, what matter? she never caught cold. You know that Amelia never thinks that anything matters that concerns herself."

This would be an even handsomer tribute to Amelia than it is, if it did not suggest a secondary intention of administering a back-hander to someone else.

"In the case of my children," says Mr. Wilson, making his voice heard for the first time from the window, where he is discontentedly peering up and down the sheets of a journal through his spectacles, "there seems to be no mean possible between senseless rashness and preposterous self-indulgence."

Mr. Wilson likes his eldest daughter. He is uneasy and upset, and rather angry at her indisposition, and this is his way of showing his paternal tenderness.

"In bed!"

The human animal is the most adaptive of created beings; but even it requires some little time to adjust itself to entirely new conditions of existence.

"Amelia," continues Mr. Wilson, fanning the flame of his ire with the bellows of his own rhetoric, "is the one among you whom I did credit with the possession of a head upon her shoulders, and now here she is wantonly laying herself up!"

"You talk as if she did it on purpose, father," says Cecilia, with an indignant laugh--"as if she enjoyed it. I do not think that anyone, even Sybilla"--with a resentful side-glance at the sofa--"could enjoy having her teeth chattering with cold, her head as heavy as lead, and her knees knocking together under her."

"Good heavens!" cries Jim, his bewildered surprise swallowed up in genuine alarm; "you do not mean to say that she is as bad as that?"

Sybilla laughs, and even in the midst of his real anxiety, Burgoyne has time for the reflection that the Wilson family seem this morning to have *se donne le mot* to show in how many different styles it is possible to be merry without the least tinge of genuine mirth in any.

"My dear Jim, have not you known Cis long enough not to take her *au pied de la lettre*? Do not you know of old what a magnificent colourist she is?--a perfect Tintoret! Of course Amelia is not quite the thing, poor dear--she has no one but herself to blame for that!--but equally of course, to a colossally healthy person such as she, any little ailment appears a mountain."

This speech is uttered with the accent of such entire conviction that it ought to carry reassurance into the heart of the person to whom it is addressed. Sybilla really and honestly disbelieves in the reality of any claims but her own to sincere sickness. But Jim unreasonably neither is nor feigns to be reassured.

"You have had advice for her? You have sent for Dr. Coldstream?" he asks rapidly of the two sound members of the family, turning his back unceremoniously upon the invalid.

"I was going to send for him at once," answers Cecilia, her own latent anxiety quickened by the evident alarm of her interlocutor, "but Sybilla said it was needless, as in any case he was coming to see her this afternoon."

"I think he wishes to change my medicine," puts in Sybilla in a piano voice, that shows an evident desire to assert her threatened position of prime and only genuine invalid, a sort of "beware of imitations" tone; "he is not quite satisfied with the effect of the last, I think; it has not brought up the pulse and quickened the appetite in the way he hoped. I

thought that he might run up and look at Amelia at the end of his visit to me."

"And is it possible," inquires Jim, with some heat, "that you are going to let half a day go by without doing anything for her? I suppose you have not exaggerated, have you?" turning with an earnest appeal in his eyes to Cecilia; "but in any case I am very sure that nothing short of being really and gravely ill would have kept her in bed--she who is always waiting hand and foot upon us all, whom we all allow to spend her life in hewing wood and drawing water for us."

"Send for Dr. Coldstream at once," says Mr. Wilson irritably; "at once, I tell you; he is so very seldom out of the house that I have often thought of suggesting to him to take a room here; and now, on the only occasion on which he is really needed, he is not at hand."

"If you will write the note," says Jim, a shade relieved at having at last succeeded in rousing Amelia's relations to prompt action, and feeling a feverish desire to be doing something, "I will take it at once; it will be the quickest way; I may catch him before he goes out and bring him back with me."

"Do you really think it is necessary?" asks Sybilla, as Jim hustles Cecilia to her writing-table, and stands, nervously fidgeting beside her as she writes; "do you think, if it is only a common cold, as I suspect, that it is quite fair to worry a man who is so run off his legs already? He will probably laugh in your face; still, if you are so set upon it, it is perhaps more satisfactory."

"You need not go into details--just a line--make haste!" cries Jim, hanging tiresomely over Cecilia, rather impeding her than the reverse by his impatience, and leaving entirely unnoticed Sybilla's observation, which indeed has been uttered more to preserve her own self-respect than with much hope that in the present wrong-headed state of mind of her family any member will pay much heed to it.

In five minutes more, Jim, with Cecilia's note in his pocket, is being borne rapidly in a fiacre through the sweet, gay streets. But, drive as rapidly as he may, he is not quick enough to intercept the popular English doctor, who, although, as his servant tantalizingly informs Jim, he is almost always at home at that hour, has, on this occasion, been sent for to an urgent case of sudden illness out of Florence, at the village of Peretola. Jim has to content himself with the assurance that immediately on his return the note will be given him; and with this unsatisfactory intelligence Mr. Burgoyne reappears at the Anglo-American. He finds the three persons whom he had left much as he had quitted them--uneasy, cross, and unemployed.

"It is all the fault of that odious expedition yesterday," says Cecilia, harking back to her old cry. "Why we set out at all, I can't imagine; on such a day, it was madness, and----"

"It is not much use thinking of that now," interrupts Burgoyne impatiently, and wincing at these philippics against his poor bride's miserable treat as if they had been directed against herself.

"Well, it is an ill-wind that blows nobody any good," pursues the young lady. "I suppose that two of us enjoyed it enough to make up for the wretchedness of the other four."

Her large prominent eyes are fixed upon Jim as she speaks with a sort of knowingness overlying their former lugubrious expression.

"Do you mean Mr. Byng and Miss Le Marchant?" inquires he, pronouncing both names with a laboured distinctness, while his voice sounds to himself loud and wooden. "You are perfectly right in your conjecture; no doubt they enjoyed themselves. Byng wished me to tell you that they are engaged to be married."

If the essence of a good piece of news is to surprise, Jim can certainly not flatter himself that his comes under that head.

"It did not require a conjurer to prophesy that," is Cecilia's comment. "I never saw two people who troubled themselves less to disguise their feelings. I saw that they neither of them knew whether they were on their heads or on their heels, when they emerged dripping from that horrid pine wood. Dear me!--with a good-sized sigh--"how smoothly things run for some people! how easily some of these affairs come off, without a hitch anywhere from beginning to end!"

She pauses, and it is plain to those acquainted with her heart history that her thoughts are coursing mournfully back to the all-along reluctant and ultimately entirely faithless clergyman who had last possessed her young affections.

"Without a hitch from beginning to end?" cries Jim hotly, jarred more than he would like to own to himself by this phrase. "How can you possibly tell? These are early days to assert that so dogmatically.

"There's many a slip
'Twixt the cup and the lip."

"Do you mean to say that you think it will not come off?" asks Cecilia, a slightly pleasurable light coming into her eyes as she asks--not that she has any ill-will towards Elizabeth, nor any distinct design of her own upon Byng; but that there is something not absolutely disagreeable to her in the idea of his being still among the ranks of the possible.

"I am sure he would make a delightful husband," puts in Sybilla, her praise given emphasis by her desire to employ it as a weapon of offence against one who is at present more deeply than usual in her black books; "he has such gentle, feminine ways; he comes into a room so quietly, and when he asks one how one is really listens for the answer."

"Perhaps you are right, and it will fall through," says Cecilia thoughtfully; "many engagements do!" (sighing again). "She is a sweet, pretty creature, and looks as if butter would not melt in her mouth; but she is evidently older than he."

"Jim will not allow that to be an objection," cries Sybilla, with a faint laugh, "will you, Jim? How much older than you is Amelia? I always forget."

"I never can help thinking that she has a history," resumes Cecilia, in a meditative voice, "and that Mr. Greenock knows it. If ever her name is mentioned he always begins to look wise, as if there were something that he was longing to tell one about her; it is continually on the tip of his tongue--some day it will tumble over the tip."

"I do not think that there is any use in my staying all this while!" cries Jim, jumping up. "Dr. Coldstream cannot be here at soonest for another hour; and I do not think that we are, any of us, very good company for each other to-day, so I will look in again later."

He is out of the room and out of the hotel before his companions can take exception to his disappearance. For some time he walks along aimlessly, his mind a jumble of misery, and dull, remorseful anxiety about Amelia; intolerable comparisons between his own lot and his friend's; sharp knives of jealousy as often as--which is almost unintermittently--his imagination wings its cruel way to the Piazza d'Azeglio--through one opulent week, *his* Piazza. At this moment--this moment, while his own leaden feet are treading goalless the hot flags that for him lead nowhere--Byng is enthroned with *her* in the heaven of the mean little *salon*. He unconsciously shows his teeth in a stern smile to the surprised passers-by. He had jeered Byng for his hyperboles, and now he is *out-hyperboling* him. What a detestable verb he has invented! He laughs out loud. Are they sitting at the window, looking out at the judas tree and the Paulownia? Not they! The window is commanded to a certain extent by the roadway. The window is for acquaintances, banal acquaintances, like himself--no place for the permitted freedoms of exquisite new love. Are they then on the sofa, the vulgar walnut sofa, over which Elizabeth has thrown her blue Neapolitan tablecloth? It is a little sofa, scarcely room for two upon it, but, oh! plenty of room for them! Or are they at the piano? Is she singing him some sugared ditty "lovely well" until he breaks into her song with the storm of his kisses, and her little white hands drop from the keys, and they lie sobbing with ecstasy in each other's arms? It is quite certain that Byng will sob. He is always delighted at having an opportunity for turning on the water-works. Is there a bare possibility that Mrs. Le Marchant may carry her disapprobation to the pitch of impeding by her presence their *tete-a-tete*? The idea gives him a momentary alleviation. Why should not he go and see for himself whether it is so? It will be a method of passing the tedious interval before he can hear the doctor's verdict on Amelia. He must at some time or other comply with Byng's pressing prayer to him to offer his congratulations to Elizabeth, and he may as well have a day of complete and perfect pain--pain of various flavours and essences mixed into one consummate draught--a day of which not one hour shall be without its ache.

Having come to this conclusion, his aimless walk quickens, and changes into a purposeful striding through streets and Piazzas, till he finds himself standing at the door of 12a. He looks up at the *entresol* windows--they are all open, but no one is either sitting in or looking out at them. It is as he had thought. The window is too public for them; neither can they be at the piano, for not a sound of either voice or instrument is wafted down to him. He runs up the stone stairs, and rings the electric bell. The standing before the unopened portal, and the trembling jar of the bell, bring back to him, with a vividness he could do without, those other long-ago days--they seem to him long ago--when he stood there last, with no easy heart even then, but yet with how different anticipations. He has found it hard enough to bear the brunt of Byng's furious inhuman joy when alone with him. How will he stand it when he sees them together?

He is recalled from these reflections by the opening of the door, and the appearance in it of the ministering angel who has usually admitted him into his Eden--Annunziata. It strikes him that Annunziata looks older and more dishevelled than ever, and is without that benevolent smile of welcoming radiance which her hard-featured face generally wears. Nor does she, as has been her wont, stand back to let him pass in almost before he has put his question, as if she could not admit him quickly enough. But to-day she stands, on the contrary, in the doorway without a smile. In a second the idea flashes across Jim's mind that Byng has forbidden anyone to be let in. It turns him half sick for the moment, and it is with an unsteady voice that he stammers:

"The Signora? The Signorina?"

Annunziata lifts her shoulders in a dismal shrug, and stretches out her hands:

"Gone!"

"*Gone?* You mean gone out driving?" Then remembering that her English is as minus a quantity as his Italian, he adds in eager explanation, "En fiacre?"

She shakes her head, and then nods vaguely in the direction of the whole of the rest of the world--the whole, that is, that is not 12 bis.

"No, *gone!*"

"But *where? Dove?*" cries he, frantic with irritation at his own powerlessness either to understand or be understood.

Again she shakes her head.

"I do not know; they did not say."

He gathers this to be her meaning, and hurriedly puts another query.

"When? *Quando?*"

But her answer being longer and more voluble, he can't take in its drift, seeing which she retreats a step, and, motioning him with her hand to enter, points down the passage. He does not require to have the dumb-show of invitation twice repeated, but, rushing past her, hurries down the well-known little corridor to the *salon* door. It is open, and he stands within. At the first glance it seems to him to wear much its usual air. There is even a score of music standing on the piano, the copper pots are full of rose-branches, and the *scaldini* brimming with Firenze's own lilies, the bit of red Venetian brocade, with the little old tinsel fringe, still hangs over the arm-chair by the fireplace, and the blue Neapolitan table-cover still disguises the vulgarity of the sofa. He has misunderstood Annunziata--it is really monstrous to be so helplessly ignorant of the language of the country you are living in--or she has lost her wits, or---He had thought the room empty, but as he advances a step further into it, he discovers that he is not the sole occupant: that lying stretched upon the floor, with his fair head buried in a little pillow, against which both men have often seen Elizabeth's small white cheek resting, is Byng!--the Byng whose riotous, insolent happiness he had doubted his own powers of witnessing without murdering him!--the splendid felicity of whose lot he has been so bitterly laying beside his own destiny--the Byng whom he had been gnashing his teeth at the thought of--at the thought of him lying in Elizabeth's arms!

CHAPTER XXVI.

"Cressid, I love thee in so strained a purity,
That the blest gods--as angry at my fancy,
More bright in zeal than the devotion which
Cold lips blow to their deities--take thee from me."

"What does this mean?"

The question has to be twice repeated before the person to whom it is addressed gives any sign of having heard it. His ears must be so deeply embedded in the pillow that the passage to his hearing is blocked. It is not till the interrogation is put a second time, in a louder key, and accompanied by a not very gentle shake of the shoulder, that he at length looks up, and reveals what Jim knows to be, and yet has some difficulty in recognising, as the features of Byng--features so altered, so distorted, so swollen by excessive weeping, that no one less intimately acquainted with them than the person who has been already contemplating them, under the influence of a variety of circumstances for a couple of months, could possibly put the owner's name to them. Jim has expected that his young friend would spend some portion of this day in crying, knowing well both his powers of, and his taste for, "turning on the water-works," as he but lately cruelly and uncivilly phrased it to his own mind. But the warm tears of emotion, few and undisfiguring, with which he had credited him, have not much kinship with the scalding torrents that have made his handsome young eyes mere red blurs on his ashen face, that have furrowed his cheeks, and damped his disordered curls, and taken all the starch out of his immaculate "masher" collar. They have wetted, too, into a state of almost pulp, a crumpled sheet of note-paper, which his head seems to have been burrowing in, upon the pillow.

"What does it mean?" repeats Burgoyne, for the third time, a hideous fear assailing him, at the sight of the young man's anguish, that he himself may have mistaken Annunziata's meaning; that her "gone" may have stood for the final one; that some instant stroke may have snatched lovely Elizabeth away, out of the world. Surely no catastrophe less than death can account for such a metamorphosis as that wrought in Byng. "Why do you look like that?" he goes on, his voice taking that accent of rage which extreme fear sometimes gives. "Why do not you speak?"

The other, thus adjured, plainly makes a violent effort for articulation; but his dry throat will let pass nothing but a senseless sob.

"What does that paper mean?" goes on Burgoyne, realizing the impotence of his friend to obey his behest, and rendered doubly terrified by it; "what is it? what does it say? Does it--does it--explain anything?"

He points as he speaks to the blurred and rumped *billet*, and Byng catches it up convulsively, and thrusts it into his hand.

"It is the first letter I ever had from her," he says, the words rushing out broken and scarcely intelligible upon a storm of sobs, and so flings his head violently down upon the floor again in a new access of furious weeping.

Burgoyne holds the paper in his fingers, but for a moment or two he is unable to read it. There is an ugly swimming before his eyes for one thing; for another, Byng's treatment has not improved it as a specimen of caligraphy; but it never in its best days could have been a very legible document. And yet it is not long. Its few words, when at length he makes them out, ran thus:

"Good-bye, I was mad yesterday. I shall never marry you; I have no right to marry anyone. For God's sake do not ask me what I mean; and oh! don't, don't, DON'T come after me!"

There is neither date nor signature. As Jim stands staring at the five crooked, straggling sentences, a great swelling compassion fills his heart. Did ever poor little scribble make it so easy to construct the small shaking hand, and the tender breaking heart that penned it? An immense pity fills his soul; yet does it quite fill it? Is there room besides, in one corner, for a small pinch of devilish joy?

"There's many a slip
"Twixt the cup and the lip."

His own words of ill-natured croaking, uttered not an hour ago, to Cecilia Wilson, recur to his mind. How little he thought that that prophecy would so soon be fulfilled! He remains so long motionless and silent, his fingers still

holding the paper, whose contents he has long ago mastered, that Byng--the violence of his paroxysm of grief at length exhausted--struggles to his feet and speaks--speaks as well as the catch in his sobbing breath and his quivering lips will let him.

"It is not her doing! You may think it is her doing, but I know it is not! I know her better than you do."

"I never made any pretensions to knowing her well," replies the other sadly, and relinquishing as he speaks the note to its owner.

"Is it likely, I ask you?" cries Byng excitedly. "I put it to you fairly: is it likely that she, with her seraph nature, all love and burning, she that is tender over drowning flies, would have put me to this horrible pain?--O God, you do not know what pain it is" ["Do not I?" aside]--"of her own free will?"

"I do not know; as you say, I do not know her well."

"Then tell, oh tell! how thou didst murder me?"

says Byng, beginning to walk up and down the room with the tears still rolling down his cheeks, but in his spouting voice--a voice which at once assures Jim of an amelioration in his friend's condition, and hardens his heart against him. As a broad rule, indeed, it may be laid down that that sorrow which courses through one of the numberless channels cut by the poets for it will not bring its owner to Waterloo Bridge.

"But what am I saying?" lapsing out of his quotation into broken-hearted prose again. "It was not she! If I thought it were she, could I live a moment? It is her mother; no sane person can doubt that it is her mother's doing! She was always so sweetly docile, and her mother has conceived some prejudice against me. Did not I tell you how barbarously she shut the door upon me last night?--shut the door of my heaven in my face just as I thought I had won the right to enter it. Who would not have thought that it was won who had seen us together in the wood?"

Jim writhes.

"Oh, never mind the wood now!"

"Someone has prejudiced her against me, but who? I did not know that I had an enemy in the world. Someone has told her about--about Oxford--about my being sent down."

Jim is silent.

"If it is only that----" a tearful buoyancy beginning to pierce through his despair.

"It is not that."

"Someone has put a spoke in my wheel; but who? You are the only person who could, and you, dear old chap, are the last person who would, though you were not very encouraging to me last night! *You* did not?"

There is so direct an interrogation in the last words, accompanied by so confiding a look of affection, that yet has an uneasy touch of doubt in it, that Jim is obliged to answer.

"No, I did not put a spoke in your wheel; but"--his honesty forcing the admission--"I am not at all so sure that I am the last person who would have done so, if I could."

Byng has wiped his eyes to clear his vision of the blinding tears, and has again directed them to the note, which he has all this while been alternately pressing against his heart, laying upon his forehead, and crushing against his mouth.

"It seems blasphemy to say so of anything that came from her hand," he says, poring for the hundredth time over each obscure word, "but it reads like nonsense, does it not? '*I shall never marry you! I have no right to marry anyone!*' No right? what does she mean?"

Jim shakes his head sadly.

"How can I tell?"

"Do you think it is possible"--lifting his disfigured eyes in horrified appeal to his friend--"it is a dreadful hypothesis, but I can think of no other--that that bright intelligence was clouded--that--that her dear little wits were touched when she wrote this?"

"No, I do not think so."

"You--you are not keeping anything from me?"--coming a step nearer, and convulsively clutching his friend's arm--
"you--you do not know anything--anything that could throw light upon--upon this? I do not know whether you are conscious of it, but there is something in your manner that might lead me to that conclusion. Do you know--have you heard anything?"

"I know nothing," replies Jim slowly, and looking uncomfortably away from the questioner, "but I conjecture, I fear, I believe that--that----"

"That what? For God's sake, be a little quicker!"

"That--that--there is a--a--something in her past."

Byng falls back a pace or two, and puts up his hand to his head.

"What--what do you mean? What are you talking about? Her past? What"--soaring into extravagance again--"what can there be written on that white page?--so white that it bedazzles the eyes of even the angels who read it."

"I do not know what there is," replies Jim miserably, irritated almost beyond endurance by this poetic flight, and rendered even more wretched than he was before by the *role* that seems to be forced upon him, of conjecturally blackening Elizabeth's character. "How many times must I tell you that I *know* no more than you, only from--from various indications I have been led to believe that she has *something*--some great sorrow behind her?"

There is a silence, and when it is broken it is infringed by what is not much more than a whisper.

"What--what do you mean; what--what sort of a sorrow?"

"I tell you, I do not know."

Byng's tears have stopped flowing, and he now lifts his eyes, full of a madness of exaltation, to the ceiling.

"I will go to her," he cries; "if sorrow has the audacity to approach her again, it will have to reckon with me. There is no sorrow, none, in the whole long gamut of woe, for which love such as mine is not a balm. Reciprocal love!"--trailing the words in a sort of slow rapture--"no one that had seen her in the wood could have doubted that it *was* reciprocal."

"No doubt, no doubt."

"I will go to her!"--clasping his hands high in the air--"I will pour the oil and spikenard of my adoration into her gaping wounds! I will kiss the rifts together, though they yawn as wide as hell--yes, I will."

"For heaven's sake, do not talk such dreadful gibberish," breaks in Jim, at length at the end of his patience, which had run quite to the extreme of its tether indeed at the last mention of that ever-recurring wood. "It *is* a knockdown blow for you, I own, and I would do what I could to help you; but if you will keep on spouting and talking such terrible bosh----
"

"I suppose I am making an ass of myself," replies Byng, thus brought down with a run from his heroics. "I beg your pardon, I am sure, old man. I have no right to victimize you," his sweet nature asserting itself even at this bitter moment; "but you see it is so horribly sudden. If you had seen her when I parted from her last night at the door! She lingered a moment behind Mrs. Le Marchant--just a moment, just time enough to give me one look, one wordless look. She did not speak; she was so divinely dutiful and submissive that nothing would have persuaded her by the lightest word to imply any censure of her mother; but she gave me just a look, which said plainly, 'It is not *my* fault that you are turned away! I would have welcomed you in!' Upon that look I banqueted in heaven all night."

He stops, choked.

"Well?"

"And then this morning, when I got here--I think I ran all the way; I am sure I did, for I saw people staring at me as I passed--to be met by Annunziata with the news that they were *gone*! I did not believe her; I laughed in her face, and then she grew angry, and bid me come in and see for myself! And I rushed past her, in here, with my arms stretched out, confident that in one short moment more *she* would be filling them, and instead of her"--dropping upon his knees by the table with a groan--"I find this!"--dashing the note upon the floor--"all that she leaves me to fill my embrace instead of her is this poor little pillow, that still seems to keep a faint trace of the perfume of her delicate head!"

He buries his own in it again as he speaks, beginning afresh to sob loudly.

Jim stands beside him, his mind half full of compassion and half of a burning exasperation, and his body wholly rigid.

"When did they go? at what hour? last night or this morning?"

"This morning early, quite early."

"They have left all their things behind them"--looking round at the room, strewn with the traces of recent and refined occupation.

"Yes"--lifting his wet face out of his cushion--"and at first, seeing everything just as usual, even to her very workbasket--she has left her very workbasket behind--I was quite reassured. I felt certain that they could have gone for only a few hours--for the day perhaps; but----"

He breaks off

"Yes?"

"They left word that their things were to be packed and sent after them to an address they would give."

"And you do not know where they have gone?"

"I know nothing, nothing, only that they are gone.

"Then tell, oh tell! how thou didst murder me?"

Oh! oh!! oh!!!"

"You never heard them speak of their plans, mention any place they intended to move to on leaving Florence?"

"Never!"

"It is too late for Rome," says Jim musingly; "England? I hardly think England," recalling Elizabeth's forlorn admission made to him at Monte Senario, "Why should we go home? We have nothing pleasant to go to."

"I do not think they had any plans," says Byng, speaking in a voice which is thick with much weeping; "they never seemed to me to have any. She was so happy here, so gay, there never was anything more lovely than her gaiety, except--except--her tenderness."

"Yes, yes, no doubt. Then you are absolutely without a clue?"

"Absolutely."

"Do you mean to say that up to yesterday--all through yesterday, even--she never gave you a hint of any intention of leaving Florence?"

"Never, *never*. On the contrary, in the----" (he is going to say "the wood," but thinks better of it), "we were planning many more such expeditions as yesterday's. At least, I was planning them."

"And she assented?"

"She did not *dissent*. She met me with a look of divine acquiescence."

Jim turns away his head. He is involuntarily picturing to himself what that look was like, and with what sweet dumb-show it was accompanied.

"What powers of hell"--banging his head down upon the table again--"could have wrought such a hideous change in so few hours? Only ten! for it was eight in the evening before I left them, and they were off at six this morning. They could have seen no one; they had received no letters, no telegrams, for I inquired of Annunziata, and she assured me that they had not. Oh no!"--lifting his face with a gleam of moist hope upon it--"there is only one tenable hypothesis about it--it is not *her* doing at all. She wrote this under pressure. It is her handwriting, is it not?--though I would not swear even to that. I--I have played the mischief with my eyes"--pulling out his drenched pocket-handkerchief, and hastily wiping them--"so that I cannot see properly; but it *is* hers, is not it?"

"I do not know; I never saw her handwriting; she never wrote to me."

"It was evidently dictated to her," cries Byng, his sanguine nature taking an upward spring again; "there are clear traces, even in the very way the letters are formed, of its being written to order reluctantly. She did it under protest. See how her poor little hand was shaking, and she was crying all the while, bless her! There, do not you see a blister on the paper--here on this side?"

Burgoyne does not see any blister, but as he thinks it extremely probable that there was one, he does not think himself called upon to wound his friend by saying so.

"I declare I think we have got hold of the right clue at last," cries Byng, his dimmed eyes emitting such a flash as would have seemed impossible to them five minutes ago. "Read in this light, it is not nearly so incomprehensible: '*I shall never marry you, I have no right to marry anyone.*' Of course, I see now! What an ass I was not to see it at once! What she means is that she has no right to leave her mother! To anyone who knew her lofty sense of duty as well as I ought to have done it is quite obvious that that is what she means. Is not it quite obvious? is not it as clear as the sun in heaven?"

Jim shakes his head.

"I am afraid that it is rather a forced interpretation."

"I do not agree with you," rejoins the other hotly; "I see nothing forced about it. You do not know as well as I do--how should you?--her power of delicate, self-sacrificing devotion. It is overstrained, I grant you; but there it is--she thinks she has no right to leave her mother now that she is all alone."

"She is not alone; she has her husband."

"I mean now that all her other children are married and scattered. There are plenty more--are not there?--though I never could get her to talk about them."

"There are two sisters and two brothers."

"But they are no longer any good to their mother," persists Byng, clinging to his theory with all the greater tenacity as he sees that it meets with no very great acceptance in his friend's eyes; "as far as she is concerned they are non-existent."

"I do not know what right you have to say that."

"And so she, with her lofty idea of self-sacrifice, immolates her own happiness on the altar of her filial affection. It is just like her!"--going off into a sort of rapture--"blind mole that I was not to divine the motive, which her ineffable delicacy forbade her to put into words. She thought she had a right to think that I should have comprehended her without words!"

He has talked himself into a condition of such exalted confidence before he reaches the end of this sentence that Jim is conscious of a certain brutality in applying to him the douche contained in his next words.

"I do not know why you should credit Mrs. Le Marchant with such colossal selfishness; she never used to be a selfish woman."

But Burgoyne's cold shower-bath does not appear even to damp the shoulders for which it is intended.

"Since you left me, taking no farewell,"

murmurs Byng, beginning again to tramp up and down the little room, with head thrown back and clasped hands high lifted; and in his rapt poet voice:

"Since you left me, taking no farewell,"

I must follow you, sweet! Despite your prohibition, I must follow you.

"We two that with so many thousand sighs,
Did buy each other."

Then, coming abruptly down to prose--"Though they left no address, it will of course be possible, easy, to trace them. I will go to the station and make inquiries. They will have been seen. It is out of the question that she can have passed unnoticed! No eye that has once been enriched by the sight of her can have forgotten that heavenly vision. I will telegraph to Bologna, to Milan, to Venice. Before night I shall have learnt her whereabouts. I shall be in the train, following her track. I shall be less than a day behind her. I shall fall at her feet, I shall----"

"You are talking nonsense," answers Burgoyne impatiently; and yet with a distinct shade of pity in his voice; "you cannot do anything of the kind. When the poor woman has given so very unequivocal a proof of her wish to avoid you, as is implied in leaving the place at a moment's notice, without giving herself even time to pack her clothes, it is

impossible that you can force your company again upon her--it would be persecution."

"And do you mean to tell me," asks Byng slowly, and breathing hard, while the fanatical light dies out of his face, and leaves it chalk white; "do you mean to say that I am to acquiesce, to sit down with my hands before me, and submit without a struggle to the loss of---O my God"--breaking out into an exceeding bitter cry--"why did you make me

"so rich in having such a jewel,
As twenty seas, if all their sands were pearl,
The water nectar, and the rocks pure gold,'

if it were only to rob me of her?"

"I do not see what other course is open to you," replies Jim, answering only the first part of the young sufferer's appeal, and ignoring the rhetoric, terribly genuine as is the feeling of which it is the florid expression. "It is evident that she has some cogent reasons--or at least that appear cogent to her--for breaking off her relations with you."

"What cogent reasons can she have that she had not yesterday?" says Byng violently--"yesterday, when she lay in my arms, and her lips spoke their acquiescence in my worship--if not in words, yet oh, far, far more---"

"Why do you reiterate these assertions?" cries Burgoyne sternly, since to him there seems a certain indecency in--even in the insanity of loss--dragging to the eye of day the record of such sacred endearments. "I neither express nor feel any doubt as to the terms you were on *yesterday*; what I maintain is that *to-day*--I do not pretend to explain the why--she has changed her mind; it is not"--with a sarcasm, which he himself at the very moment of uttering it feels to be cheap and unworthy--"it is not the first time in the world's history that such a thing has happened. She has changed her mind."

"I do not believe it," cries Byng, his voice rising almost to a shout in the energy of his negation; "till her own mouth tell me so I will never believe it. If I thought for a moment that it was true I should rush to death to deliver me from the intolerable agony of such a thought. You do not believe it yourself"--lifting his spoilt sunk eyes in an appeal that is full of pathos to his friend's harsh face. "Think what condemnation it implies of her--her whom you always affected to like, who thought so greatly of you--her whose old friend you were--her whom you knew in her lovely childhood!"

"You are right," replies Jim, looking down, moved and ashamed; "I do not believe that she has changed her mind. What I do believe is that yesterday she let herself go; she gave way for one day, only for one day, after all, poor soul, to that famine for happiness which, I suppose"--with a sigh and a shrug--"gnaws us all now and then--gave way to it even to the pitch of forgetting that--that something in her past of whose nature I am as ignorant as you are, which seems to cast a blight over all her life."

He pauses; but as his listener only hangs silently on his utterance he goes on:

"After you left her, recollection came back to her; and because she could not trust herself again with you, probably for the very reason that she cared exceedingly about you"--steeling himself to make the admission--"she felt that there was nothing for it but to go."

Either the increased kindness of his friend's tone, or the conviction that there is, at least, something of truth in his explanations, lets loose again the fountain of Byng's tears, and once more he throws his head down upon his hands and cries extravagantly.

"It is an awful facer for you, I know," says Burgoyne, standing over him, and, though perfectly dry-eyed, yet probably not very much less miserable than the young mourner, whose loud weeping fills him with an almost unbearable and yet compunctious exasperation.

"What is he made of? how can he do it?" are the questions that he keeps irefully putting to himself; and for fear lest in an access of uncontrollable irritation he shall ask them out loud, he moves to the door. At the slight noise he makes in opening it Byng lifts his head.

"Are you going?"

"Yes; if it is any consolation to you, you have not a monopoly of wretchedness to-day. Things are not looking very bright for me either. Amelia is ill."

"Amelia," repeats the other, with a hazy look, as if not at first able to call to mind who Amelia is; then, with a return of consciousness, "Is Amelia ill? Oh poor Amelia! Amelia was very good to her. Amelia tried to draw her out. She liked Amelia!"

"Well"--with an impatient sigh--"unfortunately that did not hinder Amelia from falling ill."

"She is not ill *really*?"--his inborn kind-heartedness struggling for a moment to make head against the selfishness of his absorption.

"I do not know"--uneasily--"I am going back to the hotel to hear the doctor's verdict. Will you walk as far as to the Anglo-American with me? There is no use in your staying here."

But at this proposition the lover's sobs break out louder and more infuriating than ever.

"I will stay here till I die--till I am carried over the threshold that her cruel feet have crossed.

"Then tell, oh tell! how thou didst murder me?"

Against a resolution at once so fixed and so rational, Jim sees that it is useless to contend.

CHAPTER XXVII.

The sun rides high, as Burgoyne issues into the open air, and beats, blinding hot, upon the great stone flags that pave the Florentine streets, and seem to have a peculiar power of absorbing and retaining light and heat. He must have been longer in the Piazza d'Azeglio than he had thought, and the reflection quickens his steps as he hurries, regardless of the midsummer blaze--for, indeed, it is more than equivalent to that of our midsummer--back to the Anglo-American. As he reaches it, he hears, with annoyance, the hotel clocks striking one. He is annoyed, both because the length of his absence seems to argue an indifference to the tidings he is expecting, and also because he knows that it is the Wilsons' luncheon hour, and that he will probably find that they have migrated to the *salle-a-manger*. In this case he will have to choose between the two equally disagreeable alternatives of following and watching them at their food, or that of undergoing a *tete-a-tete* with Sybilla, who, it is needless to say, does not accompany her family to the public dining-room; a *tete-a-tete* with Sybilla, which is, of all forms of social intercourse, that for which he has the least relish.

But as he apprehensively opens the *salon* door, he sees that his fears are unfounded. They have not yet gone to luncheon; they are all sitting in much the same attitudes as he had left them, except that Sybilla is eating or drinking something of a soupy nature out of a cup. There are very few hours of the day or night in which Sybilla is not eating something out of a cup. There is that about the entire idleness of the other couple which gives him a fright. Are they too unhappy? Have they heard too bad news to be able to settle to any occupation? Urged by this alarm, his question shoots out, almost before he is inside the door:

"Has not he come yet? Has not the doctor come yet?"

"He has been and gone; you see, you have been such a very long time away," replies Cecilia. She has no intention of conveying reproach, either by her words or tone; but to his sore conscience it seems as if both carried it.

"And what did he say?"

"He did not say much."

"Does he--does he think that it is anything--anything serious?"

"He did not say."

"Do you mean to tell me"--indignantly--"that you did not ask him?"

"If you had been here," replies Cecilia, with a not inexcusable resentment, "you might have asked him yourself."

"But did not you ask him?" in too real anxiety to be offended at, or even aware of, her flier. "Did not he say?"

"I do not think he knew himself."

"But he must have thought--he must have had an opinion!" growing the more uneasy as there seems no tangible object for his fears to lay hold of.

"He says it is impossible to judge at so early a stage; it may be a chill--I told him about that detestable excursion yesterday, and he considered it quite enough to account for anything--it may be measles--they seem to be a good deal about; it may be malaria--there is a good deal of that too."

"And how soon will he know? How soon will it declare itself?"

"I do not know."

"But has he prescribed? Is there nothing to be done--to be done *at once*?" asks Jim feverishly, chafing at the idea of this inaction, which seems inevitable, with that helpless feeling which his own entire ignorance of sickness produces.

"Do not you suppose that if there was we should have done it?" cries Cecilia, rendered even more uncomfortable than she was before, by the contagion of his anxiety. "We are to keep her in bed--there is no great difficulty about that, poor soul; she has not the least desire to get up; she seems so odd and heavy!"

"So *odd and heavy*?"

"Yes; I went in to see her just now, and she scarcely took any notice of me; only when I told her that you had been to inquire after her, she lit up a little. I believe"--with a rather grudging smile--"that if she were dead, and someone

mentioned your name, she would light up."

A sudden mountain rises in Jim's throat.

"If she is not better to-morrow, Dr. Coldstream will send a nurse."

"But does he think it will be necessary?"

"He does not know."

Jim writhes. It seems to him as if he were being blind-folded, and having his arms tied to his sides by a hundred strong yet invisible threads.

"Does no one know anything?" he cries miserably.

"I have told you exactly what the doctor said," says Cecilia, with the venial crossness bred of real anxiety. "I suppose you do not wish me to invent something that he did not say?"

"Of course not; but I wish I had been here--I wish I had been here!"--restlessly.

"Why were not you?"

No immediate answer.

"Why were not you?" repeats she, curiosity, for the moment, superseding her disquiet. "What prevented you? I thought, when you left us, that you meant to come back at once?"

"So I did, but----"

"But what?"

"I could not; I was with Byng."

"With Byng?" repeats Cecilia, too genuinely astonished to remember even to prefix a "Mr." to Byng's name. "Why, I should have thought that if there were one day of his life on which he could have done without you better than another, it would have been to-day!"

"Were not you rather *de trop*?" chimes in Sybilla's languid voice from the sofa. "Rather a bad third?"

"I was not a third at all."

"Do you mean to say," cries Cecilia, her countenance tinged with the pink of a generous indignation, "that you were *four*--that Mrs. Le Marchant stayed in the room the whole time? I must say that now that they are really and *bona fide* engaged, I think she might leave them alone together."

"Mrs. Le Marchant was not there at all." Then, seeing the open-mouthed astonishment depicted on the faces of his audience, he braces his mind to make the inevitable yet dreaded announcement. "I had better explain at once that neither Mrs. nor Miss Le Marchant was there; they are gone."

"Gone!"

"Yes; they left Florence at seven o'clock this morning." There is a moment of silent stupefaction.

"I suppose," says Cecilia, at last slowly recovering the power of speech, "that they were telegraphed for? Mr. Le Marchant is dead or ill? one of the married sisters? one of the brothers?"

Never in his life has Jim laboured under so severe a temptation to tell a lie, were it only the modified falsehood of allowing Cecilia's hypothesis to pass uncontradicted; but even if he were able for once to conquer his constitutional incapacity, he knows that in this case it would be useless. The truth must transpire to-morrow.

"I believe not."

"Gone!" repeats Cecilia, in a still more thunderstruck key than before--"and where are they gone?"

"I do not know."

"Why did they go?"

Jim makes an impatient movement, fidgeting on his chair. "I can only tell you their actions; they told me their motives as little as they did you."

"Gone! Why, they never said a word about it yesterday."

This being of the nature of an assertion--not an interrogation--Jim feels with relief that it does not demand an answer.

"Gone, at seven o'clock in the morning! Why, they could not have had time to pack their things!"

"They left them behind."

The moment that this admission is out of Burgoyne's mouth, he repents having made it; nor does his regret at all diminish under the shower of ejaculations from both sisters that it calls forth.

"Why, it was a regular flit! they must have taken French leave."

There is something so horribly jarring in the semi-jocosity of the last phrase that Jim jumps up from his chair and walks towards the window, where Mr. Wilson is sitting in dismal idleness.

Mr. Wilson has never cared much about the Le Marchants, and is now far too deeply absorbed in his own trouble to have anything but the most inattentive indifference to bestow upon the topic which to his daughters appears so riveting. Jim blesses him for his callousness. But the window of a small room is not so distant from any other part of it that sounds cannot, with perfect ease, penetrate thither, as Jim finds when Cecilia's next eager question pursues him.

"Did Mr. Byng know that they were going?"

"No."

There is a pause.

"It is absolutely incomprehensible!" says Cecilia, with almost a gasp. "I never saw any one human being so much in love with another as she was yesterday--there was so little disguise about it, that one was really quite sorry for her--and this morning at cockcrow she decamps and leaves him without a word."

"You are mistaken--she left a note for him."

"Poor dear boy!" sighs Sybilla, "is not he quite prostrated by the blow? I am not apt to pity men generally--they are so coarse-grained--but he is much more delicately strung than the general run."

"I suppose he is frightfully cut up," says Cecilia, with that inquisitiveness as to the details of a great affliction which we are all apt to experience.

For some perverse reason, inexplicable even to himself, Jim would like to be able to answer that his friend is not cut up at all; but truth again asserting its empire, he assents laconically, "Frightfully!"

"How did he take it?"

"How do people generally take such things?"

The impatience of the key in which this is uttered, coupled with the implied side-allusion to an acquaintance with sorrows of a somewhat similar nature on her own part, silences the younger and sounder Miss Wilson for a moment, but only for a moment--a moment long enough to be filled by another sighing "Poor dear boy!" from Sybilla.

"You say that she left a note for him?"--with a renewed light of curiosity in her eyes--"have you any idea what was in it?"

Jim hesitates; then, "Yes," he replies; "but as it was not addressed to me, I do not think that I have any right to repeat it."

"Of course not!"--reluctantly; "but did it throw no light--absolutely no light at all--upon this extraordinary stampede?"

"No."

"Did not she even tell him where they were going?"

"No."

"Nor whether they were coming back?"

"No."

"Nor ask him to follow her?"

"If she did not tell him where she was going, is it likely that she would ask him to follow her?" cries Jim irritably, deeply annoyed to find that he is, by the series of negatives that is being forced from him, doing the very thing which he had just denied his own right to do.

"It is the most incomprehensible thing I ever heard in my life. I wonder"--with an air of even alerter interest than before--"what Mr. Greenock will say? Perhaps he will now tell what he knows about them; if they are gone, there will no longer be any need to conceal it. I am afraid this looks rather as if there were something!"

For the second time in one day the mention of an amiable *flaneur's* name makes Jim vault to his feet.

"Well, I will not keep you any longer from your luncheon," he cries hastily. "I will call in again later."

"Are you going?" asks Mr. Wilson dully, lifting his head from his chest, upon which it is sunk. "Well, you are about right; we are not much good to anyone when our mainspring is gone."

The phrase strikes cold on Jim's heart.

"Are you going back to the poor dear boy?" inquires Sybilla as he passes her. "By-the-bye, if it is not too much trouble, would you mind tucking the Austrian blanket a little closer in on the left side?" and as he stoops to perform the asked-for service, she adds: "Let him know how sincerely I sympathize with him; and if he wants anything quieting for his nerves, tell him that there is nothing that I can more conscientiously recommend than----"

But what Sybilla can conscientiously recommend is shut into the closing door. Outside that door Jim finds that Cecilia has joined him. Anxiety has quite banished the not altogether disagreeable curiosity of five minutes ago, from the troubled face she lifts to his.

"You will come back, will not you?" she asks. "You are not of much use, I suppose; but still, one feels that you are there, and we are all so much at sea. You have not an idea how much we are at sea--without her."

"I think that I have a very good idea," he answers mournfully. "Tell me, Cis; do you think she is really very ill?"

As he puts the question, he feels its irrationality. He knows that the person to whom he is making his futile appeal has already given him all the scanty tidings she has to give; yet he cannot help indulging a faint hope that her response to this last query of his may perhaps set Amelia's condition in a slightly more favourable light. A look of helpless distress clouds Cecilia's already cloudy face.

"I tell you I do not know; I am no judge; I have seen so little real illness. Sybilla would kill me if she heard me say so, would not she"--with a slight parenthetical smile--"but I have seen so little real illness, that I do not know what things mean; I do not know what it means that she should be so heavy and stupid. As I told you before, the only time that she roused up at all was when I mentioned your--"

He stops her, breaking rudely into her sentence. He cannot bear to hear that it is only at the magic of his name that his poor faithful love lifts her sick head.

"Yes, yes; I remember."

"Some one ought to sit up with her, I am sure," pursues Cecilia, still with that same helpless air of disquiet; "she ought not to be left alone all night; but who? I should be more than willing to do it, but I know that I should fall asleep in five minutes, and I am such a heavy sleeper that, when once I am off, there is no possibility of waking me. I am a dreadfully bad sick-nurse; father can never bear to have me near him when he has the gout."

Burgoyne is too well aware of the perfect truth of this last statement to attempt any contradiction of it.

"Amelia has always been the one to sit up when any one was ill," continues she woefully; "and even now, by a stupid confusion of ideas, I catch myself thinking, 'Oh, Amelia will sit up with her!' before I can realize that *her* is Amelia herself."

Jim can well sympathize with this same confusion, when, several times during his walk back to the Piazza d'Azeglio, a muddled thought of comfort, in the idea that he will go and tell Amelia what a terrible day of anxiety about some one he has been having, taps at the door of his brain. The portals of No. 12 are once again opened to him by Annunziata, who indicates to him, by a series of compassionate gestures and liquid Tuscan sentences, that the *povero* is still within, and the Padrona, who this time also appears on the scene, and who is possessed of somewhat more English than her handmaid, intimates, albeit with a good deal of sympathy for his sufferings, yet with still more of determination, that it would be no bad thing were he to be removed, since, whether the sun shines or the rain falls, people must live, and the apartment has to be prepared for new occupants.

Anything that speaks less intention of removing than Byng's pose, when his friend rejoins him, it would be difficult to imagine. He is stretched upon the parquet floor, with his head lying on the small footstool that has been wont to support Elizabeth's feet; her rifled workbasket stands on the floor beside him, while her bit of embroidery half shrouds his distorted face. The needle, still sticking in it, may prick his eyes out for all he cares; the book she last read is open at the page where she has put her mark of a skein of pale silk; and the yellow anemones, that he must have plucked for her yesterday in drenched Vallombrosa, are crushed under his hot cheek. But outwardly he is quite quiet. Jim puts his hand on his shoulder.

"Come away, there is no use in your staying here any longer."

As he receives no answer, he repeats the exhortation more imperatively, "Come."

"Why should I come? Where should I come to?" says the young man, lifting his head, "where can I find such plain traces of her as here? I will stay."

He says this with an air of resolution, and once more lays down his face upon the footstool, which, being entirely worked in beads, has impressed the cheek thrust against it with a design in small hollows, a fact of which the sufferer is quite unaware.

"You cannot stay!" cries Burgoyne, the more impatiently that his own share of anxiety is fretting his temper almost past endurance; "you cannot stay, it is out of the question; they want to come into the rooms, to prepare them for new occupants."

"*New occupants!*" repeats Byng, turning over almost on his face, and flattening his nose and lips against the beaded surface of his stool, "other occupants than *her*. Never! never!"

It is to be placed to the credit side of Mr. Burgoyne's account that he does not, upon this declaration, withdraw the resting-place from his young friend's countenance and break it over his head. It is certainly not the temptation to do so that is lacking. Instead, he sits down at some distance off, and says quietly:

"I see, you will force them to call in the police. You will make a discreditable *esclandre*. How good for her; how conducive to her good name. I congratulate you!"

The other has lifted his head in a moment.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you think," asks Jim indignantly, "that it is ever very advantageous to a woman to have her name mixed up in a vulgar row? And do you suppose that hers will be kept out of it? Come"--seeing a look of shocked consternation breaking over the young man's face, and determined to strike while the iron is hot--"I will call a fiacre, and we will go home to the hotel. Put back her things into her basket. What right have you to meddle with them? You have no business to take advantage of her absence to do what you would not do if she were here."

Byng obeys with a scared docility; his eyes are so dim, and his fingers tremble so much, that Jim has to help him in replacing Elizabeth's small properties. His own heart is pricked with a cruel smart that has no reference to Amelia's illness, as he handles the departed girl's spools and skeins, and awkwardly folds her scrap of broidery. Byng offers no further resistance, and, equally indifferent to his own bunged-up eyes, bead-marked cheeks, and dishevelled locks, follows his companion dully, down the stone stairs, compassionately watched from the top by Annunziata, whose heart is an inconveniently tender one to be matched with so tough a face. They get into the fiacre, and drive in dead silence to the Minerva. Arrived there, Jim persuades his friend, who now seems prepared to acquiesce meekly in whatever he is told to do, to lie down on his bed, since the few words that he utters convey the fact of his being suffering from a burning headache, a phenomenon not very surprising, considering his late briny exercises, since, even at the superb age of twenty-two, it is difficult to spend six hours in banging your forehead against a parquet floor, in moaning, bellowing, and weeping, without leaving some traces of these gymnastics on your physique.

Burgoyne stands or sits patiently beside him, bathing his fiery temples with eau-de-Cologne, not teasing him with any questions, having, indeed, on his own part, the least possible desire for conversation; and so the heavy hours go by. The day has declined to evening before Burgoyne quits his *protege's* side to dine, shortly and solitarily, previous making a third visit to the Anglo-American, to learn the latest news of his betrothed.

He had left Byng still stretched upon his bed, apparently asleep, and is therefore the more surprised, on returning to take a final look at him before setting out on his own errand, to find him up, with hat and stick in hand, evidently prepared for a walk.

"You are going out?"

"Yes."

"Where are you going?"

The other hesitates.

"I am going back there."

"Impossible!"

"But I am," replies Byng doggedly; "it will not do *her* any injury, for I shall not attempt to go in, I shall only ask at the door whether any telegram has yet been received from--from them; they must telegraph to direct where their things are to be sent to, and it is most probable that they have done so already."

"It is most *improbable*."

"Well, at all events, it is possible, it is worth trying, and I mean to try it."

There is such a fixed resolution in his voice, which is no longer quavering with sobs, and in his ashy face, that Jim offers no further resistance. The only concession he can obtain from him is that of permitting him to accompany him.

"You will not mind coming with me to the Anglo-American first, will you?" inquires Jim, as they set off walking across the Piazza.

"It will delay us quite half-an-hour," answers the other restlessly. "But stay" (a hazy look of reminiscence dawning over his preoccupied haggard face), "did you tell me that Amelia was ill--or did I dream it?"

"No, you did not dream it," replies the other sadly. "She *is* ill."

Perhaps the wretchedness that pierces through his friend's quiet tones recalls the young dreamer to the fact that the world holds other miseries than his own. There is at all events something of his old quick sympathy in his next words, and in the way in which they are uttered:

"Oh, poor Amelia, I *am* sorry! By all means let us go at once and ask after her. Is there nothing that we can get?--nothing that we can do for her?"

It is the question that Jim, in baffled anxiety, puts when he is admitted inside the dull *salon*, where no love-glorified, homely face to-night lights up the tender candles of its glad eyes, from over its stitching, at his entry.

Sybilla is lying less comfortably than usual on her sofa, her cushions not plumped up, and her bottle of smelling-salts rolled out of her reach. Mr. Wilson is walking uneasily up and down the room, instead of sitting placidly in his chair, with the soothing voice--which he had always thought as much to be counted on, and as little to be particularly thankful for, as the air that fills his lungs--lulling reading him to sleep.

"Cecilia is with her just now," he says, in a voice of forlorn irritation. "I wish she would come down again; I have no great opinion of Cecilia as a sick-nurse, and she must know how anxious we are." A moment later, still pursuing his fidgety ramble from wall to wall, and exclaiming peevishly, as he stumbles over a footstool: "If it would only declare itself! There seems to be nothing to lay hold of, we are so completely in the dark--if it would only declare itself!"

A not very subdued sob from the sofa is the only answer he gets, an answer which evidently irritates still further his fretted nerves.

"I cannot think what Cecilia is doing!" he cries, hastening to the door, opening it noisily, and then listening.

"Let me run up and see," says Jim, his heart going out to the fractious old man in a sympathy of suffering. "Yes, I know where her room is--*au troisieme*, is not it?" (a flash of recollection lighting up the fact that Amelia's is distinctly the worst room of the suite occupied by the Wilson family; the room with most stairs to climb to, and least accommodation when you reach it). "I will knock quite gently. Do not be afraid, I will not disturb her, and I will come down immediately to tell you."

Without waiting for permission, he springs up the stairs, and, standing on the landing, taps cautiously on the closed door, whose number (by one of those quirks of memory that furnish all our minds with insignificant facts) he has recollected. His first knock is so superfluously soft that it is evidently inaudible within, since no result follows upon it. His second, a shade louder, though still muffled by the fear of breaking into some little fitful yet salutary sleep, brings Cecilia out. His first glance at her face shows him that she has no good news, either to warm his own heart, or for him to carry down as a solace to the poor old man below.

"Oh, it is you, is it?" says she, shutting the door behind her with a clumsy carefulness that makes it creak. "No, I do not think she is any better; but it is so difficult to tell, I am no judge. She does not complain of anything particular; but she looks so *odd*."

It is the same adjective that Cecilia had applied earlier in the day to her sick sister, and it fills Jim with an impotent terror.

"If she is asleep, might not I just look in at her?" he asks. "I do not know what you mean when you say she looks *odd*."

"She is not asleep," replies Cecilia, in a noisy whisper, much more likely to pierce sick ears than a voice pitched in its normal key; "at least, I think not. But I am sure you ought not to see her; Dr. Coldstream said she was to be kept very quiet, and nothing would upset her so much as seeing you."

"She need not see me; I would only take just one look at her from behind the door," persists Jim who feels a desire, whose gnawing intensity surprises himself, to be assured by the evidence of his own eyes that his poor love's face has not undergone some strange and gruesome change, such as is suggested by Cecilia's disquieting epithet.

"Do you think she would not know you were there?" asks she scornfully, "Why, she hears your step three streets off!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

So that night Jim does not see Amelia. After all, as Cecilia says, it is better to be on the safe side, and to-morrow she will be brighter, and he can sit by her, and tell her lovingly--oh very lovingly!--what a fright she has given him. Yes, to-morrow she will be brighter. The adjective is Cecilia's; but, apparently, he cannot improve upon it, for he not only keeps repeating it to himself as he runs downstairs, but employs it for the reassurance of Miss Wilson's anxious relatives.

"She will be brighter to-morrow; sick people are always worse at night, are not they?"--rather vaguely, with again that oppressive sense of his own inexperience in illness. "Not that she is *worse*"--this is hastily subjoined, as he sees her father's face fall--"Cecilia never said she was *worse*--oh, no, not *worse*, only not distinctly better; and, after all, it would have been irrational to expect that. She will be brighter to-morrow--oh, yes, of course she will be brighter to-morrow!"

He leaves the hotel with the phrase, which sounds cut and dried and unreal, still upon his lips, after bidding a kinder good-night than usual to Mr. Wilson, after having offered to supply Amelia's place by reading aloud to him, a feat he has not performed since the evening of his disastrous experience of the Provident Women of Oxford; and lastly, having even--as a reward to Sybilla, who has been understood to murmur something tearful about letting her maid look in upon Amelia at intervals through the night--tucked in her Austrian blanket, and picked up her smelling-bottle. He has expected to rejoin Byng outside, as he had promised to wait for him with such patience as a cigar could lend, and on the condition that his absence should not exceed a stipulated period. But either the promise has been broken, or the period exceeded, for Byng is gone. The fact does not greatly surprise Burgoyne, though it causes him a slight uneasiness, which is, perhaps, rather a blessing for him, distracting his mind in some slight measure from the heaviness of his own trouble.

He walks fast to the Piazza d'Azeglio; but he neither overtakes him of whom he is in pursuit, nor finds him at 12 bis. He has been there, has inquired with agitation for the telegrams, which have naturally not been received, and has then gone away again immediately. Whither? The Padrona, who has answered the door-bell herself and, with Italian suavity, is doing her best to conceal that she is beginning to think she has heard nearly enough of the subject, does not know. For a few moments Jim stands irresolute, then he turns his steps towards the Arno. It is not yet too late for the charming riverside promenade, the gay Lung'Arno, to be still alive with *flaneurs*; the stars have lit their lamps above, and the hotels below. The pale planets, and the yellow lights from the opposite bank of the river, lie together, sweet and peaceful upon her breast. In both cases the counterfeits are as clear and bright as the real luminaries; and it seems as if one had only to plunge in an arm to pick up stars and candles out of the stream's depths.

Leaning over the parapet near the Ponte Vecchio, Burgoyne soon discovers a familiar figure, a figure which starts when he touches its arm.

"I thought I would wait about here for an hour or so," says Byng, with a rather guilty air of apology, "until I could go back and inquire again. The telegram has not arrived yet--I suppose it is too early. Of course they would not telegraph until they get in to-night. You do not think"--with a look of almost terror--"that they are going through to England, and that they will not telegraph till they get there?"

"How can I tell?"

"There is nothing in the world less likely," cries Byng feverishly, irritated at not having drawn forth the reassurance he had hoped for. "I do not for a moment believe that they have gone home; I feel convinced that they are still in Italy! Why should they leave it, when they--when she is so fond of it?"

Jim looks down sadly at the calm, strong stream.

"I do not know, I cannot give an opinion--I have no clue."

"I will ask again in about an hour," says Byng, lifting his arms from the parapet, "in an hour it is pretty certain to have arrived; and meanwhile, I thought I would just stroll about the town, but there is no reason--none at all--why I should keep you! You--you must be wanting to go back to Amelia."

He glances at his friend in a nervous, sidelong way, as he makes this suggestion.

"I am not going back again to-night," replies Jim quietly, without giving any evidence of an intention to acquiesce in his dismissal. "There is nothing that I can do for her--there is nothing to be done."

His tone, in making this statement, must be yet more dreary than he is aware, as it arouses even Byng's self-absorbed attention.

"Nothing to be done for her?" he echoes, with a shocked look. "My dear old chap, you do not mean to say--to imply--"

"I mean to imply nothing," interrupts Jim sharply, in a superstitious panic of hearing some unfavourable augury as to his betrothed put into words. "I mean just what I say--neither more nor less; there is nothing to be done for her to-night, nothing but to let her sleep--a good sleep will set her up: of course a good sleep will quite set her up."

He speaks almost angrily, as if expecting and challenging contradiction. But Byng's spirit has already flown back to his own woes. He may make what sanguine statements he pleases about Amelia's to-morrow, without fearing any demurrer from his companion. What attention the latter has to spare is evidently only directed to the solving of the problem, how best, with amicable civility, to be rid of him. Before he can hit upon any expedient for attaining this desired end, Burgoyne speaks again, his eye resting with a compassionate expression upon his junior's face, whose wild pallor is heightened by the disorder of his hair, and the hat crushed down over his brows.

"You have not had anything to eat all day--had not you better come back to the hotel and get something to eat?"

"Eat!" cries the other, with almost a scream; "you must have very little comprehension of---" Then, checking himself and with a strong and palpable effort for composure: "It would not be worth while, I should not have time; in an hour--less than an hour now, for I must have been here quite ten minutes at the least--I have to return to the Piazza d'Azeglio."

"Then go to Doney's; why not get something to eat at Doney's? It will not take you five minutes to reach the Via Tornabuoni."

"What should I do when I got there?" asks Byng impatiently. "If I tried to swallow food, it would stick in my throat; no food shall pass my lips till I learn where she is; after that"--breaking out into a noisy laugh--"you may do what you please with me--we will make a night of it with all my heart, we will--"

"Drink, drink,
Till the pale stars blink!"

Jim looks blankly at him. Is he going mad?

"If you think that you will get me to go back to the hotel to-night, you are very much mistaken," continues Byng recklessly; "no roof less high than this"--jerking back his head, to throw his fevered look up to the cool stars--"shall shelter my head; and besides, where would be the use of going to bed when I should have to be up again so early? I shall be off by one of the morning expresses: until I have learnt--as, of course, I shall do to-night--where she has gone, I cannot tell which; but neither of them starts much later than seven."

For a moment Jim stands dumb with consternation at the announcement of this intention; but, reflecting that it would not be a whit more irrational to attempt to reason with a madman who had reached the padded-room stage of lunacy, than with his present companion, he contents himself with saying:

"And supposing that you do not learn to-night where she has gone?"

"There is no use in supposing anything so impossible!"

But as the hours go by, the possibility becomes a probability, the probability a certainty! Midnight comes, and the closed telegraph-office puts a final extinguisher upon the expectation, which no one but the unhappy lover had ever entertained, that Florence would be enlightened before the dawn of another day as to the place whither her two truants have fled.

Burgoyne has accompanied his friend upon his last importunate visit to the now-going-to-bed and justly-incensed 12 bis. He has been ashamed again to present himself at the so-often-attacked door, so has awaited at the bottom of the stairs, has heard Byng's hoarse query, and the negative--curter and less suave than the last one--that follows it; has heard the door shut again, and the hopeless footsteps that come staggering down to him.

"You will go home now?"

"Perchance, Iago, I shall ne'er go home!"

replies Byng; and, though he is compelled to admit that there is no longer any possibility of his to-night obtaining the information for which he so madly hungers, that there can consequently be no question of his setting off by one of the

early trains, since he would not know in which direction to go, and might only be fleeing further from her whom he would fain rejoin, yet he still keeps with fevered pertinacity to his project of spending the night *a la belle etoile*.

Finding it impossible to dissuade him, Jim resigns himself to bearing him company. It is with very little reluctance that he does so. There is no truer truism than that all sorrows, however mountainous, are more easily carried under God's high roof than man's low ones, and he who does not sleep has for compensation that at least he can have no dreadful waking. So the two men wander about all night in the boon southern air, and see--

"The moon exactly round,
And all those stars with which the brows of ample heaven are crown'd;
Orion, all the Pleiades, and those seven Atlas got;
The close-beam'd Hyades, the Bear, surnamed the Chariot,
That turns about heaven's axle-tree, holds ope a constant eye
Upon Orion, and of all the cressets in the sky,
His golden forehead never bows to the Ocean's empery."

There are not many hours of a summer's night during which the stir of life has ceased and has not yet reawaked in an Italian town, the talk and the tread and the mule bells, and the flutes of the voiceful people lasting on till near the small hours, and beginning again ere those hours have had strength to grow big. But yet there is a space of time when Florence lies silent, baring her beauty to the constellations alone; and under this unfamiliar and solemn and lovely aspect the two night-wanderers see her. They see her Campanile

"Commercing with the skies,"

with no distracting human bustle about her feet; they see her Perseus battling beneath her Loggia, and her San Giorgio standing wakeful at his post on Or san Michele. They see her scowling palace rows, her stealing river, and her spanning bridges--palaces out of which no head peeps, a river on which no boat oars, bridges upon which no horse-hoof rings. They have all her churches--Santa Croce, Arnolfo's great "Bride," that *new* Maria that is now four hundred years old or more, the humbly glorious San Marco--to themselves; all her treasure houses, all her memories, all her flower-embalmed air--for a few hours they possess them all. She is but a little city, this fair Firenze, and in these few hours they traverse her in her length and breadth, rambling aimlessly wherever Byng's feverishly miserable impulses lead them. Burgoyne offers no opposition to any of these, but accompanies his friend silently down slumbrous thoroughfare, or across sleeping Piazza, by Arno side, under colonnade or arch. It is all one to him; nor is he sensible of any fatigue, when at length, at about the hour when Byng had meant to have caught the early morning train, they return to the hotel, and the younger man, happily dead-beat at last, worn out with want of food, tears, and weariness, flings himself down, dressed, upon his bed, and instantly falls into a leaden sleep. Jim feels no desire, nor indeed any power of following his example. He is not easily tired, and his former life of travel and hardship has made him always willing to dispense with the--to him--unnecessary luxury of a bed; and, under ordinary circumstances, a night passed in the open air would have had an effect upon him rather exhilarating than otherwise. He has his bath, dresses, breakfasts, and then jumps into a fiacre, and has himself driven to the Anglo-Americain.

The day is so exactly the counterpart of its predecessor, in its even assured splendour, that Jim has a hazy feeling that they both make only one divided into two parts by the narrow dark blue ribbon of the exquisite brief night. When did yesterday end and to-day begin? As he is borne along, his memory, made more alert by sleeplessness, reproduces--merely, as it seems to him, the better to fill him with pain and remorse--the different states of mind in which he has passed over the often trodden ground. Here, at the street corner, what a nausea had come over him at the thought of the interest he would have to feign in those humdrum details, so dear to Amelia's soul, of their future *menage*, with all its candle-end economies and depressing restrictions. Here, in the church shadow, how he had tried to lash himself up into a more probable semblance of pleasure in her expected and dreaded caresses. There seems to be scarcely an inch of the way where he has not had some harsh or weary thought of her; he is thankful when the brief transit, that has appeared to him so long, is over. And yet the change is only from the sharp sting of recollected unkindness to the dull bruising ache of anticipated ill. A *garcon* is sweeping out the *salon*, for the hour is not much beyond eight, so Jim goes into the dreary little dining-room, where two places are laid with coffee-cups and rolls. Only two. And, though he knows that nothing short of a miracle could have already restored Amelia so completely as to enable her to come down to breakfast, yet the ocular demonstration of the fact that her place is and will be empty, strikes a chill to his boding heart. He is presently joined by Cecilia, whose carelessly-dressed hair, heavy eyelids, and tired puffy face, sufficiently show that not to her, any more than to himself has night brought

"Sweet child sleep, the filmy-eyed."

"How fresh and cool you are!" she cries, with an almost reproachful intonation. "Do not look at me!"--covering her face

with her hot hands--"I am not fit to be seen; but what does that matter? What do I care?"--beginning to cry--"Oh, she is so bad! We have spent such a dreadful night! As I tell you, I am a shocking sick-nurse; I never know what to do; I lose my head completely; and she has been so odd--she has been talking such gibberish!"

"Delirious?"

"Yes, I suppose that is what you would call it. I never saw anybody delirious before, so I do not know. I have seen Sybilla in hysterics, but I never believed that they were real--I always thought that a bucket of water would bring her round."

As a general rule, Jim may be counted upon for cordial co-operation in any hit directed against Sybilla, but now he is too spiritless even to notice it.

"I was so frightened," continues Cecilia; "it is not cheerful being all alone at the dead of night with a person talking such nonsense as she was. Amelia, of all people, to talk nonsense! I could not quite make out what it was about, but it seemed to have more or less reference to you. She was begging you to forgive her for something she had done, as far as I could gather; some treat she had prepared for you, and that you had not liked. Have you the least idea what she could have meant?"

He has every idea; but it would seem profanation to explain that her poor wandering brain is still distressedly labouring with the abortive project she had so happily framed for his enjoyment.

"She is quieter now. Sybilla's maid is with her; Sybilla really has not behaved badly--*for her*; she let her maid look in several times during the night; but still, for the most part I was alone with her! Oh, I do trust"--shuddering--"that I may never again have to be alone at night with a person who is not right in her head!"

This aspiration on the youngest Miss Wilson's part is, for the present occasion, at least, likely to be gratified; for, by the time that another night settles down on Florence, Amelia's illness has been declared by Dr. Coldstream to have every symptom of developing into the malarious Florentine fever, which not unfrequently lays low the chilled or over-fatigued, or generally imprudent foreign visitor to that little Eden. Amelia has Florentine fever; and the verification of this fact is followed by all the paraphernalia of serious sickness--night and day nurses, disinfectants, physic phials.

The announcement of her being attacked by a definite and recognised disease brings at first a sort of relief to Burgoyne's mind, which, under Cecilia's frightened and frightening word-pictures, had been beset by terrors great in proportion to their vagueness. Now that Amelia is confessedly sick of a fever, there is nothing abnormal in her being "odd," and "stupid," and "wandering," these being only the inevitable stages on a road which will--which *must* lead to ultimate recovery. His heart is heavy, yet scarcely so heavy as it had been upon his arrival in the morning, when, late in the afternoon--not sooner do the claims upon him of the disorganized and helpless family of his betrothed relax--he returns to the Minerva to look after Byng. Having had every reason to fear that he will not find him at the hotel, but will be obliged again to set off in pursuit of him through the streets and squares so repeatedly traversed last night, he is relieved to learn from the hotel servants that the young man is in his bedroom. He finds him there indeed; no longer stretched in the blessed oblivion of deep sleep upon his bed, but sitting on a hard chair by the open window, his arms resting upon the back, and his face crushed down upon them. By no slightest movement does he show consciousness of his friend's entrance.

"I am afraid I have been a long time away," says the latter kindly.

"Have you?" answers Byng, his voice coming muffled through lips still buried in his own coat-sleeve. "I do not know; I have done with time!"

"I do not know how you have managed that," rejoins Jim, still indulgently, though a shade dryly. "Have you been here all day?"

"I do not know where I have been. Yes,"--lifting his head--"I do; I have been to the Piazza d'Azeglio."

"Well?"

"They know where she is. They were packing her things; through the door I saw them tying the label on the box; if I had tried I could have read the address on the label, but I did not. She had forbidden them to give it to me; in her telegram she had forbidden them to give it to anyone."

CHAPTER XXIX.

Jim refrains from saying how likely this culmination of his friend's woes has appeared to him, since it would have been the height of the illogical for the Le Marchants to have put themselves to extreme inconvenience in order to escape from a person to whom they immediately afterwards gave the power of following them. He refrains from saying it, because he knows of how very little consoling power the "told you so" philosophy is possessed.

"And what will you do now?"

"Do! What is there to do? What does a man do when he is shot through the heart?"

"I believe that in point of fact he jumps his own height in the air. I know that a buffalo does," replies Burgoyne with a matter-of-fact dryness, which proceeds less from want of sympathy, than from an honest belief that it is the best and kindest method of dealing with Byng's heroics.

"*Shot through the heart!*" murmurs the latter, repeating his own phrase as if he found a dismal pleasure in it. "I had always been told that it was a painless death; I now know to the contrary."

"Shall you stay here? There is no longer any use in your staying here."

"There is no longer any use in my doing anything, or leaving anything undone.

"There's nothing in this world can make me joy;
Life is as tedious as a twice-told tale,
Vexing the dull ear of a drowsy man."

So saying, he replaces his head upon his arms, and his arms upon the chair-rail, with the air of one who, upon mature consideration, has decided to maintain that attitude for the remainder of his life.

A week has passed; a week upon which Burgoyne looks back as upon a blur of wretchedness, with distinct points of pain sticking up here and there out of it. It is a blur; for it is a time-space, without the usual limitations and divisions of time; a week not cut up into orderly lengths of day and night, but in which each has puzzlingly run into and overlapped each. There have been nights when he has not been in bed at all, and there have been days when he has slept heavily at unaccustomed hours. He has not dined at any particular time; he has shared forlorn breakfast, dotted about the morning as the less or more anxiety about Amelia dictated, with the Wilsons. He has drunk more tea than he ever did in his life before, and the result of this whole condition of things is, that he cannot for the life of him tell whether the day of the week is Wednesday, or Thursday, or Friday, and that he has lost all sense of proportion. He has not the least idea whether the dreadful moments when he stood on the landing outside Amelia's door, and heard her heartrendingly beg him not to go away from her for *quite* so long, to be a little gladder to see her when he came back; or again affectingly assure him that she can do quite well, be quite cheerful without him--whether, I say, those dreadful moments were really only moments, or stretched into hours.

Besides the agony of remorse that the impotent listening to those pathetic prayers and unselfish assurances causes him, he suffers too from another agony of shame, that the father and sister, standing like himself with ears stretched at that shut door, should be let into the long secret of his cruelty and coldness, that secret which for eight years she has so gallantly been hiding. It is an inexpressible relief to him that at least the old man's thickened hearing admits but very imperfectly his daughter's rapid utterances.

"Poor soul! I cannot quite make out what it is all about," he says, with his hand to his ear; "but I catch your name over and over again, Jim; I suppose it is all about you."

Cecilia, however, naturally hears as well as he himself does, and apparently pitying the drawn misery of his face, whispers to him comfortingly--

"You must not mind, you know it is all nonsense. She talks very differently when she is well."

The Wilson family have never hitherto shown any very marked affection for Burgoyne, but now it seems as if they

could hardly bear him out of their sight. They cling to him, not because he is *he*--Jim makes himself no illusion on that head--but because they have got into such a habit of leaning, that it is no longer possible to them to stand upright. He had never realized till now how helpless they are. He had known that Amelia was the pivot upon which the whole family turned; but he had not brought home to himself how utterly the machine fell to pieces when that pivot was withdrawn.

In the course of the past week each member of the family has confided to him separately how far more she or he misses Amelia, than can be possible to either of the others. Upon this head Sybilla's lamentations are the loudest and most frequent. She had at first refused to admit that there was anything at all the matter with her sister, but has now fallen into the no less trying opposite extreme of refusing to allow that there is any possibility of her recovery, talking of her as if she were almost beyond the reach of human aid. Sybilla's grief for her sister is perfectly genuine; none the less so that it is complicated by irritation at her own deposition from her post of first invalid, at having been compelled to confess the existence in the bosom of her own family of a traitor, with an indisputably higher temperature and more wavering pulse than she.

"It is ridiculous to suppose that a person in such rude health as Cecilia *can* miss her as I do," she says querulously; "I was always her first object, she always knew by instinct when I was more suffering than usual; who cares now"--breaking into a deluge of self-compassionating tears--"whether I am suffering or not?"

Then, when next he happens to be alone with Cecilia, it is her turn to assert a superiority of woe; a superiority claimed with still more emphasis the next half hour by the father. With a patience which would have surprised those persons who had seen him only in his former relations with the family of his betrothed he tries to soothe the sorrow of each--even that of Sybilla--in turn; but to his own heart he says that not one of their griefs is worthy to be weighed in the balance with his. In the case of none of theirs is the woof crossed by the hideous warp of self-reproach that is woven inextricably into his. They have worked her to death, they have torn her to pieces by their conflicting claims; their love has been exacting, selfish, inconsiderate; but at least it has been love; they have prized her at almost her full worth while they had her. For him it has been reserved as for the base Indian, to

"Throw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe."

In the intervals--neither long nor many--between his ministrations at the Anglo-American, Burgoyne hurries back to the Minerva to see that Byng has not blown his brains out. In the present state of mind of that young gentleman this catastrophe does not appear to be among the least likely ones. He has refused to leave Florence, always answering the suggestion with the same question, "Where else should I go?" and if pressed, adding invariably in the same words as those employed by him on the first day of his loss, when his friend had urged the advisability of his removing his countenance from the beaded stool--"Where shall I find such recent and authentic traces of her as here?"

He passes his time either on the Lung' Arno, staring at the water, or stretched face downwards upon his bed. He walks about the town most of the night, and Jim suspects him of beginning to take chloral. Occasionally he rouses up into a quick and almost passionate sympathy with his friend's trouble, asking for nothing better than to be sent on any errand, however trivial, or however tiresome, in Amelia's behalf. But no sooner have the immediate effects of the appeal to his kind-heartedness died away, than he sinks back into his lethargy, and Jim is at once too much occupied and too miserable to use any very strenuous endeavours to shake him out of it. But yet the consciousness of the tacit engagement, under which he lies to the young man's mother, to look after him, coupled with the absolute impossibility, under his present circumstances, of fulfilling that engagement, and his uneasiness as to what new form the insanity of Byng's grief may take on, from day to day, add very perceptibly to the weight of his own already sufficiently ponderous burden.

It is the ninth day since Amelia fell sick, that ninth day which, in maladies such as hers, is, or is at least reckoned to be, the crisis and turning-point of the disease. Jim has been up all night, and has just rushed back to the Minerva, for the double purpose of taking a bath, and of casting an uneasy eye upon his charge. He finds the latter not in his room, but leaning over the little spiky balcony, out of his window, hanging over it so far, and so absorbedly, that he does not hear his friend's approach, and starts violently when Jim lays a hand on his shoulder.

"What are you looking at?"

"I; oh--nothing particular! What should I be looking at? What is there to look to? I was only--only--wondering as a mere matter of curiosity, how many feet it is from here to the pavement? Sixteen? eighteen? twenty?"

Jim's only answer is to look at him sadly and sternly; then he says coldly:

"I do not recommend it; it would be a clumsy way of doing it."

"What matter how clumsy the way, so that one attains the end?" asks Byng extravagantly, throwing off even the thin pretence he had at first assumed; "who cares how bad the road is so that it leads him to the goal?"

"Oh, amiable lovely death!
Thou odoriferous stench, sound rottenness!"

Jim shudders. Death has been so near to him for the last nine days, that the terrific realism of Constance's apostrophe seems to be almost more than he can bear.

"It is silliness to live when to live is a torment, and then, have we a prescription to die, when death is our physician?" continues Byng loudly and wildly, clasping his hands above his head, and apparently perfectly indifferent as to whether the other inmates of the hotel, or passers-by on the piazza, overhear him.

"If you stay here much longer you will spare yourself the trouble of putting an end to your existence," replies Jim, glancing at the other's head, exposed hatless to the scorch of the Tuscan sun, "for you will certainly get a sunstroke."

So saying, he takes him quietly, yet decidedly, by the arm, and leads him within the room. Either his matter-of-fact manner, or the sight of his face, upon which, well-seasoned as it is, vigil and sorrow have begun to write their unavoidable marks, brings the young madman back to some measure of sense and self-control.

"I had no fixed intention," he says apologetically, still looking white and wild; "you must not think I meant anything; but, even if I had--do you know--have you ever happened to read anything about the statistics of suicide? Do you know what an increasing number of people every year find life intolerable?"

"I know that you are fast making *my* life intolerable," answers Jim, fixing his tired, sleepless eyes with melancholy severity upon his companion. "Amelia is--you are as well aware of it as I am--probably dying, and yet even now, thanks to you, into *my* thoughts of her is continually pushing the fear that I may have to tell your mother that you have had the colossal selfishness to rush out of the world, because, for the first time in your pampered life, the toy you cried for has not been put into your hand."

Burgoyne's hopes have not been high, as to any salutary result of his own philippic while uttering it. But our words, sometimes, to our surprise, turn from wooden swords to steel daggers in our hands. For a moment Byng stands as if stunned; then he breaks into a tornado of sobs and tears, such tears as have often before angered his friend, but which now he welcomes the sight of, as perhaps precursors of a saner mood.

"Oh, my dear old chap!" he cries, catching at Jim's unresponsive hand, and wringing it hard, "she is not dying *really*? You do not mean it? You are only saying it to frighten me? Oh! dear, kind Amelia. Not dying! not dying?"

"I do not know: to-day is the turning-point, they say; even now it may have come."

"And why are not you with her? Why do not you go back to her?" cries Byng, in a broken voice of passionate excitement, the tears still racing down his face.

"And leave you to go tomfooling out there again?" asks Jim, with a nod of his head towards the balcony, seen from where they stand, grilling in the midday blaze.

The verb employed, if closely looked into, bears a ludicrous disproportion to the intended action indicated, but neither of the men sees anything ridiculous in it.

"I will not!" cries Byng, in eager asseveration; "I give you my word of honour I will not; if you do not believe me, take me with you! Keep me with you all day! Do you think that I, too, do not want to know how Amelia is? Do you think that I am indifferent as to whether she lives or dies? Poor, good Amelia! When I think of that drive to Vallombrosa, only ten days ago! They two sitting side by side, so happy, laughing and making friends with each other!"

He covers his face with his hands, and through them the scalding drops trickle; but only for a moment. In the next, he has dashed them away, and is moving restlessly about the room, looking for his hat.

"Let us go this instant," he says urgently; "my poor old man, do you think I would willingly add a feather weight to your burden? I should never forgive myself if I kept you a second longer from her at such a time; let us go at once."

Burgoyne complies; but under pretext of making some change in his dress, escapes from his friend, for just the few minutes necessary to write and despatch a telegram to the young man's mother. It runs thus:

"No cause for alarm, but come at once. He is perfectly well, but needs you."

If, as is to be hoped, Mrs. Byng is still in London, reaping the succession of the old relative whose death-bed she had

quitted Florence to attend, his message will bring her hither within forty-eight hours, and the burden of responsibility, now grown so insupportable, will be shifted from his shoulders. Until those forty-eight hours have elapsed, he must not again let Byng out of his sight.

The day rolls by, the critical ninth day rolls by on its torrid wheels to eventide, and when that eventide comes, it finds Cecilia Wilson running down from Amelia's room, to give the last news of her to the three men and one woman waiting below.

"I think he seems quite satisfied," she says, in answer to the silent hungry looks of question addressed to her, and alluding to the doctor, who is still with the patient; "the strength is maintained; the temperature lower." What a dreadful parrot-sound the two phrases, so familiar to us all in the newspaper bulletins of distinguished men on their death-beds, have during the last week assumed in Burgoyne's ears; "you can speak to him yourself when he comes down, of course, Jim; but I am sure he is satisfied."

"She is better!--she is saved!" cries Byng, rushing forward and snatching both Cecilia's hands--"do you say that she is really saved?"

"Oh, are you here still, Mr. Byng? how very kind of you!" replies Cecilia, a tinge of colour rushing over her mealy face--that face, ten days ago, clothed in so many roses--"well, I am afraid he does not go quite so far as that, but he says it is as much as we can expect, and even I can see that she is not nearly so restless."

"Thank God!--thank God!"

In the ardour of his thanksgiving he presses her hands closer, instead of dropping them, a fact of which he is entirely unaware, but so is not she; and who knows, even at that serious moment, what tiny genial hope may slide into her plump heart!

Again this night Burgoyne does not go to bed, from a superstitious fear that if he does, if he seems to take for granted an improvement, that very taking for granted may annul it--may bring on a relapse. But when the next morning finds no such backsliding to have taken place, when each hour through the cheerfully broadening day brings falling fever and steadying pulse, then indeed he cautiously opens the door of his heart to let a tiny rose-pinioned hope creep in--then at last, on the third night, he stretches his tired limbs in deep slumber upon his bed.

He has received a brief telegram from Mrs. Byng to announce her arrival as fast as boat and train can bring her; and seven o'clock on Saturday morning--he having sent his despatch to her on the previous Wednesday--finds him pacing the platform of the railway-station, awaiting the incoming of the morning express from Turin. He is pacing it alone, for he has thought it best not to reveal to her son the fact of her expected return, not being at all sure in what spirit he will receive it, nor whether indeed the news of it might not even drive him, in his present unsound state of mind, to fly from the place at her approach.

The morning air, in its early clear coolness, blows sweet here, under the station-roof, unconquered even by engine smoke, and on Jim's face as he walks up and down--careworn as it still is--there comes, now and again, a half-born smile. He is never one to hope very easily, but surely now--now that yet another night has been prosperously tided over, there can, even to him, seem no reasonable ground for doubt that Amelia has turned the corner. Amelia, with the corner turned--Byng, in five minutes wholly off his hands! The only wonder is, that the small smile never comes quite to the birth.

The train is punctual, and almost at its due moment draws up in dusty length at the platform. Its passengers are comparatively few; for at this latening season most of the English are winging home to their rooky woods; and he has no difficulty in at once discovering among them the tall smart figure--smart even after forty-eight hours of the unluxurious luxury of a *wagon-lit*--of the lady he is awaiting. As he gives her his hand to help her down the high step, the admiring thought crosses his mind of what a large quantity of fatigue, dust, and uneasiness of mind a radically good-looking Englishwoman, in radically good clothes, can undergo without seeming much the worse for them. Before her neat narrow foot has touched the pavement, a brace of eager questions shoots out of her mouth.

"Am I in time? Am I too late?"

"In time for *what*? Too late for *what*?"

"Has he--has he done anything--anything irrevocable? Is he--is he? I suppose that horrid woman has got hold of him? I suppose that is why you sent for me!"

By this time she is safely landed at his side, which is possibly the reason why he at once lets fall her hand.

"I am not aware that there is any 'horrid woman' in the case."

"Oh, what does it matter what I call her?" cries the mother, fast becoming frantic at the delay in answering her passionate questions. "I will call her what you please; you know perfectly whom I mean; she *has* got hold of him, I suppose. I always knew she would! Did not I tell you so? but is it too late? is there no way of getting him off?"

Now that Burgoyne has a nearer view of Mrs. Byng, he sees that she has a more fagged and travel-worn air than he had at first supposed, and her dusty eyes are fastened upon him with such a hunger of interrogation, that, angered and jarred as he is by her tone, he has not the heart any longer to keep her in suspense.

"If you are alluding to Miss Le Marchant, I may as well tell you at once that she has left Florence."

"Left Florence! Do you mean to say that she has run away with someone else?"

She puts the question in all good faith, her lively imagination having easily made the not very wide jump from the fact already established in her own mind of Elizabeth being an adventuress, to the not much more difficult one to swallow, of her having devoured another *filis de famille*, as well as Mrs. Byng's own.

For a moment, Burgoyne turns away, voice and countenance alike beyond his control. He has by no means perfectly recovered either, when he answers--

"Yes, with someone else--she has reached the pitch of turpitude of leaving Florence with her mother."

"She is gone?" cries Mrs. Byng, with an accent of the highest relief and joy; "gone away altogether, do you mean?--oh, thank God!"--then, with a sudden lapse into affright, she adds rapidly--"and he is gone after her?--he is not here?"

"No, he is here."

"Then why has not he come to meet me?"--suspiciously.

"He did not know you were expected."

"You did not tell him?"

"No."

"Why did not you tell him?"

"I did not know how he would take it."

"Do you mean to say"--falling from her former rapidity of utterance to a dismayed incredulous slowness--"that he will not be glad to see me?--that *Willy* will not be glad to see *me*?"

"I mean to say that I am afraid you will not find him very much in sympathy with you; I do not think he will find it easy to hear you speak of Miss Le Marchant in the terms, and make the implication about her that you did just now," replies Jim, avenging by this sentence the wrongs done to Elizabeth, and doing it so well, that a moment later a feeling of compunction comes over him at the success of his own attempt at retributive justice.

Mrs. Byng turns pale.

"Then she has got hold of him?" she says under her breath.

"Got hold of him?" repeats Jim, his ire aroused again, no sooner than allayed, by this mode of expression; "you certainly have the most extraordinary way of misconceiving the situation! *Got hold of him?* when she had to leave Florence at a moment's notice to escape his importunities!"

But at this, Mr. Burgoyne's auditor looks so hopelessly bewildered that he thinks it the simplest plan at once, in the fewest possible words, to put her in possession of the tale of her son's achievements and disasters. He does this, partly to stem the torrent of her questions, the form that they have hitherto taken producing in him a feeling of frenzied indignation, which he doubts his own power much longer to conceal--partly in order to set Elizabeth's conduct with the least possible delay in its true light before her. Surely, when she has been told of her magnanimous renunciation, she will do her justice, will cease to load her with those hard names and insulting assertions that have made him grind his own teeth to listen to. But in this expectation he soon finds that he is mistaken. The wrath of Mrs. Byng against Elizabeth for having "drawn in" her son, as she persists in stating the case, is surpassed only by indignation at her insolence in having "thrown him over." As to the genuineness of this last action she expresses, it is true, the most complete incredulity.

"It was only to enhance her own value. Do you suppose that she expected him to take her at her word? She thought, of course, that he would follow her--that he would employ detectives--it is a proof"--with an angry laugh--"that he cannot

be quite so bad as you make him out, that he has not done so."

"I would not put it into his head, if I were you," replies Jim, with an anger no less real, and a merriment no less spurious than her own.

By this time they have reached the hotel; and Jim, having helped his companion out of the fiacre, shows symptoms of leaving her.

"Will not you stay to breakfast with me?" she asks, a little aghast at this unexpected manoeuvre; "I cannot make my toilette till the luggage arrives: and I suppose that he"--her eyes wandering wistfully over the hotel front till they rest on her son's closed persiennes--"that he is not up yet; it would be a sin to wake him; do stay with me."

"I am afraid I cannot."

"Why cannot you?"--with an impatient but friendly little mocking imitation of his tone. "You are not"--with a conciliatory smile--"angry with an old hen for standing up for her own chick?"

Jim smiles too.

"I do not think that the old hen need have clucked quite so loudly; but that is not why I am leaving her; I *must* go."

"Where *must* you go?"

"To the Anglo-American."

She lifts her eyebrows.

"At this hour--you forget how early it is. Well, Amelia *has* got you into good training; but I can assure you that you will still find her in bed."

He sighs.

"I am afraid that there is not much doubt of that."

"What do you mean?--she is not ill, surely?"--in a tone of lively surprise--"Amelia ill?--impossible!"

He looks at her with an irrational stupefaction. It appears to him now, in the distortion of all objects that the last fortnight has brought, as if Amelia's illness had spread over the whole of his life, as if there had never been a time when she had not been ill, and yet of this event, immense as it seems to him in its duration, the woman before him obviously has never heard. When he comes to think of it, how should she? In point of fact it is not a fortnight since Miss Wilson fell sick, and during that fortnight he himself has not written her a line; neither, he is equally sure, has her son.

"I am evidently very much behind the time," she says, noting the, to her, unintelligible astonishment in his face; "but you must remember that I have been kept completely in the dark--has she been ill?"

In answer he tells her, with as much brevity and compression as he had employed in the tale of Elizabeth's disappearance, that of Amelia's illness, often interrupted by her expressions of sympathy. At the end she says:

"I am so thankful I did not hear till she was getting better! It would have made me so wretched to be such a long way off!"

Her adoption of his trouble as her own, an adoption whose sincerity is confirmed by her impulsive seizure of his hand, and the feeling look in her handsome eyes make him forgive the exaggeration of her statement, and go some way towards replacing her in that position in his esteem which her diatribes against Elizabeth had gone near to making her forfeit.

"But it will be all right now," continues she sanguinely; "there will be nothing to do but to build up her strength again, and she is young--at least"--as the reminiscence of Amelia's unyouthful appearance evidently flashes across her mind, of that prematurely middle-aged look which an unequal fortune gives to some plain women--"at least, young enough for all practical purposes."

Whether it be due to the possession of this modified form of juvenility, to an excellent constitution, or to what other reason, certain it is that the next two days go by without any diminution, rather with a sensible and steady increase, in Miss Wilson's favourable symptoms, and, on the afternoon of the latter of these days, Cecilia, in rather impatient answer to Jim's long daily string of questions about her, says:

"You could judge much better if you saw her yourself. I do not see why you should not see her to-morrow for a minute,

that is to say, if you would promise not to talk or ask her any questions."

"But would it be safe?" inquires he, with a tremble in his voice. He desires passionately to see her; until he does he will never believe that she is really going to live; he has a hunger to assure himself that no terrible metamorphosis has passed over her in these nightmare days; and yet, coupled with that hunger, is a deep dread, which translates itself into his next halting words.

"Shall I be--shall I be very much shocked? is she--is she very much changed?"

"She does look pretty bad," replies Cecilia half sadly, yet with the sub-lying cheerfulness of assured hope; "for one thing she is so wasted. I suppose that that is what makes her look so much older; but then you know Amelia never did look young."

It is the second time within two days that the fact of his betrothed's maturity has been impressed upon him, and formerly it would have caused him a pang; but now, of what moment is it to him that she looks a hundred, if only she is living, and going to live?

"Has she--has she asked after me?"

"We do not allow her to speak, but if anyone mentions your name there comes a sort of smile over her face; such a ridiculous-sized face as it is now!"

The tears have come into Cecilia's large stupid eyes, and Jim himself is, with regard to her, in the position of the great Plantagenet, when he heard the lovely tale of York and Suffolk's high death.

"I blame you not
For hearing this; I must perforce compound
With mistful eyes; or they will issue too!"

As he walks away he is filled with a solemn joy, one of those deep serious gladnesses with which not the stranger, no, nor even the close friend or loving kinsman intermeddled. He is under an engagement to meet Mrs. Byng at a certain hour, but although that hour has already come and passed, he feels that he cannot face all her sincere congratulations without some preparatory toning down of his mood.

The streets, with their gay *va-et-vient*, their cracking whips and shouting drivers, seem all too secular and every-day to match the profundity of his reverent thankfulness. He takes it with him into the great cool church that stands so nigh at hand to his hotel, Santa Maria Novella. The doors fall behind him noiselessly as he enters, shutting out the fiery hot piazza, and the garish noises of the world. In the great dim interior, cold and tranquil, there is the usual sprinkling of tourists peering up at its soaring columns, trying to read themselves, out of their guide-books, into a proper admiration for Cimabue's large-faced Virgin and ugly Bambino, folded, with all its gold and sombre colours, in the dignity of its twice two centuries of gloom. There are the usual three or four blue-trousered soldiers strolling leisurely about, there is a curly-tailed little dog trotting hither and thither unforbidden, ringing his bell, and there are the invariable tanned peasant-women kneeling at the side-altars. He does not belong to the ancient Church, but to-day he kneels beside them, and the tears he had hastened away to hide from Cecilia come back to make yet dimmer to his view the details of the dim altar-pieces behind the tall candles. His eye, as he rises to his feet again, falls on the contadina nearest him. What is she praying for? In the expansion of his own deep joy he longs to tell her how much he hopes that, whatever it is, she will obtain it. It is not the contadina who, standing a little behind, joins him as he turns away from the altar.

"I saw you go into the church," says Mrs. Byng, her smile growing somewhat diffident as she sees the solemnity of his face, "so I thought I would follow you; do you mind? shall I go away?"

He would, of the two, have preferred that she had not followed him, that he had been given five more minutes to himself; but he naturally does not say so.

"Since we are here, shall we go into the cloisters?" and he assents.

A small Dominican monk, with a smile and a bunch of keys, is opening a door to some strangers, prowling like our friends about the church. The latter follow, the little monk enveloping them too in his civil smile. Down some steps into the great cloister, under whose arches pale frescoes cover the ancient walls--where in Florence are there not frescoes?--and the hands that painted them seem all to have wielded their brushes in that astounding fifteenth century, which was to Florence's life what May is to Italy's year. For some moments they stand silent, side by side, perhaps picking out familiar scenes from among the sweet faded groups--a slim Rebecca listening to Eliezar's tale, and looking maiden pleasure at his gifts; a shivering Adam and Eve chased out of Paradise; an Adam and Eve dismally digging and stitching respectively; Old Testament stories that time has blurred, that weather--even in this dry air--has rubbed out

and bedimmed, and that yet, in many cases, still tell their curious faint tale decipherably.

"Good news this evening, I hope?" says Mrs. Byng presently, growing a little tired of her companion's taciturnity, being indeed always one of those persons who are of opinion that the gold of which silence is said to be made has a good deal of alloy in it.

"I am to see her to-morrow."

He speaks almost under his breath, either because he has no great confidence in his voice, if he employ a higher key, or because there seems to him a certain sanctity in this promised meeting on the kindly hither side of the grave which has so lately yawned.

Mrs. Byng is much too old and intimate a friend of Jim's not to have been pretty well aware of the state of his feelings during the past eight years, though certainly not through any communication from him. So it is, perhaps, scarcely to be wondered at that she presently says, in a tone tinged with admiring surprise:

"How fond you are of her!"

He receives the remark in a jarred silence, his eye resting on the square of neglected graves in the middle of the cloister, how unlike our turfy quads and lawns. A commonplace nineteenth century photographer, with his vulgar camera planted on the time-worn stones, is evidently trying to persuade the little monk to pose for his picture. The gentle-looking Fra laughs, and draws up his cowl, then lowers it again, folding his arms, and trying various postures.

"You are so much fonder of her than you were!"

This speech--though such is certainly far from the good-natured speaker's intention--stings Burgoyne like a whip-lash.

"I was always fond of her--I always thought her the very best woman in the world; you know!"--with an accent of almost anguished appeal--"that I always thought her the very best woman in the world."

"Oh, yes; of course, I know you did," replies she, astonished and concerned at the evident and extreme distress of his tone. "That is not quite the same thing as being *fond* of her, is it? But"--with a laugh that is at once uneasy and reassuring--"what does that matter *now*? *Now* your fondness for her is as indisputable as Tilburina's madness; and, for my part, I always think people get on quite as well, if not better, afterwards, if they do not begin quite so volcanically."

But her light and well-meant words fail to remove the painful impression from her hearer's mind. Has she, during all these years, been crediting him with a wish for Amelia's death, that she should be so much astonished at his thankfulness for her being given back to him?

"I believe that this illness is the best thing that could have happened to you both," continues Mrs. Byng, feeling uncomfortably that she has not been happy in her choice of a topic, and yet unable to leave it alone. "It will have drawn you so much together: in fact"--again laughing nervously--"I think we are all looking up. As I told you, after the first shock, Willy really was rather glad to see me; and you would not believe how discreetly I handle the burning subject--yes, everything is on the mend, and we are all going to have a lovely time, as the Yankees say!"

CHAPTER XXX.

"The world's a city full of straying streets,
And Death the market-place where each one meets."

The words are scarcely out of Mrs. Byng's mouth before she adds, in a changed key, and with an altered direction of the eyes--

"Is this person looking for you? He seems to be coming straight towards us."

Jim turns his head at her speech, and at once recognises in the figure hastening towards them the porter of the Anglo-American hotel. The man looks strangely, and carries a slip of paper, unfolded and open, in his hand.

In a second Jim has sprung to his side, has snatched the paper, and is staring at its contents. They are hardly legible, scrawled tremblingly with a pencil, and for a moment he cannot make them out. Then, as he looks, in one horrible flash their import has sprung into his eyes and brain.

"She is gone; come to us!"

Mrs. Byng is reading too, over his shoulder.

In going over the scene in memory afterwards, he believes that she gives a sort of scream, and says, "Oh, what does it mean? It is not true!" But at the time he hears, he knows nothing.

He is out of the church; he is in the fiacre waiting at the door: he is tearing through the streets, with the hot summer air flowing in a quick current against his face. He thinks afterwards at what a pace the horse must have been going, and how the poor jade must have been lashed to keep it up to that useless speed. At the time he thinks nothing, he feels nothing. He rushes through the court of the hotel, rushes through what seem to be people; he thinks afterwards that they must have been waiters and chambermaids, and that there came a sort of compassionate murmur from them as he passed. He is up the stairs, the three flights; as he tears up, three steps at a time, there comes across his numbed intelligence a flash of wonder why they always give Amelia the worst room. He is at that door, outside which he has spent so many hours of breathless listening; he need no longer stay outside it now. It is open, inviting him in. He is across that, as yet, unpassed threshold, that threshold over which he was to have stepped in careful, soft-footed joy to-morrow. He has pushed through the people--why must there be people everywhere?--of whom the room seems full, unnecessarily full; he is at the bedside. Across the foot a figure seems thrown--he learns afterwards that *that* is Sybilla. Another figure is prostrate on the floor, heaving, in dreadful dry sobs; that is Cecilia. A third is standing upright and tearless, looking down upon what, an hour ago, was his most patient daughter. They have left her alone now--have ceased to tease her. They no longer hold a looking-glass to her pale mouth, or beat her tired feet, or pour useless cordials between her lips. They have ceased to cry out upon her name, having realized that she is much too far away to hear them. Neither does he cry out. He just goes and stands by the father, and takes his thin old hand in his; and together they gaze on that poor temple, out of which the spirit that was so much too lovely for it has fled. Later on they tell him how it came about; later on, when they are all sitting huddled in the little dark *salon*. Cecilia is the spokeswoman, and Sybilla puts in sobbing corrections now and again.

"She was sitting up the moment before; the nurse was holding her propped up--she said she was so tired of lying. She had been quite laughing, the nurse said."

"Almost laughing," corrects Sybilla, who has forgotten to lie down upon her sofa, and is sitting on a hard chair like anyone else.

"Quite laughing," continues Cecilia, "at her own arm for being so thin. She had pushed up her sleeve to look at it, and had said something--something quite funny, only the nurse could not remember the exact words--and then, all in a minute, she called out, in quite an altered voice, 'The salts! Quick! Quick!' and her head just fell back, and she was gone!"

"And she had not bid one of us good-bye!" cries Sybilla, breaking into a loud wail.

Then comes a dreadful and incongruous flash of that ridiculous, which is the underlining to all our tragedies, across Jim's mind at this last lament. The going, "taking no farewell," naturally seems to Sybilla the most terrible feature in the whole case, to her who has so repeatedly taken heartrending last farewells of her family.

"Who would ever have thought that I should have survived her?" pursues Sybilla, still sobbing noisily, and without the least attempt at self-control. Cecilia, who is sitting with her head on her arms resting on the table, lifts her tear-blurred face and answers this apostrophe in a voice choked with weeping.

"Jim always did; he always said that you would see us all out."

Again that dreadful impulse towards mirth assails Burgoyne. Is it possible that, at such an hour, he can feel a temptation to laugh out loud? But, later again, this horrible mood passes; later, when they have all grown more composed, when their tears run more gently, when their voices are less suffocated, and they are telling each other little anecdotes of her, aiding each other's memories to recall half-effaced traits of her homely kindness, of her noiseless self-denials, of her deep still piety.

They bring out her photographs, mourning over their being so few, and such old and long-ago ones. There are effigies by the dozen of Cecilia, and even touching presentments of Sybilla stretched in wasted grace upon her day bed; but it had never occurred to anyone--least of all to Amelia herself--that there is any need for *her* image to be perpetuated. And now they are searching out, as treasures most precious, the scanty faded likenesses that exist of her, planning how they can be enlarged, and repeated, and daintily framed, and generally done homage and tender reverence to.

Jim listens, occasionally putting in a low word or two, when appealed to to confirm or correct the details of some little story about her. But it seems to him as if his anguish only begins when the stream of their reminiscences turns into the channel of her love for him.

"Oh, Jim, she *was* fond of you! We were none of us anywhere, compared to you; she worshipped the ground you trod upon. We all knew--did not we, Sybilla?--did not we, father?--when you used to be away for so long, and wrote to her so seldom---Oh, I know!"--hastily--"that you were not to blame, that you were in out-of-the-way places, where there was no post: but there were sometimes long gaps between your letters; and we always knew--did not we?--when she had heard from you by her face, long before she spoke."

Next it is--

"How she fired up if anyone said anything slightly of you: she never cared in the least if one abused herself; she always thought she quite deserved it; but if anybody dared to say the least disparaging thing of *you*"--it is pretty evident, though at the moment in his agony of preoccupation the idea does not occur to Jim, that this has not been an uncommon occurrence--"she was like a lioness at once."

"The saddest thing of all," says Sybilla, taking up the antiphonal strain, "is that she should have died just as she was beginning to be so happy!"

Just beginning to be so happy? And he might have made her heavenly happy so easily, since she asked so little--for eight years. The groan he utters is low in proportion to the depth of the fountain whence it springs, and they do not hear it. If they did, they would in mercy stop; instead, they go on.

"Did you ever see anything so radiant as she was--that last fortnight? She used to say that she was quite ashamed of being so much more fortunate than anyone else, she seemed always trying to make up to us for not being so happy as she. Oh, she was happy that last fortnight!"

This time he does not groan, he seems to himself to have passed into that zone of suffering which cannot be expressed or alleviated by the utterance of any sound. Perhaps, by-and-by, Cecilia dimly divines something, some faint shadow of what he is enduring; for she begins with well-intentioned labour to try to assert lamely that Amelia had always been happy, well, *fairly* happy, as happy as most people. You could not expect, in this dreadful world, to be always in the best of spirits, but she had never complained. And, oh! that last fortnight she *had* been happy, it was a pleasure to see her! And, oh, what a comfort it must be now to Jim to think that it was all owing to him.

She puts out her hand kindly to him as she speaks, and he takes it, and silently wrings it in acknowledgment of the endeavour--however clumsy--to lay balm upon that now immedicable wound.

He stays most of the night with them; and when at length, overcome with weariness and sorrow, they rise from their grief-stricken postures to go to bed, he kisses them all solemnly, even the old man. He has never kissed any of them before, except once or twice Cecilia on some return of his from the Antipodes, and because she seemed to expect it.

Three days later Burgoyne leaves Florence; and, as his arrival in the City of Flowers had been motivated by Amelia alive,

so is his departure to companion her dead.

END OF PART ONE.



PART II.

Elizabeth.

CHAPTER I.

"It was a chosen plot of fertile land,
Amongst wide waves set like a little nest,
As if it had by Nature's cunning hand
Been choicely picked out from all the rest,
And laid forth for ensample of the best.
No daintie flower or herb that grows on ground,
No arborete with painted blossomes drest,
And smelling sweete, but there it might be found
To bud out faire, and throwe her sweet smell all around."

Time has stepped upon another year; not much more than stepped, since that year's first month is not yet out; and Burgoyne has stepped upon another continent before we again rejoin him. There are few, if any of us, who, in the course of our lives, have not had occasion to wish that certain spaces in those lives might be represented by the convenient asterisks that cover them in books; but this is unfortunately impossible to Jim, as to the rest of us; and he has fought through each minute and its minuteful of pain (happily no minute can contain two minutefuls) during the seven months that have elapsed since we parted from him. At first those minutes held nothing but pain; he could not tell you which of them it was that first admitted within its little compass any alien ingredient; and he was shocked and remorseful when he discovered that any such existed. But that did not alter the fact. He has not sold his guns; on the contrary, he has bought two new ones, and he has visited his old friends, the Rockies. Since Amelia's funeral--immediately after which he again quitted England--he has seen no member of his dead betrothed's family, nor has he held any intercourse, beyond the exchange of an infrequent letter, with Mrs. Byng or her son. From the thought of both these latter he shrinks, with a distaste equal in degree, though inspired by different causes. From Mrs. Byng, because he knows that she was aware of his weariness of his poor love--that poor love whom, had he but known it, he had so short a time to be weary of; and from Byng, because, despite the ocean of sorrow, of remorse, of death that rolls in its hopelessness between him and her, he cannot even yet think, without a bitter pang, of the woman who had inspired the young man's hysterical tears and sincere, though silly, suicidal impulses. Jim took that pang with him to the Rockies, stinging, even through the overlying load of his other and acknowledged burden of repentant ache and loss, and he has brought it back with him. He packs it into his portmanteau as much as a matter of course as he does his shirts--in fact more so, for he has once inadvertently left his shirts behind, but the pang never.

It is the 20th day of January; here, in England, the most consistently detestable month in the year. The good Januaries of a British octogenarian's life might be counted upon the thumbs of that octogenarian's hands. The favoured inhabitants of London have breakfasted and lunched by gaslight; have groped their way along their dirty streets through a fog of as thick and close a fabric as the furs gathered round their chilled throats; have, even within their houses, seen each other dimly across a hideous yellow vapour that kills their expensive flowers, and makes their unwilling palm-trees droop in homesick sadness. There is no fog about the Grand Hotel, Mustapha Superieur, Algiers; no lightest blur of mist to dim the intensity of the frame of green in which its white face is set. It is not so very grand, despite its unpromising big name, as it stands high aloft on the hillside, looking out over the bay and down on the town, looking down more immediately upon tree-tops, and on the Governor's summer palace. It is an old Moorish house, enlarged into an hotel, with little arched windows sunk in the thick walls, with red-tiled floors, and balconies, with low white balustrades of pierced brick, up which the lush creepers climb and wave--yes, climb and wave on this 20th of January.

From the red-floored balcony over the creepers, between the perennial leafage of the unchanging trees, one can daily descry in the azure bay the tiny puff of smoke that tells that the mail steamer from Marseilles has safely breasted the Gulf of Lyons, threaded her way among the Isles, and brought her freight of French and English and American news to the hands and ears of the various expectant nationalities. To-day, blown by a gently prosperous wind, the boat is punctual. It is the *Eugene Perrere*, the pet child of the Transatlantic Company, the narrow and strong-engined little vessel which is wont to accomplish the transit in a period of time less by an hour than her brother craft. To-day she has brought but one guest to the Grand Hotel, who, having left the bulk of his luggage to be struggled for by Arabs, and by the hotel-porter at the Douane, arrives at the modest Moorish-faced hostelry, having, with British mercifulness, walked up the break-neck green lane that leads from the steep main road in order to spare the wretched little galled, pumped horse that has painfully dragged him and his bag from the pier. He has travelled straight through from London--fifty-five hours without a pause--so that it is not to be wondered at that his thoughts turn affectionately towards a

wash and a change of raiment. Having extracted from the case of unclaimed letters in the bar two or three that bear the address of James Burgoyne, Esq., he is ushered to his room by the civil little fussy Italian landlord, who, in order to enhance his appreciation of the apartment provided for him, assures him, in voluble bad French, that only yesterday he had been obliged to turn away a party of eight.

It is not until refreshed by a completed toilette--and who can overrate the joy of a bath after a journey?--that it occurs to him to look out of window. His room possesses two. One faces the hill's rich-clothed steepness, and a row of orange-trees covered with fruit, and at whose feet tumbled gold balls lie. But the dusk is falling fast, and he can only dimly see the prodigality of green in which the modest Grand Hotel lies buried. The other window looks out--but a very little way lifted above it, for the room is on the ground floor--upon the red-tiled terrace. It is growing very dim too. At the present moment it is empty and deserted, but the chairs studded over its surface in talkative attitudes, as if sociable twos and threes had drawn together in chat, tell plainly that earlier in the day it had been frequented, and that several people had been sitting out on it. Jim's London memories are too fresh upon him for him not to find something ludicrous in the idea of sitting out of doors on the 20th of January. How pleasant it would have been to do so to-day in Hyde Park! He turns back to the table with a smile at the idea, and, taking out a writing-case, sits down to scribble a line. Jim's correspondence is neither a large nor an interesting one. On the present occasion, his note is merely one of reminder as to some trifling order, addressed to the landlord of his London lodgings. It does not take him ten minutes to pen, and when it is finished he turns to have one final look out of window before leaving the room. How quickly the dark has fallen! The empty chairs show indistinct outlines, and the heavy green trees have turned black. But the terrace is no longer quite empty. A footfall sounds--coming slowly along it. One of the waiters, no doubt, sent to fetch in the chairs; but, no! an overworked Swiss waiter, hurried by electric bells, and with an imminent swollen table *table d'hote* upon his burdened mind, never paced so slowly, nor did anything male ever step so lightly.

It must be a woman; and even now her white gown makes a patch of light upon the dark background of the quickly on-coming night. A white gown on the 20th of January! Again that pleasing sense of the ludicrous tickles his fancy. She must be one of the persons who lately occupied the empty chairs, and have come in search of some object left behind. He recollects having noticed an open book lying on the low parapet. She has a white gown; but what more can be predicated of her in this owl-light? The radiance from the candle behind him makes a small illuminated square upon the terrace, falling between the bars of the window through which the Moorish ladies once darted their dark and ineffectual ogles.

Having apparently accomplished her errand, the white-gowned figure obligingly steps into the illumined square, and still more obligingly lifts her face and looks directly up at him. It is clear that the action is dictated only by the impulse which prompts all seeing creatures to turn lightwards, and no gleam of recognition kindles in the eyes that are averted almost as soon as directed towards him. Placed as he is, with his back to the light, his own mother could not have distinguished his features; and, after her one careless glance, the white-gowned lady turns away and disappears again into the gloom. She has one more oasis of light to traverse before she reaches the hotel porch, just discernible, gleaming in its whitewash, at the far end of the terrace; just one more lit window throws its chequered lustre on the tiles. He presses his face against the bars of his own lattice, and holds his breath until she has reached and crossed that tell-tale patch. Her traversing of it does not occupy the tenth part of a second, and yet it puts the seal upon what he already knows.

Five minutes later he is standing before the case, hung on the wall of the entrance hall, which contains the names and numbers of the rooms of the visitors, eagerly scanning them with eye and finger. He scans them in vain. The name he seeks is not among them. Had it not been for that five minutes' delay--that five minutes of stunned and stupid staring out into the dark after her--he must have met her in the hall. He is turning away in baffled disappointment, when the little host again accosts him.

Monsieur must excuse him, but he must explain that the list of visitors that monsieur has been so obliging as to peruse is by no means a full or correct one. To-morrow morning he shall have the pleasure of placing beneath monsieur's eye a proper and complete list of the visitors; but, in point of fact, there has been such a press of business, he has been daily obliged to turn away such large and *comme il faut* families from the door, that time has been inadequate for all his obligations, which must be his excuse.

Burgoyne accepts his apologies in silence. It would seem easy enough to inquire whether among the English visitors there are any of the name of Le Marchant; but the question sticks in his throat. It is seven months since he has pronounced that name aloud, and he appears to have lost the faculty of doing it. The host comes to his aid.

Is there perhaps a family--a friend whom monsieur expects to meet? But monsieur only shakes his head, and moves away. He has ascertained that the *table d'hote* is at seven, and it is now half-past five. He has, therefore, only an hour and a half of suspense ahead of him. She will surely appear at the *table d'hote*? But will she?

As the hour of seven approaches, ever graver and graver doubts upon this head assail his mind, both when he reflects upon how much it is a habit with the better sort of travelling English to dine in their own rooms, and also when he calls to mind the extremely retired character of Elizabeth's and her mother's habits. Even if she does appear in the public room--and the more he thinks of it, the less probable, it seems--it is most unlikely that he will be placed near her. But he might possibly intercept her in the hall on her way to the *salle a manger*.

In pursuance of this project he takes up his position before the bell, tingling so lengthily as to reach the ears of the deafest and most distant, has summoned the company together; and it is several minutes before enough are assembled to justify, according to the etiquette prevailing at the Grand Hotel, a move to the dining-room. Men, at that hotel, although in a very distinct minority--as when, indeed, are they not?--are yet not quite the same choice rarities as at some of the Swiss and Italian ones. But the young of the one sex are perennially interesting to the other; and Burgoyne, as "the new man," is an object of some attention to half a dozen young girls, and even to two or three sprightly-hearted old ones. His eyes are eagerly shining as each opening door, each step on the staircase, raises his hopes afresh. But neither door nor staircase yields the form he seeks, and he is at last obliged, under penalty of exciting remark, reluctantly to follow the band that go trooping hungrily down a flight of steps to the whitewashed dining-room. He finds himself placed between a bouncing widow who is too much occupied in fondling an old valetudinarian on her other side to have much notice to spare for him; and a sparkling creature of five-and-thirty in a red shirt, who, before dinner is over, confides to him that she fears she has not got a nice nature, and that she cannot get on at home because her mother and the servants insist upon having cold supper instead of dinner on Sunday. When she tells him that she has not a nice nature, he absently replies that he is very sorry for it, and her confidence about the Sunday supper provokes from him only the extremely stupid observation that he supposes she does not like cold meat. It is a wonder that he can answer her even as rationally as he does. It is more by good luck than good management that there is any sense at all in his responses. And yet he may as well give his full attention to his neighbour, for now every place at the E-shaped table is filled up, and, travel as his eye may over those who sit, both at the long and cross-boards, it fails to discover any face in the least resembling that which lifted itself from the dusk terrace into his candle-light.

Was it her little ghost, then, that he had seen, her dainty delicate ghost? But why should it appear to him *here*? Why haunt these unfamiliar shores? The only places in the room which still remain untenanted are those at a round table laid for three, in the embrasure of a Moorish window, not very distant from where he sits. On first catching sight of it his hopes had risen, only immediately to fall again, as he realizes that it is destined for a trio. Why should three places be laid for Elizabeth and her mother?

With a disheartened sigh he turns to his neighbour, intending to put to her a question as to the habitual occupants of the empty table; but she is apparently affronted at his tepidness, and presents to him only the well-frizzled back of her expensive head. He is reduced to listening to the conversation of his *vis-a-vis*, an elderly couple, who have been upon some excursion, and are detailing their experiences to those around them. They have been to Blidah apparently, and seen real live monkeys hopping about without organs or red coats on real palm trees. He is drawn into the conversation by a question addressed to him as to his journey.

It is five minutes before he again looks towards the table in the window. His first glance reveals that the three persons for whom it is destined have at length arrived and taken their seats. Idiot that he is! he had forgotten Mr. Le Marchant's existence.

"They are nice-looking people, are they not?" says his neighbour in the red shirt, apparently repenting of her late austerity, and following the direction of his eyes; "but they give themselves great airs; nobody in the hotel is good enough for them to speak to. M. Cipriani evidently thinks them people of importance; he makes twice as much fuss about them as he does about anyone else. Look at him now!"

And in effect the obsequious little host may be seen hanging anxiously over the newcomers, evidently asking them with solicitous civility whether the not particularly appetizing fish (the strongest point of the blue Mediterranean does not lie in her fishes, of which some are coarse, some tasteless, and some even lie under the suspicion of having poisonous qualities)--whether it is not to their liking.

At something that M. Cipriani says they all laugh. Elizabeth, indeed, throws back her little head, and shows all her perfect teeth, in a paroxysm of the most genuine mirth. It gives Burgoyne a sort of shock to see her laugh.

Not a day, scarcely an hour, has passed since he last saw her in which he has not pictured her as doing or suffering, or living through something; he has never pictured her laughing. It seems to him now but a moment since he was reading her broken-hearted, tear-stained note; since he was seeing Byng grovelling in all the utter collapse of his ungoverned grief on the floor of the little Florentine *entresol*. What business has she to laugh? And how unchanged she is! How much less outwardly aged than he himself is conscious of being! Sitting as she now is, in her simple white tea-gown, with one slight elbow rested on the table, her eyes all sparkling with merriment and laughter, bringing into prominence

that one enchanting dimple of hers, she does not look more than twenty. But a few moments later he forgives her even her dimple. However *empresse* may be the little landlord, he has to move away after a time; and the merriment moves away, too, out of Elizabeth's face. Jim watches it decline, through the degrees of humorous disgust, as she pushes the coarse white fish about her plate, without tasting it (she was always a very delicate eater), into a settled gravity. And now that she is grave he sees that she is aged, almost as much as he himself, after all. Her eyes had ever had the air of having shed in their time many tears; but since he last saw her, it is now evident to him that the tale of those tears has been a good deal added to.

There is no pleasing him. He was angry with her when he thought her gay, and now he quarrels with her for looking sad. As if, in her unconsciousness of his neighbourhood, she was yet determined to give him no cause of complaint, she presently again lays aside her sorrowful looks, and, drawing her chair confidentially nearer to her mother's, makes some remark of an evidently comic nature upon the company into her ear.

They stoop their heads together--what friends they always were, she and her mother!--and again the blue twinkle comes into her eyes; the dimple's little pitfall is dug anew in her white cheek. Was there ever such an April creature? Mr. Le Marchant appears to take no part in the jokes; he goes on eating his dinner silently, and his back, which is turned towards Burgoyne, looks morose.

How is it that Elizabeth's roving eye has not yet hit upon himself? He sees presently that the cause lies in the fact of her look alighting upon old and known objects of entertainment, rather than going in search of new ones. But it must sooner or later embrace him in its range. The fond fat widow beside him must surely be one of her favourites, and, in point of fact, as he feverishly watches to see the inevitable moment of recognition arrive, he perceives that Miss Le Marchant and her mother are delightedly--though not so openly as to be patent to the rest of the room--observing her. And then comes the expected careless glance at him, and the no less expected transformation. Her elbows have been carelessly resting on the table, and she has just been pressing her laughing lips against her lightly-joined hands to conceal their merriment. In an instant he sees the right hand go out in a silent desperate clutch at her mother's, and the next second he knows that she also has seen him. They both stare helplessly at him--at least, the one *at* him, and the other beyond him! How well he remembers that look of hers over his shoulder in search of someone else. But yet it is not the old look, for that was one of hope and red expectation. Is there any hope or expectation lurking even under the white dread of this one? His jealous heart is afraid quite to say no to this question, and yet an indisputable look of relief spreads over her face as she ascertains that he is alone. She even collects herself enough to give him a tiny inclination of the head--an example followed by her mother; but they are, in both cases, so tiny as to be unperceived, save by the person to whom they are addressed.

He would not have been offended by the minuteness of their salutations, even had he not divined that it was dictated by a desire--however futile--to conceal the fact of his presence from their companion. His heart goes out in all the profundity of his former pity towards them, as he sees how entirely that one glance at him (for she does not look again in his direction) has dried the fountain of Elizabeth's poor little jests; of how white and grave and frightened, and even shrunk, his mere presence has made her. Now that they have detected him, good breeding, and even humanity, forbid his continuing any longer his watch upon them. The better to set them at ease he turns the back of his head towards their table, and compels the reluctant widow to relinquish her invalid booty for fully ten minutes in his favour. Perhaps when Elizabeth can see only the back of his head she may resume her jokes. But all the same he knows that, for her, there will be no more mirth to-day.

"That is what they always do!" cries a voice on Burgoyne's left hand--the voice of his other neighbour, who begins to think that his attention has been usurped quite long enough by her plump rival. "That is what they always do--come long after dinner has begun, and go out long before it has ended. Such swagger!"

There is a tinge of exasperation in both words and voice, nor is the cause far to seek.

The table in the window is again empty. In the meantime the "swaggering" Elizabeth is clinging tremblingly about her mother's neck in the privacy of their own little salon. The absence of the husband and father for the moment in the smoking-room has removed the irksome restraint from both the poor women.

"Did you see him?" asks Elizabeth breathlessly, as soon as the door is safely closed upon them, flinging herself down upon her knees beside Mrs. Le Marchant, who has sunk into a chair, and cowering close to her as if for shelter. "What is he doing here? Why has he come? When first I caught sight of him I thought that of course--" She breaks off, sobbing; "and when I saw that he was alone I *was* relieved; but I was disappointed too! Oh, I must be a fool--a bad fool--but I *was* disappointed! Oh, mammy! mammy! how seeing him again brings it all back!"

"Do not cry, dear child! do not cry!" answers Mrs. Le Marchant apprehensively; though the voice in which she gives the exhortation is shaking too. "Your father will be in directly; and you know how angry----"

"I will not! I will not!" cries Elizabeth, trying, with her usual extreme docility, to swallow her tears; "and I do not show it much when I have been crying; my eyes do not mind it as much as most people's; I suppose"--with a small rainy smile--"because they are so used to it!"

"Perhaps he will not stay long," murmurs the mother, dropping a fond rueful kiss on the prone blonde head that lies on her knees; "perhaps if we are careful we may avoid speaking to him."

"But I *must* speak to him," breaks in the girl, lifting her head, and panting; "I *must* ask him; I *must* find out; why, we do not even know whether Willy is dead or alive!"

"He is not dead," rejoins the elder woman, with melancholy common-sense; "if he had been, we should have seen it in the papers; and, besides, why should he be? Grief does not kill; nobody, Elizabeth, is better able to attest that than you and I."

Elizabeth is now sitting on the floor, her hands clasped round her knees.

"He is aged," she says presently; and this time it is evident that the pronoun refers to Burgoyne.

Mrs. Le Marchant assents.

"He must have cared more for that poor creature than we gave him credit for. Get up, darling; dry your eyes, and sit with your back to the light; here comes your father!"



CHAPTER II.

One of the reasons, though not the sole or even the main one, of Burgoyne's visit to Algiers is that the Wilson family are wintering there. And yet he dreads the meeting with them inexpressibly. When they last parted, immediately after having stood together round Amelia's open grave, they had all been at a high pressure of emotion, and of demonstrative affectionateness, which nothing in their tastes, habits, or natures could possibly make continuous. He has a horrible fear that they will expect to take up their relations at the same point at which he had left them. He would do it if he could, but he feels that it is absolutely impossible to him. The door of that room in his memory which is labelled "Amelia" is for ever locked. It is only in deepest silence and solitude that he permits himself now and again to turn the key and sparely and painfully look in. How will he bear it if they insist on throwing the portals wide, dragging its disused furniture to the light, rummaging in its corners?

He sleeps ill on this, his first night of Africa; and even when at length he succeeds in losing importunate consciousness, he is teased by absurd yet painful dreams, in which Amelia and Elizabeth jostle each other impossibly with jumbled personalities and changed attributes. Extravagant as his visions are, they have yet such a solid vividness that, at his first waking, he feels a strange sense of unsureness as to which of the two women that have beset his pillow is the dead, and which the living one. In dreams, how often our lost ones, and those whom we still possess, take hands together on equal terms! Even when he is wide awake, nay more, dressed and breakfasted, that feeling of uncertainty, that something akin to the

"Blank misgivings of a creature,
Moving about in worlds not realized,"

remains strong enough to drive him once again to the list of visitors in the entrance-hall, in order to assure himself that his brain has not been the dupe of his eye.

M. Cipriani has been as good as his word. The corrected list, promised overnight, has replaced the incomplete one, and almost the first names that Jim's eye alights upon are those of "Mr., Mrs., and Miss Le Marchant, England." His own name immediately follows, and he takes as a good augury what is merely an accident due to the fact of his room and theirs being on one floor. Elizabeth is, beyond question, beneath the same roof as himself; nay, even now she may probably be sunning herself like a white pigeon on that terrace, whose red tiles he sees shining in the morning sun through an open side-door.

The thought is no sooner formed than he follows whither it leads him; but she is not on the terrace; and though a moment ago his nerves were tingling at the thought of speech with her, yet he is conscious of a feeling of relief that their meeting is, for the moment, deferred. What can he say to her? What can she say to him?

He stands looking down on the green sea of richly-clothed dark trees beneath him--ilex and eucalyptus, and all the unfamiliar verdure of the soft South. From the fiercely-blazing red purple of a Bougainvillia, so unlike the pale, cold lilac blossom, to which in our conservatories we give that name, his eye travels over tree-tops and snowy villas, cool summer palace and domy mosque, to the curving bay, round which the Atlas Mountains are gently laying their arms; and Cape Matifou, with the haze of day's young prime about it, is running out into the Mediterranean.

He is alone at first, but presently other people come forth; the old valetudinarian, for once delivered from his fostering widow, sits down with a pile of English newspapers to enjoy himself in the sun, which does not yet ride so high as to be sun-stroke. Jim's last night's neighbour in the red shirt comes out too, bonneted and prayer-booked. She is going to church; so is he: but he does not tell her so, for fear she should offer to accompany him. She observes to him that the climate is a fraud; that this is the first day for three weeks in which she is able to go out without a mackintosh and umbrella.

"We are not so green for nothing, I can tell you," says she, with a laugh, and a rather resentful glance at the splendid verdure around her, and so leaves him.

He, too, as I have said, is going to church, and is presently asking his way to the English chapel. The Wilson family will certainly be there, and it has struck him that the dreaded meeting will be robbed of half its painful awkwardness if it takes place in public. At a church-porch, crowded with issuing congregation, Sybilla cannot fall into hysterics--it is true that Sybilla never attends divine service--nor can Cecilia weepingly throw her arms about his neck. But whatever means he may take to lessen the discomfort and smart of that expected encounter, the thought of it sits like lead upon his

spirits, as he walks quickly--it is difficult to descend slowly so steep a hill--down the precipitous lane, which is the only mode of approach for man or labouring beast to the high-perched hotel he has chosen. But he is young, and presently the cheerful, clean loveliness of the day and the sight of Nature's superb vigour work their natural effect upon him. It must, indeed, be an inveterate grief that refuses to be soothed by the influences of this green Eden.

What a generosity of vegetation, as evidenced by the enormous garlands of great-leaved ivy, waving from tree to tree as for some perpetual fete! Along the high hill bank that skirts this steep by-road, eucalyptus rear their lofty heads and their faintly-scented blossoms, aloë draws her potent sword, and thick-fleshed prickly pear displays her uncouth malignity. Beneath, what a lush undergrowth of riotous great-foliaged plants--acanthus, and a hundred other green sisters, all flourishing and waxing, so unstinted, so at large! He has reached the main road--the shady road that leads by a three-mile descent from Mustapha Superieur to the town.

How shady it is! Pepper-trees hang their green hair, so thick and fine, over it; and ilexes hold the thatch of their little dark leaves. Past the Governor's summer palace, with its snowy dome and Moorish arcades gleaming through its iron gates. From a villa garden a flowering shrub sends a mixed perfume of sweet and bitter, as of honey and hops, from its long yellow flower-tassels to his pleased nostrils.

At a sharp turn, where the hill falls away more precipitously than before, the bay, the mole, the shipping, the dazzling little city, burst upon him--the little city swarming up her hill, from where the French town bathes its feet in the azure ripples, to where the Arab town loses the peak of its triangle, in the Casbah and the fort of the now execrated Emperor. Blinding white, ardent blue, profound green--what a pleasant picture for a summer Sunday morning! And how gay the road is too, as the East and the West step along it together!

Here is a tram tearing down the steep incline with five poor little thin horses abreast. It is full of English church-goers, and yet, oh anomaly! standing up in the vulgarest of modern vehicles, with his slight dark hands grasping the tramrail, is a tall Arab, draped with the grave grace of the Vatican Demosthenes. But alas! alas! even upon him the West has laid its claw, for, as the tram rushes past, Jim's shocked eyes realize that he, who in other respects might have fed the flocks of Laban in Padan-aram, wears on his feet a pair of old elastic-sided boots.

Here come clattering a couple of smart Chasseurs d'Afrique, in blue and red, followed by a woman dressed as Rachel was at the palmy well--so dressed, that is to say, as to her white-shrouded upper woman, for, indeed, there is no reason for supposing that Rachel wore a pair of Rob Roy Tartan trousers! Past the Plateau Sauliere, where, in the lichen-roofed lavoir Frenchwomen are sousing their linen in water that--oh, hideous thought!--is changed but once a week; along an ugly suburb, and past a little wood; through the arch in the fortifications, the Porte d'Isly, till at length the Episcopal chapel--why are the Protestant places of worship scattered over the habitable globe everywhere so frightful?--stands before him.

He had thought himself in good time, but he must have loitered more than he had been aware of, as the bell is silent and the porch closed. He enters as quietly as may be, and takes his place near the door. The building strikes damp and chilly, despite the warming presence of the whole English colony, emptied out of the four hotels sacred to Anglo-Saxons, and out of many an ilex-shaded orange-groved campagne besides. The building is quite full, which is, no doubt, the reason why Jim fails to catch any glimpse of the Wilson family throughout the service. He has plenty of time to interrogate with his eye the numerous rows of backs before him, as the sermon is long. Jim had known that it would be so from the moment when the clergyman entered the pulpit with an open Bible--no written sermon--in his hand. The sound of a brogue, piercing, even through the giving out of the text, soon puts him in possession of the further fact that he is in the clutches, and at the mercy, of an entirely uneducated yet curiously fluent Irishman.

Is Elizabeth writhing under the infliction too? Never, in the Moat days, was she very patient under prolonged pulpit eloquence. He can see her with his memory's eye not very covertly reading her hymn-book--can hear her foot tapping. Several people around him now are, not very covertly, reading *their* hymn-books, but she is not among them. He has no more sight of her than he has of Cecilia; but in neither case--such are the disadvantages of his position--does his failure to see prove the absence of the object he seeks. He is one of the first persons to be out of church when at length set free, and stands just outside the porch while the long stream of worshippers defiles before him. It takes some time to empty itself into the sunshine, and nearly as long before he catches sight of any member of either of the families he is on the look-out for. Of the Le Marchants, indeed, he never catches sight, for the excellent reason that they are not to be caught sight of, not being there. In the case of the Wilsons he is more fortunate, though here, too, a sort of surprise is in store for him. He has involuntarily been scanning, in his search for them, only those of the congregation who are dressed in mourning. The picture that the retina of his eye has kept of Cecilia is of one tear-swollen and crape-swaddled; and though, if he had thought of it, his reason would have told him that, after seven months, she is probably no longer sobbing and sabled, yet even then the impression that he would expect to receive from her would be a grave and a black one. This is why, although he is on the look-out for her, she yet comes upon him at last as a surprise.

"Jim!" cries a voice, pitched a good deal higher than is wont to make itself heard within the precincts of a church--a female voice of delighted surprise and cheerful welcome; "father, here is Jim!"

Burgoyne turns, and sees a lady in a very smart bonnet, full of spring flowers, and with a red *en tout cas*--for they have now issued into the day's potent beam--shading her rosy face; a lady whose appearance presents about as wide a contrast to the serious and inky figure he had expected to see as it is well possible to imagine.

Cecilia, indeed, is looking, what her maid admiringly pronounced her before sending her forth to triumph, "very dressy." Mr. Wilson is black, certainly--but, then, clergymen always are black--and he still has a band upon his hat; but it is a very narrow one--sorrow nearing its vanishing-point. In answer to his daughter's joyous apostrophe, he answers:

"Sh, Cecilia! do not talk so loud. How are you, Jim?"

And then the meeting is over--that first meeting which Jim had shrunk from with such inexpressible apprehension--as certain to be so fraught with intolerable emotion; with calls upon him that he would not be able to answer; with baring of incurable wounds. The contrast with the reality is so startling that at first it makes him almost dizzy. Can the showy creature beside him, preening herself under her gay sunshade, be the same overwhelmed, shrunk, tear-drenched Cecilia whom at their last meeting he had folded in so solemn an embrace? Her cheerful voice answers for herself:

"It is so nice to see you again! When did you come? We did not expect you quite so soon; in your last letter you were rather vague as to dates; I can't say that you shine as a correspondent. You will come back to luncheon with us, of course, will not you? *dejeuner*, as they call it here; I always thought *dejeuner* meant breakfast. You will come, will not you? Sybilla will be so glad to see you--glad, that is to say, in her dismal way."

She ends with a laugh, which he listens to in a silence that is almost stunned. The sound of her voice, though set to so different a tune from what he had anticipated, has brought back the past with such astonishing vividness to him; her very flier at Sybilla seems so much a part of the old life that he half turns his head, expecting once more to see Amelia's deprecating face, to hear her peace-making voice put in a plea, as it has done so many hundred times, for the peevish *malade imaginaire*.

They have been strolling towards the carriages waiting outside, and have now reached one, driven by an *indigene*, a Moor, dusky as Othello, solemn as Rhadamanthus, and with his serious charms set off by a striped yellow and white jacket and a red sash.

"Is not he beautiful?" asks Cecilia, with another laugh, alluding to her coachman, as she and Burgoyne set off upon their *tete-a-tete* drive, Mr. Wilson seeing, apparently, no reason in the fact of his (Burgoyne's) appearance on the scene for departing from his invariable custom of walking home from church; "is not he beautiful? When first we came here we were in mourning; as if"--catching herself up with a stifled sigh--"there were any need to tell *you* that; and father wanted to put him into black, but I would not hear of it: was not I right? He would have been nothing in black; it is his red and yellow that give him his *cachet*."

Jim feels inclined to burst out laughing. There is something so ludicrous in the disproportion between his fears and their fulfilment, in the fact of the whole importance of Amelia's death resolving itself into a sash or no sash for an Arab coachman, that he has some difficulty in answering in a key of which the irony shall not be too patent:

"I think you were perfectly right."

He does not know whether she perceives the dryness of his tone; he thinks probably not, as she goes on to ask him a great many questions as to his journey, etc., talking quickly and rather flightily, scarcely leaving room between her queries for his monosyllabic replies, and ending with the ejaculation:

"How nice it is to see you again!"

"Thank you." His acknowledgment seems to himself so curt that, after a moment, he feels constrained to add something to it. That something is the bald and trivial inquiry: "And you--how have you all been getting on?"

Cecilia shrugs her shoulders.

"We are better off than we were; you know that, of course. Nobody ever thought that father's brother would have died before him. Wait till you see our villa--it is one of the show ones here; and of course it is very pleasant having more money; but one cannot help wishing that it had come earlier." She sighs as she speaks; not an ostentatious sigh, but a repressed and strangled one; and, despite the flower-garden in her bonnet, his heart softens to her. Perhaps his look has rested on that flower-garden with a more open disapprobation than he knows, for she says presently: "I think that one may be very bright-coloured outside, and very black inside. Father and I are sometimes very black inside."

"Are you?"

"We do very well when we are alone together, father and I; we like to talk about her. Dear me! what a place Algiers is for dust! that is why there are so many blind people here. How it gets into one's eyes!" She puts her handkerchief up hastily to her face as she speaks; but Jim is not taken in by the poor little ruse, and he listens to her in a silence that is almost tender, as she goes on: "Sybilla begins to cry if we even distantly allude to her; yet I know"--with exasperation--"that she talks of her by the hour to strangers--to her new doctor, for instance; yes, she has picked up a new doctor here--a dreadful little adventurer! She will probably talk of nothing else but her to you."

"God forbid!"

They have by this time left the town behind them, and have turned through a stone-pillared gate down an ilex and ficus-sheltered drive, along which the *indigene*, whipping up his horses to an avenue canter, lands them at the arched door of a snowy Moorish house, whose whitewash shows dazzling through the interstices of a Bougainvillia fire blazing all over its front.

Two minutes later Jim is standing by Sybilla's couch. She is holding both his hands in hers, and there is something in her face which tells him that she means that he shall kiss her.

"When I think--when I think of our last meeting!" she says hysterically.

"Yes," he says, gasping; "yes, of course. What a beautiful villa you have here!"

The observation is a true one, though, for the moment, he has not the least idea whether it is beautiful or not, as he turns his tormented eyes round upon the delicious little court, with its charming combination of slender twisted marble columns, of mellow-tinted tiles, of low plashing fountain. Originally it has been open, roofless to the eye and the breath and the rains of heaven; but its Northern purchaser has covered it in with glass, and set low divans and luxuriantly cushioned bamboo chairs about its soft-tumbling water.

Sybilla has let fall her hands, and the expression of the wish for a sisterly embrace has disappeared out of her face. For a few moments she remains absolutely silent. He looks round anxiously for Cecilia, but she has gone to take off her bonnet, and Mr. Wilson has not yet come in. Under pretence of examining the tiles, he walks towards the lovely little colonnade of horseshoe arches that form the court, and his uneasy look rests, scarcely seeing them, upon the vertical lines of lovely old faience that intersect the whitewash with softest blues and greens and yellows.

When will Cecilia return? Behind him he presently hears the invalid's voice, steadied and coldened.

"It is very beautiful; and, of course, it is everything for weary eyes to have such pleasant objects to rest upon. I believe"--with a little laugh--"that we sick people really take in most of our nourishment through the eyes. Was not it wonderfully enterprising of us to come here? I suppose your first thought when you heard the news was, 'How mad of Sybilla to attempt it!'"

It is needless to say how innocent of the mental ejaculation attributed to him Jim has been, and the consciousness of it makes him inquire with guilty haste:

"But you were none the worse? you got over it all right?"

"I was really wonderful," replies she; "we sick people"--with a little air of playfulness--"do give you well ones these surprises sometimes; but I must not take the credit to myself: it is really every bit due to Dr. Crump, my new doctor, who is a perfect marvel of intuition. I always tell him that he never need ask; he *divines* how one is; he says he is a mere bundle of nerves himself; that is, I suppose, why one can talk to him upon subjects that are sealed books with one's nearest and dearest."

Her voice has a suspicious tremble in it which frightens Jim anew.

He looks again apprehensively for help towards the two tiers of curving column and rounding arch, which rise in cool grace above each other, and sees, with relief, the figure of Cecilia leaning over the balustrade that runs along the upper tier, and looking down upon him. At the same moment Mr. Wilson enters, and shortly afterwards they all go to luncheon. It is not a very pleasant repast, although the cool dining-room, with its beautiful old pierced stucco ceiling and its hanging brass lamps, contributes its part handsomely towards what should be their enjoyment. There is no overt family quarrel, but just enough of covert recrimination and sub-acid sparring to make an outsider feel thoroughly uncomfortable, and to prove how inharmonious a whole the soured little family now forms.

"We quarrel more than we used to do, do not we?" says Cecilia, when Jim, a little later, takes leave, and she walks, under her red sunshade, up the ilexed drive with him to the pillared gate; "and to-day we were better than usual,

because you were by. Oh, I wish you were always by!"

He cannot echo the wish. He had thought that he had already held his dead Amelia at her true value; but never, until to-day, has he realized through what a long purgatory of obscure heroisms she had passed to her reward.

"I do hope you will not drop us altogether. Of course, now that the link that bound us to you is broken"--her voice quivers, but he feels neither the fear nor the rage that a like phenomenon in Sybilla has produced in him--"there is nothing to hold you any longer; but I do trust you will not quite throw us over."

"My dear old girl, why should I? I hope that you and I shall always be the best of friends, and that before long I shall see you settled in a home of your own."

"You mean that I shall marry? Well, to be sure"--with a recurrence to that business-like tone which had always amused him formerly in her discussion of her affairs of the heart--"I ought to have a better chance now than ever, as I shall have a larger fortune; but"--with a lapse into depression--"this is not a good place for men--I mean Englishmen. There are troops of delightful-looking Frenchmen, Chasseurs d'Afrique, and Zouaves; but, then, we do not know any of them--not one. Well, perhaps"--philosophically--"it is for the best; one always hears that Frenchmen make very bad husbands."



CHAPTER III.

Notre Dame d'Afrique--Lady of Africa--is an ugly lady, homely and black; and the church that is dedicated to her is ugly too--new and mock-Moorish; but, like many another ugly lady, being very nobly placed, she has a great and solemn air. It is Our Lady of Africa who first gives us our greeting as we steam in from seawards; it is to Our Lady of Africa that the fisher-people climb to vespers, and to the touching office that follows, when priests and acolytes pass out of the church to the little plateau outside, where, sheer against the sky, stands a small Latin cross, with a plain and, as it seems, coffin-shaped stone beneath it, on which one reads the inscription:

"A la memoire de tous ceux, qui ont peri dans la mer, et ont ete ensevelis dans ses flots."

"All those who have perished in the sea, and been buried in her waves."

What a gigantic company to be covered with one little epitaph!

Notre Dame d'Afrique stands grandly on the cliff-tops, overlooking the sea, whose cruel deeds she is so agonizedly prayed to avert, whose cruelty she is sometimes powerful to assuage, witness the frequent votive tablets with which the church walls are covered:

"Merci, oh ma mere."

"J'ai prie, et j'ai ete exauce."

"Reconnaissance a Marie."

"Reconnaissance a Notre Dame d'Afrique."

She does not look very lovable, this coal-black Marie, who stands in her stiff brocade, with her ebon hands stretched straight out above the high-altar; but how tenderly these poor fisherwives must have felt towards her when she brought them back their Pierre or their Jean, from the truculent deeps of the ocean!

Burgoyne has been told, both by his guide-book and by his *table-d'hote* neighbour, that he ought to see Notre Dame d'Afrique; nor is he loth to pay further obeisance to that high lady who already yesterday beckoned to him across the blue floor of her waters. He does not tell Cecilia of his intention, as he knows that she would offer to accompany him; but on leaving her he takes his way through the gay French town, along its Arab-named streets, Bab-a-Zoun and Babel-Oued, towards the village of St. Eugene, and breasts the winding road that, with many an elbow and bend, heading a deep gorge that runs up from the sea to the church-foot, leads him within her portals. The congregation is sparse--a few peasants, a blue and red Zouave, and several inevitable English. Now and again a woman, clad in humble black that tells of prayers in vain, goes up with her thin candle, and, lighting it, sticks it in its sconce among the others that burn before the altar. For awhile Burgoyne finds it pleasant after his climb to sit and watch her, and speculate pityingly with what hope of still possible good to herself she is setting her slender taper alight--now that her treasure has all too obviously gone down beneath the waves; to sit and speculate, and smell the heady incense, and listen to the murmur of chanted supplication; but presently, growing weary of the uncomprehended service, he slips outside to the little plateau, with its view straight out--no importunate land-object intervening--towards the sea, across which a little steamer is cutting her way; and on the horizon two tiny shining sails are lying.

Here, on this bold headland, it seems as if one were one's self in mid-ocean; and one has to lean far over the low wall in order to realize that there is some solid earth between us and it; that two full cities of the dead--a Jewish and a Christian--lie below. From the land-cemeteries to the vast sea-cemetery--for read by the light of that plain inscription upon which his eyes are resting, what is even the azure Mediterranean but a grave? For the matter of that, what is all life but a grave?

"First our pleasures die, and then

Our hopes, and then our fears, and when

These are dead, the debt is due:

Dust claims dust, and we die too."

He turns away, and, muttering these words half absently between his lips, begins to make the circuit of the church; and in doing so, comes suddenly upon three persons who are apparently similarly employed. The party consists of a man and two ladies. Being a little ahead of him, they are, for the first moment or two, not aware of his presence, an ignorance by which he, rather to his own discomfiture, profits to overhear a scrap of their conversation certainly not intended for

his ears.

"I suppose that you were wool-gathering, as usual?" Mr. Le Marchant is saying, with an accent of cold severity, to his daughter; "but I should have thought that even *you* might have remembered to bring a wrap of some kind for your mother!"

Jim starts, partly at having happened so unexpectedly upon the people before him, partly in shocked astonishment at the harshness both of voice and words.

In the old days Elizabeth had been the apple of her father's eye, to oppose whose lightest fancy was a capital offence, for whom no words could be too sugared, no looks too doting. Yet now she answers, with the sweetest good-humour, and without the slightest sign of surprise or irritation, or any indication that the occurrence is not a habitual one:

"I cannot think how I could have been so stupid; it was inexcusable of me."

"I quite agree with you," replies the father, entirely unmollified; "I am sure you have been told often enough how liable to chills insufficient clothing makes people in this beastly climate at sundown."

"But it is not near sundown," breaks in Mrs. Le Marchant, throwing herself anxiously, and with a dexterity which shows how frequently she is called upon to do so, between the two others; "look what a great piece of blue sky the sun has yet to travel."

"You shall have my jacket," cries Elizabeth impetuously, but still with the same perfect sweetness; "it will be absurdly short for you, but, at least, it will keep you warm." So saying, she, with the speed of lightning, whips off the garment alluded to, and proceeds to guide her mother's arms into its inconveniently tight sleeves, laughing the while with her odd childish light-heartedness, and crying, "You dear thing, you do look too ridiculous!"

The mother laughs too, and aids her daughter's efforts; nor does it seem to occur to any of the three that the fatal Southern chill may possibly strike the delicate little frame of Elizabeth, now exposed, so lightly clad in her tweed gown, to its insidious influence.

"I wish you had a looking-glass to see yourself in!" cries she, rippling into fresh mirth; "does not she look funny, father!" appealing to him with as little resentment for his past surliness as would be shown by a good dog (I cannot put it more strongly), and yet, as it seems to Jim, with a certain nervous deprecation.

The next moment one of them--he does not know which--has caught sight of himself, and the moment after he is shaking hands with all three. It is clear that the fact of his presence in Algiers has been notified to Mr. Le Marchant, for there is no surprise in his coldly civil greeting. He makes it as short as possible, and almost at once turns to continue his circuit of the church, his wife at his side, and his daughter meekly following. Doubtless they do not wish for his (Jim's) company; but yet, as he was originally, and without any reference to them, going in their direction, it would seem natural that he should walk along with them.

He is hesitating as to whether or no to adopt this course, when he is decided by a very slight movement of Elizabeth's head. She does not actually look over her shoulder at him, and yet it seems to him as if, were her gesture completed, it would amount to that; but it is arrested by some impulse before it is more than sketched. Such as it is, it suffices to take him to her side; and it seems to him that there is a sort of satisfaction mingled with the undoubted apprehension in her face, as she realizes that it is so. Her eyes, as she turns them upon him, have a hungry question in them which her lips seem afraid to put. Apparently she cannot get nearer to it than this--very tremblingly and hurriedly uttered, with a timid glance at her father's back, as if she were delivering herself of some compromising secret instead of the mere platitude which she so indistinctly vents:

"A--a--great many things have happened since--since we last met!"

Her eye travels for a moment to his hat, from which, unlike Cecilia's rainbow raiment, the crape band has not yet been removed; and he understands that she is comprehending his troubles as well as her own in the phrase.

"A great many!" he answers baldly.

He has not the cruelty to wish to keep her on tenterhooks, and he knows perfectly what is the question that is written in the wistful blue of her look, and whom it concerns; but it would be impertinence in him to take for granted that knowledge, and answer that curiosity which, however intense and apparent, has yet not become the current coin of speech. Probably she sees that he is unable or unwilling to help her, for she makes another tremendous effort.

"I hope that--that--all your friends are well."

"All my friends!" repeats he, half sadly; "they are not such a numerous band; I have not many friends left still alive."

His thoughts have reverted to his own loss, for, at the moment, Amelia is very present to him; but the words are no sooner out of his mouth than he sees how false is the impression produced by his reply--sees it written in the sudden dead-whiteness of her cheek and the terror in her eye.

"Do you mean"--she stammers--"that anybody--any of your friends--is--is lately dead?"

"Oh no! no!" he cries reassuringly; "you are making a mistake; nobody is dead--nobody, that is"--with a sigh--"that you do not already know of. All our friends--all our common friends--are, as far as I know----"

"Elizabeth!" breaks in Mr. Le Marchant's voice, in severe appellation; he has only just become aware that his daughter is not unaccompanied, and the discovery apparently does not please him.

Without a second's delay, despite her twenty-seven years, she has sprung forwards to obey the summons; and Jim has the sense to make no further effort to rejoin her. By the time that their circuit is finished, and they have again reached the front of the church, vespers are ended, and there is a movement outwards among the worshippers. They stream--not very numerous--out on the little terrace. The priests follow, tonsured, but--which looks strange--with beards and whiskers. The acolytes, in their red chasubles, carry a black and white pall, and lay it over the memorial stone below the cross. On either hand stand a band of decently clad youths--sons of drowned seamen--playing on brass instruments. It is a poor little music, doubtfully in tune; but surely no rolling organ, no papal choir, could touch the heart so much as this simple ceremonial. The little Latin cross standing sheer out against the sea; the black pall thrown over the stone that commemorates the sea's innumerable dead; the red-clad acolytes, standing with eyes cast down, holding aloft their high tapers, whose flickering flame the sea-wind soon puffs out; and the sons of the drowned sailors, making their homely music to the accompaniment of the salt breeze. The little service is brief and those who have taken part in it are soon dispersing. As they do so, Jim once more finds himself for a moment close to Elizabeth.

The sun has nearly touched the sea-line by this time, and he sees, or thinks he sees, her shiver.

"You are cold," he says solicitously; "you will get a chill."

She looks back at him, half surprised, half grateful, at the anxiety of his tone.

"Not I!" she answers, with a gentle air of indifference and recklessness; "naught never comes to harm!"

"But you shivered! I saw you shiver."

"Did I? It was only"--smiling--"that a goose walked over my grave. Does a goose never walk over your grave?"

And once more she is gone.

He does not see her again that day. Of the three places laid for dinner at the round table in the *salle a manger*, only two are occupied; hers is, and remains, empty. She is not with her parents, and, what is more, she does not appear to be missed by them. It fills Jim with something of the same shocked surprise as he had felt on hearing the cold and surly tone in which she had been addressed by her father; to see how much more, and more genially, that father talks; how much less morose his back looks than had been the case on the previous evening.

The next morning rises superb in steady splendour, and Jim, on issuing out on the little red-tiled terrace, finds the whole strength of the hotel gathered upon it. Even the worst invalids, who have not shown their noses outside their rooms for a fortnight, are sunning themselves, wrapped in apparently unnecessary furs. The Arabs and Turks have spread their gay rugs and carpets, and displayed their bits of stuff, their brasswork, and their embroidery. They make a charming garden of colour under the blue. One is lying beside his wares, in an azure jacket and a rose-red sash, twanging a "gunebri," or little Arab mandolin. Apart from the rest of the company, at the extreme end of the terrace, in a place which is evidently hers by prescriptive right, close to the balustrade, upon whose blue and white tiled top her books are lying, Elizabeth is sitting--and sitting alone, neither truculent father not frightened mother barring approach to her. He makes his way at once to her.

"You were not at dinner last night?"

"No."

"I hope that did not mean that you were ill?"

Her eyes are not lifted to his--resting rather on the balustrade, through whose pierced brickwork little boughs of Bougainvillia are pushing.

"No, I was not ill," she replies slowly; "but I had made such a figure of myself by crying that mammy thought I had better stay away. When I looked in the glass," she adds humorously, "I thought so myself."

"There was not much sign of tears about you when we parted at Notre Dame d'Afrique," he says brusquely.

"No, but"--with a sudden lifting of her pretty lashes--"you know there is never any medium in me; I am always either laughing or crying; and, of course, seeing you again brought--brought things back to me."

She looks wistfully at him as she makes this leading remark.

He can no longer have any doubt as to her wish to embark upon the subject which, even in the three minutes of their meeting on the previous day, she had sought to approach. If he is kind, he will enter into her wish, he will make her path easier for her; but for the moment he does not feel kind--angry, rather, and rebellious.

Is his intercourse with her to be a mere repetition of that which, although now seven months ago, makes him still writhe, in the recollection of his latter intercourse with Byng? Is he again to be spitted upon the skewer of reminiscences of the Vallombrosan wood? *Never!*

He looks obstinately away from her--towards where first an ivied bank rises, with red gladioli flowering upon it; then a little space of bare ground, then a row of orange-trees; then some young stone-pines, holding their heads against the blue to show what an exquisite contrast they make to it; then, topping, or seeming to top the hill, a white villa, with little blue jewels of sky, seen through the interstices of the balustrade on its roof, its whitewash making the solid wall of sapphire behind it look even more desperately and unnameably blue than elsewhere. What a blue! sapphire! turquoise! lapis! To what poor shifts are we driven to express it! How could we describe its glory to a blind person? If to such a one the colour of scarlet is represented by the sound of a trumpet, surely this divine tint above us can be best conveyed by the whole heavenly hierarchy of burning seraphs and winged angels, harping and quiring together.

"I always think," says Elizabeth, following the direction of his eyes--"perhaps it may be fancy--that this particular corner of the sky is much bluer than any other."

There is a shade of disappointment in her tone at his failure to take up her challenge, but she is far too gentle to make any further effort in a direction which, for some reason, is disagreeable to him; and since he will not follow her inclination, she is pliantly willing to follow his.

The Arabs have come up in might to-day, and, no longer fearing rain, have carpeted almost the whole terrace with their wares. They hang over the low wall, and cover the red tiles; blue and purple, and Moslem green, and Venetian red; dazzling white *haiks*, blinding in the blinding sunshine; carpets, embroidered jackets, flashing back gold in the gold light. A pert English miss is standing over them, and saying disparagingly about each:

"You can get this 7-1/2d. cheaper at Whiteley's. I saw a much better one than this for half the price at Marshall's," etc., etc.

One longs to ask the "miss" whether she saw the sunlight, and the cobalt sea, and the glorified whitewash, with its amethyst shadows, for 7-1/2d. at Whiteley's too, and, if so, why she did not stay there?

Burgoyne's friend in the red shirt is beating down a one-eyed Kabyle, and having a happy haggle with him over a Mozambique coat.

"She does not get on with her own family at home, and she has quarrelled with all her travelling companions!" says Elizabeth, in a delighted explanatory whisper. Wistfulness and disappointment have alike vanished out of her small face, which is one ripple of mischief. "The fat widow in the weepers, who is preening herself like a great pouter pigeon, is trying to marry the wizened old gentleman in the bamboo chair. Sometimes we think she will succeed; sometimes we think she will not: it is *so* interesting!"

Jim looks down at her with an astonishment bordering on indignation.

Is this the woman who cried herself sick last night over memories of the so recent past? In this mobile nature, is there nothing that one can lay hold of?

"Mammy and I get an infinity of amusement out of them," continues she, still playfully, but faltering a little under the severity of his look; "oh, we know a great deal about them all; and those that we do not know about we make stories for!"

"Indeed!"

His tone is so curt that the stream of her gaiety dries up under it, and she relapses into silence, looking towards the

flashing sea, and the ficus-tree, that is casting its now grateful shade.



CHAPTER IV.

"You said just now that seeing me brought things back to you."

It is partly remorse at having snubbed her, and partly perversity, which dictates this sentence on Jim's part. The perversity is, perhaps, the predominating element in his motive--a perversity which, having chilled her away from the subject when she was eagerly seeking an opening to it, now forces her to return to it. She starts a little.

"Yes--yes," she answers; "but 'brought things back' is not quite the right phrase; they"--her voice growing low and tremulous--"had not very far to come."

The quiver in her voice annoys him almost as much as Byng's tears used to do.

"If you would like to ask me any questions," he says stiffly, "I am ready to answer them."

"Are you?" she cries hungrily; "oh, that is kind of you! but, then, you always *were* kind; but not here"--looking apprehensively round--"I could not trust myself to talk about--about him here; I--I should break down, and nothing"--with a smile that, though watery, is still humorous--"would induce me to make a fool of myself before the widow Wadman." Then, seeing him look at a loss: "Come indoors!" she says impulsively, standing up, and half stretching out her hand as if to draw him after her. "Come into our salon--no, you need not be afraid; we shall have it all to ourselves; father and mother have gone out for their usual constitutional on the Boulevard Mustapha."

He follows her silently, and neither speaks till they find themselves *tete-a-tete* in the private apartment of the Le Marchants.

It is on the *rez-de-chaussee*, a suite of three little whitewashed rooms, transmogrified from their original hotel nakedness by flowers and brocade bits. Three large green jars on the chimney-piece, full of generous rose-branches, and boughs of salvia and iris, and stalwart yellow jessamine, make the air sweetly and lightly perfumed. On the table is a litter of Tauchnitz novels, disastrously old English papers, the little scurrilous Algerian sheet, and, lastly, Elizabeth's workbasket--the big workbasket which Jim had last seen standing on the floor in the *entresol*, at the Piazza d'Azeglio, with its contents strewn all over his friend's prostrate body. At the sight a bitter smile breaks over his face.

"An old acquaintance!" he says, making a mock salutation to it; "it is in better order than when last I had the pleasure of seeing it."

"Do you mean in Florence?" she asks, very slowly.

"Yes"--still with that acrid smile--"after you were gone, I had the honour of helping to pack it to send after you. I am afraid I was rather clumsy over it; but, at any rate, I managed better than he. By-the-bye, did you find any rust on your scissors and thimble when next you had occasion to use them? Poor boy! he cried enough over them to take all the polish off!"

She has sunk down upon the sofa, over which a great woollen *haik*, dyed with harmonious dull tints, is thrown.

"Do not sneer at me!" she says faintly. "You would not if you knew how you hurt me. Is he--is he--how is he?"

"He is not ill."

The answer ought to be reassuring; but there is something in the manner in which it is uttered that tells her that it neither is, nor is meant to be so. It is so ominous that her lips, after a feeble effort or two, give up the endeavour to frame any query. All her power of interrogation has passed into those eyes, out of which her companion has been so brilliantly successful in chasing their transient morning mirth.

"When a man," says Jim gravely, "at the outset of his life, gets such a facer as he did, if he has not a very strong character, it is apt to drive him off the rails, to give him a shove downwards."

"I see; and you think I have given him a shove downwards?"

"Yes."

There is a pause. Jim's eyes are resolutely turned away from the face of Elizabeth, upon whose small white area twitches of pain are making cruel disfigurement. He does not want to have his heart softened towards her, so he stares

persistently over her head at a Mussulman praying-carpet, which, old and still rich-toned, despite the wearing of pious knees, hangs on the wall. At length she speaks, in a key as low as--were not the room so entirely still--would be inaudible.

"If I had married him, I should have given him a much worse shove down."

Jim holds his breath. Is he about to hear from her own lips that secret which he has magnanimously resisted all opportunities of hearing from other sources? But the words that, after a pause, follow this almost whispered statement are not a confession. They are only an appeal.

"You would be doing the kindest thing that you ever did in your life, if you could bring yourself to say that you thought I did it for the best."

He feels that if he submits his eyes to hers, his will must go with them; he will have no power left of dissent from any request she may choose to make; so he still stares over her head at a screen which hides the doorless entrance to the third room of the little suite. One leaf, folded back, gives a peep through the little chamber, through its deep-arched window to where a date-palm stands up straight against the sea.

"I could not possibly say that unless I knew the circumstances of the case," he answers judicially.

He hears a low sigh, not of impatience, but of melancholy acquiescence.

"Then you must go on thinking ill of me."

There is such a depth of dejection, as well as such an unalterable sweetness, in her voice, that the words of little Prince Arthur, addressed to Hubert, flash upon his mind:

"If Heaven be pleased that you should use me ill,
Why, then you must!"

After all, what power in earth or sky has appointed him her executioner?

"I do not wish to think ill of you," he answers sadly. "Good heavens! do I need to tell you that? I have tried all along to keep myself from judging you; but I should not be human--you must know that I should not be human--if I did not ask myself why you did it."

"Why I left Florence?"

"Yes."

She sits stock-still for a moment, the very little colour that there ever was in it retreating out of her face.

"If I told you that, I should be telling you everything."

He is looking at her now; after all, he cannot keep his gaze pinned to the screen for ever, and, as he looks, he sees an emotion of so transcendently painful a nature set her little sad features working, that the one impulse that dominates him is to ease her suffering.

Poor little docile creature! She is going to tell him her secret, since he exacts it, though it is only with a rending asunder of soul and body that it can be revealed. He puts out his hand hurriedly, with a gesture as of prohibition.

"Then do not tell me."

She sinks back upon her *haik* with a movement of relief, and puts up her fine handkerchief to her pale lips. There is a perfect silence between them for awhile. At his elbow is a great un-English, unwinty nose-gay of asphodel and iris. He passes his fingers absently over the freakish spikes.

"How did he take it? how did he take it at first?"

Her voice, though now tolerably distinct, is stamped with that character of awe which fills us all at approaching a great calamity.

"He would not believe it at first; and then he cried a great deal--oh, an immense deal!"--with an accent of astonishment, even at the recollection of his friend's tear-power--"and then--oh, then, he thought of putting an end to himself!"

Jim had meant to have made this relation in a tone of dispassionate narrative, but against his will and intention, as his memory recalls what seem to him the unworthy antics played by Byng's grief, his voice takes a sarcastic inflection. The

horror written on his auditor's face as he utters the latest clause of his sentence recalls him to himself.

"Do not be afraid!" he says, in a tone which has no longer anything akin to a sneer in it, though it is not devoid of bitterness; "the impulse was a short-lived one; he is not thinking of putting an end to himself now, I can assure you of that; he is only thinking of how he can best amuse himself. Whether he is much more successful in that than he was in the former, I am not so sure."

Her eyes have dropped to her own fragile, ringless hands as they lie on her lap.

"Poor boy! poor boy!" she says over softly twice, moving her head up and down with a little compassionate movement.

At the pity expressed by her gesture, an unjust and unjustifiable hard anger takes harsh possession of him.

"It was a pity you let it go so far," he says austerely; "you must allow me to say that much; but I suppose, in point of fact, the ball once set rolling, it was past your power to stop it."

She listens to his philippic, with her head meekly bent.

"I did not try," she answers, in a half-whisper; then, after a pause, raising her down-dropped eyes, lit with a blue fire of excitement, almost inspiration, to his, "I said to myself, 'If I have any luck, I shall die before the smash comes;' and I just lived on from day to day. I had not the heart to stop it; I knew it would stop of itself before long; I had never--hardly ever"--correcting herself, as it seems, with a modifying afterthought--"in my life before known what happiness meant; and oh! *oh!* OH!"--with a groan of deepening intensity at each repeated interjection--"what a big word it is!"

Never--hardly ever--known what happiness meant before! Why, surely she was happy at the Moat! and before his mind's eye there rises an image of her in her riotous rosy gaiety; but even as it does, there flashes upon him a comprehension of her speech.

It is not the careless merriment of childhood to which she is alluding; it is to *the* happiness, *par excellence*, of life. If this is the case, why did she correct herself and modify her negative with a "hardly"? A jealous feeling of someone else--someone beside Byng; a jealousy none the less keen for being vague--for not knowing on what object it can lay hold--sharpen his tone as he repeats aloud, and with an accent of interrogation, her qualifying adverb:

"*Hardly* ever, that implies----"

But she breaks in hurriedly, as if dreading--and at the same time doubting her own power of baffling--cross-examination upon that subject on whose borders they are continually hovering.

"Talking of happiness makes one think of unhappiness, does not it? We both know something about that, do not we?"

She pauses, and he sees that she is alluding to his own sorrow, and that her eye is sounding his to see whether he would wish her to approach it more nearly. His eye, in answer, must give but a dubious beam, since he himself is quite unsure of what his wishes on the subject are; and she goes on with the haste and yet unsteadiness of one who is treading on swampy ground, that gives beneath his feet.

"We saw it in the papers; I could not believe it at first. It was the last thing I ever expected to happen. I thought of writing to you, but I did not."

She looks at him rather wistfully, and although but two minutes ago she had been confessing to him her passion for another man, he sees that she is anxious he should tell her that her sympathy would have been precious to him. He feels the same sensation as before of mixed anger and fascination at the ductility of her nature. What business has she to care whether he would have liked to hear from her or not?

"It seemed such a pity that it was she, and not I!"

Again her eye interrogates his, as if asking for acquiescence in this suggestion, but he cannot give it. With a shock of surprise--nay, horror--at himself, he finds that he is unable to echo the wish that Elizabeth had died and Amelia lived.

"I said so to mammy at the time. Ah, here is mammy!"

And, indeed, as she speaks the door opens, and Mrs. Le Marchant enters in her walking-dress. At the sight of Jim, a look, which certainly does not betoken pleasure, though good breeding prevents its representing the opposite emotion, crosses her handsome, worn face.

"I brought Mr. Burgoyne in here," says Elizabeth, in what seems rather precipitate explanation, "because we could not talk comfortably out on the terrace; they listen to everything we say: they have such long ears--the Widow Wadman

and Miss Strutt!"

"I do not know what State secrets you and Mr. Burgoyne can have to discuss," replies the mother, with a smile that, though courteous, but ill disguises the underlying anxiety. "Yes, dear child, I shall be very much obliged if you will take my bonnet upstairs for me"--this in answer to little tender overtures from Elizabeth, overtures that remind Jim of 12 *bis*, Piazza d' Azeglio. "I do not know whether you have yet found it so" (to Jim); "but this *is* a slack place."

No sooner has the door closed upon her daughter than her tone changes.

"What have you been talking about to her," she inquires rapidly; "not, I hope, about *him*?"

"I could not help it; she asked me."

Mrs. Le Marchant strikes her hands together, and gives utterance to that short and shapeless monosyllable which has a prescriptive right to express vexation.

"Th! th!" A moment later, "I am sure you will understand that I do not mean to imply any ill-will to you; but it *is* unlucky that we should have happened to meet you here; it has brought it all back to her, and she was just beginning to pluck up her spirits a little."

"Did she--did she take it so much to heart?" inquires Jim, in a tone of almost as awed concern as Elizabeth had employed but a quarter of an hour before in putting nearly the same question with regard to Byng.

"*Did she take it to heart!*" repeats Mrs. Le Marchant, with the irritation of one to whom a perfectly senseless and superfluous inquiry is put; "why, of course she did! I thought at one time that she would have gone out of her mind!"

No one can feel less merry than Jim; and yet his lips at this juncture cannot resist the impulse to frame themselves into a gloomy smile.

"And I thought that *he* would have gone out of *his* mind," he rejoins.

As he speaks, it flashes upon his memory that one of the hypotheses that have formerly occurred to him to account for the mystery that hangs over Elizabeth's past was that she had been mad; and though he had long abandoned the idea, her losing her wits now recurs to him with a shock as a possibility. Might not that changeable, mobile, emotional mind lose its balance under the blow either of a sudden calamity or of a long wearing sorrow? It has escaped--evidently but barely escaped the first. Will it escape the second too?

His heart goes out in a great yearning to her at the thought of what a touching little lunatic she would make; and, with an oblivion of his own personal feelings, which is generous, if not very lasting, he says compassionately:

"It seems a pity--a great pity!"

"A pity!" repeats the mother, with a sort of wrath, down which he detects a broad stripe of agony running; "I should think it *was* a pity! Pity is a weak word! The whole thing is piteous! her whole history! If you only knew----"

She breaks off.

He is silent, waiting to see whether that impulse towards confidence in him will go any further; but it does not. She has evidently gone beyond her intention, and is passionately vexed with herself for having done so.

"They were so well suited to each other," continues Jim slowly, but still generously. Possibly his generosity becomes more easy as he sees how hopeless is the plea upon which he employs it. "Is it--I do not wish to intrude upon your confidence, but in the interests of my friend you will allow me to say that much--is it quite out of the question?"

"Quite! quite!" replies the mother, in painful excitement; "what, poor soul, is not out of the question for her that has any good or happiness in it? and that--*that* more than anything! If you have any mercy in you, do not put it into her head that it is not!"

"If it is not in her head already, I could not put it there," replies Jim gravely; "but I will not--I promise you I will not."

As he speaks, a slight smile touches the corners of his serious mouth as he reflects how entirely easy it is to comply with a request *not* to urge Byng's suit upon its object, and how cheaply a character for magnanimity may sometimes be bought.

"That is very kind of you!" replies the poor woman gratefully; "and I am sure when you say a thing I can depend upon you for it; and though, of course, it was unlucky our happening to meet you, yet you need not see much of her. Although it is not in the least 'out of sight, out of mind' with her"--sighing--"yet she *is* very much influenced by the

objects around her; and when you are gone--I dare say you do not mean to make a long stay; this is not a place where there is much for a man to do--for a man like you----"

She breaks off, and her imploring eye invites him to reassure her by naming a speedy day for his own departure. But magnanimity may have calls made upon it that exceed its power to answer, and Jim's silence sufficiently proves that he is not going to allow himself to be seduced into a promise to go.

CHAPTER V.

The next morning proves the truth of Miss Strutt's words that "we are not so green here in Algiers for nothing." The weather changes some time after dark has fallen. A mighty wind arises. Jim's slumbers are broken by the fact that somebody's outside shutters bang, loose and noisy all night. The great sign at the top of the hotel swings and creaks and groans. In the morning, as far as can be seen through blurred panes, the trees--eucalyptus, ilex, stone-pine--are all cowering and stooping before the wind's lash. The fan palm before Mrs. Le Marchant's window, with its fans all pinched and bent, is staggering before the gale. One cannot conceive what that unlucky tropical product can be doing in this galley, and it requires a strong effort of reason and will to resist the conviction that the oranges and lemons are tied upon the shivering trees instead of growing naturally there.

"And this is 'Afric's burning strand!'" says Jim to himself, over his breakfast in the *salle a manger*, through whose shut windows the mad rain forces itself; and the blast, coming to his wet sister's aid, bursts them open now and again.

The day seems enormously long. He gets through the morning tolerably well with letter-writing, and after the twelve o'clock *dejeuner* he faces the gale in a determined walk down into the town. Seldom in the course of his wide wanderings has he felt the furious scourge of more tremendous rain. The side-path is whitened with big hailstones; red torrents tear with ferocious speed and violence down the steep incline. The great acanthus-leaves, and all the plentiful undergrowth, are dripping and rejoicing.

Through the blinding white deluge he gets forlorn peeps of the villas that had shone yesterday with the white splendour one associates with the city of the saints of God; and instead of, as yesterday, "laced with heaven's own tinct," the Mediterranean is whitening the bay's rounded curve with its angry breakers, and the snow is sprinkling the Atlas crests. A few Arabs are sitting on the ground under the Pont d'Isly, packed up into whitish woollen parcels, knees to nose, and arms and hands all withdrawn into the protection of the sheltering burnous. But no one else, who can help it, is abroad.

It seems to Jim as if his disagreeable tussle with the elements had lasted a long time, and yet, on his return to the hotel, he finds that it is only half-past two. He thinks at first that the clocks must have stopped, but finds, on examination, that they are all ticking, and all unanimous. His drenched condition is at least a resource, necessitating an entire and fundamental change of raiment; but even this expedient, though dragged out to its utmost possible limit, does not carry him further than three. How is he to dispose of the seven or eight hours that must elapse before he can seek refuge in bed? He has exhausted his correspondence, which is never a large one, and he has seldom in his life been so short of books.

He makes his way through the hall, which is crammed with young people playing battledore, and noisily counting; with elder persons, dreadfully short of a job, looking on and applauding; to the *salon*, in hopes of there finding a Tauchnitz novel, or even a superannuated *Pall Mall* or *World*. But half a dozen other weather-bound sufferers have been before him, and the tables are swept clean of all literature save a three-months-old *Court Journal*.

Miss Strutt and the pert votary of Whiteley are sitting shawled, and with their heads close together. By their titters, and the fragments he catches of their talk, they seem to be concocting a practical joke of some kind. The widow Wadman, shawled too, and her valetudinarian in a comforter, are stopping over a wood-fire, which refuses to burn, the souches being wringing wet. Jim rather injudiciously approaches them, and offers his assistance in piling the damp logs; but he is so evidently *de trop*, that he retires discomfited. On the other hand, the invitation in Miss Strutt's and her coadjutor's eye is so apparent that he beats a hasty retreat out of the room, in dread lest he should be drawn into their mysterious pleasantries.

He never is quite clear afterwards how he gets over the hours that intervene before dinner--whether sleep comes to his aid, or whether he is after all reduced to perusing in the *Court Journal* the narrative of which direction the Queen and Princess Henry of Battenburg took their walk in, in October. But at length the welcome bell rings, drowning even, for two minutes, the banging of the wind; and the whole hotel, unwontedly punctual, rushes in answer to its summons. People who have hitherto scarcely exchanged words, have eyed each other with hardly veiled distrust, now show a feverish desire to enter into conversation, to detain one another after dinner on the steps of the *salle a manger*.

As the evening advances, Jim sees an intention among the younger portion of the company to launch out into noisy, romping games, to institute a Dumb Crambo. He feels it is far from impossible that he himself may fall so low as to be drawn into it. Miss Strutt's eye is on him, but before he succumbs he will make one effort on his own behalf. He

embraces a desperate resolution. He has seen the Le Marchants eating their dinner near, and yet hopelessly far from him. Elizabeth had given him one furtive smile, and her mother a hurried bow; this is, to tell the truth, all the encouragement he has to go upon--all that he can find to keep his courage up as he knocks at their door, telling himself that his excuse--that of asking them to lend him a book--is a quite sufficient and legitimate one. He knocks, and Elizabeth's voice at once answers:

"Herein!"

It is clear that she takes him for the German waiter, Fritz. She remains in this belief even after he has opened the door, since she does not at first look up. She is alone--not in the pretty flowered room in which she had yesterday received him, but in the first and less adorned of the little series--one that he had, on his former visit, cursorily supposed to be chiefly used as an ante-room--sitting alone at a table, and before her are spread writing-materials, over which she is stooping. An odious and ridiculous thought darts, with a prick, across his mind.

Is she sitting here, all alone, in order to write to Byng?

"I came----" he begins; and at the unexpected voice she looks up with a start:

"Oh, it is you!" she says, in a low key, glancing rather apprehensively at the closed door, which separates them from the inner room, in a manner which tells him that her parents are within.

"I came"--his voice almost unconsciously sinking to the level hers has indicated to him--"to ask you to lend me a book."

"A book!" she repeats doubtfully, with another and still more nervous glance at the shut door; "I am afraid that they are all in there."

"Oh, it is of no consequence!" rejoins Burgoyne hastily, unwittingly quoting the words of the immortal Mr. Toots; "it does not matter in the least."

As he speaks, he begins to retreat towards the door, but so slowly as to give her plenty of time to recall him had she so wished. But she does not. She only stands looking uncertain and distressed. He cannot take such a melancholy impression of her little face away for the whole night with him--it would give him the blues too seriously after this dismal day--so he takes a step or two forward again.

"Are not you rather lonely?" he asks, with an expressive look round.

She gives a small, uncomplaining smile.

"Oh no; I do very well. I am generally alone at this time of day; they like to have their evenings to themselves--at least, father likes to have mammy to himself; I am sure it is quite natural."

There is not the slightest trace of any sense of being aggrieved in either words or tone.

Again that picture of the adored Elizabeth of former days, of whose prattle her father was never weary, whose jokes were always considered so unequalled, and whose pre-eminence in favour was so allowed that her intercession and influence were always employed by the others as certain in their efficacy, rises before Jim's eyes.

"They are like lovers still," continues Elizabeth softly; "it is very pretty when people are lovers still after nearly thirty years."

"And you--you write letters?"

"No, I do not; I have not anyone to write to."

A pang of shame at his unworthy suspicion, coupled with a sense of astonishment at her simple confession of friendlessness, prevent his speaking; and it is she who goes on:

"I was writing an Italian exercise; I began to learn Italian in Florence"--with the inevitable low sigh that always accompanies her mention of that name--"and to-day, for something to do, I took it up again. It has been a long day, has not it? Oh, *what* a long day!"

"*Long!*" repeats Jim emphatically; "it might choose to call itself a *day*; but many a century has been shorter."

"Someone was playing battledore and shuttlecock in the hall. I wonder to what number they kept it up? how many years it is since I have played battledore and shuttlecock!"

There is a suppressed envy in her tone, which tells how far from disagreeable the innocent noisy pastime to which she alludes would be to her even now. She has sat down again on the straight-backed chair from whose elevation she had commanded her Italian studies; a large grayish cloak, lined and heavily collared, and bordered with fur, hangs, unfastened at the throat, about her. Out of the dark beaver her delicate neck and head rise, like a pale primrose from out of piled dead oak-leaves in a yet wintry wood. Through the door, which he has left open behind him, come bursts of maniac mirth from the votaries of Dumb Crambo.

"What a noise they are making!"

"I should think they were!"

"I wonder what they are doing?"

"I can inform you on that point; they are playing Dumb Crambo."

She repeats the words after him with a lingering intonation, in which there again is, or, at least, he thinks that he detects it, a tinge of envy.

"Dumb Crambo!"

"Would you like to join them?"

"No"--slowly--"not quite that; but--it sounds ridiculous--but I should like to play Dumb Crambo again. We used"--in an affectionate, lingering tone--"to play it when we were children."

It is the first time that she has ever voluntarily alluded to the Moat, and he calls to mind her earnest prohibition addressed to him at Florence against any mention of it.

"I know you did; once or twice I played with you."

"*You?*"

She starts. It is evident that the unimportant fact of his having taken part in their games has quite escaped her; but, a moment later, her soft and courteous nature evidently making her fear that he will look upon her obliviousness as unkind--

"Oh yes, to be sure!" Then again lapsing into reminiscence, "What odd words we used to choose sometimes--words that nobody could guess! I wonder what words they have chosen?"

He thinks of saying jocosely, "Shall I go and ask them?" but refrains, because he fears it would put it into her head to send him away.

A sort of piercing squeal makes itself heard from the *salon*.

"Do you think that that can be meant for a *pig*?" asks Elizabeth, her line ears pricked in unaffected interest. "Oh!"--with a return of uneasiness--"I wish that they would not make so much noise; father does so dislike noise. They might as well have put it off till to-morrow."

"Why would to-morrow's noise be more endurable than to-night's?"

"It would not have mattered to-morrow; father will not be here; he is going to Hammam Rhira."

Burgoyne's jaw drops. Is this the alternative course decided upon by

Mrs. Le Marchant? Having failed to dislodge him from Algiers, is she going to remove herself and her daughter out of his reach?

"Do you mean--are you *all* going to Hammam Rhira to-morrow?--*all* going away?"

Is it some effect of light from the rose-shaded lamp that makes it seem to him as if a tiny smile, and a yet smaller blush, swept over Elizabeth's face at the aghastness of his tone--an aghastness much more marked than he had intended it should be.

"Not to-morrow; not all of us. Father and mammy are going there for a couple of nights to see what the place is like--one hears such contradictory accounts; and if they are pleased with it--"

"Yes?"

"If they are pleased with it we shall all probably move on there in a day or two."

He would like to be sure that this sentence ends with a sigh, but a prodigious storm of hand-clapping from the extempore theatre prevents his hearing whether it has that regretful finish.

"And they are going to leave you behind?"

"Why not? there would not be much use in taking me; and, as I tell you, they love being *tete-a-tete*."

"And you love being alone?"

The moment that the question is out of his mouth, he realizes its full unkindness. He is perfectly aware that she does *not* like being alone; that she is naturally a most sociable little being; that, even now, these frightened five minutes of unsatisfactory broken talk with himself have made her look less chilled, less wobegone, less white. Her answer, if it can be looked upon as one, must be taken by him as a rebuke. It is only that she says nervously:

"One certainly does hear dreadfully plainly here with the door open."

Her tone is of the gentlest, her look no angrier than a dove's, and yet he would be obtuser than he is if he did not at once comprehend that her remark implies a wish that he should presently shut that door behind him on the outside. He complies. With that newly-gained knowledge as to to-morrow's Hammam Rhira, he can afford to comply.

The next morning's light reveals that the weather, pleased with having so indisputably proved its power of being odious, has recovered its good-humour.

Beyond the tree-tops a radiant sea is seen laughing far below; and the wet red tiles on the little terrace shine like jewels. A sea even more wonderful than radiant; no servile copy of the sky and clouds to-day, but with astonishing colours of its own--a faint yet glorious green for a part of its watery breadth; then what our poverty compels us to call blue; and then a great tablecloth of inky purple, which looks so solid that the tiny white boats that are crossing it seem to be sailing on dry land. From amongst the glossy green of the wooded hill, mosque and campagne start out, dazzling, in their recovered lustre; one cool entrancing villa in especial, backed with a broken line of dusky stone-pines, stands, snowy-arcaded, enthroned high up among the verdure.

Jim is very anxious to be out of the way at the hour of the Le Marchants' departure. He has a panic fear of being waylaid by the mother, and having some earnest supplication addressed to him to abstain, during her absence, from any converse with Elizabeth. He is not quite clear at what time they will set off, so, to insure himself against mistakes, he resolves to spend the morning and lunch at the Villa Wilson. Arrived there, he is shown by an Arab man-servant into the court, and, finding it empty, sinks down into a cane chair, and lets his eyes wander round to the fountain, lullingly dripping into its basin; to the tiles, the white-arched doorways, carved in low relief, and themselves so low that it must be a humble-statured person who enters them without stooping. What a home for love in idleness! Who can picture any of the vulgar work of the world done in such a house? any harder labour ever entered upon than a listening to some lady singing "with ravishing division to her lute"?

The lady who presently joins Jim appears, by her ruffled air, to have been engaged upon no such soothing occupation as luting to a recumbent lover.

"You will not mind staying here?" asks Cecilia; "Dr. Crump is in the drawing-room with Sybilla; I am sure that you do not want to see Dr. Crump!"

"I cannot express how little I wish it."

"I cannot think what has happened to Sybilla"--wrinkling up her forehead into annoyed furrows--"but she is so dreadfully sprightly when he is there; she never was sprightly with Dr. Coldstream, and he is such an impossible man!--the sort of man who, when first he comes in, always says, 'Well, how are we this morning?' Do not you think that it stamps a man to say 'How are we?'"

"I think it does."

"He talks such nonsense to her!"--with irritation--"he tells her that he, too, is a bundle of nerves! if you could only see him! And one day he told her that when first he came here he had seen the Angel of Death waving his fans above her head! and she swallows it all!"

"I am not at all surprised."

"It makes me sick!" cries she energetically; "let us go into the garden."

So into the garden they go; both the new one, whose luxuriant growth of verdure is the outcome of but eight or nine years; and the old one, along whose straight walks the feet of the Moorish ladies used to patter under the orange-trees.

Beneath them now there are no white bundles of muslin; only on the ground the oranges lie thick, no one in this plenteous land thinking it worth while to pick them up. Jim and his companion pace rather silently to a pretty Moorish summer-house, dug, a few years ago, by the English architect out of a farm-house, into which it had been built. It is dainty and cool, with a little dome and lovely green and blue tiles; and an odd small spring, which is taught to wander by tiny snaky channels into a little basin. They go into the summer-house and sit down.

"Yes, it is pretty," says the girl absently! but her mind is evidently preoccupied by some other subject than the beauty of the giant bignonia which is expanding the multitude of its orange-red clusters all over a low wall, making it into one burning hedge, and has called forth an exclamation of delight from Burgoyne. What that subject is immediately appears.

"Do you know who is in Algiers--whom I saw driving through the Place Bressant on Sunday afternoon?"

"Who?"

"The Le Marchants. Ah, you are not surprised!"--rather suspiciously. "You knew already!"

Jim hesitates a second; then, reflecting that, whether or not he acknowledges the fact now, Cecilia is certain to learn it in a day or two at latest, he answers with a slight laugh:

"It would be odd if I did not, seeing that they are staying at my hotel."

"You knew that when you went there?"--very quickly.

"Of course not!"--with a movement of impatience.

A pause.

"I suppose," says Cecilia, rather cautiously, as if aware that she is treading on dangerous ground, "that you have not found out why they stampeded from Florence in that extraordinary way? Oh no, of course not!"--as this suggestion is received with a still more accented writhing than her former one. "It is not a thing upon which you could question them; and, after all, it was their own affair; it was no business of ours, was it?"

"Not the slightest."

"I always used to like them," continues Cecilia pensively; "at least"--becoming aware of an involuntary movement of surprise at this statement on the part of her neighbour--"at least, they never gave me the chance of *liking* them; but I always *admired* them. I wonder are they more accessible than they were in Florence? There are so few nice English here this year; everybody says that there never was a year when there were so few nice English!"

The tentative towards sociability implied in this last speech is received by Jim in a discouraging silence. He has not the slightest desire to promote any overture on the part of Cecilia towards intimacy with Elizabeth. He knows that they would be unsuccessful; and, moreover, he is conscious that he would be annoyed if they were not.

"I can fancy that this would be a very pleasant place if one had someone to go about with," continues she; "but father grows less and less inclined to move. Poor dear! he is not so young as he was, and I am not quite old enough yet, I suppose, to go about alone."

She makes a rather wistful pause--a pause which he feels that she intends him to fill by an offer of himself as her escort. But none such comes. Realizing this, she goes on with a sigh:

"There are not many advantages in being old; but, at least, one is freer, and in a youth spent as mine is, there is really not much profit or pleasure."

The tone in which she makes this lugubrious reflection is so extremely doleful that Jim cannot refrain from a laugh.

"Cheer up, old girl! there is a good time coming! It is a long lane that has no turning."

But he contents himself with these vague forms of consolation. He has no engagements of his own. Why, then, is he conscious of so strong a reluctance towards tying himself by any promise to the broadly-hinting lady beside him? There is another pause, during which Cecilia looks down on the floor with a baffled air, and traces the outlines of the tiles with the point of her red sunshade.

"There is a band plays twice a week in the Place de Gouvernement--plays admirably. Now, I suppose that there would be nothing odd; that no one could say anything; that it would not be the least improper, considering our connection and everything, if you were to take me to hear it some day?"

"I never have the slightest idea of what is improper and what is not," replies he; but there is more of alarm than of encouragement in his tone.

"No more have I"--laughing rather awkwardly--"but in this case I am pretty sure. Tuesdays and Fridays are the days on which the band plays."

"Oh!"

"To-day is Tuesday, is not it?"

"Yes."

Another pause.

"I thought that perhaps, if you had nothing better to do, you might take me to-day?"

The direct proposal which he has in vain tried to avert has come. If he accept it, of what profit to him will the absence of the Le Marchant parents be? He does not formulate this fact to himself, not having, indeed, owned to his own heart that he has any set design upon Elizabeth's company for the afternoon.

"I am afraid----" he begins slowly.

"You are vamping up an excuse!" cries Cecilia, reddening. "I see it in your eyes. You cannot have made any engagements here yet. You do not know anybody, do you, except the Le Marchants?"

"And they have gone to Hammam Rhira," replies he precipitately.

He is ashamed the moment that the words are out of his mouth, for he knows that they convey a falsehood.

"At least----"

But she interrupts him before he can add his conscience clause.

"To-morrow, then?"

Again he hesitates. The same objections apply with even greater force to the morrow.

"But the band does not play to-morrow."

"Oh! what does that matter?" rejoins she impatiently. "I had just as soon go somewhere else--the Arab town, the Kabyle village, anywhere."

He is driven into a corner, and remains there silent so long that there is a distinct element of offence in the tone and large sigh with which the girl resumes.

"Well, times are changed! I always used to make one in those happy excursions at Florence; and somehow--thanks to her, I suppose--I never felt a bad third."

She rises as she speaks, and takes a couple of huffy steps towards the house; but he overtakes and stops her. The allusion to Amelia has annoyed and yet stirred in him the sea of remorse, which is always lying but a very little way below the surface in his soul.

"Why, Cis!" he says, in a tone of affectionate rallying, "are we going to quarrel at this time of day--you and I? Of course I will take you to the band and the Kabyle village, and any other blessed sight you choose to name, only tell me by which of them you would like to begin to ride round."

As he leaves the house and the appeased fair one, after luncheon, an hour and a half later, he tells himself that he has got off cheaply in having vaguely sacrificed the whole of his Algerian future, but having preserved to-day and to-morrow.

CHAPTER VI.

"And therein sat a lady fresh and fayre,
Making sweet solace to herself alone.
Sometimes she sang as lowd as lark in ayre,
Sometimes she laught, as mery as Pope Joan."

Jim's first care on returning to his hotel is to ascertain that the departure for Hammam Rhira has really taken place, and, having been reassured on this point, retires to his own bedroom to reconnoitre the terrace, upon which it gives. The sun has long drunk up the rain from the tiles, and the chairs have been set out again. The hotel guests, in all the sociability of their after-luncheon mood, are standing and sitting about. The widow Wadman, with great play of eyebrow and lip, is pacing up and down in arch conversation with her habitual victim. Snatches of her alluring talk reach Jim behind his muslin curtain as she comes and goes:

"I think that caged birds ought to be *loved!*" "The Prophet was a wise man, was not he? he knew a little about us," etc.

In her usual place, aloof from the rest of the company, Elizabeth is sitting in a clinging white gown of some woolly stuff. With a dainty white kerchief twisted about her head, and a bundle of many-tinted Eastern stuffs on her knees, she looks like a little Romney. Now and again, as fragments of the widow's siren strains reach her ears, he sees her lips curl up into delighted laughter; but, for the most part, she seems to be looking round rather uneasily, as if seeking something or someone. Can it be himself that she, in her innocence of being observed, is on the watch for? He has no right to be playing the spy on her in any case. It is clear that, dressed as she is, she cannot be meditating going out. He must not frighten her by any too direct or sudden attentions. In a little while the other occupants of the terrace will drift away, and he will stroll out and join her, and together they will watch the shade of the ficus-tree, lengthening over the red flags. But she presently baffles his calculations by rising, and, with her rainbow-tinted pile of brocades clasped in her slender arms, slowly passes into the house. Has she retreated thither for good? and will he have to frame some new flimsy excuse for knocking at her door? But again he is out of his reckoning, for in about a quarter of an hour she re-issues, dressed for walking; and after one more lingering and, as it seems to him, disappointed glance around her, paces, a solitary little figure, down the hill. He lays his watch before him, and, having counted five minutes on its dial-plate, sets off in pursuit. He overtakes her just as she reaches the point where the lane debouches into the highroad. She stands, looking rather disconsolately, first up the hill, then down it, evidently uncertain which direction to choose.

"You cannot make up your mind?" he says, pausing beside her, and taking off his hat.

She gives a slight start, and a friendly, pleased smile runs all over her face and up into her eyes--a smile that makes him say to himself confidently that it *was* he whom her glance had been seeking on the terrace.

"Which do you advise?"

"I advise the town."

He has long known her teachableness, so it is no great surprise to him that she at once turns in the direction counselled.

"As I am going there myself, will you allow me to walk a little way with you?"

He makes the request with respectful diffidence; and she, after one small troubled look, evidently given to the memory of her father, assents.

They set off down the hill together, the air, sharp after the rain--as sharp, at least, as Algiers' stingless air ever is--bringing the colour to Elizabeth's cheeks, as she steps along light-heartedly, scarcely refraining from breaking into a run, down the steep incline. Her spirits are so evidently rising at every yard that he hazards his next step.

"I am going to see the Arab town; Miss Strutt says that I ought."

"She meant you to ask her to show it you!" cries Elizabeth, with a laugh; "but she was quite right--it is delightful; I am sure you will like it."

"You have been there?"

"Yes, once or twice; not half so often"--regretfully--"as I should like to have been."

Dare he speak upon the last innocent hint? But while he is doubting she goes on:

"You must take care not to lose yourself; it is such a puzzling place; all the streets are exactly like each other."

"You do not feel inclined to show me the way about it?"

He throws out the suggestion in a semi-bantering voice, so that if it meet with obvious disapproval he may at once withdraw it. She stops suddenly stock-still, and faces him.

"Are you speaking seriously? It would be very delightful; but do you think I might? do you think I ought?"

She lifts her eyes, widely opened, like a child's at hearing of some unexpected treat, to his. How astonishingly clear they are! and how curiously guileless! He has not the least doubt that she will sweetly acquiesce in his decision, whichever way it tends; and, for a second, a movement of irritation with her for her pliability crosses his mind. She ought to be able to have an opinion of her own. While he hesitates, she speaks again.

"It is just the afternoon to do something pleasant on," she says wistfully, and yet gaily too. "Oh, how good the air tastes! and how dearly I love the sun!"--lifting her face with sensitive lips, half open, as if to suck in his beams, to the great gold luminary pouring down his warmth through the pepper-trees upon them. "But I will take your advice; I know of old"--with a pretty flattering smile--"that you always give good advice. Do you think that I ought--do you *really* think that I ought?"

He throws conscience to the winds, and although not two hours ago he had professed to Cecilia his inability to decide upon the propriety or impropriety of any given course of female action, now answers with an almost brutal decisiveness:

"I do not think that there is the smallest doubt about it."

A relieved look crosses her features.

"Then I am sure it is all right," she says, with a joyful surrendering of her judgment into his keeping, and so, once again, steps along with her quick feather-light feet at his side.

For the moment she is the happier of the two, since he is not perfectly pleased either with himself or her. It is in vain that he tells himself that it is no babe whom he is beguiling; that, difficult as it is to believe it, those limpid eyes have looked at the sun for seven-and-twenty years. He still has a lingering sense of discomfort at having availed himself, for his own profit, of her ductility. And yet, five minutes later, he takes yet further advantage of that quality in her. They have reached the Plateau Sauliere, and the stand of fiacres that "stationnent" there. Jim pauses.

"It is a good distance to the Arab town, I fancy, and very tiring walking when you get there."

"It is as steep as the side of a house; we shall be like flies on a wall," cries she delightedly.

"It would be a pity to be too tired to enjoy it before you got there, would not it?" says he doubtfully, and eyeing her bright slenderness with an air of uncertainty as to her powers of endurance. "Had not we better--would you mind--our driving there?"

"I am not at all tired," replies she; "I do not feel as if I ever should be tired to-day; but if you think it better----"

Still he looks at her dubiously. To him there appears to be a much greater degree of the compromising in a *tete-a-tete* drive than in a walk. In the one case the meeting may have been accidental; in the other there can be no mistake as to the deliberate intention. But either this does not strike Elizabeth, or she thinks, "In for a penny, in for a pound"; or, lastly, and most probably, having given up her judgment into his keeping, she finds it easiest and most natural to acquiesce in whatever he may propose.

The ungenerous thought flashes across him that if this is the principle on which she has guided her life, it is small wonder if she have made shipwreck of it. He hails a fiacre, and silently hands her in, and again they are off.

Elizabeth has disclaimed fatigue, and yet the restful position is evidently agreeable to her delicate body; and she thanks him so gratefully for his thought of her that his hard thoughts of her dissolve into remorse, and by-and-by change into an enjoyment almost as entire and uncalculating as her own.

Elizabeth has astonishing powers of enjoying herself. If he had not known that fact before, the afternoon would have revealed it to him.

She must have driven through the French town almost every day since her arrival, and yet its cheerful white-shuttered houses, its boulevards of glossy-leaved ficus-trees, its cafes, its arcaded streets with their polyglot promenaders, seem

to fill her with as lively a pleasure as if she had but just landed from the steamboat that brought her.

The three Spahis, eternally sitting in a row on a bench outside some general officer's quarters, robed in their great red cloaks, with muslin-swathed swart heads and long red-leather boots, dimly descried beneath the stately sweep of their mantles, sitting there motionless, solemn and silent as the Fates; a venerable Arab, only to be distinguished from Abraham or Isaac by his carrying a vulgar brown umbrella; a short Kabyle seen in back view, with his rope-bound headdress, his brown-and-white striped frock, and his bare red legs striding along, looking exactly like a ludicrous and indelicate old woman; a Biskrah water-carrier, poising a great burnished copper pot on his shoulder; two little baggy trousered white ladies waddling along; a dozen of smart blue Turcos. She is enraptured with them all.

They leave their fiacre in the Place de la Cathedrale, and enter upon the mysterious recesses of the Arab town. Up and down endless flights of steps, up street after street--if streets they can be called, that are not wider than a yard in their widest part--and above their heads the rafter-supported houses lean together, letting scarce a glint of daylight drip down upon the dusky path far below.

They pass arched doorways, with pretty designs in plaster--doorways whose doors open inwards upon mysterious interiors--house or court, or mosque or Marabe. All along stand tiny shops, like wild-beast dens, as far as light and space go, lit only by the tempered light--in reality, only semi-darkness--that enters in front. How can they see to work--plait straw, for instance? as the three ebon-black negroes are doing, upon whom they stare in, as squat upon the ground. The turbans, and the red sashes, and the burnouses glimmer out of the little dim frontages, where charming pierced-brass Moorish lamps hang and swing aloft; and tempting piles of dully splendid brocades and bright gold-laminated gauzes gleam from the crowded shelves.

The narrow streetlets are full of unbusy, un-hurrying Easterns, hideous old negresses grinning like monkeys, idle Arabs sauntering along in their lazy grace, draped like Greek statues, sauntering along between the blue-washed walls that look in their effective variation upon the blinding whitewash as if some of the sky-colour had rubbed off upon them.

Jim and Elizabeth have paused, in their leisurely strolling and staring, to look from the straight shadowed alley in which they are standing up a long flight of steps to a low carved doorway, and a bit of starch-blue wall at the top. Down the steep flight a veiled, trousered woman is waddling, her immense pantaloons wagging awkwardly as she descends.

Elizabeth stands still, shaking with laughter at the sight. Jim laughs too.

"There is no expense spared in material there, is there? It would not be a bad dress for a fancy ball. Did you ever go to a fancy ball as a Moorish lady?"

Her laughter lessens, though her face is still alight with mirth.

"I never was at a fancy ball."

"*Never?*"

"Never; I never was at any ball in my life."

Her laughter is quite dead now.

"Never at any ball in your life!" repeats he, his surprise betraying him into one of those flights back into the past for which she has always showed such repugnance. "Why, you used to love dancing madly! I remember your dancing like a dervish. What is more, I remember dancing with you."

"Oh, do not remember anything to-day!" cries she, with a sort of writhe in her voice; "do not let either of us remember anything! let us have a whole holiday from remembering!"

So saying, she moves on quickly; and yet with the dance gone out of her feet. It never quite comes back. They look into an Arab club, where men are squatting, playing with odd-looking cards and drinking muddy coffee. Then a loud noise of jabbering young voices makes them peep in upon an Arab school, where a circle of little Moslems is sitting on the ground, scribbling Arabic on slates; while between the knees of the turbaned master a tiny baby scholar, of three or four, is standing in a lovely dull green coatlet. Elizabeth strokes the baby-learner's coppery cheek with her light hand, and says, with a laugh, that it seems odd to see little street-boys writing Arabic; but her laughter is no longer the bubbling, irrepressible joy-drunk thing it was before he had indulged in his tactless reminiscences; it is the well-bred, civil, grown-up sound that so often has no inside gladness to match it. In his vexation with himself for the clouding over of his little heaven that he himself has effected, he tries to persuade himself that it is caused by bodily fatigue.

"If I were asked," he says, by-and-by, looking down affectionately at her pallid profile, "I should say that you had had

about enough of this; your spirit"--smiling--"is so very much too big for your body that one has to keep an eye upon you."

"It would not be much of a spirit if it were not," replies she, with a pretty air of perfectly sincere disparagement of her own slight proportions; "I know that I look a poor thing, but I am rather a fraud: I do not tire easily; I am not tired now."

"Bored, then?" with a slight accent of pique.

She lifts her sweet look, with a sort of hurry of denial in it.

"Most distinctly not."

"You would like to go on, then?"

"Yes."

"Or back?"

She hesitates, her eye exploring his with, as he feels, a genuine anxiety in it to discover what his own wishes are, so that her decision may jump with them.

"Yes--perhaps; I have really no choice."

He both looks at and speaks to her with a streak of exasperation.

"Do you never have a will--a preference of your own?"

It is evidently no unfamiliar thing to her to be addressed with causeless irritability. The recollection of her father's tone in speaking to her flashes back remorsefully upon Jim's memory. Is he himself going to take a leaf out of that book? It would be a relief to him were she to answer him sharply; but to do that is apparently not within her capabilities, though the tender red that tinges her cheek shows that she has felt his snub.

"In this case I really have not," she answers gently; "but I dare say that it was tiresome of me not to speak more decidedly; let us--let us"--another swift and apparently quite involuntary glance at him to see that she is not, after all, running counter to his inclinations--"let us go home!"

So they go home. It is near sun-setting as they drive along the Boulevard de la Republique, the fitting end to so princely a day. At the quay the moored vessels lie, their masts and spars making a dark design against an ineffable evening sky of mother-of-pearl and translucent pink. The sea, which to-day has not been of sapphire, but of "watchet-blue," pierced and shot with white, now copies exactly the heavens. It, too, shades from opal to translucent pink. How many changes of raiment there are in the wardrobe of the great wet mother!

"If I had as many gowns as the Mediterranean, how well-dressed I should be!" says Elizabeth, with a smile.

It is the first time she had spoken since they had set off on their return-drive. She is lying back, with her hands carefully shielding in her lap a few little crockery pots that she has bought of a fat Turk for some children at her hotel. Her face looks tired; and yet over its small area is spread an expression of content that makes his heart warm. Is it only the pageant of sky and ocean that has called forth that look of real, if passing, happiness on the features of her who is always so tremblingly sensitive an instrument for all influences of beauty and grandeur to play upon? or has his own neighbourhood anything to say to it? Before he can give himself an answer to this anxious question, she speaks again.

"You do not mind my not talking, do you?" she asks, half apologetically, and yet with a confidence in his sympathy that still further quickens the beats of his already not very still heart.

"No, I am sure you do not. Somehow--it is a great gift--you always feel in tune with one, and one does not chatter most when one is most greatly pleased, does one? Oh, what a treat you have given me!"

As she speaks, her humid eyes travel from his face to where, beyond the long Atlas range, delicately toothed and cut out, rises the gold-washed snow of the Kabyle mountains, that retire majestically invisible on dull days, and only come out, candescent and regal, when the great sun rides in pomp. Above their heads wild plumes of deep rose, that it seems ridiculous to call clouds, tuft the sky.

Jim's look has followed his companion's; the chins of both are in the air; the cheerful *va et vient* of the boulevard is lost upon them. They see neither the Frenchmen nor plump Frenchwomen drinking coffee outside the cafes, nor the idle *indigenes* leaning draped against the sea-wall. (Never does that industrious race seem to attempt any severer exertion.)

"Thought was not; in enjoyment it expired."

But it is brought back to life with a jump.

"*Arretez! arretez!*" cries a female voice. "Jim! Jim! do you not see us? *Arretez! arretez!*"

Obedient to his ears, Burgoyne's eyes make one bound from the heavenly spectacle down to earth, and alight upon the Wilsons' carriage, which, going in the same direction as himself, has just been brought to a standstill alongside of his fiacre, by the solemnly beautiful, yellow-jacketed native coachman.

It is, of course, Cecilia's voice that has apostrophized him, but oh, portent! does his vision, so lately recalled from the skyey bowers, play him false? or is it really the moribund Sybilla, stretched beside her, with only two instead of three cushions at her back, with a bonnet on her head--he did not even know that she possessed a bonnet--and with a colour in her cheek and a lustre in her eye that may owe their origin either to the freshness of the evening air, or to the invigorating properties of the conversation of the very ordinary-looking young man seated opposite to her?

In a second Jim has leapt out of his own vehicle, and gone to the side of the other. It is a perfectly futile impulse that leads him to do so. Not all the leaping in the world from her side now can alter the fact that he has been driving *tete-a-tete* with Elizabeth Le Marchant, and that the Wilson sisters have seen him so doing; but yet it is a dim instinct of preservation towards, and shielding of her, that leads him to adopt this useless course of action. It is Cecilia who has summoned him, and yet, when he reaches her side, she does not seem to have anything particular to say to him. Sybilla is the one to address him.

"A miracle! a miracle! I know you are saying to yourself!" cries she, in a sprightly voice; "and well you may! This is the miracle-monger!" indicating with a still sprightlier air her *vis-a-vis*. "Dr. Crump, let me present to you Mr. Burgoyne--Jim, our Jim, whom I have so often talked to you about."

The person thus apostrophized responds by a florid bow, and an over-gallant asseveration that any person introduced to his acquaintance by Miss Sybilla needs no further recommendation.

"It is an experiment, of course; there is no use in pretending that it is not an experiment," continues she, with a slight relapse into languor; "but"--lowering her voice a little--"they wished me to make the effort."

It is a favourite allocation of Sybilla's that any course of action towards which she is inclined is adopted solely under the pressure of urgent wishes on the part of her family. Burgoyne has long known, and been exasperated by, this peculiarity; but at present she may say what she pleases; he hears no word of it, for his ear is pricked to catch the sentences that Cecilia is leaning over the carriage-side to shoot at Elizabeth.

"Oh, Miss Le Marchant! is it you? I beg your pardon, I did not recognise you at the first moment. One does not recognise people--does one?--when one is not expecting to see them"--is an intended sting lurking in this implication? "How are you? How do you like Algiers? I hope Mrs. Le Marchant is well. What a long time it is since we met! I hope we shall see something of you."

(No, evidently no sting was meant. Cecilia, with all her faults, is really a good soul, and he will take her to hear the band play next Tuesday.)

There seems to him to be a slight falter in the tone with which Elizabeth responds, and her voice sounds curiously small and low; but that may be merely owing to its flute quality, following upon and contrasting the other's powerful organ.

It is not till the two parties have again separated, and that he is once more seated by her side in the fiacre, that he dares steal a look at her face to see how plainly written on it are the traces of vexation caused by a meeting which has produced in his own breast such acute annoyance. Good heavens! it is even worse than he had expected. Down the cheek nearest to him two good-sized tears are unmistakably trickling. No doubt the consciousness of the mysterious story attaching to her past makes her smartingly aware of how doubly discreet her own conduct should be--makes her bitterly repent of her present indiscretion.

He is a strait-laced man, and it seems to him as if there were something gravely compromising to her in this *tete-a-tete* drive with himself, in the known absence of her parents at Hammam Rhira. Why was he fool enough this morning to admit to Cecilia that they had gone thither? He had no business to have led her into temptation, and she had no business to have fallen into it. Remorse and irritation give a tartness to his tone as he says:

"After all, I do not think you need take it so much to heart."

"Take what to heart?" she asks, in unaffected surprise, turning her full face, and her eyes, each with one hot raindrop dimming its slate-blue, upon him. "Oh, I see"--a sudden enlightenment coming to her, and changing her with instant spring from a snowdrop to a carnation--"I see what you mean; but you are mistaken. I--I--it had not occurred to me; I was only thinking--only remembering that the last time I saw her was at--at Vallombrosa."

Vallombrosa! Is he never to hear the last of Vallombrosa?



CHAPTER VII.

The latest waking impression left on Jim's fancy is that it is the golden rule of Elizabeth Le Marchant's life to comply with any and every request that is made to her; moreover, that in her mind the boundary-line which parts the permitted from the unpermitted is not so clearly defined as, did she belong to him (the naked hypothesis makes his strait-laced heart give a jump), he should wish it to be. If on the morrow, with the sun shining and the leaf-shadows dancing on the fretted balcony-wall, he invite her to some fresh junket, he is sure that she will readily and joyfully acquiesce; that her spirits will go up like rockets at the prospect; and that her one anxiety will be that she may be sure to hit in her choice upon the form of dissipation most congenial to him. He will therefore not invite her. He will have a greater care for her reputation than apparently she has for it herself. Not until the return of her parents, not until the difficulties of intercourse with her are centupled, and the pleasure minimized, will he again seek her.

To put himself beyond the reach of temptation, he sets off immediately after breakfast on a long walking expedition, which he means to occupy the whole of the daylight hours. He wanders about the great plain of the Metidje; he visits a Kabyle village, with its hovels cowering among its hideous fat-fleshed cactus; later on in the afternoon he finds himself in the little French hamlet of Biermandreis, and finally drops down upon the Jardin d'Essai, that delightful botanic garden which is one of the many blessings for which Algerian France has to thank the much-vilipended Napoleon III.

It is difficult for even the reddest Republican to think hardly of that dead ruler as he walks down the avenue of gigantic palms that lead, straight as a die, to where, like a deep blue gem far away, the Mediterranean shows

"No bigger than an agate stone
On the forefinger of an alderman."

Jim walks along beneath the huge date-palms that give him a crick in the neck to gape up at ere he can perceive their towering head of waving plumes far up against the blue. They remind him absurdly of the pictures in the missionary books of his youth--the palm-tree, the log cabin, the blackamoors, and the missionary in a palm hat. Is *he* the missionary, and is this inky negress in a black bonnet, scarcely distinguishable from her face, his one catechumen?

Alternating with the date are superb fan-palms, of which it is difficult to realize that it is their stunted, puny brothers which, anxiously tended, sponged, and cosseted, drag out a languid existence in London drawing-rooms. Among their Titan fans lies their mighty fruit, like a bunch of grapes, a yard and a half long, strung upon ropes of yellow worsted.

Half-way down its length the main avenue is intersected by a splendid alley of bamboos, which lean their smooth-jointed stems and their luxuriant narrow leaves towards each other across the dimmed interspace, and unite in a pointed Gothic arch of living green.

Jim paces objectlessly down the long arcade, stooping now and again to pick up a fragment of the peeled bark that looks so strangely like a papyrus roll with a mother-of-pearl glaze upon it. He pulls it idly open, as if expecting to find the secret of some forgotten race written upon its shining surface; but if he reads any secret there, it is only his own, which, after all, is not much of a secret. He merely sees written there that it is too early to go home yet; that there is no security that Elizabeth may not still be sitting on the terrace stitching away with her gold thimble and her coloured silks. The sun, it is true, has left the garden, but he departs thence over-early. It will be safer to stay away yet half an hour or so.

Thus resolving, he retraces his steps, and explores in a new direction; saunters down a rose-alley, where, climbing immoderately high up tall palms, seeming as if they would strangle them with their long bowery arms, rose-trees wave far above him in the still air; and upon them, though it is still but the month of January, when people are skating, blue-nosed, in England, creamy tea-roses show their pale-yellow hearts, fair and frequent, on the unpruned boughs, rioting in licensed liberty above his head. The walk ends in a circle of gigantic magnolias, which take hands round a square fountain-basin. Each huge trunk is, as it were, a little commonwealth of trees rolled into one, instead of a single tree. Beneath them benches stand. Upon one his negress sits, chatting with a French *bonne*; on a second there is also something female and slender, something with its little white profile--how white it looks in this deceiving light!--lifted, although white, yet smiling, animated, and talking to a man standing beside it.

He has dawdled and kicked his heels, and run the chance of contracting a spiteful Southern chill, in order to avoid Elizabeth; and he has succeeded in running straight into her arms.

He does not at the first glance recognise her companion, but a second look shows him that he is one of the inmates of

the hotel--a French Vicomte; and though Jim knows that he is both consumptive and the father of a family, that knowledge does not hinder the rising in his breast of the jealous and censorious thought that he has detected Elizabeth in throwing a great deal more than the necessary modicum of amiability into her manner to him.

As Jim comes into sight, the Frenchman clicks his heels, doubles up his body, lifts his hat, and walks away. It is evident, at all events, that their meeting was a casual one; and the reflection brings with it a sense of relief, coupled with a feeling of shame at his own rooted readiness to suspect her, on any or no evidence, which yet, on the other hand, is not strong enough, when she turns her sweet bright look towards him, to hinder the thought that it is scarcely, if at all, sweeter or brighter than that which he had caught her squandering on the casual *table d'hote* acquaintance who has just quitted her.

"You, too!" she says; "why, the whole hotel seems to be emptied out into these gardens; the widow Wadman is buying violets--mark if they do not appear upon Uncle Toby at dinner to-night. The Vicomte----"

"Yes, I saw you engaged in animated dialogue with him," interrupts Jim, with slight acrimony; "I had no idea that you were such allies."

"Had not you?" rejoins she innocently. "He was telling me about his English governess, what a treasure she is"--her face dimpling mischievously--"and how wonderfully pure her accent. So it is--pure Cockney. You should hear the little Vicomte talk of the *b/by* and the *p/pers*."

He rewards her small pleasantry only by an absent smile, and she speaks again--rather wistfully this time.

"Have you been on another expedition?"

"No, not an expedition; only a walk. If"--yielding to the temptation of putting a question which no one would have judged more severely than he, had it been put by anyone else--"if I had invited you to do me the honour of making another excursion with me to-day, do you think that you would have consented?"

As he speaks, he departs yet further from the line of conduct he has marked out for himself by sitting down on the bench at her side.

Her eyes are fixed upon the soaring date-palm, which stands, instead of a water-jet, in the middle of the fountain-basin, and on which last year's dead plumes hang sapless, and ready to fall off, in contrast to this year's verdant vigour.

"Is not that rather a tantalizing question when you did not ask me?" inquires she, with soft archness. "Yes, I suspect that I should; I was so very happy yesterday; and although you told me the other night"--swallowing a sigh--"that you supposed I must love my own society, in point of fact, I do not think I do."

After all, the sun is not quite gone; there are flashes of light in the verdant gloom, and green reflections in the water.

"And yet," says Jim thoughtfully, "you seem to have a good deal of it; I suppose, in your position, it is unavoidable."

He had meant an allusion to her situation as bad third to her uxorious parents; before his mind's eye has risen a picture of the little forlorn shawled figure he had seen studying its Italian Grammar with the door shut upon its loneliness; but almost before the words have left his lips, he sees of how different, of how cruel, a construction they may be capable.

He snatches a glance of real terror at her, to see whether she has made that erroneous, yet all too plausible application--a glance which confirms his worst fears. She has turned as white as the pocket-handkerchief which she is passing over her trembling lips.

"Yes," she says in a hollow whisper; "you are right. In my position it *is* unavoidable, and it is cowardly of me not to accept it as such."

"I mean"--he cries desperately--"I only meant--I mean----"

But she does not suffer him to finish his stuttered explanation.

"It is cold," she says, rising. "I will go home."

He does not attempt to accompany or follow her.

After she is gone, he rages about the garden, and passes beyond it to where--still sunlight-smitten--the blue Mediterranean is breaking in joyous foam.

He sits down on the shelly strand, and, in futile anger, hurls back the wet pebbles into the sea's azure lap. Away to the left, the three-cornered town swarms candescent up the hill, and the white lighthouse stands out against the lapis-

coloured air.

How sharp-cut and intense it all is!--none of our dear undecided grays. Here, if you are not piercing blue, you are dazzling white or profound green. There is, indeed, something less sharp-cut and uncompromising--a something more of mystery in the glory that--bright, too, but not making its full revelation--envelopes the long hill range that, ending in Cape Matifou, stretches away to the far right. Round the corner, to the right too, a party of Arabs, sitting sideways on little donkeys, white draped, with their *haik*-swathed heads, are disappearing on their small beasts in the clear air. It is like a page out of the Bible--a flight into Egypt--and they are going towards Egypt too.

Jim's eye follows the placid Easterns, but without catching the infection of their tranquillity. "Whenever I see her, I stick a knife into her! It is impossible! There is no use trying! I will give up the attempt. It is out of the question to have any happy relations with a woman who has a past!"

After all, Mr. Le Marchant does not like Hammam Rhira. He thinks the hotel cold and the roads bad. Jim overhears him telling someone this, and his own heart leaps.

It is true that he takes it to task for doing so. Perhaps, after all, Elizabeth's removal would have been the best solution of his problem. Had she left Algiers, he could scarcely have followed her, and she would have been freed from the chance of his clumsy stabs.

But all the same his heart leaps. It leaps yet higher a day or two later when he discovers that, though Hammam Rhira has not met with Mr. Le Marchant's approbation, yet that, by his trip to it, he has been bitten with a taste for travel, the outcome of which is his solitary departure on an expedition to Constantin, Tunis, etc., which must occupy him at least a week. His wife accompanies him to the station, but his daughter is not allowed to go beyond the hotel steps.

Jim surreptitiously watches her hovering with diffident affection round her father, unobtrusively and unthanked fetching and carrying for him. He sees the cold kiss that just brushes her cheek, and hears the chill parting admonition to look well after her mother and see that she does not overtire herself.

It is accepted with ready meekness, but leaves the recipient so crestfallen, as she stands looking after the departing vehicle, that Burgoyne cannot forbear joining her, with some vague and, as he knows, senseless velleity of championship and consolation.

"He is gone for a week, is not he?" is the form that his sympathy takes, in a tone which he is at but small pains not to render congratulatory.

"Yes, quite a week."

"Are you"--he is perfectly conscious while asking it that he has not the slightest right to put the question--"are you glad or sorry?"

She starts perceptibly.

"Why should I be glad? Do you mean"--with an unconquerable streak of satisfaction in her own voice--"because I shall have mammy all to myself? You must not think"--with an obvious rush of quickly following compunction--"that I am not fond of him, because he sometimes speaks a little roughly to me." After a pause, in a lowered voice: "You see, when you have broken a person's heart, you can scarcely blame him for not having a very high opinion of you."

So saying, she suddenly leaves him as she had left him in the Jardin d'Essai. He does not again approach her that day, but at dinner-time he has the answer to his question as to her being glad or sorry at her father's departure. She is apparently in the best of spirits, sitting nestled close up to her mother for the better convenience of firing a series of little jokes and comments into that parent's appreciative ear.

"They make fun of the whole hotel," observes Miss Strutt with exasperation. "I do not believe that one of us escapes! When he is not there to check them, there is no holding them!"

No holding Elizabeth! The phrase recurs to him several times during the next few days, as not without its justness, when he sees its object flitting about the house, gay as a linnet; when he meets her singing subduedly to herself upon the stairs; when he watches her romping with the French children, and mischievously collecting flowers of Clapham eloquence from their governess, which she is good enough to retail for his own and her mother's benefit when evening unites the three in the retirement of their little salon. For, strange and improbably blissful as it seems, he has somehow, ere three days are over, effected an entrance into that small and fragrant sanctuary.

Mrs. Le Marchant's first fears that the meeting with him again would re-open sorrow have disappeared in the light of her daughter's childish gaiety, and are even exchanged for a compunctious gratitude to him for having been in part the cause of her new light-heartedness. The weather has again broken, a fact which he alone of the whole hotel does not deplore, since it was his own ostentatiously displayed wet-day dreariness that was the cause of his first admission within the doors that are closed upon all others. Moreover, had it not been wet weather, could he have held an umbrella over Elizabeth's head when he met her in the eucalyptus wood, and they walked among the naked trunks, while the long, loose, pale foliage waved like dishevelled hair in the rain, and the pungent asphodels grew thick about their feet in the red earth? And when, by-and-by, the clouds disperse again, and there comes a fair day, bracketed between three or four foul ones--the usual Algerian proportion--it has grown quite natural to all three that he should sit opposite to them in their drives; that he should haggle with Arabs for them, and remonstrate with the landlord, and generally transfer all the smaller roughnesses of life from their shoulders to his own. Brought into more intimate communion with them than he has ever been before, Burgoyne realizes how much they belong to the kneeling, leaning, spoiling type of womankind. Elizabeth would be the easiest woman in the world to manage. How is it that in her ten years of womanhood no man has been found to undertake the lovely facile task? He himself knows perfectly the treatment that would befit her; the hinted wishes--her tact is too fine and her spirit too meek to need anything so coarse as commands--the infinitesimal rebukes and the unlimited--oh! limitless--caresses:

"Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears, and smiles."

Every day he finds himself repeating Wordsworth's line, and every day, in his fancied guidance of her, he tells himself that the blame should be less and the kisses more.

Mr. Le Marchant has been gone more than a week, and February has come wetly in, with rain wildly weeping against the easements, and angry-handed rain boxing the unlucky orange-trees' ears. It has rained for forty-eight hours without a break. The Grand Hotel is at the end of its resources. Uncle Toby, his struggle ended, lies vanquished in the widow's net; and there is murder in the lurid eye which Miss Strutt turns on the votary of Whiteley.

Jim alone, outdoor man as he habitually is, looking upon a house merely in the light of a necessary shelter, has no quarrel either with the absent sun or the present deluge? for are not they the cause of his having spent two whole afternoons in the company of Elizabeth and her mother? To-day has not Elizabeth been singing to him, and cutting him orange-flower bread-and-butter, when Fritz brought in the afternoon tea, and set the real English kettle fizzing over its spirit-lamp? And, in return, has not he now, after dinner, been helping her to weed out her own and her mother's photograph-books? As he does so the idea strikes him of how very meagre her own collection of acquaintances seems to be. From that weeding have they not, by an easy transition, at her suggestion, passed to the more playful and ingenious occupation of amputating the heads of some of the rejected friends and applying them to the bodies of others? Each armed with a pair of scissors, and with Mrs. Le Marchant for umpire, they have been vying with each other as to who can produce the most startling results by this clever process.

The palm has just been awarded to Elizabeth for a combination which presents the head of an elderly lady, in a widow's cap, mounted upon the cuirass and long boots of a Life Guardsman. Jim's application of the cornet's discarded head to the body of a baby in long clothes, although allowed to be a pretty conceit, commands but little real admiration--an instance of nepotism which he does not allow to pass without protest.

Elizabeth, elated by her triumph, has flown out of the room to examine her private stores for fresh material, and Jim and her mother--for the first time, as it happens, since that early meeting, when her anxious eye had so plainly implored him to leave Algiers--are *tete-a-tete*. Her changed aspect towards him as she sits, with a lingering laugh still on her face, beside the wood fire--which, after having twice gone out, as it almost always does, the souches being invariably wet, burns bright and crackly--strikes him with such a feeling of warm pleasure that he says in a voice of undisguised triumph:

"What spirits she is in, is not she?"

"Yes; is not she?" assents the mother eagerly. "Oh, I cannot say how grateful I am to you for having cheered her up as you have done! Oh," with a low sigh that seems to bear away on its slow wings the last echoes of her late mirth, "if it could only last!"

"Why should not it last?"

"If nothing fresh would happen!"

"Why should anything fresh happen?"

She answers only indirectly;

"Fear at my heart, as at a cup,
The life-blood seemed to sip."

"Sometimes I think that Coleridge wrote those lines expressly for me." After a pause, in a voice of anxious asking: "She has not mentioned him to you lately, has she?"

"No."

"That is a good sign. Do not you think that that is a good sign? I think that she is getting better; do not you?"

For a moment he cannot answer, both because he is deeply touched by the confidence in him and his sympathy evidenced by her appeal, and for a yet more potent reason. Little she guesses how often, and with what heart-searchings and spirit-sinkings, he has put that question to himself.

"I do not know," he replies at last, with difficulty; "it is hard to judge."

"You have not told him that we are here?" in a quick, panic-struck tone, as of one smitten with a new and sharp apprehension.

"Oh no!"

"You do not think that he is at all likely to join you here?"

"Not in the least!" with an almost angry energy, which reveals to himself how deeply distasteful the mere suggestion of Byng's reappearance on the scene is to him.

Mrs. Le Marchant heaves a second sigh. This time it is one of relief.

"Then I do not see," with a sudden bound upwards into sanguineness which reminds him of her daughter, "why we should not all be very comfortable."

Jim is pondering in his mind upon the significance of this "all," whether it is meant to include only Mr. Le Marchant, or whether, under its shelter, he himself may creep into that promised comfort, when she of whom they have been speaking re-enters. She has a packet of photographs, presumably suitable for amputation, in her hand, in which is also held a telegram, which she extends to Burgoyne.

"I met M. Cipriani bringing you this. It seems that you ought to have had it two days ago, but, by some mistake, it was put into another gentleman's room--a gentleman who has never arrived--and there it has remained. He was full of apologies, but I told him what culpable carelessness it showed. I do trust," with a sweetly solicitous look, "that it is not anything that matters."

"It cannot be of much consequence," replies Jim indifferently, while a sort of pang darts through him at the thought of how strangely destitute he is of people to be uncomfortably anxious about, and so tears it open.

An English telegram transmitted by French clerks often wears a very different air from that meant to be imparted to it by the sender, which is, perhaps, the reason why Jim remains staring so long at his--so long that the two women's good manners prompt them to remove their sympathetic eyes from him, and to attempt a little talk with each other.

"I hope you have no bad news?"

The elder one permits herself this inquiry after a more than decent interval has elapsed, during which he has made no sign.

He gives a start, as one too suddenly awaked out of deep sleep.

"Bad news?" he repeats in an odd voice--"what is bad news? That depends upon people's tastes. It is for you to judge of that; it concerns you as much or more than it does me."

So saying, he places the paper in her hand, and, walking away to the little square window--open, despite the wildness of the weather--looks out upon the indigo-coloured night.

Although his back is turned towards them, he knows that Elizabeth is reading over her mother's shoulder--reading this:

"BOURGOUIN,

"Grand Hotel,
"Algiers.

"Have heard of Le Marchants. If you do not wire to the contrary, shall cross to-morrow.--BYNG, Marseille."

He is not left long in doubt as to their having mastered the meaning of the missive.

"He is coming!" says Mrs. Le Marchant with a species of gasp; "and you told me--not five minutes ago you told me"--with an accent of reproach--"that there was not the remotest chance of it. Oh, stop him! stop him! Telegraph at once! The office will be open for two or three hours yet! There is plenty, plenty of time! Oh, telegraph at once--at once!"

"It is too late," replies Jim, retracing his steps to the table; "you forget that it is two days old. You see, they have spelt my name wrong; that accounts for the mistake. *Bourgouin!* It looks odd spelt *Bourgouin*, does not it?"

He hears himself giving a small, dry laugh, which nobody echoes.

"He must have sailed yesterday," continues the young man, wishing he could persuade his voice to sound more natural; "he may be here at any moment. If the weather had been decent, he would have arrived ere now."

"Then there is nothing to be done!" rejoins Mrs. Le Marchant in a tone of flat desperation, sitting down again on the chair out of which she had instinctively risen at the little stir of the telegram's arrival.

Elizabeth is dead silent. Though there is no direction by the eye to show that Jim's next remark is aimed at her, there can be no doubt that it is awkwardly thrown in her direction.

"If this had not been delayed--if it had not been too late, would you have wished, would you have decided to stop him?"

"What is the use of asking me such a question now that it *is* too late?" replies she, with more of impatience, almost wrath, in her voice than he has ever before heard that most gentle organ express.

But besides the ire and irritation, there is another quality in it which goads him to snatch a reluctant glance at her. She is extremely agitated, but underlying the distress and disturbance of her face there is an undoubted light shining like a lamp through a pale pink shade--a light that, with all her laughter and her jokes, was not there half an hour ago. He had often reproached himself that, by his clumsiness, he had stuck a knife into her tender heart. She is even with him to-night. To-night the tables are turned. It is she that has stuck a knife into him. It is clear as day that she is *glad* it is too late.

CHAPTER VIII.

"After all," says Mrs. Le Marchant presently, rallying a little, her naturally buoyant temperament--that temperament which she has transmitted with such curious fidelity to her child, coming to her rescue; "after all, there is no reason why you should see him, Elizabeth. There is no reason why she should see him, is there, Mr. Burgoyne? It could serve no possible end--could it?--and only be exceedingly painful to them both. You will explain to him, will not you? You will take any message from her? You will tell him that she really is not up to it, will not you? It is quite true, I am sure. You are not, are you darling? She is not, is she?"

The mother turns as she speaks eagerly from one to the other, addressing each in turn; but from neither does she obtain any answer.

"Or I would speak to him myself; if you thought that better," continues she, still interrogating them with her handsome, careworn eyes. "I would say anything you wished said to him, and I would be careful to say it as kindly as possible. I am sure he would understand; he would see the sense, the justice of it, would not he? There is no need for her to expose herself to such useless suffering, is there, Mr. Burgoyne?"--appealing desperately to him by name, since he will not respond to any less direct address--"when either you or I are more than ready to shield her from it, are not we?"

Thus apostrophized, Jim is compelled to break the silence, which seems to himself to wall him round like a petrification. It is to Elizabeth that he offers his hardly-won speech.

"I think I need not tell you," he says gravely, and with passable steadiness, "that I would help you in any way I could."

She stands a moment or two irresolute, her features all quivering as if with pain; and yet, underlying and under-shining the pain, something that is not pain. Then she puts out a hand impulsively to each. If the one that gives itself to Burgoyne had struck him on the mouth, instead of offering itself with affectionate confidence to his clasp, it could not have hurt him more than do those small fingers that lie in his, trembling with a passion that is not for him.

"You are both very good to me," she says brokenly. "As to you, mammy, that is an old story. But I really believe that there is nothing disagreeable that you, too"--with a slight grateful pressure of the lifeless hand that so slackly keeps possession of hers--"would not do for me. But do not think me obstinate if I say that I think--I am sure--that it would be better--that it would hurt him less--if I spoke to him myself."

"It is not a question of what will hurt him least," cries Mrs. Le Marchant, with an agony of impatience in her tone. "The thing to be considered is what will hurt *you* least. Mr. Burgoyne, am I not right? Do tell her that I am! Ought not she to think of what will hurt her least?"

But Jim is incapable of coming a second time to her rescue. His eyes are painfully fastened upon Elizabeth, and he is watching the pain fall off, as it were, from her face, and the light spread rosilily over it. Some instinct makes her withdraw that hand of hers which he has shown so little eagerness to retain, ere she says, in a low but perfectly firm voice:

"Well, then, I think it will hurt me least, too."

Five minutes later Jim has left the room--ostensibly to make arrangements for his friend's arrival, in reality because he cannot count upon his own self-control if he remain in it. The survivors of Elizabeth Le Marchant's acquaintance remain undecapitated. The widow-headed Life Guardsman and the baby-bodied cornet lie unregarded on the table, while Elizabeth herself is stretched along the floor, with her face pressed against her mother's knees. Jim has decided to sit up for his friend. He is perfectly aware that neither will the two women go to bed. But he has no desire that their vigil should be shared in common. It is equally impossible to him to take part in the noisy mirth of the rest of the hotel, which, having taken the place of their measureless daylight ennui, now boils over in ebullient laughter, in dancing, squeaking, and noisily scampering out of the public drawing-room into the hall and up the stairs. It is not till the clamour has declined, until, indeed, its total cessation tells him that the promiscuous revellers have retired to their apartments, that he issues from his, and takes possession of the now empty smoking-room, whence he can hear more distinctly than from his own bedroom any noise of wheels approaching the hotel. The wind has risen again, and it needs an ear very finely pricked to dis sever from its mad singing, and from the storming of the frantic rain, any lesser and alien sound. What a terrific night in which to be out on the raging sea! Worse even than that one last week, when the *Moise* broke her shaft, and tossed for twenty-four hours at the mercy of the waves. Possibly the weather may have already yesterday been so rough at Marseille as to prevent his setting off. But the idea--at the first blush eagerly welcomed by him--is dismissed from his mind almost as soon as entertained. If the boat has started--and it is only

under such heavy penalties that the mail-boats do not start, that this contingency hardly ever occurs--Byng will have started too. A terrific bang at the casement seems to come as a comment upon this conviction. He will have started; but will he ever arrive? It is said that in eight years during which they have been running no catastrophe has ever sent one of this line of steamers to the bottom; but yet they are cranky little craft, with engines too big for them--built rather for speed than safety. The clock has struck, with a repetition that seems strangely frequent through the sleeping house: 11, 11.30, 12, 12.30.

"I will give him half an hour more," says the watcher to himself, "and then I will turn in."

Of this allotted half-hour only five minutes are yet left to run, when, in a lull in the hurricane, the sound which Jim's hearing has been so long stretched to catch--the sound of wheels on the gravel--is at length audible. During the last two hours he has heard many phantom wheels--many of those ghostly coaches that the wind drives shrieking through the winter nights. But these are real ones. Before the drowsy porter, nodding in his little den, can reach the hall-door, Jim has opened it--opened it just in time to admit a man who, his pace still further accelerated by the mighty hands of the pushing blast, is bounding up the steps. If any doubt as to this person's identity lingered in Jim's mind, his first words would dispel it.

"She is here? There is no mistake? She is here?"

"How late you are!" cries the other, apparently regarding the new arrival's utterance more as an ejaculation than as a question expecting or needing an answer. "Why are you so late? Did the engines break down?"

"She is here?" repeats Byng insistently, taking no notice of the queries addressed to him. "You have not deceived me? For mercy's sake say that you have not deceived me!"

"Why should I deceive you?" rejoins Jim impatiently. "Yes; certainly she is here."

They are in the hall by now--the hall which, the Grand Hotel being gasless, is lit by only one weak paraffin lamp, which the gust from the door, necessarily still open to admit of the carrying in of the traveller's bags and rugs, is making even more faint and flickering than its wont.

"You must have had a fine tossing!"

"I believe you; they all thought we were going to make a dinner for the fishes--ha, ha! All but I. I knew better. I knew that I could not come to grief when *she* had called me to her."

Byng's hat is rammed down over his brows, and his fur coat turned up so high round his ears that it is impossible in the obscurity to see his face; but there is something in the tone of his voice--a loud, wild rollicking--that makes the idea cross Jim's mind that he has been drinking. What a shock it will give to Elizabeth if, in her covert vigil--he has no more doubt that she has been watching than that he has been doing so himself--she overhears that thick, raised voice! Prompted by this thought, he says hastily:

"Come into the dining-room. I told them to put something to eat for you there."

Byng complies; and when they have reached the empty *salle a manger*, whose whitewash looks weird and unnatural in the chill of the night, he sends his hat skimming down one of the long tables, and, grasping both Jim's hands in his, cries out, in the same loud tone of intoxicated triumph:

"Oh, my dear old chap, how good it is to see your ugly old mug again! If you had known--oh, if you had only known!--what I went through during the twenty-four hours after I sent you that telegram, when through every hour, through every minute and second of every hour, I said to myself, 'It may come *now*--my death-warrant may come *now*! In five minutes it may have come!' But it did not, it did not! I ought to have known"--with an accent of ecstasy--"that of her pitifulness she would relent at last. She is infinitely pitiful, is not she? but I shall upbraid her a little--oh, do not be afraid; it will be gently, *most* gently--for having kept me so long, so inhumanly long, upon my gridiron! I had always"--breaking into a rather wild laugh--"something of a tenderness for St. Lawrence, but during the last seven months I have loved him like a brother!"

He goes on again, with scarcely a pause, or apparently any consciousness of the unresponsive silence of his auditor:

"But what does it matter now?" beginning to stride about with his eyes cast up to the beamed ceiling and his lifted hands locked together--"what does it matter? 'After long grief and pain, to feel the arms of my true love round me once again!' You may think that I word it extravagantly," returning to Jim as he leans downcast and shocked upon one of the chairs of the monotonous *table-d'hote* row; "but in the hope itself, the more than hope, there is nothing extravagant; you must own that yourself. If she had not meant to put an end to my long agony, she would not have sent for me; *not* to stop me was to send for me."

"You are labouring under a mistake," says Jim coldly, and yet with an inward quaking as to the effect that his words may produce; "she had not the option of stopping you. By some accident I did not receive your telegram till four hours ago. She could not have stopped you if she had wished."

The idea, as I have already said, has occurred to Burgoyne that his companion is under the influence of intoxication; but either this is not the case, or the shock of the last words has the effect of instantly sobering him.

"I--I--do not understand," he says in a voice out of which all the insane exhilaration has been conjured as if by magic; "I do not follow you. What do you mean?"

"I mean," replies Jim, in a matter-of-fact, level tone, meant to have a calming effect upon his auditor, "that owing, I suppose, to my name being spelt wrongly--Bourgouin instead of Burgoyne--your telegram was given to someone else, and did not reach me till nine o'clock this evening."

Byng puts up his hand to his throat, and, unfastening the collar of his fur coat as if it were strangling him, throws back the coat itself. Now that he sees him freed from enveloping wrap and concealing hat-brim, Jim can realize the full amount of change and deterioration that are visible in his appearance; can see how bloodshot his eyes are; how lined his mouth; and how generally ravaged and dimmed his good looks.

"I am to understand, then, that--that she would have stopped my coming if she could."

Jim is silent. He cannot answer that question with any certainty even to himself.

"She would have escaped me again if she had had the chance! What am I saying?"--with a sudden access of terror in his tone--"she may have escaped me already! She may be gone! Tell me the truth--do not dare to tell me anything but the bare truth. I saw that you hesitated when I asked you whether she was really here. Is she gone?"

"Gone!" repeats Jim, with an exasperated jerk of the head towards the window, against which the rain and wind are hurling themselves with threefold rage, as if to recapture the victim just escaped them. "To-night--in this storm? How likely! Come, be rational; try to keep your head, and let us have a truce to this ranting. I give you my word of honour that she is here, under this roof; asleep, I should hope, if your bellowings have not awoken her."

The latter clause may perhaps come under the head of a pardonable fiction; at all events, it has, despite its incivility, the desired effect of soothing, to some extent, the agitation of him to whom it is addressed.

"Asleep!" he repeats, while an ecstatic smile breaks over his handsome, dissipated face. "Good angels guard her slumbers! But"--with a rather ominous return of excitement--"are you sure that she *is* asleep--that she has gone to bed yet? They used to sit up very late in Florence sometimes. If she has not gone to bed, why should not I see her; why should not I fall at her feet *now*--to-night?"

"My dear boy," rejoins Jim, with a praiseworthy attempt to answer this modest and sensible proposal with patient good-humour; "have you any idea what time it is? I should have thought it might have occurred even to you that 1.30 A.M. is scarcely a suitable hour for paying a morning call! Do not be a fool! Pull yourself together. I swear to you that she has every intention of seeing you to-morrow. Come"--trying to laugh--"you will not have long to wait! It is to-morrow already; and, meantime, sit down and eat something; you must be as empty as a drum."

But to this prudent if homely counsel Byng opposes an obstinate negation, adorned with excited asseverations that food shall never cross his lips until they have pastured upon his lady's pardoning hand.

The same prohibition does not, however, apparently apply to drink, as he pours more than half the bottle of happily not very potent wine, prepared for his refreshment, into a tumbler, and tosses it off at a draught. He offers an even stouter refusal to Burgoyne's suggestion that he should go to bed; and as he utters it a flash of cunning suspicion comes into his eyes, shocking his friend with a gleam as of possible and scarcely latent madness. Across the latter's brain darts the query, which had proposed itself more than once to him last spring at Florence:

"Is there insanity in Byng's blood?"

Not certainly on the distaff side, the side of his eminently sane and wholesome mother; but can he be throwing back to some distempered ancestor?

"What security have I if I go to bed that she will not steal away from me in the night? It was in the night--almost in the night--that she stole away from me before."

From this logic it is impossible to move him; and although, with some return to his old sweet-natured kindness of manner, he begs his friend not to think it necessary to keep him company, yet the latter is far too ill at ease as to his

condition, both of mind and body, to comply.

The porter, having drawn the natural inference that as soon as the traveller has refreshed his body he will wish to retire to rest, has put out the lights in the smoking-room; the *salle a manger* is therefore the only room in the hotel where lamps still burn, and in it the two men spend the dreary remaining hours of the night, Byng walking up and down like a captive beast, frequently going to the door, opening it, putting his head out into the darkness, and listening suspiciously if, perchance, he may hear the footfall of Elizabeth fleeing away from him even through the hurricane. As the time goes on, his restlessness increases rather than diminishes. Jim has vainly tried to distract his thoughts by putting questions to him as to his pursuits and companions since their last parting--by inquiries as to the extent and direction of his travels.

Did he get as far as Palestine? How long is it since he left Cairo? etc. But to all his interrogations Byng gives brief and unsatisfactory answers, putting a final stop to them by breaking out excitedly:

"Why do you go on questioning me as to where I have been, and what I have done? I tell you I have been nowhere, and done nothing; I believe that my body has been here and there, but my soul has been nowhere; it has been lying dead! Would you expect a man who has been lying six months in his coffin to give you a catalogue of his adventures? My soul has been dead, I tell you--dead and putrescent. What is the use of putting me through a catechism about its doings?"

Before the long-delaying dawn shows its pale profile upon the deep obscurity, it seems to Jim as if six midwinter nights must have pieced themselves end to end. But it comes at last; and at last also, by dint of strenuous representations to his companion as to how unfit he is, in his present travel-stained and disordered condition, to offer himself to Elizabeth's eyes, he induces him to let himself be led to the bedroom prepared overnight for him, and to refresh himself with a bath and a change of clothes. Even this concession he obtains only in exchange for an exacted promise to seek out Elizabeth at the earliest possible hour at which she may be presumed accessible, and urgently to entreat of her an instant interview with his friend.

Jim feels that he is keeping his word handsomely when, not a minute later than nine o'clock, he finds himself knocking at the door of the Le Marchants' apartment--that door with which of late his knuckles have grown so pleasantly and friendlily familiar. It is opened to him by Elizabeth herself, and he follows her silently through the ante-room into the little *salon*. Arrived there, he looks mournfully round with a sort of feeling as of taking farewell of the familiar objects.

It is impossible that Elizabeth can have spent the just-past stormy night in gathering flowers, and yet the flowers have a freshened air. She must have been carefully rearranging them. The bits of brocade, too, the Turkish embroideries, the *haiks*, and the praying-carpets, wear a more festal appearance than usual. The little room looks decked as if for a gala. His jealous fancy cannot but admit that Elizabeth herself is dressed in her ordinary morning gown, but even over it some holiday transmutation has passed. He cannot trust himself to verify whether that holiday look is on her face too.

"He has come; you know that, I suppose?"

"Yes."

What a catch in her breath! He must steal a glance at her. She will think it unnatural if he does not; and perhaps his eye may not be offended by so much radiance as he feared. In her voice there was something not very distant from a sob. The result of his glance shows itself in what sounds like a reproach.

"I do not believe that you went to bed at all."

"Yes, I did! yes, I did!" hurrying away eagerly from the subject of herself, as from something irrelevant and importunate; "and--he--how is he? How does he look? Had not he a dreadful crossing? Does he want to see me? to see me soon? to-day?"

There is such a breathless passion in her tone, coupled with something so apologetic for putting her questions to him, that his heart, hitherto half touched, half angered by the pathos of her little preparations, melts wholly towards her.

"Of course he wants to see you--wants it very, very much," replies he; and, to his credit, replies without any harshness marring the cordial kindness of his tone. "As much as"--with a rather melancholy smile--"you want to see him. No, do not be angry. Why should not you wish to see each other?"

"Oh, there is every reason!" cries she miserably--"the same reason that there always was. But"--with rising agitation--"where is it to be? How soon? When does he wish it?"

"He is waiting outside now."

She starts painfully.

"Now! Oh, poor fellow! we must not keep him waiting; and yet"--stretching out her hand in detention--"tell me, before he comes in--tell me, is he changed? Is he? Is he the same as he was?"

Jim hesitates, and the painful perplexity written on his brow is misread by her.

"You are vexed with me for teasing you with so many tiresome questions. Oh, forgive me! I ought not to take advantage of your kindness; but we have grown to depend upon you so; and I will promise not to worry you with any other, if you will only answer me this one. Is he changed--much changed?"

"I am afraid," replies Jim, with the slowness of one who is trying to convey unpleasant tidings in the least unpleasant terms, "that you must be prepared to find him a good deal altered."

"Altered! How?"

"I do not quite know how to describe it"--uneasily--"but you must not be shocked if you find him a good deal changed in looks; and he is--he seems, in a very excited state."

She makes a clutch at his hand.

"Do you mean"--her voice has sunk to a horror-struck whisper--"that he is--mad?"

"Mad! Oh, of course not," with a strained laugh; "you must not jump to such conclusions. But I do not think he is quite himself, that is all. He looks as if he had not eaten or slept for a fortnight; and if you play such tricks as that with yourself, you must expect to get a little off your balance."

She is still terrifiedly clutching his hand, though with no consciousness of doing so, nor that the fingers so tightly gripped by her are not made of dry stick.

"You must not look so frightened," he says soothingly. "I would not have said anything to you, only that I thought it better you should be prepared--that it should not take you quite by surprise; and also because I wanted to give you a hint, that you might be a little careful what you say to him, or, at all events, how you say it."

Still she does not speak, and there is scarcely any diminution of the horror of her look.

"If you do not mind, I think it would be as well to have someone within call, if he--he--became--unreasonable."

"Do you think," she asks, with a sort of scorn, "that I am afraid of him--afraid for myself?"

"No, that I am sure you are not; but I cannot shake off the idea that--poor fellow!--he may be on the verge of some grave illness; and in that sort of case one never knows what may happen. So, if you do not mind----"

"As you please," she answers, docile even now. "Do as you think best; and will you tell him that I am ready to see him?"

The misgivings with which Jim complies with this request are not much allayed by the manner and voice of him who receives it, and who has been raging up and down the narrow corridor.

"She will not see me, I suppose?"

"On the contrary, she will see you now. But stay!" catching him by the arm as he springs past him. "One moment! For God's sake control yourself! Behave like a gentleman. Do not make her a scene; she is not up to it."

Byng's answer is to fling resentfully away the detaining hand of his Mentor, while he says, with a furious look coming into his bloodshot eyes:

"What do you mean by keeping me here, preaching to me, while *she* is waiting for me?"

The rudeness of both words and actions is so unlike the real Byng, that it is with an even more sinking spirit than before that Jim follows him with his eyes as he passes out of sight into the *salon*. As soon as the door is shut behind him, he himself takes up the position he had suggested in the ante-room.



CHAPTER IX.

There are few things more trying to an active-minded person than to sit occupationless, vaguely waiting. At first, it is true, the keenness of Jim's alarm prevents his feeling the ennui which would be the natural result of his situation. Poignantly anxious questions succeed each other in his mind. Has he had any right to permit the interview at all? How far is Byng accountable for his actions? What chance is there that his already rocking reason will stand the shock of a meeting which, even in his sanest moments, would have so wildly excited him? And if not, what may be the consequences? Grisly headings of newspaper paragraphs write themselves in the air before him--"Homicidal Mania," "Murder and Suicide."

The details of a tragic story which, illustrated by sensational woodcuts, he had idly read a day or two ago in a venerable *Police News*, left lying on the smoking-room table, recur to his memory. It was a tale of a groom who, in an access of jealous madness, had shot a scullion sweetheart through the head, and then blown his own brains out. The tale had made but little impression on him at the time--unhappily, it is scarcely possible to take up a journal without the eye alighting upon some such--but it comes back to him now with terrifying vividness. What security is there that such tragedies may be confined to grooms and kitchen-maids? How does he know that Byng has not a revolver hidden in his breast-pocket? How can he tell that he is not at this very moment drawing it out? He (Jim) ought to have made sure, before exposing her to such a peril, that the danger was minimized by Byng's being weaponless. Is it too late to make sure of that even now?

He takes one step towards the *salon* door, then hastily retraces it. Pooh! he is growing as mad as Byng. They will come out and find him eavesdropping.

He retreats to the table, which is at the greatest distance allowed by the room's narrow enceinte from the scene of the drama whose *denouement* he is expecting, and, sitting down, takes up a book. It happens to be Elizabeth's Italian exercise-book, and the sight of it conjures up before his memory her forlorn figure stooping disconsolately over the page, wrapped in her brown furs, as he had seen it on that rainy night that seems now so distant. He had pitied her for being lonely then. Well, whatever else she may be, she is not lonely now.

He catches his breath. It is quite a quarter of an hour since he began his watch. How quiet they are! There is a murmur of voices, but there is nothing that in the least indicates violence. Before his eyes there flashes in grotesque recollection the hideous picture in the *Police News* which illustrates the high words with which the catastrophe of the groom and kitchenmaid had been heralded. He has been making a mountain out of a mole-hill; has been exaggerating his friend's emotional temperament, naturally further heightened by sleeplessness and want of food, into incipient insanity. If he were mad, or at all tending that way, would he be talking in the low rational key which he obviously must be? It is evident that her presence, her eye, her--yes, what more likely?--her touch have soothed and conjured away what of excessive or perilous there was in his emotion.

They have been together half an hour now. All danger is certainly over. Why should he any longer continue his officious and needless watch?--superfluously spying upon them?

Relieved as to what he had thought his worst fear, and yet with an uncommon bitterness about his heart, he turns to withdraw, and his hand is already on the lock of the door which leads into the corridor, when suddenly, without any warning, there reaches his ear the noise of a loud, crashing fall, followed--accompanied, rather--by a piercing scream.

In infinitely less than a second he finds himself on his knees beside the prostrate body of Byng, who, with blood pouring from his forehead, is stretched upon the floor of the *salon*. Even at this second there flashes upon him, ludicrous and dreadful, the memory of the *Police News*. This scene has a grotesque likeness to the final one of the groom and kitchenmaid series, only that in the present case the heroine, instead of staggering backward with the top of her head flying up to the ceiling, is hanging unharmed over her fallen lover.

"Are you hurt?" cries Jim in frantic anxiety, looking at her across the prostrate figure, and unable to eradicate from his mind the revolver idea. "Did he hit you? I did not hear a shot."

"Oh no, no! but he," fetching her breath in terrible gasps, and hanging over the bleeding man with that utter abandonment of all disguise, in which a great naked grief sweeps away our sophistications--"he is dead!"

"Oh no, he is not," answers Jim hastily, tearing open Byng's waistcoat and laying his hand upon his heart. "He has only fainted. Get some water! Have you got any salts? No; do not lift his head"--seeing that she is agonizedly trying to

raise his prone head and rest it upon her knees--"he had better be as flat as he can. Quick, some water!"

She does not need to be twice told. In an instant she has sprung to the table, and brought thence the china jug out of which she is wont to water her flowers, and also the big cut-glass bottle of smelling-salts with which Jim has often seen poor Mrs. Le Marchant solacing herself when racked with that neuralgic headache which means worry. He splashes water out of the one upon Byng's ashy face, and holds the other to his pale nostrils; while Elizabeth, once more flinging herself upon her knees, wipes the blood from his temples with her little useless gossamer inch of handkerchief.

"How did it happen?" asks Jim rapidly. "What did he do to himself?"

The heads of the two ministrants are very close to each other as they bend together over the swooned youth. Jim can see a little smear of Byng's blood upon one of her white cheeks. The sight gives him a shudder. Byng seems to have made her more his own by that gory baptism than by all his frenzied vows and tears.

"Oh, I do not know," she answers, still fetching both breath and words with difficulty. "He was standing up, and he seemed quite right; and then, all of a sudden, in a minute, he went down like a log, and hit his forehead against the sharp corner of the table"--with a convulsive shiver at the recollection. "I ought to have saved him! I ought; but I was not quick enough. I stood stock-still, and now he is dead! You say that he is not; but I am sure he is dead!"

"Oh no, nonsense! he is not," replies Jim brusquely, thinking a certain harshness of manner the best recipe for her. "He is alive, sure enough; and as for the cut on his forehead, now that you have wiped the blood away, you can see for yourself that it is not at all a deep one. It is merely a big scratch. I have often had a worse out hunting from a bramble, in jumping through a hedge. Oh, Mrs. Le Marchant, here you are! That is all right. We have had an accident, you see. He has fallen down in a faint, and given himself a bit of a knock. That is all; do not be frightened. It looks worse than it is--Oh, M. Cipriani, vous voila! Envoyez chercher un medecin tout de suite! Il y a un M. Crump"--catching in his destitution at the thought of even Sybilla's objectionable friend.

But hereupon half a dozen voices--for by this time even more than that number of inmates of the hotel have thronged into the little room--raise themselves to pronounce another name--the name of one who both stands higher in medical fame and is more quickly procurable. In search of him Zameth, the porter, is instantly despatched, and meanwhile about the inanimate body sympathizers stand three deep, until reluctantly dispersed by a hint of a nature so broad as not to be misunderstood from Jim, to the effect that the patient would have a better chance of coming to himself if he were allowed to have a breath of air. By the time the doctor arrives--there is some small delay before he appears--all are got rid of, and, Mrs. Le Marchant having gone to give directions for having Jim's room arranged for the sick man, both because it is on the ground-floor and also of a better size than that allotted to him, Jim and Elizabeth are once again left *tete-a-tete*.

Once again they kneel on either side of the prone figure. How dreadfully dead and how extravagantly long it looks! Once again he sees that blood-smear on her face. It is just above her one dimple, and stands out in ghastly incongruity over that little pitfall for love and laughter. How passionately he wishes that he might ask her to go and wash it off! If he did she would not hear him. She has no ears left, no eyes, no sense, save for that livid face, splashed with the water which has not brought him back to life, and with the red drops still slowly trickling from the wound on his brow, and which have stained here and there the damp tendrils of his hair--for that livid face and for the flaccid hands, which she rubs between her own with an ever more terrified energy, as he still gives no sign of returning consciousness.

By-and-by he is taken out of her custody. She is robbed even of the wretched satisfaction of chafing his poor senseless fingers. On the arrival of the doctor he is carried off, and laid upon the bed that has been made ready for him. She follows them miserably as they bear him staggering across the hall--a powerfully-built young man of over six feet high, in the perfect inertness of syncope, is no light weight--and looks hungrily over the threshold of the bedroom; but when she attempts to cross it Jim puts her gently back.

"No, dear, no!" he says. (He is almost sure afterwards that for that once in his life he calls her "dear.") "You had better not. We think he is coming round, and if you are the first person he sees when he comes to himself it might be bad for him--might hurt him. You would not hurt him, would you?"

"No, I would not hurt him," she answers slowly. And so turns in her utter tractableness, and goes away meekly without a word.

It is evening again now, almost the same hour at which Jim and Elizabeth were beheading photographs twenty-four hours ago. Twenty-four hours! It feels more like twenty-four years. This is what he says to himself as he once again

opens the door of the Le Marchants' apartment. It is the first time during the whole day, except to snatch a couple of mouthfuls of food, that he has left Byng's side; and it is only due to the fact that Mrs. Le Marchant is supplying his place, and has sent him on a message to her daughter, that he has quitted his post. He knows that she has meant to do him a kindness in despatching him upon this errand; but he is not sure that it is one.

Elizabeth is not in the *salon*, but the screen that masks the door separating that room from the little alcove beyond is folded back. Over the doorway is a hanging of Eastern embroidery--as to the meaning of the strange gold scrolls that look like Arab letters on whose red ground Elizabeth and he have often idly speculated. He pushes it aside, and sees her standing with her back towards him, the flimsy muslin window-curtains drawn back as she looks out on the night. The alcove is on ordinary occasions scarcely ever occupied, and there is something uneasy and uncomfortable that matches the wretchedness of her other circumstances in finding her standing there alone and idle.

The elements have long finished their raging, and fallen to boisterous play. It has been a fine day, and though the sun has long laid down his sceptre, he has passed it on with scarcely diminished, though altered, radiance to his white imitator. It is broad moonlight--startlingly broad. The moon hangs overhead, with never a cloud-kerchief about her great disk. The winds that, loudly sporting, are up and abroad have chased every vapour from the sky, which is full of throbbing white stars. Before he reaches her side she has heard him, and turned to meet him, with a mixed hunger and pitiful hope in her wan face. She thinks that he has come to fetch her. He must kill that poor hope, and the quicker the more mercifully.

"Mrs. Le Marchant sent me. I came to tell you that he has recovered consciousness. You see, you were wrong"--with an attempt at a reassuring smile--"he is not dead, after all. He is conscious; that is to say, he is not insensible; but I am afraid he is not quite himself yet, and you must not--must not mind--must not be frightened, I mean--if he begins to shout out and talk nonsense by-and-by: the doctor says it is what we must expect."

"And may I--mayn't I--will not you let me?"

What a quivering voice the hope has, and yet how alive it is! However clumsily, and with whatever bitter yearnings over the pain he is causing her, he must knock it on the head at once.

"Go to him?--impossible! quite out of the question! The great object is to keep him perfectly quiet, and if once he caught sight of you--"

"But if he is not himself," interrupts she, with a pathetic pertinacity, "he would not know me. I could not do him any harm if he did not know me, and I might do something--oh, ever such a little thing for him! If you knew what it was to stand here and do nothing--*do nothing* indeed!"--with a change of tone to one of agonized self-reproach;--"have not I done enough already? Oh, would anyone have believed that it would be I that should kill him!"

She turns back to the window again, and dashes her forehead with violence against the frame. Outside the tall date-palm is shaken through all its plumes by the loud breeze; it is swaying and waving and blowing, and not less is its solid shadow cut out by the moonshine's keen knife on the terrace, wavering and shaking too, as if convulsed by laughter. The porch of the hotel--mere whitewash and plaster, as memory and reason tell one that it is--stands out in glorified ivory like the portals of such a palace as we see in vision, when

"Good dreams possess our fancy."

"I can't have you talking such nonsense," says Jim, in an exceedingly kind and not very steady voice, for his own feelings are horribly harrowed; and on thinking over the scene afterwards, he cannot swear that, at this point, he did not pass a most brotherly arm for one moment round the poor little heaving shoulder, which is shaking almost as much as the palm-tree's shadow. "He is not going to die; he is not thinking of dying. Nobody has killed him--least of all you."

She makes him no answer, nor lifts her stricken head, over which he looks out, while the ghostly mirth shakes the landscape; at his wits' end, in search of consolation. Below waves a sea of foliage, out of which the strong elfin light has stolen all the colour. From that colourless dark ocean rises far away to the right the dazzling little snowy dome of a mosque, showing like a transfigured mushroom; and down below the rounding bay is seen laying its foam-lips in white glory on the land.

"Dr. Stephens feels sure that he must have had a sunstroke. You know that he has been in the East. He was a month in Cairo; the sun has great power there, even in winter, and he is sure to have exposed himself recklessly. He was on his way home--had got as far as Paris, it seems--when he accidentally heard that you were here. Since then, no doubt, he has neither eaten nor slept; so you see how little you are to blame. You know that I told you how odd he was before you even saw him. Do not you remember?"--trying to recall every circumstance that may tend to reassure her--"I warned you that you would have to be careful what you said to him?"

His words have a very different effect from that intended by him.

"Oh, that is why I cannot forgive myself!" says she, with what sounds almost like a cry of physical pain. "You *did* warn me; I had no excuse. In his state I ought never--it was murdering him to tell him--"

She breaks off. To tell him what? Jim bites his lips hard to hinder himself from putting this question, as he again, in mercy to her, looks away from her out into the night.

The moon has swum over the housetop by now; but one can see her handiwork as plainly as ever in the broad argent fringe, like the border of a cloak, that marks where the waves are breaking on the beach.

One often talks of a fringe without really meaning that there is much likeness to one; but to-night the moon-washed breakers really do wear that aspect--a fringe of silver with long silver tags and ends.

"But I was so deceived," she continues, with that wail still in her voice; "he was not violent. After what you had told me, I expected him to be violent; but he was not: he was quite gentle and quiet, and he did beg so hard, and I was so glad to see him again, that I felt I was giving in--that I should give way altogether if I did not tell him--tell him at once, without giving myself time to think; and so I did"--growing very breathless and incoherent--"and in a second; and then all in a minute, without any warning, just as if I had shot him through the head, he went down with a crash. I did not see it, for I was not looking at him. I could not bear to look at him while I told him. I had both hands over my face, and then--and then--I heard him fall."

What can Jim say to her? Fear lest any dastardly unchivalrous curiosity may seem to pierce through whatever sympathetic question he might put to her keeps him dumb, and stupidly staring at the bowing, ironically merry palm.

"And now," she goes on, lifting her face, and he is shocked to see how livid it is in the moonlight, "he will go out of the world thinking me much worse than I really am, for I had not time to tell him all. He heard only the bare fact; he did not hear what excuse I had--that I was not really so wicked as--as--he will die thinking me."

The sob with which she ends alarms him by its kinship to a convulsion.

"I do not know what to say to you," he says, desperately making a snatch at her two hands, as if by the violence of his grip he could convey to her some little portion of the deep compassion that is swelling up in his heart for her; "I am so much in the dark. No, no, no!" with a return of that terror lest this ejaculation should seem the outcome of any inquisitiveness; "I do not want you to tell me anything! What is more, I will not listen to you if you attempt it; but what there is not the least manner of doubt about is that his fainting had no sort of reference to what you said to him: he would have fainted whatever you had said to him, or if you had said nothing at all. He was as mad as a hatter when he went in to you. It is all part of the same thing--over-fatigue, sunstroke. But he is not going to die"--with a hurried trip back to his former strain of consolation--"he is not thinking of it; I promise you, I give you my word of honour"--becoming perfectly reckless and completely insensate--"that he shall not!"

But she is too strangled with sobs to make any rejoinder.

"He shall have the best of nursing," goes on Jim. "I have telegraphed for a nurse to Nice. How astonishing it is that in a place of this size you cannot get a decent sick-nurse! I hoped we might have caught the one who nursed General Smith before----"

He stops abruptly, with a too tardy recollection that the allusion is not a happy once, since the General died two days ago. Unfortunately, she also remembers, as is evidenced by the strong shudder that passes over her.

"If he dies, will he be buried in that deep narrow, red grave that they showed us in the Protestant cemetery, and which they said that they always kept open for English visitors? If he dies! if he dies! Oh, if I could but have told him! if he would but have waited for me to tell him how it really was!"



CHAPTER X.

Though "February Fill-dyke" was never and nowhere truer to her name than this year, and in Algiers--coming laden with wet days to make the green Sahel, if possible, greener than it was before; yet the inhabitants of the Grand Hotel do not again, for a matter of three weeks, relieve their ennui or let off their energies in far from Dumb Crambo, or loud charade. The voice of the battledore is silent in the entrance-hall, and the shuttlecock sleeps. M. Cipriani has scarcely had to do more than mention his request that they would lay aside their more noisy pastimes, for they are, most of them, rather good-natured persons than otherwise, since, indeed, it is quite as uncommon to be very ill-natured as to be very selfless, or very foolish, or very wise. Those of them who have been fortunate enough to be present at the catastrophe have carried away such a moving image of a wounded Adonis, apparently several yards long, stretched upon Mrs. Le Marchant's Persian carpet, that they have infected those less happy persons who know of him only by hearsay with a compassionate interest scarcely inferior to their own.

The only person in the hotel who makes much noise is poor Byng himself, and for awhile he falls it with clamour enough to furnish two or three of those bump suppers of which, not so long ago, he was a conspicuous ornament.

There had never, even when he was in his wits, been much disguise as to the state of his feelings; now that he is out of them, the whole house rings with his frantic callings upon the name of Elizabeth, uttered in every key of rage, expostulation, tenderness, and appeal. These cries reach Elizabeth herself as she sits cowering in that one of the little suite of rooms which is nearest the door of entrance--sits there cowering, and yet with the door, through which those dreadful sounds penetrate to her, ajar, in order the better to hear them--cowering, and for several days alone.

Owing to various accidents, similar in their results, though differing in character, almost a week elapses from the first breaking out of Byng's malady before the arrival of either the hospital nurse or of Mrs. Byng. When the latter event occurs, Mrs. Le Marchant retires from her post at the sick man's bedside with the same unostentatious matter-of-factness with which she had assumed it, and Elizabeth is no longer alone. But to set against this advantage is the counterbalancing evil that, after the arrival of Byng's mother, she can no longer steal out, as she had before done a hundred times a day, to his door, to glean fragments of tidings from any outcomer thence. She is never able to repeat those little surreptitious excursions after that occasion when Mrs. Byng, coming suddenly out upon her, passes her with such speaking, if silent, hostility and scorn in her tired and grief-stricken eyes, that the luckless spy slinks back sobbing to her own tender mother; and there Jim, flying out a while after to carry them a crumb of reassurance, finds them, to his indignation, mingling their bitter tears.

Whatever else his faults may be, Mr. Burgoyne is a man of his word; he certainly keeps his promise to Elizabeth that Byng shall be well nursed. He keeps his other promise, too--though that is more by good luck than good management--that Byng shall not die. Whether to hinder his friend from being made a liar, or because he himself is loth to leave a world which he has found so pretty, cruel, and amusing, Byng does not die--Byng lives.

By her 25th day February has dried her tears, though they still hang on her green lashes, and a great galleon of a sun steers through a tremendous sea of blue, as Jim persuades Byng's mother to go out for her first delicious drive in that fresh and satin-soft air of the Algerian February, which matches our best poets' May. He takes her along the Route des Aqueduques, that lovely route which runs high along the hillside among the villas above the town, so high as to be on a level with the roofs of the lofty-standing Continental and Orient Hotels. It is a most twisting road, which in curves and loops winds about the head of narrow deep gorges, full of pale olive-trees, caroubiers, and ilex. Below lies the red-roofed white town. Slowly they trot past the campagne of the "English Milor," "L'Epicier Anglais," and many others, over whose high walls bougainvillias light their now waning purple fires, and big bushes of fleurs de Marie stoop their milky stars.

Mrs. Byng's eyes, sunk and diminished by watching and weariness, have been lying restfully on the delightful spring spectacle--on the great yellow sorrels by the wayside; she now turns them tear-brimmed to her companion.

"I could jump out of my skin!" she says shakily. "What a sun! what a sea! And to think that, after all, we have pulled him through."

Jim's only answer is a sympathetic pressure of the extremely well-fitting glove nearest him. If Willy had died instead of lived, her gloves would have fitted all the same.

"But we are not out of the wood yet," continues she, with a shake of the head. "He is cured, or nearly cured, of one disease, but what about the other?"

"What other?" inquires he, obstinately stupid, and with somewhat of a heart-sinking at the prospect of the engagement which he sees ahead of him.

How many elbows the road makes! It seems to have been cut in places right through the wet red rock, now overhung by such a torrent of vegetation.

At the head of one of the deep clefts that run up from the sea they pause, and look down upon a second sea of greenery that would seem to belong to no month less leafy than June. To June, too, belong the murmur and hum and summer trickle of running water at the ravine bottom.

"I do not see why, if he goes on as swimmingly as he is now doing," says Mrs. Byng in a restless voice--"why we should not get him off in a week, even if he were carried on board the boat."

"A week? Is not that rather sanguine?"

"I do not think so, the sooner the better; and during that week I should think she could hardly make any attempt to see him."

"Has she shown any signs of making one hitherto?"

"Well, no"--rather grudgingly. "In fact, between you and me, considering that it is they who have brought him into this plight, I think they might have shown a little more solicitude about him. In the last ten days I do not believe that they have been once to the door to inquire."

"You do not seem to be aware," says Jim, in a voice which, though quiet, is not pacific, "and that is odd, considering how often I told you, that until you came Mrs. Le Marchant nursed him like a mother; not like a mother, indeed"--correcting himself with a somewhat malicious intention--"for mothers grow flurried, and she never did."

"You mean that she nursed him better than I do," in a jealous tone. "Well"--more generously--"how shabby of me to mind, if she did! I do not mind. God bless her for it! I always thought"--compunctiously--"that she looked a nice woman."

"She *is* nice--as nice"--descending into a slang unworthy of his ripe years--"as they make 'em."

"And the girl--I suppose one can hardly call her a girl--*looks* nice too."

They are passing the Casbah, the solid Moorish fortifications, about which now hang only a few gaitered, sunburnt, baggy Zouaves.

Jim has a silly hope that, if he maintains an entire silence, the current of his companion's ideas may drift into another channel; but he is soon undeceived.

"I suppose that she must have been quite, *quite* young when--when those dreadful things happened that Willy talked about in his delirium?"

"Is it possible"--indignantly--"that you take the ravings of a fever-patient au pied de la lettre?"

"No, I do not; but"--with an obstinate sticking to her point--"there was a substratum of truth in them; that was only too evident."

Jim shuts his teeth tight together. His vow of silence is harder to keep than he had thought.

"Since he came to himself he has never mentioned her to me," continues his companion anxiously; "has he to you?"

"No."

"I quite tremble whenever he opens his lips, lest he should be going to begin the subject, and one could not contradict him yet awhile; he is so quixotic, it is quite likely that he may have some distorted idea that her being--how shall I say?--*fletrie*--is an additional reason for standing by her, rehabilitating her, marrying her. He is so chivalrous."

They have left the Prison Civile and the Zouave Barracks behind them. A longer interval than that usually supposed to elapse between a remark and its rejoinder has passed, before Jim can bring himself to utter the following sentence with the calmness which he wishes:

"Has it never occurred to you that she may be chivalrous too?"

Perhaps Mrs. Byng does not readily find a response to this question; perhaps it sets her off upon a train of speculation which does not conduce to garrulity. Certain it is that, for the rest of the drive, she is as silent as Jim could wish her. It

is a sharp surprise to him two days later to be mysteriously called outside the sick man's door by her, in order to be informed that she has invited Miss Le Marchant to accompany her on a drive.

"I went to call upon them," she says, avoiding--or so he fancies it--his eye as she speaks; "and I asked the girl to drive with me to the Mole, and get a good blowing about."

"How kind of you!" cries Jim, a flash of real pleasure in his serious look; "how like you--like your real self, that is!"

And he takes her hand to thank it by a friendly pressure. But she draws it away rather hastily.

"Oh, it was nothing so very wonderful--nothing to thank me for."

She seems confused and a little guilty, and escapes with some precipitation from his gratitude. Mrs. Byng is not a woman addicted to double-dealing, and if she ever makes any little essays in that direction, she does them, as on this present occasion, villainously.

Burgoyne is not at the hall-door to help the ladies into the carriage when they set off. Perhaps this may be because he is in attendance upon the invalid. Perhaps because--glad as he had at first felt and expressed himself at their friendliness--some misgiving may, upon reflection, have beset him at so strange a conjunction. At all events, it is only Fritz who throws the light Arab rug over their knees and gives them his encouraging parting smile.

Poor Miss Le Marchant needs his encouragement, for, indeed, it is in a very frightened spirit that she sets forth on her pleasuring. But before the horse-bells have jingled to the bottom of Mustapha Superieur, her spirits are rising. The sun shines, and he has shone so seldom in Elizabeth's life that a very few of his beams, whether real or metaphorical, suffice to send up her quicksilver. She does not consciously admit for a second the hope that in the present overture on the part of her companion lies any significance. But yet a tiny trembling bliss now and then taps at her heart's door, and she pushes it away but feebly.

Before they have reached the Amiraute, where they are to get out, she has thanked Mrs. Byng with such pretty and unsuspecting gratitude for bringing her, and has made her laugh so irrepressibly by her gay and naive comments upon the motley passers-by, that the latter is filled with a compunctious regret that a person with such lovely manners, and such a sense of a joke, should have made so disastrous a fiasco of her life as renders necessary the extremely distasteful errand on which she herself is at present bound. At the Amiraute, as I say, they get out; and, turning under a groined roof that looks as if it were the crypt of a church, find themselves presently upon the long stone breakwater that runs out into the bay. It was built, they tell us, in old days by the wretched Christian captives; but the sea has taken care that not much of the original labour of blood and tears has survived.

The wind is high, and the sunshine ardent and splendid. On their right as they walk, with the wind officiously helping them from behind, is a world of dancing sapphire, each blue billow white-tipped. On their left are great blocks of masonry, built strong and square, with narrow intervals between to break the might of the water. How little their strength has availed against that of their tremendous opponent is seen at every step, since nearly half the blocks are overthrown or in semi-ruin; though the date engraved upon them shows for how few seasons they have been exposed to the ravages of the tempestuous sea. They walk on to the end, till they can go no further, since, just ahead of them, the waves are rolling in half-fierce play--though the day is all smiles--over the breakwater; and even where they stand, their footing is made unsure by lengths of slimy seaweed that set them slipping along. Elizabeth insists upon the elder woman taking her slight arm--insists upon carrying her wraps, and generally waiting upon and ministering to her. From the bottom of her heart Mrs. Byng wishes that she would not, since every instance of her soft helpfulness, so innocent and spontaneous, makes more difficult the answer to that question which she has been asking herself ever since they set foot upon the Mole:

"How shall I begin?"

It is unanswered still, when, retracing their steps a little, they sit down under the lee of one of the half-wrecked blocks to enjoy the view.

From here the sea is a lake, the distant mountains and the breakwater seeming--though in reality parted by how wide a wet waste--to join in embracing it. The mountains are dim and filmy to-day, Cape Matifou scarcely visible; but the Koubah shows white-domed on the hillside, and all the dazzling water is shot through with blinding light. The town, Arab-French, is dazzling too; the arcaded quay, the fortifications, one can scarcely look at any of them. Two or three steamers, with a little vapour issuing from their ugly black and red funnels, lie moored; and other smaller craft lift their spars against the heaven. Near by a man is sitting with his legs dangling over the water, fishing with a line; and two or three Arabs, draped in the dignity of their poetic rags, lie couched round a fire that they have kindled. Beneath and around them is the banging and thundering of the sea. August noise! "A voice like the sound of many waters." Could

there be a more awful comparison? Just underneath them, where the sea has made a greater breach than usual, it is boiling as in a caldron. Looking down and in, they see the water comparatively quiet for a moment; then, with a shout of its great jubilant voice, rushing and surging in, tossing its mane. Elizabeth's eyes are resting on the heavenly sapphire plain.

"How blue!" she says, under her breath; "one cannot believe that it is not really blue; one feels that if one took up a little in a spoon it would be just as blue as it is now."

"I dare say it will not *feel* so blue when we are on it," replies Mrs. Byng, lugging in somewhat awkwardly, as she feels, the subject which she finds it so hard to introduce, "as I suppose we shall be within a week now."

Her charity bids her not glance at her companion as she speaks, so she is not quite sure whether or not she gives a start.

"Mr. Burgoyne thinks that I am sanguine; but I am all for moving him as soon as possible; it cannot be too soon."

She tries to throw as much significance as they are capable of holding into the latter words, and feels that she has succeeded.

"Of course he may refuse to go," continues she, with a rather strained laugh. "Do you remember Victor Hugo's definition of heaven as a place where children are always little and parents are always young? I am continually quoting it. But, unfortunately, one's children will not stay little; they grow big, and get wills of their own, and it is quite possible he may refuse to go."

"Yes?" almost inaudibly.

"But"--reddening slightly at the patently-intended application of her next sentence--"anyone that was fond of him--anyone that liked him *really* and--and *disinterestedly*, I mean, must see that the only happy course for him would be to go; that it would be his salvation to get away; they--they would not try to hinder him."

"I should think that no one would do that."

There is not a touch of asperity in the dove-soft voice; but there is a shade of dignity.

"When he was ill--while he was delirious" ("How dreadfully unpleasant it is!" in an anguished internal aside)--"I could not help hearing--gathering--drawing inferences."

The ardour of the chase has vanquished her charity, and she is looking at her victim. But, to do her justice, the success of her labours shocks her. Can this little aged, pinched face, with its dilated eyes, so full of woe and terror, be the same one that dimpled into riotous laughter half an hour ago at the sight of the two dirty old men, in Jewish gaberdines and with gingham umbrellas, kissing each other by the Mosque de la Pecherie?

"Of course it was all incoherent," she goes on hurriedly, snatching at the first expression that occurs to her as likely to undo, or at least a little modify, her work--"nothing that one could make sense of. Only your name recurred so incessantly; it was nothing but 'Elizabeth, Elizabeth.' I am sure"--with a remorseful if clumsy attempt to be kind, and a most uneasy smile--"that I do not wonder at it!"

In the narrow interspace between the blocks and the path--not more than a couple of fingers wide--how the sea forces itself! and up race its foam-fountains, throwing their spray aloft in such mighty play, as if they would hit heaven's arch. What exhilaration in its great glad noise, superb and battle-ready!

"I cannot express how distasteful a task this is to me"--in a tone that certainly gives no reason to doubt the truth of her statement; "but, after all, I am his mother; he is all I have in the world, and I am sure that you are the very last person who would wish to do him an injury."

"No; I do not think that I would do him an injury."

How curiously still and slow her voice is! Mrs. Byng has resolutely averted her eyes, so that her purpose may not again be shaken by the sight of the havoc she has wrought, and has fixed them upon some sea gulls that are riding up and down upon the merry waves, making them, with their buoyant motion, even more jocund than they were before.

"It seems an impossible thing to say to you--a thing too bad to apologize for--but yet I *must* say it"--in a tone of excessive distress, yet firmness. "Under the circumstances, it would--would throw a blight over his whole life."

"Yes, I know that it would; I have always known it; that is why we left Florence."

"And very good it was of you, too! Not that I am quite certain of the judiciousness of the way in which you did it; but,

however, I am sure you meant it for the best."

"Yes, I meant it for the best."

The sea-gulls have risen from the billow, and are turning and wheeling in the air. The light is catching their wings, and making them look like whitest silver. It seems as if they were at conscious play with it, trying experiments as to how they can best catch their bright playfellow, and again shake it off, and yet again recapture it.

"What a monster you must think me!" breaks out the elder woman presently.

Now that the impression has somehow been conveyed to her mind that her mission is likely to be completely successful, the full brutality of the method by which she has accomplished it bursts upon her mind.

"How treacherous! luring you out here, under the pretence of friendliness, to say such horrible things to you!"

Elizabeth's narrow hands are clasped upon her knee, and her small heart-broken, white face is looking out straight before her.

"No, I do not think you a monster," she answers--"you are a kind-hearted woman! and it must have been very, very unpleasant to you. I am quite sorry"--with a sort of smile--"for you, having to do it; but you are his mother. If I had been his mother, I should have done the same; at least, I suppose so."

"I am sure, if things had been different, there is no one that I should have--I do not know when I ever saw anyone whom I took such a fancy to. If it had not been for the disparity--I mean, if he had been less young and unfit to take upon himself the serious responsibilities of life----"

How deplorably lame even to Mrs. Byng's ears sound her tardy efforts to place the grounds of her objection on a less cruel basis than that which she has already made so nakedly plain to be the real one! Even the sweet-mannered Elizabeth does not think it necessary to express gratitude for such insulting civilities.

"I do not quite understand what you wish me to do," she says, with quiet politeness; "if you will explain to me----"

"Oh, I do not want to dictate to you; please do not imagine I could think of being so impertinent; but, of course, he will be asking for you. Since he came to himself, he has not mentioned you as yet; but of course he will. I am expecting it every moment; probably he has not felt up to embarking on the subject. He will ask for you--will want to see you."

"And you wish me not to see him?"

Her delicate suffering mouth quivers; but she is perfectly composed.

"Oh, but of course you must see him! you quite, *quite* misunderstand me! Much chance there would be"--with a wretched stunted laugh--"of getting him away without a sight of you! How little you know him!"

Elizabeth does not dispute the fact of her want of acquaintance with Byng's character, nor does she help his floundering parent by any suggestion. She merely goes on listening to her with that civil white look, while the sportive sea-mews still play at hide-and-seek with the sun-rays on the wide blue fields of heaven.

"It is dreadful that I should have to say these things to you," says Mrs. Byng, in a voice of the strongest revolt and ire against her destiny--"insult you in this unprovoked way; but, in point of fact, you are the only person in the world who can convince him that--that--it is impossible--that it cannot be. Of course he will be very urgent and pressing, and I know how persuasive he is. Do not you suppose that I, his own mother, know how hard it is to refuse him anything? and of course, in his present weak state, it must be very carefully done. He could not stand any violent contradiction. You would have to be very gentle; dear me!"--with a fresh access of angry remorse--"as if you ever could be anything else."

This compliment also its pale object receives in silence.

"You know one has always heard that there are two kinds of 'No,'" goes on Mrs. Byng with another dwarfish laugh, which has a touch of the hysteric in it--"a woman's 'No,' as it is called, that means 'Yes'; and a 'No' which anyone--which even *he*--must understand to be final. If you *could*--I dare say I am asking you an impossibility--but if you *could* make him understand that this time it is final!"

There is a silence between them. An unrulier billow than usual, yet more masterless in its Titan play, is hurling itself with a colossal thud and bang against the causeway; and Elizabeth waits till its clamour is subsided before she speaks.

"Yes," she answers slowly, "I understand; thank you for telling me what you wish. I think I may promise that I shall be able to--that I shall make him understand that it is final."

A moment or two later they are on their way back to the Amiraute. The ocean is at its glorious pastimes all around them; the hill-climbing, shining town smiles upon them from its slope; but upon both has fallen a blindness. The feelings of Mrs. Byng are perhaps the least enviable of the two.

They are nearly back at the beginning of the breakwater, when she stops short. Probably when cool reflection comes, when she is removed from the charm and pathos of Elizabeth's meek white presence, lovely and unreproachful, she will not repent her work; but at the present moment of impulse and remorse she feels as if the expunging of the last half-hour would be cheaply purchased by the sacrifice of six months of her remaining life.

"I suppose it is not the least use my asking you to try and forgive me--to make allowances for me?" she says, with unsteady-toned humility; "oh, *how* you must hate me! If the case were reversed, *how* I should hate you! How you will hate me all your life!"

The tears are rolling down her cheeks, and in an instant Elizabeth's hand has gone out to her. As it does so, the grotesque regret flashes across the elder woman's mind that any future daughter-in-law of hers will be most unlikely to be the possessor of such a hand.

"Why should I hate you? you cannot"--with a heart-wrung smile--"possibly think me more undesirable than I do myself; and even if it were not so, I do not think it is in me to hate anyone very much."

On their drive home they meet with one or two little incidents quite as funny as the old Jews kissing each other; but this time they do not move poor Miss Le Marchant to any laughter.



CHAPTER XI.

"I do remember an apothecary,—
And hereabouts he dwells."

Two days later she is called upon to perform the task she has undertaken. Probably she has spent those two days, and also the appertaining nights, in bracing her mind to it, for Jim can plainly see the marks of that struggle, though he is not aware of its existence, graved upon her face, on the third morning after the excursion to the Mole, when he comes in search of her. He does not find her in her accustomed corner of the terrace, but, looking down over the balustrade, sees her sitting below and alone on a small tree-shaded plateau that seems to have been levelled for lawn-tennis or bowls. Probably the giggling and chaffing of the girls on the terrace, and the respectful but persistent importunities of the Omars and Ahmeds to buy their colourful wares outspread on the hot flags have oppressed her spirits.

Fritz has carried down for her an arm-chair, a cane table, and a Persian rug for her feet, and she looks as if she were established for the day.

Since Byng has been out of danger Elizabeth has returned to her embroidery. She is one of those women to whom needlework is unaffectedly dear, like that other sweet woman "who was so delicate with her needle."

Before she catches sight of him he watches for a few moments her bright bent head and flying white fingers, and is able to perceive how many sighs she is sewing into the pattern.

"What a morning!" he says, running down the steps and joining her. "No one has any excuse for being an invalid to-day, has he?"

There is no second seat, so he stands beside her, looking up over her head at the tall trees above her, from which immense garlands of ivy are hanging and swinging in the warm breeze. That potent ivy has killed one tree altogether.

She glances up at him mutely, knowing that he has not come merely to tell her that the day is fine.

"We can hardly keep him on his sofa; he is virtually almost well, so well that he is quite up to seeing people. He would like--he has been asking--to see *you*."

He had thought her nearly as pale as it was possible for her to be when he had first come upon her. He now realizes how many degrees of colour she then had left to lose. While he speaks she has been mechanically pulling her thread through, and as he ceases, her lifted hand stops as if paralyzed, and remains holding her needle in the air.

It has come, then. For all her two days' bracing, is she ready for it?

"*Now?*"

The whisper in which this monosyllable is breathed is so stamped with a fear that borders on terror, that his one astonished thought is bow best to reassure her.

"Not if you do not feel inclined, of course--not unless you like. It can perfectly well be put off to another time. I can tell him--there will not be the least difficulty in making him understand--that you do not feel up to it this morning: that you would rather have more notice."

"But I would not," she says, standing up suddenly, and with trembling hands laying her work down upon the table, and beginning from dainty habit to pin it up in its protecting white cloth. "What good would more notice--a year's notice--do me?"

She turns away from him and fixes her unseeing eyes, glassy and dilated, upon a poplar tree that is hanging tasselled catkins out against the sky. Then once again she faces him, and he sees that there are cold beads of agony upon her forehead.

"Wish for me," she says huskily--"wish very hard for me, that I may get through it--that we may both get through it--alive!"

Then, motioning to him with her hand not to follow her, she walks quickly towards the hotel.

It is impossible to him to stay quiet. He wanders restlessly away, straying he knows not whither. The mimosas are out

charmingly in the gardens, sending delicious whiffs of perfume from the soft yellow fluff of their flowers. The pinky almond-trees are out too, but not till long afterwards does he know it.

By-and-by he finds himself strolling, unhindered by a gardener placidly digging, through the grounds of a villa to let. Gigantic violets send their messages to his nostrils, the big and innumerable blue blossoms predominating over the leaves, which in England have to be so carefully searched for them. Superabundant oranges tumble about his feet; arum lilies, just discovering the white secret hid in their green sheaths, stand in tall rows on either side of him; a bed of broad beans points out the phenomenon of her February flowers to him. He sees and smells none of them. Have his senses stolen away with his heart into Byng's bedchamber? They must have done so, or he could not see with such extraordinary vividness the scene enacting there. He has himself helped to place it in such astonishing reality before himself. Does not he know the exact position of the chair she is to occupy? Did not he place it for her before he went to fetch her? Nor can his reason prevent his distorted fancy from presenting the interview as one between happy and confessed lovers. Even the recollection of her features, ghastly and with beads of agony dewing them, cannot correct the picture of his mind as he persistently sees it. That she meant, when he parted from her, to renounce Byng, he has no manner of doubt. But does not he know the pliancy of her nature? Is not he convinced that the rock on which her life has split is her inability ever to refuse anyone anything that they ask with sufficient urgency or with enough plausibility to persuade her that she can do them a kindness by yielding?

How much more, then, will she be incapable of resisting the importunate passion of her own heart's chosen one, freshly risen from a bed of death? Presently his restless feet carry him away out of the villa grounds again. He finds himself on the Boulevard Mustapha, and sits down on the low wall by the roadside, staring absently at a broken line of dusky stone-pines, cutting the ardent blue of the African sky on the hill opposite, and at an arcaded campagne throned high up among the verdure. He knows that it belongs to an Englishman who made reels of cotton, and the idle thought saunters across his mind how strange it is that reels of cotton should wind anyone into such a lofty white Eden! Can the interview be lasting all this while? Is not it yet ended? May not his tormented fancy see the chair by Byng's sofa once again empty or occupied by nurse or mother? Will not Mrs. Byng, will not Elizabeth herself; have seen the unfitness of taxing the sick man's faint powers by so extreme a strain upon them? But no sooner has this suggested idea shed a ray of light upon his darkness than an opposing one comes and blows it out. Has not Byng a will of his own? Will he be likely so soon to let her go? Nay, having once recovered her, will he ever let her out of his sight again? The thought restores him to restless action, and, although with sedulous slowness, he begins to retrace his steps towards the hotel. At a point about a quarter of a mile distant from it, the lane which leads to the Villa Wilson debouches into the road, and debouching also into the road he sees the figure of Cecilia, who, catching sight of him, as if unable to wait for him to join her, almost runs to meet him.

"I was coming to call upon you," says she eagerly. "Oh!"--with a laugh--"to-day I really cannot stay to think of the proprieties, and you have not been to see us for such centuries!"

"I have been nursing Byng."

"Oh yes; poor man! How dreadfully ill he must have been! I was so glad to hear he was better."

There is such a flat tepidity in the tone of these expressions of commiseration, something so different from the tender alertness of Cecilia's former interest in their object, that Jim, roused out of his own reflections to regard her more attentively than he has yet done, sees that she is preoccupied by some subject quite alien to the invalid.

"I have a piece of news to tell you"--with a sort of angry chuckle. "Such a piece of news! I am sure you will be delighted at it."

At her words a wonder as idle and slack as his late thought about the reels of cotton crosses him as to what possible piece of news to be told him by the buxom and excited person, before him could give him the faintest pleasure. That wonder sends up his eyebrows, and throws a mild animation into his voice.

"Indeed?"

"Do you like"--still chuckling--"to be told a piece of news or to guess it?"

"I like to be told it."

"Well, then"--with a dramatic pause--"we are going to have a wedding in the family!"

"My dear girl!" cries he, smiling very good-naturedly, and with a sensation that, though not violent, is the reverse of annoyance. "Hurrah! So he has come at last! Who is he? How dark you have kept him!"

Cecilia shakes her head and gives a short and rosy laugh.

"Oh, it is not I! You are wide of the mark."

"Your father?"--in a shocked voice.

He has a confused and illogical feeling that a second marriage on the part of Mr. Wilson would be a slight upon Amelia's memory.

"*Father!*"--with an accent that plainly shows him he is still further afield than in his first conjecture--"poor father! No, indeed; Heaven forbid! Fancy me with a stepmother!"

She pauses to give a shudder at the idea, while Jim gapes blankly at her, wondering whether she has gone off her head.

"Oh no; it is neither father nor I! No wonder you look mystified. It is--*Sybilla!*"

"SYBILLA!!!!"

Although Mr. Burgoyne has not got it on his conscience that he has ever either expressed or felt anything but the most strenuous and entire disbelief in Sybilla's maladies, yet it has never occurred to him as possible that she should engage in any occupation nearer akin to the ordinary avocations of life than imbibing tonics through tubes and eating beef essences out of cups.

"She is going to marry Dr. Crump!" continues Cecilia, not on the whole dissatisfied with the effect of her torpedo. "When she told father, she said that he had saved her life, and that the least she could do was to dedicate the poor remainder of it to him. She tells other people that she is marrying him because we wish it! You know that that was always her way."

"SYBILLA!!!"

"I thought that there must be something in the wind, as since the beginning of the month she has never once wished us good-bye; and the housemaid upset the ink-bottle over the book of prescriptions without her ever finding it out; and the clinical thermometer has not appeared for a week!"

"SYBILLA!!!!"

"I thought I should surprise you; it gives one a disgust for the idea of marrying altogether, does not it? I have come to the conclusion that I do not care now if I never marry. Father and I get on quite happily together; and when one is well off, one can really be very fairly content in a single state; and, at all events, I am sure I do not envy Sybilla."

"Nor I Crump"--with an emphasis so intense that Cecilia bursts out into a laugh of a more genuine character than any she has yet indulged in.

"You will have to give her away!" she cries, as soon as she can again speak distinctly. "Father will marry her, of course, and you must give her away. I am sure she will insist upon it."

"She will have to make haste, then," returns he, recovering enough from his first stupefaction to join Cecilia in her mirth; "for I shall not be here much longer."

"You are not going away?"--raising her eyebrows, and with a tinge of meaningness in her tone which vaguely frets him.

"Why should not I go?" he asks irritably, his short and joyless merriment quite quenched. "What is there for a man to do here? I have stayed already much longer than I meant. I am engaged to meet a friend at Tunis--the man with whom I went to the Himalayas three years ago; we are going to make an excursion into the interior. I am only waiting for some guns and things. Why should not I go?"

"There is no earthly reason," replies she demurely; "only that I did not know you had any such intention. But then, to be sure, it is so long since I have seen you--not, I think," glancing at him for confirmation of her statement rather too innocently, "since the lovers--ha! ha!--and I met you and Miss Le Marchant driving on the quay."



CHAPTER XII.

Elizabeth's feeble tap at Byng's door is instantly answered by the nurse, who, opening it smilingly to admit her, the next moment, evidently in accordance with directions received, passes out herself and shuts it behind her. Elizabeth, deprived of the chaperonage of her cap and apron, and left stranded upon the threshold, has no resource but to cross the floor as steadily as a most trembling pair of legs will let her.

The room is a square one, two of its thick walls pierced by Moorish windows. Drawn up to one of those windows--the one through which Jim had caught his first glimpse of Elizabeth on the night of his arrival--is the sick man's sofa. At the side of that sofa his visitor has, all too soon, arrived. She had prepared a little set speech to deliver at once--a speech which will give the keynote to the after-interview; but, alas! every word of it has gone out of her head. Unable to articulate a syllable, she stands beside him, and if anyone is to give the keynote, it must be he.

"This is very, *very* good of you. It seems a shame to ask you to come here, with all this horrid paraphernalia of physic about; but I really could not wait until they let me be moved into another room."

She has not yet dared to lift her eyes to his face, in terror lest the sight of the change in it shall upset her most unsure composure. Already, indeed, she has greedily asked and obtained every detail of the alteration wrought in him. She knows that his head is shaved, that his features are sharp, and that his voice is faint; and when, as he ceases speaking, she at last wins resolution enough to look at him, she sees that she has been told the truth. His head is shaven, his nose is as sharp as a pen, and his voice is faint. She has been told all this; but what is there that she has not been told? What is his voice besides faint?

"Will not you sit down? It seems monstrous that I should be lying here letting you wait upon yourself. Will you try that one?" pointing to the chair which is figuring at the same moment so prominently in Jim's tormented fancy. "I am afraid you will not find it very comfortable. I have not tried it yet, but it looks as hard as a board."

She sits down meekly as he bids her, glad to be no longer obliged to depend upon her shaky limbs, and answers:

"Thank you; it is quite comfortable."

"Would not it be better if you had a cushion?"--looking all round the room for one.

His voice is courteous, tender almost, in its solicitude for her ease. But is she asleep or awake? Can this be the same voice that poured the frenzy of its heartrending adjurations into her ear scarce a month ago? Can this long, cool, white saint--he looks somehow like a young saint in his emaciation and his skull-cap--be the stammering maniac who, when last she saw him, crashed down nigh dead at her feet, slain by three words from her mouth?

At the stupefaction engendered by these questions, her own brain seems turning, but she feebly tries to recover herself.

"I--I am so glad you are better."

"Thank you so much. Yes, it *is* nice; nice to be

"Not burnt with thirsting,
Nor with hot fingers, nor with temples bursting."

Do you remember Keats?"

After all, there is something of the original Byng left, and the ghost of his old spouting voice in which he recites the above couplet gives her back a greater measure of composure than could almost anything else.

"It is nice, only one would like to be able to jump, not 'the life to come'--ha! ha!--but the convalescence to come. My mother is even more impatient than I am. She has made up her mind that we are to be off in three days, even if I am carried on board on a shutter."

She can see now that he is very much embarrassed--that his fluency is but the uneasy cover of some emotion--and the discovery enables her yet further to regain possession of herself.

"I should think," she says in her gentle voice, "that you would be very glad to get out of this room, where--where you have suffered so much."

"Well, yes; one does grow a little tired of seeing

"The casement slowly grow a glimmering square;"

but"--with a rather forced laugh--"at least, I have had cause to be thankful that there is no wall-paper to count the pattern of. I have blessed the white wall for its featureless face."

She moves a little in her chair, as if to assure herself that she is really awake. That stupefaction is beginning to numb her again--that hazy feeling that this is not Byng at all, this polite invalid, making such civil conversation for her; this is somebody else.

"But I must not tire myself out before I have said what I want to say to you," he continues, his embarrassment perceptibly deepening, while his transparent hand fidgets uneasily with the border of the coverlet thrown over him, "or"--laughing again--"I shall have that tyrant of a nurse down upon me, and--and I do wish--I have wished so much--so unspeakably--to see you, to speak to you."

She sits immovable, listening, while a ray of something--can it be hope? why should it be hope?--darts across her heart. After all, this may be Byng--her Byng; this strange new manner may be only the garment in which sickness has dressed his passion--a worn-out garment soon to drop away from him in rags and tatters, and in which cannot she already discern the first rent? After all, she may have need for her armour--that armour which, so far, has seemed so pitifully needless.

"I knew that it would be no use asking leave to send for you any sooner; they would have told me I was not up to it--would have put me off with some excuse; so I kept a 'still sough.' Do you know that I never mentioned your name until to-day? But it has been hard work, I can tell you; for the last two days I have scarcely been able to bear it, I have so *hungered* to see you."

Her eyelids tremble, and she instinctively puts up her hand to cover her tell-tale mouth. Surely this is the old language. Surely there is, at all events, a snatch of it in his last words; and again that prick of illogical joy quickens the beats of her fainting heart, though she tries to chide it away, asking herself why she should be in any measure glad that the love which she has come here for no other purpose than to renounce, still lives and stirs.

"You may think I am exaggerating, but in point of fact I cannot by any expression less strong than the gnaw of downright hunger convey the longing I have had to see you."

He pauses with a momentary failure of his still feeble powers.

She catches her breath. Now is the time for her to strike in, to arrest him before he has time to say anything more definite. Now is the time for her to fulfil her promise, her inhuman promise, which yet never for one instant strikes her as anything but irrevocably binding. Does he see her intention, that he plunges, in order to anticipate it, into so hurried a resumption of his interrupted sentence?

"To see you, in order to beg--to supplicate you to forgive me for my conduct to you."

She gives an almost imperceptible start. This ending is not what she had expected, not the one to defend herself against which she has been fastening on her buckler and grasping her shield. The words that it demands in answer are not those with which she has been furnishing herself, and it is a moment or two before she can supply herself with others. He must be referring, of course, to his last meeting with her--that one so violently broken off by the catastrophe of his collapse.

"I do not know what I am to forgive," she says, half bewildered. "You were not accountable for your actions. You were too ill to know what you were doing."

"Oh, you think I am alluding to that last time," cries he, precipitately correcting her. "No, no; you are right. I was not accountable then. You might as well have reasoned with a wild beast out of a menagerie. I was a perfect Bedlamite then. No"--going on very rapidly, as it in desperate anxiety to make her comprehend with the least possible delay--"what I am asking you--asking you on my knees--to forgive me for, is my whole conduct to you from the beginning."

The two white faces are looking breathlessly into each other, and though of late he has been tussling with death on a bed, and she has been walking about, and plying her embroidery, and dining at a public table, hers is far the whiter of the two. It must be the unwonted exertion of talking so much that makes him bring out his next speech in jerks and gasps.

"I forced my acquaintance upon you at the very beginning; I watched you like a detective; I beset you wherever you went; I pestered you with my visits. Jim always told me that it was not the conduct of a gentleman, but I would not

believe him--not even when"--how difficult it is! he finds it almost as hard work as his mother had done upon the Mole--"not even when, by my importunities, I had driven you away--obliged you to rush away almost by night from a place you liked--a place you were happy in--to escape me. And I have no excuse to offer you--none; unless, indeed, as I sometimes think, my mind was off its balance even then. I express myself wretchedly!"--in a tone of deep distress--"but you will overlook that, will not you? You will--will understand what I mean?"

She makes an assenting motion with her head. At this moment she cannot speak: she will be able to do so again directly, but she must have just a minute or two. Yet she must not leave him for an instant in doubt that she understands him. Oh yes, she understands him--understands that he is apologizing for having ever loved her; that he is awkwardly trying to draw the mantle of insanity over even the Vállombrosan wood. It is true that he does it with every sign of discomfort and pain; and he looks away from her, as Mrs. Byng, too, had found it pleasanter to do.

"Do you remember what Schiller said when he was dying? 'Many things are growing clearer to me.' I thought a good deal of those words as I lay over there"--glancing towards the now neatly-arranged and empty bed. "One night they thought it was all up with me--I heard them say so. They did not think I was conscious, but I was; and it did strike me that I had made a poor thing of it, and that if ever I was given the chance I would make a new start."

Again that little assenting movement of her fair head. How perfectly comprehensible he still is! How well she understands that he is renouncing her among the other follies of his "salad days"--college bear-fights, music-halls, gambling clubs. Well, why should not he? Has not she come here on purpose to renounce him? Can she quarrel with him for having saved her the trouble?

"And I thought that I could not begin better than by falling on my knees to you. I wish I could fall on my real knees to you!"--with a momentary expression of extreme impatience at his own bodily weakness--"and ask you most humbly and tenderly and reverently to pardon me."

She looks at him, and sees his wasted face flushing with fatigue and worry and mental suffering. Oh, what a bitter wave of desolateness rolls over her! But she smiles.

"I still do not understand what I am to forgive you for. I suppose that you could no more help having once thought you loved me, than you can help"--she stops abruptly in compassion for the look of acute regret, shame and remorse that crosses his sharp features, and, in her mercy to him, gives a different close to her phrase from that which its beginning had seemed to bespeak--"than you can help having been so ill."

Her tone, quite unconsciously to herself is inexpressibly touching; and Byng, weakened by illness, turns his face upon the pillow, and breaks into violent weeping. His mother had cried too. It seems to be in the family.

She has risen--what further is there for her to stay for?--and pauses quietly at his side till the paroxysm is past. Her standing posture tells him that she is going, and he consequently struggles to recover himself in some degree; but having never cultivated self-control when he was in health, it declines to come at his enfeebled bidding now.

"Forgive me! forgive me!" is all he can stammer.

She looks down upon him with a strange and tender smile, in which for the moment the selfless, pitying sweetness has swallowed up the misery.

"Which am I to forgive you for--for having loved me? or for having ceased to love me? For having been mad? or for being sane? Yes, of course I forgive you from the very bottom of my heart! God bless you! Make haste and get well!"

She walks cheerfully to the door, and, reaching it, turns, still wearing that smile, that he may see how perfectly friendly is her last look; but he does not see it. He has rolled over on his face, and the whole sofa is shaking with his sobs.



CHAPTER XIII.

"The pity of it, Iago! The pity of it!"

The Byngs are gone, having got off just within the time first suggested by the sick man's mother. But, after all, he has to be carried on board the *Eugene Perrere*. Since his interview with Miss Le Marchant, his progress towards recovery has scarcely been so smooth or so fast as before; and perhaps his mother is right to bear him away with what seems such overhaste, even though it be on men's shoulders that he has to make his exit. At all events, he is gone. The hotel--of which a part of the inmates have seen him only prostrate and bleeding, and the other and larger part have not seen him at all, but have had their curiosity whetted by the tale of his calamitous arrival, only to have it balked by his hurried departure--crowd into the entrance-hall, some on one pretext, some on another, most on no pretext at all, to see him go. There are only two of the visitors whose faces cannot be seen among the good-naturedly curious and sympathetically pitiful group that watch the exodus of the little party. Who shall say how those two spend the hour of Byng's departure out of their lives? Jim has accompanied the invalid to the quay to see the last of him; has stayed with him till the final bell warns non-passengers off the boat; has left him with all the proper requests and adjurations to let him know how the sick man bears the voyage; how they get on, etc. But as Mrs. Byng stands on the upper deck and watches the trail of chummed water lengthening between her and the dwindling high white town, she has a feeling that her old friend does not like her as well as he did, and that it will never again be quite the same thing between them.

The Byngs are gone--have been gone a fortnight--and March is here. Over the villa faces the begonias have broken into riotous flower, and the snowy-blossomed fruit-trees, that have put on their snowy garments but lately, stand out in bright fragility against the heavy green that never, even in January, ceases to wrap itself about the lovely Moslem town.

Every day for the last fortnight, Jim, too, has been going, but he is not yet gone. His guns have arrived ten days ago, and his friend has expressed by post and wire his weariness of exploring the bazaars of Tunis alone. But he is not yet gone to join that impatient friend. Why does he still linger in a place where, as he had justly explained to Cecilia, there is nothing for him to do? Why indeed? It is a question that, by night and day, by the insolence of the staring moonlight which slides in upon his restless open eyes by night, under the fires of the great spring sun at noon, he asks himself. All the answer he can give is that it would be hardly friendly to choose this moment, when she is so down in the world, to leave Elizabeth.

She is down in the world; there can be no mistake about that. Even her father, who has returned from his wanderings, must be aware of this fact. Perhaps that is the reason why he no longer snubs her as much as he did; why he even accepts, with some semblance of graciousness, those affectionate and watchful ministrations which she tenders him with as gentle an assiduity as in her brighter days. But he has still no great appetite for her society; and she, unresentfully divining it, gives up to him, without repining, the one great solace of her melancholy--her mother's company. If Jim were gone, the more part of her life would be spent alone. She tells him so--tells him, with a sweet flattering smile, how much his comradeship is to her. Has he any right to rob her of that last prop? It is only to himself that the breathless clamberings up the steep short cut to El Biar, deep and brambly as her own Devonshire lanes, that the gazings in common over the pigeon-necked sea and the amaranth hills, can do any harm. They may put a sting into his own after-life--a sting that all the empty years that follow may be powerless to extract; but to her they serve only as a narcotic to numb the intensity of that ache which the cured madness of Byng has left behind it. Some day, of course, he must leave her; he cannot pass his whole life at her side; some day soon leave her to walk and sit and study her Italian Grammar forlornly alone. But it must not be until she has a little plucked up her spirits.

As soon as he sees any signs of this occurring, he will quit Algiers--quit it comfortably, with the consciousness of having done a good-natured thing, by which nobody is the worse. This is the compromise at which he arrives with the inward adviser--conscience, common-sense, what you will--that is hourly admonishing him to be gone. Does Elizabeth guess that her retention of the companion, to whom she so desolately clings, hangs on her remaining always as crushed as the first ten days after those cruel interviews with the Byngs, mother and son, had left her? If she did, she would probably seek to check the first faint revivings of cheerfulness in her inveterately gay spirit. Instead, while her heart is yet at its sickest, she earnestly tries to foster the tiny seeds of cheerfulness, saying to herself that it is mere selfishness in her to inflict her dismalness upon her one friend; seeking rather to lift his spirits, which seem scarcely less drooping than her own.

Does he enter into her motive? Does not it rather strike him with a species of shock how superficial must be the nature,

how on the surface the suffering, of one who can already begin again to take a mischievous interest in the Widow Wadman's amours, and to mimic afresh the Cockney twang of the French Vicomte's English governess?

It is three weeks to-day since the Byngs left. The weather is fine, and a hot sunbeam is lighting up the painful indecision of Jim's face, as he stands in his bedroom with an open telegram in his hand, which two hours ago was put into it. It is from his friend at Tunis, and is conceived in terms which demonstrate that the indignation of the sender has got the better of his economy. It contains a stringent representation of his inability any longer to dance attendance upon Burgoyne's whims, and a peremptory request, answer paid, to be at once informed either that he will join him immediately, or that the idea of their joint excursion has been entirely abandoned. He is standing holding the paper in miserable uncertainty, torn by doubts, rent in twain by conflicting emotions, when the noise of voices and laughter outside the house draws him to the window.

The room he has occupied since he vacated his own for Byng looks out over the hall-door, and in front of that door a small group is gathered--the Vicomte, his two boys, his girl, her governess, a coal-black negro who serves as kitchenmaid to the establishment, and--Elizabeth. They are all gathered round a tiny donkey, such a *bourriquot* as the valiant Tartarin slew, which has evidently been brought up for sale by its Arab master. Attached to its head gear are two long reins, and holding these reins is Miss Le Marchant. As Jim looks out, the *bourriquot*, taking some strange freak into its little brown head, sets off galloping at a prodigious rate; and Elizabeth--white gown and blonde hair flying--gallops after it. As she is dragged at racing pace down the drive, her immoderate laughter comes borne back on the wind to the spectator of whom she is unconscious.

The latter has turned away from the window, and sat down to his writing-table, where he is scribbling a hasty answer to the missive which has cost him such long deliberation. It does not take a minute to pen now that he has once made up his mind, nor can it be more than five from the moment of the donkey's start to that when the telegram is on its way to the Post Office in Zameth the porter's hand. The die is cast. When this is the case after long irresolution, there must always be a sense of relief, and perhaps, therefore, it is relief which Jim's face, thrown down upon his arms rested on the table, expresses. Since no one can see that hidden face, it is impossible to say. He has certainly no wish that Elizabeth should be unhappy. Her patient white misery had filled him with tender pity and ruth; and yet her laugh, sweet and delicate as it was with all its excess of merriment, rings jarringly in his ears. She is incapable of a great constancy. He had promised himself to stay with her until her spirits were restored. Well, he has kept his promise handsomely. He has done with her and her contradictions now. It will be someone else's turn with her next. Whose? The Vicomte's, perhaps.

By-and-by he rouses himself. Only a part of his task is yet done. He must tell them that he is going. As he passes the looking-glass, he sees that his hair is roughened and erected by his late attitude. He passes a brush hastily over it. He must not look a Bedlamite like Byng. He finds Mr. and Mrs. Le Marchant sitting under the ficus-tree on the terrace--the terrace which, at this hour, they have to themselves. She is reading aloud to him paragraphs out of the Algerian paper, translating as she goes along, since his French is about on a par with that of most Englishmen of his standing.

He is leaning back in a wicker chair, with an expression of placid good-humour on his face. Across his knees the hotel cat--a plain and ill-natured animal--lies, loudly purring, while he obligingly scratches her judiciously whenever she indicates a wish for that relaxation. As Burgoyne remembers, Mr. Le Marchant had always been on very friendly terms with the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air. About the little group there is such an air of content, of harmony, of completeness in itself, that none can connect the idea of a third person with it in anything but an interloping attitude. And yet there is a third person whose presence must be continually infringing its happy duality, since niche of her own in life has she none.

"Are you looking for Elizabeth?" asks Elizabeth's mother, laying down her paper as the new-comer draws near; "she has walked to Biermandreis."

The intimate friendliness of her smile as she gives him this bit of information--the matter of course taking for granted that he must be seeking her whose society he has so wholly monopolized of late--plants a new sting in Jim's sore heart, and robs him for the moment of the power to make his announcement.

"She has not been gone more than ten minutes"--still with that bright look of kindly confidence that she is answering his thoughts.

"I am looking for you all," he answers abruptly. "I came to tell you that I am off to-morrow."

The shaft is sped. Though he is not looking at Mrs. Le Marchant, he knows that her face has fallen. Upon Mr. Le Marchant's, on the contrary, an added shade of cheerfulness is visible. Mr. Le Marchant has ceased any overt opposition to the young man's intimacy with his family; but none the less is the young man aware that the father has acquiesced but grudgingly in the footing on which he had found Jim on his return from his tour.

"I have had a wire from my friend in Tunis; he is becoming dangerous"--laughing, oh, how forcedly!

"You are going to Tunis?" says Mr. Le Marchant, almost cordially. "You are quite right; it is a very interesting place. One does really see the genuine East there, not the mongrel hotch-potch one has here."

"Is not it rather late for a trip into the interior?" asks the wife. The geniality has gone out of her tone, and the sunshine out of her face. There is a touch of involuntary wistfulness in both.

"The interior? Oh yes, of course. My dawdling"--more laughter--"has knocked that on the head. I have let the time for that go by. We intend to run over to Spain and see the Alhambra and the Escorial."

There is a general silence. Well, it is done. Neither husband nor wife makes any effort to alter his resolution or detain him. They do not even put any questions to him as to his future projects. He has nothing to do but remove himself and allow them to resume that happy little duet which he had disturbed.

"The train sets off at such an unearthly hour to-morrow morning--six o'clock or thereabouts; it would take three days to get there if it did not--that I must put my things together this afternoon. I shall see you again, of course, before I go."

"Oh, of course," replies Mr. Le Marchant, in the easy and comfortable tone of one to whom it is a matter of supreme indifference whether or not that farewell meeting ever takes place, and Mrs. Le Marchant says nothing at all.

He has adduced his necessary packings as an excuse for leaving them; though, indeed, they neither wished for nor asked any excuse; yet nothing is further from his intentions than to enter at once upon that occupation. She has walked to Biermandreis. In five minutes he is walking thither too. There are a couple of roads that lead there, and of course he takes the wrong one--the same, that is, that she had taken, so that, although he walks fast, yet, thanks to her start of him, he has reached the pretty little flower-shaded French village which, with its white church and its Ecole Communale, looks as if it were taken to pieces at night and put to bed in a toy-box--he has reached it, and has, moreover, traced half his homeward way, before he overtakes her. The path by which he returns is a rough Arab track, cut in low steps up the hill, each step a mass of fossil-shells--whelk, and scallop and oyster shells, whose inhabitants died--strange thought!--before Adam saw Eden's fair light. It is a charming road, cut, in part, through the red rock, over which the southern greenery tumbles. He has approached quite close to her before she sees him. She is sitting on a camp-stool by the wayside, looking vacantly before her. Her figure is rather stooped, and her straight back bent, as if it were not worth the trouble to hold it up. Beside her, on the ground, lie a little tin colour-box and water-bottle and a drawing-board. He wishes, with a new pang, that he had not come upon her so suddenly. He is afraid that this is one of the aspects of her that will stick most pertinaciously in his memory. Catching sight of him, her whole sad, listless face lights up.

"It is you! I was sure you would come. I told them to tell you where I had gone. I meant to sketch"--with a glance at her neglected implements--"but"--with a sigh--"as you see, I did not."

"Are you down on your luck?" he asks, sitting down by her side; "you did not seem so"--trying to harden his heart by forcing a recollection of her extravagant gaiety--"a little while ago, when you were prancing after that jackass."

"Is not he a darling?" cries she, hurrying up the end of her sigh to make room for a smile of pleasure. "I want to buy him; only I am afraid he might die of sea-sickness going home."

"Perhaps"--scarcely knowing what he is saying.

"I should like to buy a little cart to harness him to--such a one as I saw just now going along the road, drawn by a tiny *bourriquet* that might have been twin brother to mine. Some Arab children had dressed out both him and his cart with branches of that great yellow fennel--his long ears and his little nose peeped out so pathetically between; another child walked after barefoot, waving a great acanthus-leaf. You never saw anything so pretty! Yes, you must break mine in for me," smiling again; "it will not take more than a week, I am sure."

"If it did not take more than a day even, I am afraid I should have to decline the appointment"--seizing this opening to blurt out his news. "I am off at six o'clock to-morrow morning. I--I want to see the Escorial."

She had been almost garrulous about the little donkey, and he had wished to stop her. In that he has undoubtedly succeeded.

How the asphodels cover the banks on either hand! They have come into full flower since last he passed this way: tall branching stem, white blossom, and pinky bud; here they are in thousands.

It is a soft day, on which scents lie heavy, and their strong odour--that is scarcely perfume, and yet has an odd, acrid charm--fills the air.

"Everything must come to an end," he says baldly.

She is apparently not going to make any more effort to detain him than had her mother. He has every right to come and go where and when he pleases. Since Amelia died, to no human being is he accountable for his actions, and yet there is both guilt and misery in his voice as he utters his platitude.

"It has been great good luck for me that you have stayed so long; I know that it is out of pure kindness that you have done it, and it has made all the difference to me. I--I am quite set up again now, thanks to you; and--and summer is coming on, and I shall do very well--capitally!"

She has detected--what is, indeed, pretty obvious--the deep distress of his face and voice, and, in her habitual unselfishness, her one thought is to relieve him of any self-reproachful misgiving that he is doing aught cruel in robbing her of the support of his companionship. In her tone is nothing but the meekest gratitude. It is her misfortune, not her fault, that in it there is not cheerfulness too. But her "gentle physic," instead of curing, seems to aggravate his ill.

"It must come to an end some time or other!" he murmurs wretchedly, as if to himself.

"Yes!"

Dead silence.

Below the slight eminence where they sit, the road winds white, and upon the opulent low green hills on its further side, what a banquet of colour! On one steep slope the plough is driving its difficult furrows, turning up the rich red earth, shaded with deeper claret and lighter pink stains.

Beneath, a square of stone-pines looks like a green velvet handkerchief spread on the hillside, and over the rest of the upland eucalyptus, and olive, and cactus hold their riot of various verdure; while, on the tiptop of everything, against a weirdly pale-blue sky-field, a Moorish villa lifts its white flank.

How long have they both been staring dully at that fair prospect before Elizabeth again speaks!--

"You were a very good friend to me!"

She had not meant that past tense as an arrow to shoot into his heart; but it sticks there, barbed.

"I do not know how."

"And friends--real, good friends--should not have concealments from each other, should they? They should tell one another about themselves?"

"Yes."

A pause.

"I have often wished--often tried to tell you about myself; but I could not. I never could! I can tell you to-day if you wish, if you care to hear. Do you care?"

"*Do I care?*"

What a small battlefield those three words make for the anger and agony they express to fight upon!

Another longer pause.

She has taken off her hat, and now passes her handkerchief over her damp forehead.

"I shall be all right when I have once begun, but it is bad to make a start."

"Do not make it! do not tell me! I adjure you not to tell me! it hurts you too much!"

"It would hurt me more to let you go without telling you. Do you remember"--rushing desperately into her subject--"at the time you stayed with us at the Moat, that there was a great talk among us of my having my portrait painted?"

He knits his brow in an eager straining of his memory.

"Yes, I recollect."

"Father was wonderfully proud of me in those days; it seems impossible to believe it now"--with a passing look of incredulity at her own statement--"but he was."

"Yes, yes."

"Do you remember all the arranging and planning as to who was to be the artist, and that he was to come and stay in the house to paint it?"

Jim has put his hand up to his forehead as if to quicken the return of those faint and distant impressions which are coming out in stronger and stronger colours on memory's surface.

"Yes, yes; he was not an Englishman, was he? We used to laugh about him"--adding stroke to stroke in order to convince her of the accuracy of his recollections--"used to call him the 'distinguished foreigner.'"

"Did we? Yes"--slowly--"I remember now that we did. Well"--gathering herself up for a supreme effort, panting painfully, and turning her head quite aside so that he may have no glimpse of her face--"he came, and he stayed two months, and at the end of those two months I--I--ran away with him!"



CHAPTER XIV.

VALE?

One would have thought that Jim had been in some measure prepared for the just-fallen blow, both by the overheard fragments of Mr. Greenock's conversation with the Devonshire clergyman at Florence last year; by the accumulated evidence of there being some blight upon Elizabeth's life; and, lastly and chiefly, by the ravings of Byng. But there is something so different from all these, so infinitely more dreadful, in hearing this naked statement from her own lips, that it stuns him as much as if he had never received any hint of that ruinous secret in the background of her life.

Having now uttered it, she stops, either to pick up her own spent strength or to give him the opportunity for some question or comment.

He makes neither.

"I thought--I hoped--that you had guessed, from what Mr. Byng said. I believed that when he was not himself----"

Again she breaks off, but still no sound comes from Jim.

"You understand, of course, that that was what I told him. I wanted to tell him the rest, but that time he could not hear it, and the last time he--he--did not care to hear it."

His continued muteness must daunt her, for she here makes a longer pause than before. Indeed, it is only the fear lest she should mean it for a final one that enables him to force out the two husky monosyllables:

"Go on."

She is always most obedient, and she now obeys.

"He came only two days after you left us; that was why the sight of you was so--so painful to us at first. It was not your fault, but we could not help mixing you up with him. You remember how we tried to avoid you--how discourteous we were? You forgave us afterwards, but you must have observed it."

The listener makes a slight motion of assent.

"He was a Hungarian, and had been recommended to father by Sir ----, who, as you know, is always so extraordinarily kind to struggling artists, and who thought highly of his talent, and wished to get him commissions. He was almost starving in London; that was one great reason, I think, why father employed him."

Even at this moment the thought darts across Jim's mind that he has never known Elizabeth miss an opportunity of implying some praise of that father whose harshness towards herself he has so often had an opportunity of witnessing.

"He was quite young--not more than twenty-three--and he looked very ill when he first came; indeed, he was really half starved. It has always been the surest passport to mammy's heart to be poor and sick and down in the world, and nothing could have been kinder than they both were to him."

"And well he repaid their kindness," says Jim, indignation at last giving him words.

She puts out her hand, as if to stop him.

"Wait, wait!" she says, almost authoritatively; "do not abuse him. He seemed very grateful to them, and they all--we all--became quite fond of him. When he grew stronger, he turned out to be very lively and light-hearted--almost as light-hearted as we."

She pauses, pulled up by a deep sigh, at the reminiscence of that young gaiety, then hurries on, as if afraid of his again breaking in upon her narrative with some scathing ejaculation.

"Before three weeks were over--you know how cheerful and easy-going we were--he was quite one of us--quite as--as intimate as you were."

Jim stirs uneasily, galled by the comparison.

"He was a long time painting my picture--could not satisfy himself with the likeness--and began it over again several

times. At first there was always someone in the room with us when I sat to him, but by-and-by, as he became more and more one of us--as his presence among us grew to be a matter of course--we were allowed often to be *tete-a-tete*."

She stops to let pass two Frenchmen and a Frenchwoman of the *petit bourgeois* class who are sauntering homewards, frisked about by two little cheerful curs, and with armfuls of hawthorn--yes; real English hawthorn--in their embrace. They look inquisitively, but not rudely, at the pale couple, and now they are out of sight.

"It was a very fine autumn, as you may remember, and we used to go out sketching together. He was supposed to give us sketching lessons--the children and me. The governess was by way of always being there, but she was a sentimental creature, generally straying away by herself with a poetry-book, and we were virtually alone."

Jim sees how increasingly, how horribly difficult of relation is the tale as it nears its catastrophe; but he is quite incapable of helping her.

"We fell in love with one another"--almost brusquely--"and he asked me to marry him. What did his miserable poverty matter to us? He knew almost as little of the practical business of life as I, and he was full of hope and ambition. He was convinced that he had a future before him. Perhaps he had. Who knows?"

There is mixed with the hurry and shame and anguish of her tone such an element of almost regretful compassion as she pronounces these last words, that Jim's jealous wrath awakes. Does she, then, love him still? In her heart for how many is there lodging at once? For Byng? For this unknown? For how many more?

"Even he, high-flown as he was, knew that it was impossible that father could permit our marriage if we asked his consent; but what he laboured to convince me of was, that if the thing were once done and irrevocable, father would soon, doting as he did on me--you know he *did* dote on me, poor father!--he would soon forgive us; and I, after awhile--oh! it was after awhile; do not think it was at once"--with a piteous effort to mitigate the severity of her silent judge--"and I have always all my life been terribly easily persuaded--I gave in."

Far away a dull cloud, rain-charged, is settling over the Kabyle mountains, rubbing out their toothed ridge. Can she hold out to the end?

She has not reached the worst yet.

"We were soon given an opportunity. Father and mother went away for a couple of nights upon a visit, and left us under the nominal chaperonage of a deaf old aunt of mother's, and of the governess, who, as I have told you, was worse than useless. You know that our railway-station was not more than a mile from the lodge gates; we had, therefore, no difficulty in slipping away from the others while we were all out walking, making our way there, and getting into the little branch-line train which caught the London express at Exeter."

She has repeatedly put up her handkerchief, and passed it over her brow, but it is useless. The cold sweat breaks out afresh and afresh.

"That journey! I did not know that it was the end of my life. We both set off laughing and saying to each other what a good joke it was. That was at the beginning, but long and long before we reached London--it was not till very late that we did so--I would have given all the world to go back. I did not tell him so, because I thought it would hurt him, but I have often thought since that perhaps he was feeling the same."

Again that touch of almost tender ruth in her voice makes her auditor writhe.

"We went to an hotel. I think it must have been in some very out-of-the-way part of the town, probably the only one he knew of, and at first they would not take us in because we had no luggage; but they consented at last. I heard him telling the landlady that I was his sister. I suppose she did not believe it, as she looked very oddly at me. I did not understand why she should; but it made me feel very wretched--so wretched that I could scarcely swallow a mouthful of the supper he ordered. I do not think that he had much more appetite than I; but we tried very hard to laugh and keep up each other's spirits. They gave me a very dismal bedroom--I can see it now"--shuddering--"and as I had no change of clothes I lay all night outside my bed. It took a great deal to keep me awake in those days, and, wretched as I was, I slept a good deal. The next morning I awoke, feeling more cheerful. We should be married in the forenoon, return home in the afternoon, to spring our surprise upon the children and Fraulein, and be ready to receive and be pardoned by father and mother on their return to-morrow. It had not occurred to either of us that there would be the slightest difficulty in pursuing this course. We had decided upon at once inquiring the name and address of the clergyman in whose parish the hotel was--going together to ask for an interview, and beg him to marry us at once. We had a vague idea that a licence might be needed, but relied upon the clergyman also to inform us where that might be got. In one respect our plans had to be at once modified. When I came down I found that there was such a dense fog that he would not hear of my venturing out into it, particularly, he said, as my staying behind would entail no delay; since,

when he had obtained the licence and engaged the clergyman, he would, of course, at once come back to fetch me to church. I gave in, though I had rather have gone with him, and fought my way through the fog than stayed behind, alone in that dreary sitting-room. I was there nearly all day by myself until late in the afternoon. The fog was so thick that I could not see a finger's length beyond the window, nor even across the room. I had neither book nor work. I had nothing to do but walk up and down by the flickering light of the bad gas, which was burning all day, and look at a wretched little dead aucuba in a pot. Sometimes I went out on the landing to see if there were any signs of his return. I had done this for the fiftieth time, when at last I saw him through the gas and the fog, coming up the staircase. I could not wait till he had reached me, but called out over the banisters, 'Well? Well?' His only answer was a sort of sign to me to go back into the room; but I did not understand it at first. Not until I saw, coming up the stairs too, a little behind him, the face of--of--that clergyman you saw at Certosa--our clergyman whom we used to make fun of. Oh, why did we?"

She breaks off with a low moan, but at once resumes as if she could not trust herself to pause:

"As soon as I caught sight of him I ran back; but it was too late. I knew that he had recognised me. I do not, to this day, understand how he came to be in that out-of-the-way place; whether it was a most unfortunate coincidence, or whether he had seen us in the train or at Paddington, and tracked us there. I ran back, as I have said, into the room; but I did not really mind much his having seen me; it would all be explained so soon, and I was too much taken up with the bitter disappointment in store for me to give him more than a passing thought. Of course you will understand that it was not in the power of any clergyman to marry us, as neither of us had lived in the parish for the requisite time beforehand, nor could we be married at a registry office, as our names had not been entered in the registrar's book for the legal time. I think I should have broken down altogether when I heard this if I had not had to comfort him. He was so overwhelmed with the fear that I should think that it was his fault--that he had not done his best. Heaven knows I had no such hard thought of him! Although we consulted together all that evening, and till late into the night, we could not hit upon any expedient. He had been told vaguely that the Scotch marriage law differed from the English, and that in Edinburgh we might be married at once. But we had not enough money to take us there. Our whole stock would only just buy an ordinary licence, keep us one day more at the hotel, and take us home third class. What *should* we do? We did not even try to laugh that evening--that last evening!"

In her voice is the same echo of some pitying sorrow that had before offended him; but his interest is now too strung up for him to notice it.

"I did not once close my eyes that night, and when I came down next morning I had made up my mind to beg him to let me go home and ask father to make everything right. I had such confidence that father could set everything right. When I came into the sitting-room he was not there. I waited for him, and after awhile the breakfast was brought up; but still he did not come. I waited on. It seemed to me odd that, at such a crisis, when we were both so miserable, he should be able to oversleep himself I am afraid"--with an accent of most regretful remorse--"that I did think hardly of him then. I looked at the clock; I had been down an hour. I rang for the waiter, and asked him to go and tell the gentleman this. He was so long in coming back that I lost patience, and went out into the passage. I saw a little group of people gathered round a door some way down it. They seemed to be whispering and speaking excitedly, and one chambermaid was crying. In an instant I was among them, through them, in the room. It was his bedroom. He was lying half on, half off the bed. He had evidently not undressed all night, and had taken off nothing but his coat. Before they could stop me--I believe that they humanely tried--I had caught a glimpse of his face, and had heard someone, as if at a great distance off, pronounce the word '*dead*'! Then everything went away. I believe I crashed down like a log, as Mr. Byng did. When next I came to myself mammy was leaning over me. The people in the hotel had found a letter in my pocket, with my address, and had telegraphed for her and father. They took me home. I do not remember anything about that, but so I was told afterwards, as I was also told that he had died of deep-seated heart-disease, aggravated by his anxiety about me. I have never brought good-luck to anyone that had to do with me!"

She is crying quietly now. Is it her tale or her tears that have softened Jim's heart? He no longer grudges her that tribute to the lover of her youth.

"For the first few days after I came home I did not feel anything at all, and I saw nobody but mammy. At the end of a week she came to me, and told me that I must pull myself together, for that my father wished me to go with him to an agricultural meeting at Exeter, which we were always in the habit of attending. She said that there were reports about me in the county, which nothing but my appearing in public would contradict. She said she knew how hard it was for me, but that she knew, too, that I would try to make the effort for their sakes. *For their sakes!*"--in a heart-wrung voice--"was not it the least I could do, *for their sakes?* I got up; my legs felt as if they did not belong to me. She dressed me herself--darling mammy!--and she tied on my veil, and--put some rouge on my cheeks! Think of mammy rouging anyone! If you remember, we had had some charades while you were with us, and had bought some rouge for them. And then she took me down to father, and we went--he and I."

Her breath has grown shorter, and her narrative more disjointed; but she perseveres. Is not she near the end?

"We went--and we walked about--among the shorthorns--and the prize poultry--and the tents--father and I--and we met a great many people whom we knew--the whole county was there--but we were too late. Our Rector had been before us with them--and not one of them would speak to me! Not one of them would have anything to say to me! And then we went home. Oh, poor father!"

She has covered her face with her transparent hands. The emotion that she would not permit herself for herself has mastered her at the recollection of that father's abasement and agony.

"He was quite right--it was quite natural that he should not allow me to live at home, after that. He said I must not blight the children's lives--must not stand in the light of the others. So I was sent away to live with some old friends of mammy's--two kind old ladies--with whom she had been at school; and they were very good to me, and I lived with them until, as Miriam and Rose were married, father thought I could not do anyone any more harm, and he let me come home again. There! that is all!"

She stops, her tale ended, sighing with the inexpressible relief of that lifted load. Speech from him now would be no interruption--would be kindly, rather, and welcome. Yet he still stares blankly before him. Why has she told him that painful tale? Is it that he may carry a more lenient judgment of her through the rest of his life--that life to be finally severed from hers? Or is it with some hope that that told tale may keep him for ever beside her? She does not love him. She loves Byng. But, as he has often told himself, she is not of the stuff of which great constancies are made. And, since Byng has forsaken her, whom has this pliant creature, that nature made so clinging and circumstances so lonely, left to throw her tendrils round, except him? She does not love him, and yet in the depth of his heart he knows that, if he wished it, he could make her love him. Shall he wish it? Shall he stay--stay to have those exquisite eyes, tear-washed, and yet laughing, watching for his lightest wish; that tripping step keeping time to his up the hills and through the valleys of life; that delicate sympathy, soaring with his highest thoughts, and yet playing with his lightest fancies? Shall he?

Elizabeth is looking down upon the asphodels, stooping to stroke, as if it were a sentient thing, a great plummy plant, like a sort of glorified fennel, out of whose fluthery breast a puissant sheath rises, from which an unfamiliar flower is pushing. What a fascination there is in this alien vegetation, in which every shut calyx holds a delightful secret!

Shall he? For himself, he believes her story implicitly, feeling, indeed, with a shock of mixed surprise and remorse, what a past want of faith in her is evidenced by his unspeakable relief at its being no worse a one. But who else will believe it? And the more penetratingly sweet, the more poignantly dear she is to him, the sharper to him will be the agony of the eye averted from her, the suspicious whisper, or the contemptuous smile. Is his heart stout enough, is his courage high enough, to support and uphold her through her life's long contumely? Dares he undertake that hard task? Dares he?

Elizabeth is never one apt to take offence, or she might resent his delay in making any observation on her ended story. Probably she divines that whatever may be the cause of his slowness, it is certainly not want of emotion.

At length his tardy speech makes itself heard.

"I do not know how--I have not words strong enough with which to thank you for telling me."

"I did not want my one friend to go away thinking more hardly of me than he need," she answers, with a poor, small smile.

This is one of the bitterest cups to which her lips have ever been set in the course of her sad history.

His next sentence is almost inaudible.

"I could not well think much better of you than I have done all along."

He knows, without seeing it, that her trembling hand makes a half-motion to go out to him at those kind-sounding words, but it is drawn back again before the action has passed much beyond the stage of a project.

The wind has fallen. With how almost disagreeable a strength does the sharp and pungent smell of the innumerable asphodels assail the nostrils. The light grows lower. Dares he? Has he the steady selfless valour that will be needed to fight through many years by the side of this forlorn creature against an enemy uglier--and, oh! how much more potent!--than any of the fierce forest creatures in contest with which he has so often lightly perilled his life? Dares he? He has never been lacking in self-reliance--been, perhaps, too little apt to blench at the obstacles strewn in his life-path. Is he going to blench now? Whether it be to his credit or his shame, the answer does not come all at once. Dares he? The response comes at last--comes slowly, comes solemnly, yet comes certainly:

"Yes."

He can never again laugh at Byng for his tears, for he is undoubtedly crying himself now.

"Elizabeth! Elizabeth!"--he cannot get further than that at first--"you--you are the worst-used woman in the world! and I--I have not the least desire to see the Escorial!"

THE END.