# AUNT ANNE

## VOL. 1

*Mrs. W. K. Clifford*

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# Aunt Anne.

## *By Mrs. W. K. Clifford,*

*Author of "Mrs. Keith's Crime," etc.*

"As less the olden glow abides,
And less the chillier heart aspires,
With driftwood beached in past spring-tides
We light our sullen fires."

James Russell Lowell.

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# AUNT ANNE.

# CHAPTER I.

MR. and Mrs. Walter Hibbert had been married just four months when Aunt Anne first appeared on the scene. They were at Brighton, whither they had gone from Friday to Tuesday, so that Mr. Hibbert might get braced up after a hard spell of work. Besides doing his usual journalism, he had been helping a friend with a popular educational weekly, and altogether "had slaved quite wickedly," so his wife said. But he had declared that, though he found matrimony, as far as he had gone, very delightful, it had to be paid for, especially at the beginning of its career, when it ran into furniture, linen, plate, and expensive presents to a dear little wife, though the expensiveness of the last he generously kept to himself. So it resulted in the visit to Brighton. They spent the happiest four days in the world there, and felt quite sad when Tuesday morning arrived. But they wisely did their best to forget that the evening train would take them back to London, and resolved that their last day should pass merrily.

"Suppose we have a long drowsy morning on the pier," she suggested; "nothing is nicer or more restful than to listen to the band and look down into the water. We needn't see the horrid people—indeed, if we sit on one of the end seats and keep our faces turned seawards, we can forget that they even exist."

Mr. Hibbert solemnly considered the proposal.

"The only drawback is the music, it makes so much noise—that's the worst of music, it always does," he said sadly. "Another thing is, that I cannot lie full length on the pier as I can on the beach."

"Very well, then we'll go to the beach. The worst of the beach is, that we can't look down into the water, as we can from the end of the pier."

"That's true; and then there are lots of pretty girls on the pier, and I like to see them, for then I know that there are some left—for the other fellows," he added nobly.

So they went to the pier, and sat on one of the side seats at the far end and looked down into the water, and blinked their happy eyes at the sunshine. And they felt as if all the beautiful world belonged to them, as if

they two together were being drawn dreamily on and on into the sky, and sea, and light, to make one glorious whole with happy nature; but a whole in which they would be for ever conscious of being together, and never less sleepy or blissful than now. This was Walter's idea, and he said it all in his dear romantic way that generally ended up with a laugh. "It would never do, you know, because we should get nothing to eat."

"Don't," she said. "That is so like you; you always spoil a beautiful idea, you provoking thing," and she rubbed her chin against the back of the seat and looked down more intently at the water. Without any one in the least suspecting it, he managed to stoop and kiss her hand, while he pretended to be trying to see something, that of course was not there, at the top of a wave.

They were having a delightful morning, they lived in every moment of it, and wished it would never come to an end; still, when it did, there would be a delicious luncheon to go back to—very large prawns, roast chicken and green peas, and an enormous dish of ripe figs, which both their souls loved. After all, Walter thought, the world was not a bad place, especially when you had a wife who adored you and thought that everything you did bore the stamp of genius.

The band was playing a waltz, though to this day they do not know it. All manner of people were passing to and fro, but they did not notice them.

"I should like to stay here for ever," Mrs. Hibbert said, with a sweet sigh of content. "Do you know, Walter," she went on suddenly after a pause, "it will be four months to-morrow since we were married? Time seems to have flown."

"By Jove! it really is a miracle what those four months have done with themselves," he answered, looking up for a moment; as if to be sure that Time was not a conjurer standing before him about to hand the four months from beneath a handkerchief, with a polite bow and the remark that they would have to be lived through at the ordinary rate.

A spare-looking old lady, dressed in black, passed by, but he did not notice her.

"You see," he went on, with his eyes fixed on a sailing boat in the distance, "if things were always going to be——"

At the sound of his voice the lady in black, who was only a few yards off, stopped, listened, hesitated, and, turning back, stood before him. He recognized her in a moment.

“Aunt Anne!” he exclaimed. His voice was amiable, but embarrassed, as if he did not quite know what to do next.

“My dear Walter,” she said, with a sigh and in a tone of great relief, “I am so glad to find you; I went to your lodgings, I saw your name and address in the visitors’ list yesterday, but you were out; then I thought I might find you here. And this is your wife? My dear Florence, I am so glad to see you.”

Till that moment Mrs. Walter Hibbert had never heard of the existence of Aunt Anne, but Aunt Anne had evidently heard of Mrs. Hibbert. She knew her Christian name, and called her by it as naturally as if she had been at her christening. She stretched out a small hand covered with a black thread glove as she spoke, and held Florence’s fingers affectionately in hers. Florence looked at her a little wonderingly. Aunt Anne was slight and old, nearly sixty perhaps. All over her face there were little lines that crossed and re-crossed, and branched off in every direction. She had grey hair, and small dark eyes that blinked quickly and nervously; there appeared to be some trifling affection of the left eye, for now and then, as if by accident, it winked at you. The odd thing was that, in spite of her evident tendency to nervous excitement, her shabby black satin dress, almost threadbare shawl, and cheap gloves, there was an air of dignity about the spare old lady, and something like determination in her kindly voice that, joined to her impulsive tenderness, made you quickly understand she would be a very difficult person to oppose.

“Dear boy,” she said gently to Walter, “why didn’t you write to me when you were married? You know how glad I should have been to hear of your happiness.”

“Why didn’t you write to me, Aunt Anne?” he asked, gaily turning the tables.

“Yes, I ought to have done so. You must forgive me, dears, for being so remiss,” she said, looking at them both, “and believe me that it was from no lack of affection. But,” she went on quickly, “we must not waste our time. You are coming to Rottingdean with me, and at once. Mr. Baines is longing to see you both.”

“But we can’t go now, Aunt Anne,” Walter declared in his kindest manner; “we must get back to the lodgings. We told them to have luncheon ready at one o’clock, and to-night we go home. You must come and lunch with us.”

“That is impossible, dear Walter; you are coming back with me.”

“It can’t be done to-day,” he said regretfully.

“My dear Walter,” she answered, with a look of dismay and in a voice that was almost pained, “what would your uncle say if he heard you? I could not possibly return without you.”

“But he has never seen me, Aunt Anne.”

“That is one reason why he would never forgive me if I did not take you back.”

“But it is so far, and we should be all day getting there,” Walter objected a little helplessly, for he felt already that Aunt Anne would carry her point.

“It is only to Rottingdean”—she spoke with hurt surprise—“and we will drive. I saw a beautiful fly as I was coming on to the pier, and engaged it. I know you too well, my darling, to think that you will refuse me.”

Her manner had changed in a moment; she said the last words with soft triumph, and looked at Florence. The sight of the young wife seemed to be too much for her; there was something like a tear in the left eye, the one that winked, when she spoke again.

“I must give her a kiss,” she said tenderly, and putting out her arms she gathered the girl to her heart. “But we must make haste,” she went on quickly, hurrying over the fag end of her embrace, as if she had not time to indulge in her feelings much as she desired to do so. “Mr. Baines will wonder what has happened to us. He is longing to see you;” and without their knowing it, she almost chased them along the pier.

Then Walter, thinking of the prawns and the chicken and the large dish of ripe green figs, made a wild struggle to get free.

“But really, Aunt Anne,” he said firmly, “we must go back to the lodgings. Come and lunch with us now, and let us go and see Mr. Baines another time; I dare say we shall be at Brighton again soon. We will make a point of coming now that we know you are here, won’t we, Floggie?” and he appealed feebly to his wife.

“Yes, indeed we will,” Florence assured her.

“Dear children,” Aunt Anne laughed, “I shall not take any excuse, or think of letting you escape now that I have found you.” There was an unexpected brightness in her manner, but there was no intention of letting them go.

“Besides, there may be important letters at the lodgings, and I ought to do a bit of work;” but there was evident invention in Walter’s voice, and she did not slacken her pace. Still, as if she wanted him to know that she saw through his excuses, she looked at him reproachfully, and with a determination that did not falter.

“It would be impossible for me to return without you,” she said, with extreme gravity; “he would never forgive me. Besides, dear children, you don’t know what a pleasure it is to see you. I could not let you go just yet. My heart gave a bound as I recognized Walter’s voice,” she went on, turning to Florence; “he is so like what his dear father used to be. I knew him directly.”

They were already by the turnstile. They felt helpless. The old lady with the thin shoulders and the black shawl loosely floating behind seemed to be their master: they were like children doing as they were told.

“Here is the fly. Get in, my darlings,” she said triumphantly, and Florence meekly took her place. “Get in, dear Walter,” she repeated with decision, “I will follow; get in,” and he too obeyed. Another moment and they were going towards Rottingdean.

The old lady looked relieved and pleased when they were well on their way.

“It is a lovely drive,” she said, “and it will do you far more good than sitting on the pier. I am so glad to have you with me, dear children.” She seemed to delight in calling them children, and it was odd, but each time that she said the word it seemed to give her a stronger hold on them. She turned to Florence.

“Are your father and mother quite well, my dear?” she asked, and waited with polite eagerness for a reply.

Walter put his hand on his wife’s.

“She only has a mother,” he said gently.

Aunt Anne looked quite penitent. She winked with her left eye and was silent for a moment or two, almost as if she meditated shedding a tear for the defunct father of the niece by marriage whom she had never seen in her life before to-day. Suddenly she turned the subject so grotesquely that they nearly laughed.

“Are you fond of chocolates, my darling?”

"Yes——" Florence hesitated a minute and then said softly, "Yes, Aunt Anne, very"—she had not had occasion to give the old lady any name in the few words she had spoken previously.

"Dear child, I knew you would be," Aunt Anne said, and from under her shawl she produced a box covered with white satin paper and having on its lid a very bright picture of a very smart lady. "I bought that box of chocolates for you as I came along. I thought Florence would be like the picture on the lid," she added, turning to her nephew; "and she is, don't you think so, Walter dear?"

"Yes, Aunt Anne, she is—it is a most beautiful lady," he answered, and he looked fondly at his wife and drew up his lips a little bit in a manner that Florence knew meant, in the language only she and he in all the wide world understood, that in his thoughts he kissed her.

Aunt Anne was a dear old lady, Florence thought, and of course she liked, and always would like, any relation of Walter's; still, she did so wish that on this particular day, their last by the sea together, Aunt Anne had kept her distance. Walter was so pale when they left town, but since Friday, with nothing to do but to get brown in the sun, he had been looking better and handsomer every day, and this last one they had longed to enjoy in their own lazy way; and now all their little plans were spoilt. To-morrow he would be at his office: it was really too bad, though it was ungrateful to think it, perhaps, with the remembrance of Aunt Anne's embrace fresh upon her, and the box of chocolates on her lap. Still, after all, she felt justified, for she knew that Walter was raging inwardly, and that if they were alone he would use some short but very effective words to describe his own feeling in respect to the turning up of Aunt Anne. Only he was so good, so gentle and considerate, that, no matter what his thoughts might be, of course he would not let Aunt Anne feel how much her kindness bothered him.

Meanwhile, they jogged along in the open fly towards Rottingdean. A long, even road, with a view on the right of the open sea, on the left alternate high hedges and wide meadows. The grass on the cliffs was green; among the grass were little footpaths made by wandering feet that had diverged from the main road. Florence followed the little tracks with her eyes; she thought of footpaths like them far away, not by the sea, but among the hanging woods of Surrey. She and Walter had sauntered along them less than a year ago. She thought of home, of the dear mother busy with her household duties, but making time between to write to the boys in India; of the dear, noisy boys who suddenly grew to be young men and vanished into the whirl of life; of the dirty old pony carriage in which she had loved to

drive her sweetheart; and when she got to this point her thoughts came to a full stop to think more particularly of the pony. His name was Moses, and he had liked being kissed and eating sugar. She remembered, with a pang of self-reproach, that in the last months before her marriage she used to forget to kiss Moses, though she often stood absently stroking his patient nose. She had sometimes even forgotten his morning lump of sugar in the excitement of reading the letter that the early post never failed to bring.

"Are you fond of scenery, dear?" Aunt Anne asked.

With a start Florence looked round at the old lady, at Walter, at the shabby lining of the fly.

"Yes, very," she answered.

"I knew it by the expression of your face when you looked at the sea. Mr. Baines says it is a lovely view."

Why should Mr. Baines be quoted? Florence wondered. She looked again—an open sea, a misty horizon, a blue sky, and the sun shining. A fine sea-view, certainly, and a splendid day, but scenery was hardly the term to apply to the distance beside them.

"Is Mr. Baines very fond of the sea?" she asked. She saw that Aunt Anne was waiting for her to speak, and she said the first words that presented themselves.

"Yes, my love, he delights in scenery. You must call him Uncle Robert, Florence. He would be deeply wounded to hear you say Mr. Baines. Neither he nor I could think of Walter's wife as anything but our niece. You will remember, won't you, my love?" Aunt Anne spoke in the gentle but authoritative voice which was, as they had already found, difficult to resist.

"Yes, Aunt Anne, of course I will if you wish it; it was only because as yet I do not know him."

"But you soon will know him, my love," the old lady answered confidently; "and when you do, you will feel that neither he nor I could think of Walter's wife except to love her. Dear child, how fond he will be of you!" And she put her hand affectionately on Florence's while she turned to Walter and asked suddenly—

"Walter dear, have you got a white silk handkerchief for your neck?"

He looked at her for a moment, almost puzzled, wondering whether she wanted to borrow one.

"No, Aunt Anne, I fear I have not."

She dived down into her pocket and pulled out a little soft packet. "I thought it possible you hadn't one," she said joyfully, "so I bought this for you just now;" and she tucked the little parcel into his hand.

It took him by surprise, he did not know what to say. He felt like the schoolboy she seemed to take him for, and a schoolboy's awkwardness overtook him; he smiled, nodded mysteriously, and put the handkerchief into his pocket. His manner delighted Mrs. Baines.

"He is just the same," she said to Florence; "I remember him so well when he was only ten years old. He had the most lovely eyes I ever saw. Walter, do you remember my visit to your father?—Ah! we have reached the hill, that's why he's going so slowly," she exclaimed excitedly. "We shall be there in five minutes. Now we are close to the village. Drive through the street, coachman," she called out, "past the church, and a little way on you will see a house standing back from the road with a long garden in front and a white gate. Florence dear," she asked, still keeping her eyes fixed on the driver, "do you like preserve?"

"Like—do you mean jam?" Florence asked, bewildered by another sudden question.

"Yes, my love, preserve," Aunt Anne answered pointedly, as if she resented the use of the shorter word.

"Yes, I like it very much," her newly found niece said humbly, feeling that she had been rebuked.

"We have quantities of fruit in our garden, and have been preserving it all the week. It is not very firm yet, but you must have some to take back with you."

"I am afraid we shall hardly be able to carry it," Florence began timidly, feeling convinced that if she were made to carry jam to London it would be fatal to the rest of her luggage.

"I will pack it for you myself," Aunt Anne said firmly. She was watching the driver too intently to say more. She did not speak again till they had driven down the one street of Rottingdean, past the newly built cottages and the church, and appeared to be getting into another main road. Then suddenly she rose triumphantly from her seat. "There it is, coachman, that little cottage to the left. Dear Walter—how pleased your uncle will be! Here it is, dears," and all her kindly face lighted up with satisfaction as they stopped before a small whitewashed cottage with a long garden in front and

a bed of lupins at the side. Florence noticed that the garden, stretching far behind, was full of fruit-trees, and that a pear-tree rubbed against the sides of the house.

The old lady got out of the fly slowly, she handed out her niece and nephew; the latter was going to pay the driver, but she pushed away his hand, then stood for a moment feeling absently in her pocket. After a moment she looked up and said in an abstracted voice, "Walter dear, you must settle with the flyman when you go back to Brighton; he is paid by the hour and will wait for you, my darlings;" and she turned towards the gate. "Come," she said, "I must present you to your uncle.—Robert," she called, "are you there?" She walked along the pathway with a quick determined step a little in advance of her visitors: when she reached the house she stood still, looking in, but hesitating to enter. Florence and Walter overtaking her saw that the front door opened into a room simply, almost poorly, furnished, with many photographs dotted about the walls, and a curious arrangement of quartz and ferns in one corner. While Mrs. Baines stood irresolute, there came round the house from the right a little shabby-looking maid-servant. Her dress was dirty, and she wore a large cap on her untidy head.

"Emma," said Aunt Anne in the condescending voice of one who struggled, but unsuccessfully, to forget her own superior condition in life, "where is your master?"

"I don't know, mum, but I think he's tying up the beans."

"Have you prepared luncheon?"

The girl looked up in surprise she evidently did not dare express, and answered in the negative.

"Then go and do so immediately."

"But please, mum, what am I to put on the table?" asked the girl, bewildered.

"Put!" exclaimed the old lady; "why, the cold bacon, and the preserved cranberries, of course, and the honey and the buns."

Florence thought that it sounded like the oddest meal in the world.

"I think we had better return, I do indeed, Aunt Anne, if you will kindly let us," urged Walter, thinking regretfully of the chicken.

Aunt Anne waved her hand.

“Walter,” she answered grandly, “you shall not go until you have partaken of our hospitality. I wish it were a thousand times better than it is,” she added, with a pathetic note in her voice that found their hearts directly.

Walter put his hand on her shoulder like the simple affectionate fellow he was, and Florence hastened to say heartily—

“It sounds delightful, dear Aunt Anne; it is only that we——” And then there came slouching round the left side of the house a tall ungainly-looking man of about sixty, a man with a brown beard and brown trousers, carrying in his hand a newspaper. He looked at Walter and at Florence in almost stupid surprise, and turned from them with a grunt.

“Anne,” he said crossly, “where have you been? I have wasted all my morning looking for you; you knew those scarlet runners wanted tying up, and the sunflowers trimming. Who are these?” he asked, nodding at his visitors as coolly as if they had been out of hearing; “and what is that fly doing at the gate?”

“Why, I have been to Brighton, of course,” Aunt Anne answered bravely, lifting her head and looking him in the face, but there was a quaver of something like fear in her voice; “I told you I was going: I went by the omnibus.”

“What did you go to Brighton for? you were there only last week.” He lowered his voice and asked again, “Who are these?”

“Robert, I told you yesterday that Walter Hibbert’s name was in the visitors’ list in the paper, and that I was longing to see him and his wife,” she answered sharply, but still with dignity—it was doubtful which of the two was master—“so of course I went off this morning to fetch them. I knew how glad you would be to see them.”

Mr. Baines gave a grunt.

The maid, laying the cloth in the whitewashed sitting-room, stopped clattering the forks and spoons to hear what was going on and to look through the open window. Aunt Anne noticed it in a moment, and turning round said sternly—

“Emma, proceed with your work. I told you,” she went on, again speaking to her husband, “that these dear children were at Brighton. I have brought them back, Robert, to introduce them to you. They have been looking forward to it.”

He gave another grunt, and shook his awkward shoulders in what was meant to be a civil manner.

"Oh, that's it," he said; "well, you had better come in and have something to eat." And he led the way into the cottage.

Aunt Anne entirely recovered herself the moment she was under her own roof. "He is so forgetful," she said softly, "but he has really been longing to see you;" and she touched his arm: "I told them how glad you would be to see them, Robert," she said appealingly, as if she felt quite certain that he would remember his gladness in a moment or two, and wondered if it was yet flowing into his heart. "Dear Florence, you must ask him to show you his botanical specimens; he has a wonderful collection."

"We will," said Walter, good-humouredly.

"And now you must excuse me for a few minutes, dears. I know how much your uncle will enjoy a talk with you;" and, to the dismay of the Hibberts, Aunt Anne vanished, leaving them alone with the brown man.

Mr. Baines sat slowly down on the arm-chair, the only really comfortable one in the room, and stretched out his left leg in a manner that showed it was stiff. Then he looked at his visitors grimly, yet with a suggestion of odd amusement on his face, as if he knew perfectly how embarrassed they felt.

"Sit down, Mrs. Hibbert," he said, nodding towards an ordinary chair, and including Walter in the nod. "I dare say you'll be glad of your food before you look at specimens. I shall," and he gave a lumbering laugh. "I have done a hard morning's work."

"I am sure you must be very tired," Florence said politely, wishing Aunt Anne would return.

He seemed to know her thoughts, and answered them in an explanatory manner: "Anne won't be long. She always dresses before we have dinner. Great nonsense, living as we do; but it's no use my speaking. Do you make a long stay in Brighton, Mr. Hibbert?"

"No, we go back to town to-night."

"A good thing," he said, with another lumbering laugh; "Brighton is a horrible place to my mind, and the sooner one leaves it the better. That pier, with its band and set of idle people, with nothing else to do but to walk up and down;—well, it's my opinion that railways have done a vast deal of

mischief and mighty little good to make up for it. The same thing can be said of newspapers. What good do they do?"

Walter felt that this sudden turn upon the Press was a little hard on him, but he looked up over his moustache with laughter in his eyes, and wondered what would come next. Florence was almost angry. Aunt Anne's husband was very rude, she thought, and she determined to come to the rescue.

"But you were reading a paper," she said, and tried to see the name of one that Mr. Baines had thrown down beside his chair.

"Oh, yes; I like to try and find out what mischief they are going to do next. If I had my way they should only be published monthly, if at all. All they do is to try and set people by the ears."

"But they tell us the news."

"Well, and what better are we for that? I don't want to know that a man was hanged last week, and a prince will be married to-morrow; I only waste my time reading about them when I might be usefully employed minding my own business."

"Walter writes for a paper," Florence said distantly, determined to find out if Mr. Baines was being rude on purpose. A little dull curiosity came into his eyes, as he looked up and asked—

"Walter—who's Walter?"

"I am," laughed the owner of the name; "but she needn't have betrayed me." Mr. Baines was in no way disconcerted.

"Oh! you write for a paper, do you? Well, I am sorry for you; you might do something much better. Oh, here's Anne; now we had better go and eat." With the aid of a stick, he shuffled out of the chair, refusing Walter's offered help. "I didn't know you wrote for a paper, or I would have held my tongue," he said, as a sort of apology. "No, thank you, I am all right once I am on my feet."

Florence and Walter were astonished when they looked at Aunt Anne. They hardly knew her again. The shabby black shawl had vanished, the dusty bonnet was replaced by a soft white cap; there was lace at her throat fastened by a little crinkly gold brooch that had a place for hair in the middle: her satin dress trailed an inch or two on the ground behind, and she had put a red carnation in her bosom almost coquettishly.

“Now, dears,” she said, with a smile of welcome that was fascinating from its absolute genuineness, “I shall be truly hurt if you fail to do justice to our simple repast”—and she sat down with an air of old-fashioned stateliness as if she were heading a banquet table. “Sit down, dears. Robert, you must have Florence on your right hand.”

The Hibberts took their places merrily, their spirits reviving now that they were no longer alone with their host. Aunt Anne, too, looked so picturesque sitting there in the little summer-like room, with the garden beyond, that they could not help being glad they had come. They felt that they were living a distinct day in their lives, and not one that afterwards in looking back they would find difficult to sort out from a hundred others like it.

Even Mr. Baines grew less grumpy, and offered presently to show them the garden.

“And the plum-trees and the pear-trees,” said Aunt Anne; “and the view from the summer-house in the corner.”

“Oh yes,” her husband said, “we’ll show them all;” and he helped to do the honours of the table with what he evidently intended to be genial courtesy.

“It does my heart good to see you, dears,” Aunt Anne said, as she insisted on helping them to an enormous quantity of stewed cranberries.

“And it does us good to be here,” they answered, forgetting all their vexation at losing a day by the sea; forgetting even the poor chicken that was being roasted in vain, and the waiting fly to be paid for at so much an hour.

“Walter dear,” Mrs. Hibbert said, as they drove back to Brighton, carefully balancing on their knees four large pots of jam, while they also kept an eye on an enormous nosegay badly tied up, that wobbled about on the back seat, “Mr. Baines didn’t seem to know you when we arrived.”

“He had never set eyes on me before. Aunt Anne only set eyes on him five years ago. He was rather a grumpy beggar. I wonder who the deuce he was? We none of us ever knew.”

“He didn’t know you were a journalist, I think.”

“No, I suppose not. I wonder if he ever did anything for a living himself?” Then, as if he repented saying anything that sounded unkind of a man whose salt he had just eaten, he added, “But you can never tell what

people are from their talk the first time you see them. He is not unlike a man I knew some years ago, who was a great inventive genius. He used to shuffle about in shoes too big for him, just as this beggar did."

"I felt quite frightened when he first came round the corner."

"You see it was rough upon him having his morning spoilt. A man who lives in the country like that generally gets wrapped up in his surroundings. I suppose I must have known that Aunt Anne was at Rottingdean," he went on; "but if so, I had forgotten it. She quarrelled with my father and every one else because she was always quite unable to keep any money. There was a great deliberation in the family a few years ago, when it was announced that Aunt Anne was destitute and no one wanted to keep her."

"But had she no money of her own?"

"She had a little, but she lived on the capital till it was gone, and there was an end of that. Then suddenly she married Mr. Baines. I don't know who he was, but she met him at a railway station. He had a bad headache, I believe, and she thought he was ill, and went up and offered him some smelling-salts."

"Why, it was quite romantic," Florence exclaimed.

Walter had a curious way of looking up when he was amused, and he looked up in that curious way now.

"Yes," he said, "quite romantic."

"Do go on."

"I don't know any more except that somehow they got married, and she turned up to-day as you saw; and I wish she hadn't given us any jam, confound it. I say, darling, let's throw it over that hedge."

"Oh, I wouldn't for the world," Florence said. "It would be so unkind. She was a dear old lady, Walter, and I am glad we went to see her. She asked for our address in London, and said she should write to us."

But Aunt Anne did not write for a long time, and then it was only to condole with Walter on the death of his father. The first year after their visit to Rottingdean she sent a large Christmas card inscribed to "My dear Walter and Florence, from Aunt Anne;" but the second year even this was omitted. It was not until Mr. and Mrs. Hibbert had been married nearly seven years that Aunt Anne again appeared before them.

# CHAPTER II.

MANY things had happened to Mr. and Mrs. Hibbert in those seven years. Most important of all—to themselves, at least—was the birth of their two children, lovely children Mrs. Hibbert declared them to be, and in his heart her husband agreed with her. But the time came when Walter found to his dismay that even lovely children would sometimes cry, and that as they grew older they wanted room to run about with that constant patter-pattering sound that is usually more delightful to a mother's ear than to a fathers, especially when he has to produce intelligible copy. So the Hibberts moved away from the little flat in which they had begun their married life, to an ugly little upright house sufficiently near Portland Road to enable Walter to get quickly to the office. There a nursery could be made at the top of the house, where the children would be not only out of sight, but out of hearing.

Walter did a great deal of work, and was fairly well paid, but that did not mean a large income for a young couple with two children and three servants, trying to keep up an appearance before the world. He wrote for magazines and literary journals, occasionally he did a long pot-boiler for one of those reviews he called refuges for destitute intellects; and altogether was thrown much among men better off than himself, so that he did not like to look poor. Besides, he preferred to live with a certain amount of comfort, even though it meant a certain amount of anxiety, to looking poverty-stricken or shabby for the sake of knowing precisely how he would stand at the end of the quarter, or being able at any moment to lay his hand on a ten-pound note.

"You not only feel awkward yourself if you look poor, but cause other people to feel so," he said; "and that is making yourself a nuisance: you have no business to do that if you can avoid it."

So, though the Hibberts had only a small house, it was pretty and well arranged. Their simple meals were daintily served, and everything about them had an air that implies content dashed with luxury. In fact, they lived as people can live now, even on a small income, and especially in London, in comfort and refinement.

Still, it was a difficult task to pull through, and Walter felt that he ought to be making more money. He knew, too, though he did not tell his wife so, that the constant work and anxiety were telling on him; he wanted another but a far longer bracing-up than the one he had had seven years ago at Brighton. “A sea voyage would be the thing,” he thought, “only I don’t see how it could be managed, even if I could get away.”

The last year had been a fortunate one in some respects: an aunt of Mrs. Hibbert’s had died, leaving them a hundred pounds and a furnished cottage near Witley, in Surrey. It was a dear little cottage, they both protested—red brick, of course, as all well-bred cottages are nowadays, standing in an acre and a half of its own fir-wood, and having round it a garden with tan paths and those prim flowers that grow best in the vicinity of fir. It would be delightful to stay there in the summer holidays, they agreed, or to run down from Saturday to Monday, or, by-and-by, to send the children there for a spell with the governess when their parents were not able to get away from town. Walter had tried sending Florence and the children and going down every week himself, but he found “it didn’t work.” She was always longing to be with him, and he with her. It was only a broad sea and a few thousand miles that would make separation possible, and he did not think he could endure that very long: he was absurdly fond of his dear little wife.

All this he thought over as he walked along the Strand one morning to his office. He was going to see his chief, who had sent for him on a matter of business. His chief was Mr. Fisher, an excellent editor, though not quite enough of a partisan perhaps to have a strong following. *The Centre* was a model of fairness, and the mainstay of that great section of the reading public that likes its news trustworthy and copious, but has no pronounced party leanings. Still, if it was a paper without political influence, it was one of great political use, for it invariably stated a question from all points of view with equal fairness, though it leant, if at all, from sheer editorial generosity, towards making the best of it for the weakest side. Thus a minority looked to it almost as to an advocate, and the majority knew that any strength that was against them would be set forth in *The Centre*, and that if none was pleaded there, the right and the triumph were together. Mr. Fisher liked Walter Hibbert; and though by tacit agreement their relations inside the office were purely formal, outside they were a good deal more intimate. Occasionally they took the form of a quiet dinner, or a few hours in the little house near Portland Road; for Florence was rather a favourite of the editors—perhaps, for one reason, because she was obviously of opinion that he ought to be married. A man generally likes a woman who pays him this compliment, especially when it is disinterested. Mr. Fisher was a

widower and childless. There was some story connected with his marriage, but the Hibberts never heard the rights of it, and it was evidently a painful subject to him. All that was known in the office was that years before a gaunt-looking woman used to sometimes come for him, and that they always walked silently away together. Some one said once that he had married her because he had known her for years, and she was poor and he did not know how to provide for her except by marrying her, and that she was querulous and worried him a good deal. After a time she grew thin and feeble-looking. One day, about three years after the marriage, her death appeared in the paper; her husband looked almost relieved, but very sad, and no one ventured to ask him any questions.

As Walter walked along the Strand that morning he meditated on many ways of improving his condition and at the same time of not overworking himself. He found that it told on him considerably to be down late at the office three nights a week, writing his article, and then, with the excitement of work still upon him, to go home tired and hungry in the small hours of the morning. It was bad for Florence, too, for she generally sat up for him, declaring that to taste his supper and to have a little chat with him did her good and made her heart light. Sometimes he thought he would take up a different line altogether (he knew his editor would aid and abet him in anything for his good) and try living in the country, running up to town every day if necessary. But this would never do; it would only make him restive. His position was not yet strong enough to admit of his taking things so easily. It was important to him to live among men of knowledge and influence, to be in the whirl and twirl of things, and London was essentially the bull's-eye, not only of wealth and commerce, but of most other things with which men of all degrees concern themselves.

And when he got to this point he came to the conclusion that he was thinking too much about himself. After all, he only wanted a month's rest or a couple of months' change of air; a friendly talk such as he might possibly get in the next quarter of an hour would probably bring about one or the other and in a far better form than he himself could devise it. Mr. Fisher was a man of infinite resource, not merely in regard to his paper, but for himself and his friends too, when they consulted him about their personal affairs. It was one of his characteristics that he liked being consulted. Walter felt that the best thing would be to get away alone with Florence, to some place where the climate had no cause to be ashamed of itself: he wanted to be sated with sunshine. It was no good going alone, and no matter how pleasant a friend went with him, a time always came when he wanted to go by one route and the friend by another. "Now, your wife," he thought, "not only

particularly longs to go by your route, but thinks you a genius for finding it out."

He stopped for a moment to look at a bookshop; there was a box of second-hand books outside; he hesitated, but remembered that he had no time to stay. As he turned away some one touched him on the arm, and a voice said doubtfully—

"Will you speak to me, Walter?" He looked up and instantly held out his hand with a smile.

"Why, it's Wimple," he said; "how are you, old fellow? Of course I'll speak to you. How are you?"

The man who had stopped him was about eight-and-twenty; he was tall and thin, his legs were too long and very rickety. To look at he was not prepossessing; he had a pinky complexion, pale reddish hair, and small round dark eyes with light lashes and weak lids. On either side of his face there were some straggling whiskers; his lips were thin and his whole expression very grave. His voice was low but firm in its tone, as though he wished to convey that even in small matters it would be useless to contradict him. He wore rather shabby dark clothes, his thin overcoat was unbuttoned and showed that the undercoat was faced with watered silk that had worn a little shiny; attached to his waistcoat was a watchguard made of brown hair ornamented here and there with bright gold clasps. He did not look strong or very flourishing. He was fairly gentleman-like, but only fairly so, and he did not look very agreeable. The apparent weakness of his legs seemed to prevent him from walking uprightly; he looked down a good deal at the toes of his boots, which were well polished. The oddest thing about him was that with all his unprepossessing appearance he had a certain air of sentiment; occasionally a sentimental tone stole into his voice, but he carefully repressed it. Walter remembered the moment he looked at him that the brown hair watchguard had been the gift of a pretty girl, the daughter of a tailor to whom he had made love as if in compensation for not paying her father's bill. He wondered how it had ended, whether the girl had broken her heart for him, or found him out. But the next moment he hated himself for his ungenerous thoughts, and forcing them back spoke in as friendly a voice as he could manage. "It's ages since we came across each other," he said, "and I should not have seen you just now if you had not seen me."

"I wasn't sure whether you would speak to me," Mr. Wimple said solemnly, as they walked on together, and then almost hurriedly, as if to avoid thinking about unpleasant things, he asked, "How is your wife?"

“All right, thank you. But how are you, and how are you getting on?”

“I am not at all well, Walter”—Mr. Wimple coughed, as if to show that he was delicate—“and my uncle has behaved shamefully to me.”

“Why, what has he done?” Walter asked, wishing that he felt more cordial, for he had known Alfred Wimple longer almost than he had known any one. Old acquaintance was not to be lightly put aside. It constituted a claim in Walter’s eyes as strong as did relationship, though it was only when the claim was made on him, and never when he might have pressed it for his own advantage, that he remembered it.

“Done! Why, he has turned me out of his office, just because he wanted to make room for the son of a rich client, for nothing else in the world.”

“That was rough,” Walter answered, thinking almost against his will that Wimple had never been very accurate and that this account was possibly not a fair one. “What excuse did he make?”

“He said my health was bad, that I was not strong enough to do the work, and had better take a few months’ holiday.”

“Well, but that was rather kind of him.”

“He didn’t mean it for kindness;” and Mr. Wimple looked at his friend with dull severity in his eyes. “He wanted to give my place in his office to some one else. But it is quite true about my health. I am very delicate, Walter. I must take a few months’ rest.”

“Then perhaps he was right after all. But can you manage the few months’ rest?” Walter asked, hesitating, for he knew the question was expected from him. In old days he had had so much to do with Wimple’s affairs that he did not like now to ignore them altogether.

“He makes me an allowance, of course, but it’s not sufficient,” Alfred Wimple answered reluctantly; “I wanted him to keep my post open for a few months, but he refused, though he’s the only relation I have.”

“Well, but he has been pretty good,” Walter said, in a pacific voice, “and perhaps he thinks you really want rest. It’s not bad of him to make you an allowance. It’s more than any one would do for me if I had to give up work for a bit.”

“He only does it because he can’t well refuse, and it’s a beggarly sum, after all.”

To which Walter answered nothing. He had always felt angry with himself for not liking Alfred better; they were such very old friends. They had been school-fellows long ago, and afterwards, when Walter was at Cambridge and Alfred was an articled clerk in London (he was by three years the younger of the two), there had been occasions when they had met and spent many pleasant hours together. To do Walter justice, it had always been Alfred who had sought him and not he who had sought Alfred, for in spite of the latter's much professed affection Walter never wholly trusted him; he hated himself for it, but the fact remained. "The worst of Alfred is, that he lies," he had said to himself long ago. He remembered his own remark to-day with a certain amount of reproach, but he knew that he had not been unjust; still, after all, he thought it was not so very great a crime: many people lied nowadays, sometimes merely to give their conversation an artistic value, and sometimes without even being aware of it. He was inclined to think that he had been rather hard on Alfred, who had been very constant to him. Besides, Wimple had been unlucky; he had been left a penniless lad to the care of an uncle, a rich City solicitor, who had not appreciated the charge; he had never had a soul who cared for him, and must have been very miserable and lonely at times. If he had had a mother or sister, or any one at all to look after him, he might have been different. Then, too, Walter remembered that once when he was very ill in the vacation it was Alfred who had turned up and nursed him with almost a woman's anxiety. A kindness like that made a link too strong for a few disagreeables to break. He could not help thinking that he was a brute not to like his old friend better.

"I am sorry things are so bad with you, old man. You must come and dine and talk them over."

Mr. Wimple looked him earnestly in the face.

"I don't like to come," he said in a half-ashamed, half-pathetic voice; "I behaved so badly to you about that thirty pounds; but luck was against me."

"Never mind, you shall make it all right when luck is with you," Walter answered cheerfully, determined to forget all unpleasant bygones. "Why not come to-night? we shall be alone."

Mr. Wimple shook his head.

"No, not to-night," he said; "I am not well, and I am going down to the country till Wednesday; it will do me good." A little smile hovered round his mouth as he added, "some nice people in Hampshire have asked me to stay with them."

“In Hampshire. Whereabouts in Hampshire?”

There was a certain hesitation in Mr. Wimple’s manner as he answered, “You don’t know them, and I don’t suppose you ever heard of the place, Walter; it is called Liphook.”

“Liphook? Why, of course I know it. It is on the Portsmouth line; we have a cottage, left us by my wife’s aunt only last year, in the same direction, only rather nearer town. How long are you going to stay there?”

“Till Wednesday. I will come and dine with you on Thursday, if you will have me.”

“All right, old man, 7.30. Perhaps you had better tell me where to write in case I have to put you off for business reasons.”

Mr. Wimple hesitated a minute, and then gave his London address, adding that he should be back on Wednesday night or Thursday morning at latest. They were standing by the newspaper office.

“Do you think there might be anything I could do here?” he asked, nodding at the poster outside the door; “I might review legal books or something of that sort.”

“I expect Fisher has a dozen men ready for anything at a moment’s notice,” Walter answered, “but I’ll put in a word for you if I get the chance;” and with a certain feeling of relief he shook his friend’s hand and rushed upstairs. The atmosphere seemed a little clearer when he was alone. “I’ll do what I can for him,” he thought, “but I can’t stand much of his company. There is a want of fresh air about him that bothers me so. Perhaps he could do a legal book occasionally, he used to write rather well. I’ll try what can be done.”

But his talk with Mr. Fisher was so important to himself and so interesting in many ways that he forgot all about Alfred until he was going out of the door; and then it was too late to speak about him. Suddenly a happy thought struck him—Mr. Fisher was to dine with him next week, he would ask Wimple also for Thursday. Then, if they got on, the rest would arrange itself. He remembered too that Alfred always dressed carefully and looked his best in the evening and laid himself out to be agreeable.

“By the way, Fisher, I wonder if you would come on Thursday instead of on Wednesday. I expect an old friend, and should like you to meet him; he is clever and rather off luck just now; of course you’ll get your chat with my wife all right—in fact, better if there are one or two people to engross me.”

“Very well, Thursday if you like; it will do just as well for me; I am free both evenings as far as I know.”

“Agreed, then.” And Walter went down the office stairs pleased at his own success.

“That horrid Mr. Wimple will spoil our dinner; I never liked him,” Florence exclaimed when she heard of the arrangement.

“I know you didn’t, and I don’t like him either, which is mean of me, for he’s a very old friend.”

“But if we neither of us like him, why should we inflict him on our lives?”

“We won’t; we’ll cut him as soon as he has five hundred a year; but it wouldn’t be fair to do so just now when he’s down on his luck; he and I have been friends too long for that.”

“But not very great friends?”

“Perhaps not; but we won’t throw him over in bad weather—try and be a little nice to him to please me, there’s a dear Floggie,” which instantly carried the day. “You had better ask Ethel Dunlop; Fisher is fond of music, and she will amuse him when he is tired of flirting with you,” Walter suggested.

“He’ll never tire of that,” she laughed, “but I’ll invite her if you like. She can sing while you talk to Mr. Wimple and your editor discusses European politics with me.”

“He’ll probably discuss politics outside Europe, if he discusses any,” her husband answered; “things look very queer in the East.”

“They always do,” she said wisely; “but I believe it’s all nonsense, and only our idea because we live so far off.”

“You had better tell Fisher to send me out to see.”

“Us, you mean.”

“No, me. They wouldn’t stand you, dear,” and he looked at her anxiously; “I shouldn’t be much surprised if he asked me to go for a bit—indeed, I think he has an idea of it.”

“Oh, Walter, it would be horrible.”

“Not if it did me good; sometimes I think I need a thorough change.”

She looked at him for a moment.

“No, not then,” she answered.

# CHAPTER III.

FLORENCE sat thinking over Walter's hint concerning his health. She had succeeded in frightening herself a good deal; for there was really nothing the matter with him that rest and change would not set right. She remembered all the years he had been constantly at work, for even in their holidays he had taken away something he wanted to get done, and for the first time she realized how great the strain must have been upon him. "He must long for a change," she thought, "for a break in his life, an upsetting of its present programme. The best thing of all would be a sea voyage. That would do him a world of good." She fancied him on board a P. and O., walking up and down the long deck, drinking in life and strength. How vigorous he would grow; how sunburnt and handsome, and how delightful it would be to see him return. She hoped that Mr. Fisher would offer him a special correspondentship for a time, or something that would break the routine of his life and give him the excitement and pleasure that a spell of rest and complete change would entail. She would talk to Mr. Fisher herself, she thought. He always liked arranging other people's lives; he was so clever in setting things right for any one who consulted him, and so helpful; and no doubt he had noticed already that Walter was looking ill.

"But he is quite well; it is nothing but overwork, and that can soon be set right——"

There was a double knock at the street door.

It was only eleven o'clock, too early for visitors. Florence left off thinking of Walter to wonder who it could be. The door was opened and shut, the servant's footsteps going up to the drawing-room were followed by others so soft that they could scarcely be heard at all.

"Mrs. Baines, ma'am. She told me to say that she was most anxious to see you."

"Mrs. Baines?" Florence exclaimed absently. It was so long since she had seen Aunt Anne, and she had never heard her called by her formal name, that for the moment she was puzzled. Then she remembered and went up quickly to meet her visitor.

Aunt Anne was sitting on the little yellow couch near the window. She looked thin and spare, as she had done at Brighton, but she had a woebegone air now that had not belonged to her then. She was in deep mourning; there was a mass of crape on her bonnet, and a limp cashmere shawl clung about her shoulders. She rose slowly as Florence entered, but did not advance a single step.

She stretched out her arms; the black shawl gave them the appearance of wings; they made her look, as she stood with her back to the light, like a large bat. But the illusion was only momentary, and then the wan face, the many wrinkles, and the nervous twitch of the left eye all helped to make an effect that was pathetic enough.

"Florence," she said in a tremulous voice, "I felt that I must see you and Walter again," and she folded Mrs. Hibbert to her heart.

"I am very glad to see you, Aunt Anne," Florence answered simply. "Are you quite well, and are you staying in London?—But you are in deep mourning; I hope you have not had any very sad loss?"

The tears came into the poor old lady's eyes.

"My dear," she said still more tremulously than before, "you are evidently not aware of my great bereavement; but I might have known that, for if you had been you would have written to me. Florence, I am a widow; I am alone in the world."

Mrs. Hibbert put her hands softly on Aunt Anne's and kissed her.

"I didn't know, I had no idea, and Walter had not——"

"I knew it. Don't think that I have wronged either you or him. I knew that you were ignorant of all that had happened to me or you would have written to express your sympathy, though, if you had, I might not even have received your letter, for I have been homeless too," Mrs. Baines said sadly. She stopped for a moment; then, watching Florence intently, she went on in a choking voice, "Mr. Baines has been dead more than eight months. He died as he had lived, my darling. He thought of you both three weeks before his death," and her left eye winked.

"It was very kind of him," Florence said gratefully; "and you, dear Aunt Anne," she asked gently, "are you staying in London for the present? Where are you living?"

It seemed as if Aunt Anne gathered up all her strength to answer.

“My dear, I am in London because I am destitute—destitute, Florence, and—and I have to work for my living.”

Her niece was too much astonished to answer for a minute.

“But, Aunt Anne,” she exclaimed, “how can you work? what can you have strength to do, you poor dear?”

Aunt Anne hesitated a moment; she winked again in an absent unconscious manner, and then answered with great solemnity:

“I have accepted a post at South Kensington as chaperon to a young married lady whose husband is abroad. She has a young sister staying with her, and her husband does not approve of their being alone without some older person to protect them.”

“It is very brave of you to go out into the world now,” Florence said admiringly.

“My dear, it would be most repugnant to me to be a burden to any one, even to those who love me best; that is why—why I did it, Florence.”

“And are they kind to you? do they treat you quite properly?” Mrs. Hibbert inquired anxiously.

The old lady drew herself up and answered severely:

“I should not stay with them an hour if they ever forgot what was due to me. They treat me with the greatest respect.”

“But why have you been obliged to do this, you poor Aunt Anne? Had Mr. Baines no money to leave you?”

Aunt Anne’s mouth twitched as she heard the “Mr. Baines,” but Florence had never thought of him as anything else, and when the two last words slipped out she felt it would be better to go on and not to notice her mistake.

“No, my love, at his death his income ceased; there was barely enough for immediate expenses, and then—and then I had to go out into the world.”

It was terrible to see how keenly Aunt Anne suffered; how fully alive she was to the sad side of her own position. Poor old lady, it was impossible to help feeling very much for her, Florence thought.

“And had he no relations at all who could help you, dear?” she asked, wondering that none should have held out a helping hand.

“No, not one. I married for love, as you did; that is one reason why I knew that you would feel for me.”

There was a world of sadness in her voice as she said the last words; her face seemed to grow thinner and paler as she related her troubles. She looked far older, too, than she had done on the Brighton day. The little lines about her face had become wrinkles; her hair was scantier and greyer; her eyes deeper set in her head; her hands were the thin dry hands of old age.

Florence ached for her, and pondered things over for a moment. Walter was not rich, and he was not strong just now; the hint of yesterday had sunk deep in her heart. Still, he and she must try and make this poor soul's few remaining years comfortable, if no one else could be found on whom she had a claim. She did not think she could ask Aunt Anne to come and live with them; she remembered an aunt who had lived in her girlhood's home, who had not been a success. But they might for all that do something; the old lady could not be left to the wide world's tender mercies. Florence knew but little of her husband's relations, except that he had no near or intimate ones left, but there might be some outlying cousins sufficiently near to Aunt Anne to make their helping her a moral obligation.

"Have you no friends—no relations at all, dear Aunt Anne?" she asked.

With a long sigh Mrs. Baines answered:

"Florence"—she gave a gulp before she went on, as if to show that what she had to tell was almost too sad to be put into words,—"Sir William Rammage is my own cousin, he has thousands and thousands a year, and he refuses to allow me anything. I went to him when I first came to London and begged him to give me a small income so that I might not be obliged to go out into the world; but he said that he had so many claims upon him that it was impossible. Yet he and I were babes together; we lay in the same cradle once, while our mothers stood over us, hand in hand. But though we had not met since we were six years old till I went to him in my distress a few months ago, he refused to do anything for me."

"Have you been in London long then, Aunt Anne?"

"I have been here five months, Florence. I took a lodging on the little means I had left, and then—and then I had to struggle as best I could."

"You should have come to us before, poor dear."

"I should have done so, my love, but—my lodging was too simple, and I was not in a position to receive you as I could have wished. I waited, hoping that Sir William would see that it was incumbent on him to make me an adequate allowance; but he has not done so."

“And won’t he do anything for you? If he is rich he might do something temporarily, even if he won’t make you a permanent allowance. Has he done nothing?”

Mrs. Baines shook her head sadly.

“He sent me some port wine, my love, but port wine is always pernicious to me; I wrote and told him so, but he did not even reply. It is not four years ago since he was Lord Mayor of London, and yet he will do nothing for me.”

She had lost her air of distress, there was a dogged dignity in her manner; she stood up and looked at her niece; it seemed as if, in speaking of Sir William Rammage, she remembered that the world had used her shamefully, and she had determined to give it back bitter scorn for its indifference to her griefs.

“Lord Mayor of London,” Mrs. Hibbert repeated, and rubbed her eyes a little; it seemed like part of a play and not a very sane one—the old lady, her deep mourning, her winking left eye, and the sudden introduction of a Lord Mayor.

“Yes, Lord Mayor of London,” repeated Mrs. Baines, “and he lets me work for my daily bread.”

“Is Walter also related to the Lord Mayor?”

“No, my love. Your Walter’s grandfather married twice; I was the daughter of the first marriage—my mother was the daughter of a London merchant—your Walter’s father was the son of the second marriage.”

“It is too complicated to understand,” Florence answered in despair. “And is there no one else, Aunt Anne?”

“There are many others, but they are indifferent as he is, they are cold and hard, Florence; that is a lesson one has to learn when fortune deserts one,” and the old lady shook her head mournfully.

“But, dear Aunt Anne,” Florence said, aghast at this sudden vista of the world, “tell me who they are besides Sir William Rammage; let Walter try what can be done. Surely they cannot all be as cold and hard as you think.”

“It is of no use, my love,” Mrs. Baines said sadly.

“But perhaps you are mistaken, and they will after all do something for you. Do tell me who they are.”

Mrs. Baines drew herself up proudly; the tears that had seemed to be on their way a minute ago must have retreated suddenly, for her eyes looked bright, and she spoke in a quick, determined voice.

"My love," she said, "you must not expect me to give you an account of all my friends and relations and of what they will or will not do for me. Don't question me, my love, for I cannot allow it—I cannot indeed. I have told you that I am destitute, that I am a widow, that I am working for my living; and that must suffice. I am deeply attached to you and Walter; there is in my heart a picture that will never be effaced of you and him standing in our garden at Rottingdean, of your going away in the sunshine with flowers and preserve in your hands—the preserve that I myself had made. It is because I love you that I have come to you to-day, and because I feel assured that you love me; but you must remember, Florence, that I am your aunt and you must treat me with proper respect and consideration."

"But, Aunt Anne——" Florence began astonished.

Mrs. Baines put her hand on Mrs. Hibbert's shoulder.

"There there," she said forgivingly, "I know you did not mean to hurt me, but"—and here her voice grew tender and tremulous again—"no one, not even you or Walter, must presume, for I cannot allow it. There—kiss me," and she pulled Florence's head down on to her breast, while suddenly—for there were wonderfully quick transitions of feeling expressed on the old wan face all through the interview—a smile that was almost joyous came to her lips. "I am so glad to see you again, my dear," she said; "I have looked forward to this day for years. I loved you from the very first moment I saw you at Brighton, and I have always loved your Walter. I wish," she went on, as Florence gently disengaged herself from the black cashmere embrace, "I wish you could remember him a little boy as I do. He had the darkest eyes and the lightest hair in the world."

"His hair is a beautiful brown now," her niece answered, rather thankfully.

"Yes, my love, it is," the old lady said, with a little glee at the young wife's pride. "And so is yours. I think you have the prettiest hair I ever saw." There was not a shade of flattery in her voice, so that Florence was appeased after the severe snub of a moment ago, and smoothed her plaits with much complacency. "And now, tell me when will your dear one be at home, for I long to see him?"

“He is very uncertain, Aunt Anne; I fear he has no fixed time; but I know that he will try and make one to see you when he hears that you are in town.”

“I am sure he will,” Mrs. Baines said, evidently certain that there was no doubt at all about that. “Are the dear children at home?” she inquired. “I long for a sight of them.”

“Shall I call them?”

“Yes, my love; it will do my heart good to look at them.”

Nothing loth, Florence opened the door and called upstairs:

“Monty and Catty, are you there, my beauties? I want you, my chicks.”

There was a quick patter-patter overhead, a door opened and two little voices answered both at once—

“We’ll come, mummy, we’ll come.”

A moment later there entered a sturdy boy of six, with eyes like his father’s, and a girl of three and a half, with nut-brown hair hanging down her back.

“We are come, mummy,” they exclaimed joyfully, as their mother, taking their fat hands in hers, led them up to Aunt Anne. The old lady took them in her arms and kissed them.

“Bless them,” she said, “bless them. I should have known them anywhere. They couldn’t be any one else’s children. My darlings, do you know me?” Monty drew back a little way and looked at her saucily, as if he thought the question rather a joke.

“No, we don’t know you,” he answered in a jovial voice, “we don’t know you a bit.”

“Bless him,” exclaimed Aunt Anne, and laughed aloud for glee. “He is so like his father, it makes me forget all my sorrows to see him. My dear children,” she went on, solemnly addressing them, “I did not bring you anything, but before the day is finished you shall have proof that Aunt Anne loves you. Good-bye, my dears, good-bye;” and she looked at their mother with an expression that said plainly, “Send them away.”

Florence opened the door and the children pattered back to the nursery. When they had gone Mrs. Baines rose.

“I must go too,” she said sadly, as if she had overtaken her griefs and sorrows again, “for I am no longer my own mistress. Remember that, dear, when you think of me, or when you and Walter converse together.”

“But it is nearly one o’clock, will not you stay and lunch? Walter might come, and he would be so glad to see you,” Florence said anxiously, remembering that as yet she had done nothing to help the old lady, and without her husband she felt it was too awkward a task to attempt.

“No, my dear, no; but I shall come again when you least expect me, on the chance of finding you at home.”

“And is there nothing I can do for you, Aunt Anne?” Florence asked hesitatingly, “no way in which I can be useful to you?”

“No, my dear, no; but thank you and bless you for your tender heart. There is nothing I want. I wish you could see Mrs. North, Florence, she is kindness itself. I have been in the house five weeks, and they have never once failed to show me the attention that is due to me,” she said, with grave dignity. “We went to Covent Garden Theatre last night—I refused to go to Drury Lane, for I did not approve of the name of the piece—they insisted on giving me the best place, and were most anxious when we reached home for fear I had taken cold whilst waiting for the carriage.”

It seemed as if Aunt Anne had been extraordinarily lucky.

“And you like being with young people, I think,” Florence said, noticing how her sad face lighted up while she spoke of the theatre.

“It is always a pleasure to me to witness happiness in others,” Aunt Anne answered, with a long benevolent sigh, “and it is a comfort to know that to this beautiful girl—for Mrs. North is only four-and-twenty, my dear—my presence is beneficial and my experience of life useful. I wish you would come and call on her.”

“But she might not like it? I don’t see why she should desire my acquaintance.”

“She would think it the greatest honour to know anybody belonging to me.”

“Is she an old friend, Aunt Anne, or how did you know her?” Florence asked, wondering at the great kindness extended to the old lady, and whether there was a deep foundation for it. She did not think it likely, from all that she had heard, that companions were generally treated with so much

consideration. For a moment Aunt Anne was silent, then she answered coldly—

"I met her through an advertisement. But you must not question me, you must not indeed, Florence; I never allowed any one to do that, and I am too old to begin; too old and feeble and worn out to allow it even from you, my love."

"But, dear Aunt Anne, I did not mean to hurt or offend you in any way. I merely wondered, since these people were so kind to you, if they were new or old friends," Florence said affectionately, but still a little stiffly, for now that she had been assured the old lady was so well provided for, she felt that she might defend herself.

"Then you must forgive me," Mrs. Baines said penitently; "I know I am foolishly sensitive sometimes, but in my heart I shall never misjudge you or Walter; be assured of that, my darling."

She went slowly up to a little ebony-framed looking-glass that was over a bracket in an out-of-the-way corner—it was odd that she should even have noticed it—and stood before it arranging her bonnet, till she was a mass of blackness and woe. "My love," she said, "would you permit your servant to call a cab for me? I prefer a hansom. I promised Mrs. North that I would return to luncheon, and I fear that I am already a little behindhand."

"Oh, but hansoms are so expensive, and I have been the cause——" Florence began as she put her hand on the bell.

"I must beg you not to mention it. I would spend my last penny on you and Walter, you know I would." Mrs. Baines answered with the manner that had carried all before it at Brighton. It brought back to Florence's memory her own helplessness and Walter's on that morning which had ended in the carrying away of jam and yellow flowers from Rottingdean. She went downstairs with the old lady and opened the door. Mrs. Baines looked at the hansom and winked. "It is a curious thing, my dear Florence," she said, "but ever since I can remember I have had a marked repugnance to a grey horse."

"Shall we send it away and get another?"

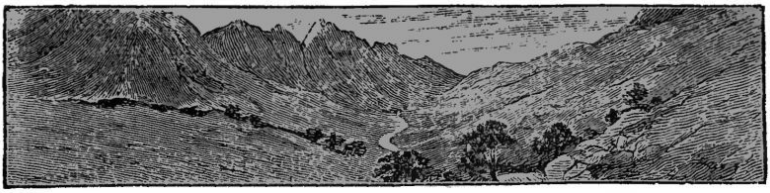
"No, my dear, no; I think it foolish to encourage a prejudice: nothing would induce me now not to go by that cab."

She gathered her shawl close round her shoulders and went slowly down the steps; when she was safely in the hansom and the door closed in front of her, she bowed with dignity to Florence, as if from the private box of a theatre.

That same afternoon there arrived a pot of maidenhair fern with a card attached to it on which was written, *Mrs. Walter Hibbert, from Aunt Anne*, and two smaller pots of bright flowers *For the dear children*.

"How very kind of her," exclaimed Florence; "but she ought not to spend her money on us—the money she earns too. Oh, she is much too generous."

"Yes, dear," Walter said to Florence; and Florence thought that his voice was a little odd.



# CHAPTER IV.

"I WISH we could do something for Aunt Anne," Mrs. Hibbert said to her husband that evening. "It was very kind of her to send us those flowers."

"Let's ask her to dine."

"Of course we will—she is longing to see you; still, asking her to dine will not be doing anything for her."

"But it will please her very much; she likes being treated with respect," Walter laughed. "Let's send her a formal invitation. You see these people she is with evidently like her and may give her a hundred or two a year, quite as much as she wants, so that all we can do is to show her some attention. Therefore, I repeat, let's ask her to dine."

"It's so like a man's suggestion," Florence exclaimed; "but still, we'll do it if you like. She wants to see you. Of course she may not be able to come if her time is not her own."

"We must risk that—I'll tell you what, Floggie dear, ask her for next Thursday, with Fisher and Wimple and Ethel Dunlop. She'll make the number up to six, which will be better than five. It will please her enormously to be asked to meet people—in your invitation say a small dinner-party."

"Very well. It will be a comfort if she takes Mr. Wimple off our hands. Perhaps she will."

So a quite formal invitation was sent to Aunt Anne, and her reply awaited with much anxiety. It came the next morning, and ran thus:

"My dear Florence,

"It gives me sincere pleasure to accept the invitation that you and your dear Walter have sent me for next Thursday. It is long since I went into society, except in this house, where it is a matter of duty. But, for your sakes, dears, I will put aside my sorrow for the evening, and try to enjoy, as I ought, the pleasure of seeing you

both, and of meeting those whom you honour with your friendship.

"In the happiness and excitement of seeing you the other day, dear Florence, I forgot to mention one object of my visit. It is most important to me in my present unfortunate position to hide my poverty and to preserve an appearance that will prevent me from being slighted in the society in which—sorely against my will—I am thrown. Will you, therefore, my dear ones, send me a black satin sunshade, plain but good, lined with black in preference to white, and with a handle sufficiently distinctive to prevent its being mistaken for another person's if it is left in the hall when I am paying visits? There are many other things I require, but I do not like to tax your kindness too far, or, knowing your generous hearts, to cause you disquiet even by naming them. At the same time, dear Florence, I am sure you will understand my embarrassment when I tell you I only possess four pocket-handkerchiefs fit to use in a house like this. If you have any lying by you with a deep black border, and would lend them to me till you require them, it would be a real boon.

"Kiss your sweet children for me. I sent them yesterday a little token that I did not cease to think of you all as soon as I had left your presence—as the world is only too prone to do.

"Your affectionate Aunt,

"Anne Baines.

"P.S.—I should be glad, my darlings, to have the sunshade without delay, for the afternoons are getting to be so bright and sunny that I have requested Mrs. North to have out the open carriage for her afternoon drive."

"Really, Walter," Mrs. Hibbert said, "she is a most extraordinary person. If she is so poor that she cannot buy a few pocket-handkerchiefs, why did she send us those presents yesterday? Flowers are expensive at this time of year."

"It was very like her. I remember years ago hearing that she had quarrelled with my uncle Tom because she sent his son a wedding present, and then he would not lend her the money to pay the bill."

"Of course we will send her the things, but she is a foolish old lady. As if I should keep deep black-bordered handkerchiefs by me: really it is too

absurd."

"Yes, darling, it is too absurd. Still, send her a nice sunshade, or whatever it is she wants; I suppose a pound or two will do it," Walter said, and hurried off to the office.

But Florence sat thinking. The sunshade and the handkerchiefs would make a big hole in the money allowed for weekly expenses, could not indeed come out of it. She wished she could take things as easily as Walter did, but the small worries of life never fell upon him as they did upon her. She was inclined to think that it was the small worries that made wrinkles, and she thought of those on poor Aunt Anne's face. Perhaps that was why women as a rule had so many more lines than men. The lines on a man's face were generally fewer and deeper, but on a woman's they were small and everywhere; they symbolized the little cares of every day, the petty anxieties that found men too hard to mark. She went through her accounts: she was one of those women who keep them carefully, who know to a penny how they spent their last five-pound note. But it was only because she was anxious to give Walter the very best that could be got out of his income that she measured so often the length and breadth of her purse. However, it was no good. The old lady must have her sunshade and her handkerchiefs. So Florence walked to Regent Street and back to buy them. She went without the gloves she had promised herself, determined that Catty should wait for a hat, and that she would cut down the dessert for a week at the little evening dinner.

The brown-paper parcel was directed and sent off to Mrs. Baines. With a sigh Florence wished she were more generous, and dismissed the whole business from her mind.

"Mrs. Baines called, ma'am," the servant said, when she reached home that day. "She wanted the address of a very good dressmaker."

"Is she here? I hope you begged her to come in?" Florence asked, with a vision of Aunt Anne calling in a hurry, tired by her walk, and distressed at finding no one at home.

"Oh no, ma'am; she didn't get out of the carriage when she heard you were not in. I gave her Madame Celestine's address, and said that she had made your best evening dress, as she was very particular about its being a grand dressmaker."

"I suppose it was for Mrs. North," Florence thought. "Poor Aunt Anne is not likely to want Madame Celestine."

Then she imagined the spare old lady in a scanty black gown going out with the pretty and probably beautifully dressed girls to whom she was chaperon.

As a sort of amends for the unkindness of fate, Florence made some little soft white adornments for throat and wrists such as widows wear and that yet look smart, and, packing them in a cardboard box, sent them—*With kind love to Aunt Anne*. "Perhaps they will gratify her pride a little, poor dear, and it is so nice to have one's pride gratified," she thought. And then, for a space, Aunt Anne was almost forgotten.

The days slipped by anxiously enough to the Hibberts—to Walter, for he knew that Mr. Fisher meant to talk with Florence about something that had been agreed between them at the office; to Florence, because without increasing the bills she really could not manage to put that little dinner together. Walter was particular; he liked luxuries, and things well managed, and she could not bear to disappoint him. However, the evening came at last. The flowers and dessert were arranged, the claret was at the right temperature, the champagne was in ice. Florence went upstairs to say good-night to the children, and to rest for five minutes. Walter came in with a flower for her dress.

"It is so like you," she said as she kissed it; "you are always the thoughtfullest old man in the world."

"I wished I had bought one for Aunt Anne as I came along in the hansom; but I forgot it at first, and then I was afraid to go back because it was getting so late."

He dressed and went downstairs. Florence leisurely began to get ready. Ten minutes later a carriage stopped; a bell rang, there was a loud double knock—some one had arrived.

"But it is a quarter of an hour too soon?" she said in dismay to Maria who was helping her.

The maid stood on tiptoe by the window to see who the early comer might be.

"It's only Mrs. Baines, ma'am."

They had learned to say "only" already, Florence thought. She was angry at the word, yet relieved at its not being a more important visitor.

"I am very vexed at not being dressed to receive her," she said coldly, in order to give Mrs. Baines importance. "Make haste and fasten my dress,

Maria."

There was a sound of some one coming upstairs, a rustle of silk, and a gentle knock at the bedroom door.

"My darling, I came early on purpose. May I be allowed to enter, dear Florence?"

The voice was certainly Aunt Anne's, but the tone was so joyous, so different from the woebegone one of ten days ago that it filled her hearer with amazement.

"Come in, Aunt Anne, if you like; but I am not quite ready."

"I know that, my love. I hoped you would not be;" and Aunt Anne entered, beaming with satisfaction, beautifully dressed, her long robe trailing, her thin throat wrapped with softest white of some filmy kind, her shoes fastened with heavy bows that showed a paste diamond in them, her hands full of flowers. Florence could scarcely believe her eyes.

"Aunt Anne!" she exclaimed, and stood still looking at her.

"Yes, my love," the old lady laughed. "Aunt Anne; and she has brought you these flowers. I thought they might adorn your room, and that they would prove how much you were in my mind, even while I was away from you. Would you gratify me by wearing one or two? I see you have a white rose there, but I am sure Walter will not mind your wearing one of his aunt's flowers; and, my love, perhaps you will permit your maid to take the rest downstairs to arrange before the arrival of your other guests. I will myself help you to finish your toilette."

With an air that was a command, she gave the flowers to Maria and carefully watched her out of the room. Then turning to Florence, she asked with the joyousness still in her manner, "And now, my dear, tell me if you like my dress?"

"It is quite beautiful, and so handsome."

"My darling, I am thankful to hear you say that, for I bought it to do you honour. I was touched to get your invitation, and determined that you should not be ashamed of me. Did the housemaid tell you that she gave me Madame Celestine's address?"

"Yes. But, Aunt Anne, I hope you bargained with her. She costs a fortune if you don't."

"Never mind what she costs. I wished to prove to you both how much I loved you and desired to do you honour. And now, my dear, I perceive that you are ready, let us go down. I have not seen Walter yet, and am longing to put my arms round his dear neck before any one else arrives and forces me into a formality that my heart would resent."

She turned and led the way downstairs. Florence followed meekly, feeling almost shabby and altogether left in the shade by the magnificent relation who had appeared for their simple party.

Aunt Anne trod with the footstep of one who knew the house well; she opened the drawing-room door with an air of precision, and going towards Walter, who met her halfway across the room, dropped her head with its white cap on his shoulder.

"My dear Walter, no words can express how glad I am to see you again, to meet you in your own house, in your own room. It makes me forget all I have suffered since we parted; it even forces me to be gay," she murmured, in an almost sobbing tone.

"Yes, dear, of course it does," he said cheerily, giving her a kiss. "And we are very glad to see you. Why, you look uncommonly well; and, I say, what an awful swell you are—isn't she, Floggie?"

"He is precisely the same—the same as ever," laughed out the old lady just as she had at Brighton seven years before. "Precisely the same. Oh, my dear Walter, I shall——"

But here the door opened, and for the moment Mr. Wimple's arrival put an end to Aunt Anne's remembrances.

Mr. Wimple was evidently conscious of his evening clothes; his waistcoat was cut so as to show as much white shirt as possible; his tie looked a little rumpled, as though the first attempt at making a bow had not been successful. He shook hands solemnly with his host and hostess, then looked round almost sadly, and in a voice that was full of grave meaning said it was cold and chilly.

"Cough better?" Walter inquired.

"Yes, it is better," Mr. Wimple replied slowly after a moment's consideration, as if the question was a momentous one.

"That's right. Now, I must introduce you to my aunt, Mrs. Baines. Alfred Wimple is an old schoolfellow of mine, Aunt Anne."

The old lady put out her gloved hand with the lace ruffle round the wrist.

“I am glad to meet you,” she said. “It is always a pleasure to me to meet any one who has been intimately associated with my dear Walter.”

“And to me to meet any one belonging to him,” Mr. Wimple responded, with much gravity. “Walter is the oldest, and I may say the dearest, friend I possess.”

“It makes us also friends;” and Aunt Anne gave him a little gracious smile.

He looked up at her.

“It would be impossible that any one loving my dear Walter should not possess my friendship,” she said as if explaining her previous speech: she made it appear almost a condescension. He looked at her again, but more attentively.

“I am very fond of Walter,” he said.

“It is impossible to help it—dear boy,” she said under her breath as she looked at her nephew. “It must be a great pleasure to him, Mr. Wimple, to preserve your affection; the feelings of our youth are so often lost in oblivion as we grow old—as we grow older I should say, in speaking to you.”

The other guests entered, Ethel Dunlop a little shy but smiling, as if aware that being a girl she had more business at dances than at dinner-parties, but was nevertheless quite happy. And lastly Mr. Fisher. Alfred Wimple stood on one side till Walter went towards him.

“Fisher, this is a very old friend of mine. I want to introduce him to you.”

There was something irritating and savouring of mock humility in Mr. Wimple’s manner as he bowed and said, with a little gulp that was one of his peculiarities—

“Walter is always conferring benefits upon me—this is a great honour.”

Mr. Fisher looked at him and, with a polite word, turned to Ethel Dunlop. She was busy with her glove.

“Buttons always come off,” she said, without looking up. Other people might treat him with deference as an editor; to her he was a mere man.

“But you can at least sew them on; my sex is not so accomplished.”

She seemed to be thinking of something else and did not answer, and a puzzled look came over his face, as if a girl was a problem he did not know how to work out. He was an odd looking man, tall and pale, with a quantity of light hair pushed back from his high forehead. He had almost tender blue eyes; but there was something hard and firm about the mouth and square jaw that gave his face a look of strength. He was not a young man, but it was difficult to believe that he had ever been younger or would be older; he seemed to have been born for middle age, and the direction of people and affairs. The awkwardness of middle age that is not accustomed to womankind overtook him as he stood by Ethel. It was a little relief to him when dinner was announced.

Aunt Anne turned to Walter, as he went up to her, with a little inclination of her head and a smile of dignified happiness.

"It is so like a dream to be here with you, to be going down on your arm —dear children," she whispered as they descended the narrow staircase.

Looking back, Florence always felt that Aunt Anne had been the heroine of that party. She took the lead in conversation, the others waiting for her to speak, and no one dared to break up the group at table into *tête-à-tête* talk. She was so bright and full of life and had so much to say that she carried all before her. Ethel Dunlop, young and pretty, felt piqued; usually Mr. Fisher was attentive to her, to-night he talked entirely to Mrs. Baines. That horrid Mr. Wimple, as she called him in her thoughts, had been quite attentive when she met him before, but now he too kept his eyes fixed on the old lady opposite; but for her host she would have felt neglected. And it was odd how well Aunt Anne managed to flirt with everybody.

"Mrs. Baines has given me some useful hints about birds," Mr. Fisher told Florence with a suspicion of amusement in his voice: "if I had been as wise formerly as she has made me to-night the white cockatoo might have been living still. We ought to have met years ago, Mrs. Baines," he said, turning to her.

"I think so too," she said winningly. "It is such a pleasure to meet dear Walter's and Florence's friends," she added, looking round the table and giving a strange little wink at the last word that made Mr. Wimple feel almost uncomfortable. "It is a privilege that I have looked forward to for years, but that living in the country has hitherto made impossible. Now that I am in London I hope I shall meet them all in turn." Then she lowered her voice and went on to the editor: "I have heard so much of you, Mr. Fisher, if

you will forgive me for saying so, though a great career like yours implies that all the world has heard of you."

"I wish it could be called a great career, my dear lady," he answered, feeling that she was a person whose death would deserve a paragraph simply on account of the extraordinary knowledge of the world she possessed. "Unfortunately it has been a very ordinary one, but I can assure you that I am most glad to meet you to-night. I ought to have been at a City dinner, and shall always congratulate myself on my happier condition."

"I should like to see a City dinner," Mrs. Baines said sadly.

"I wish I could send you my invitations. I go to too many, I fear."

"I suppose you have been to a great many also, Mr. Wimple?" Aunt Anne inquired, careful to exclude no one from her little court.

"To one only, I regret to say, Mrs. Baines," Mr. Wimple answered solemnly; "four years ago I went to the solitary one I ever attended."

"Ah, that was during the mayoralty of Sir William Rammage."

"Do you know him, Mrs. Baines, or do you keep a record of the Lord Mayors?" Mr. Fisher asked.

"I knew him well, years and years—I am afraid I should shock you—you are all so young—if I said how many years ago," she answered; and Mr. Fisher, who was well on in his forties, thought she was really a charming old lady.

"He is a great friend of my uncle's, he is a very old client of his," Mr. Wimple said, looking at Mrs. Baines again with his strange fixed gaze, while Ethel Dunlop thought that that horrid Mr. Wimple was actually making eyes at the old lady as he did at every one else.

"And may I ask if you also are on intimate terms with him?" Mrs. Baines said.

"No, I have only met him at my uncle's. He is very rich," he added, with a sigh, "and rich people are not much in my way. Literary people and out-at-elbow scribblers are my usual associates; for," he went on, remembering that there was a possibility of doing some business with Mr. Fisher, and that he had better make an impression on the great man, "I never met any illustrious members of the profession till to-night, excepting our friend Walter of course."

Mr. Fisher looked a little disgusted and turned to the young lady of the party.

"Have you been very musical lately, Miss Dunlop?" he inquired.

"No," she answered, "not very. But we enjoyed the concert. It was very kind of you to send the tickets."

The editor's face lighted up.

"I am glad," he said; "and did you find a pleasant chaperon?"

"Oh yes, thank you. I went with my cousin, George Dighton."

"Is that the good-looking youth I saw you with once?"

"Youth," Ethel laughed; "he is three-and-twenty."

"A most mature age," and a smile flickered over Mr. Fisher's grave face; "and does he often escort you to concerts?"

"Occasionally."

"He is fortunate in having the privilege as well as the time to avail himself of it," the editor said formally. His manner was always reserved, sometimes even a little stately. Now and then, oddly enough, it reminded one of Aunt Anne's, though it was a generation younger, and he had not her faculty for long words.

"You never seem able to go to concerts. It is quite sad and wicked," Ethel said brightly.

He looked up as if he liked her.

"Not often. Perhaps some day if you would honour me, only I am not a cousin; still I have passed the giddy age of Mr. Dighton."

"We will, we will," she laughed, and nodded; "but relations only are able to survive the responsibility of taking me about alone. Perhaps Mrs. Hibbert would——"

"Ah yes, Mr. Wimple," they heard Mrs. Baines say, "I have good reason to know Sir William Rammage. He is my own cousin, though for years and years we had not met till we did so a few months since, when I came to take up my residence in London."

The old lady's mouth twitched nervously, the sad note of a week ago made itself heard in her voice again. Mrs. Hibbert knew that she was

thinking of the unsuccessful appeal to her rich relation, and of the port wine that had always proved pernicious to her digestion.

"Your cousin!" said Mr. Wimple, and he fixed another long, steady gaze upon Mrs. Baines, "that is very interesting;" and he was silent.

"Cousins seem to abound in our conversation this evening," Miss Dunlop said to Mr. Fisher; "it must be terrible to be cousin to the Lord Mayor."

"Like being related to Gog and Magog," he whispered.

"Even worse," she answered, pretending to shudder.

But Mrs. Hibbert was looking at Aunt Anne, for it was time to go upstairs. Mrs. Baines went out of the door with a stateliness that was downright courage, considering how small and slight she was. Ethel Dunlop, standing aside to let her pass, looked at her admiringly, but the old lady gave her back, with the left eye, a momentary glance that was merely condescending. Unless Aunt Anne took a fancy to people, or made a point of being agreeable, she was apt to be condescending. Her manner to young people was sometimes impatient, and to servants it was generally irritating. She had taken a dislike to Miss Dunlop—she considered her forward. She did not like the manner in which she did her hair. She was of opinion that her dress was unbecoming. All these things had determined Mrs. Baines to snub Miss Dunlop, who ill deserved it, for she was a pretty, motherless girl of one-and-twenty, very anxious to do right and to find the world a pleasant dwelling-place.

The old lady sat down on the yellow couch in the drawing-room again, the same couch on which, a fortnight before, she had sat and related her misfortunes. But it was difficult to believe that she was the same person. Her dress was spread out; her gloves were drawn on and carefully buttoned; she opened and shut a small black fan; she looked round the drawing-room with an air of condescension, and almost sternly refused coffee with a "not any, I thank you," that made the servant feel rebuked for having offered it. Mrs. Hibbert and Ethel felt that she was indeed mistress of the situation.

"You are musical, I think, Miss Dunlop," she asked coldly.

"I am very fond of music, and I play and sing in a very small way," was the modest answer.

"I hope we shall hear you presently," Mrs. Baines said grandly, and then, evidently feeling that she had taken quite enough notice of Miss Dunlop, she turned to her niece.

“My dear Florence,” she said, “I think Mr. Wimple is charming. He has one of the most expressive countenances I ever beheld.”

“Oh, Mrs. Baines, do you really think so?” Ethel Dunlop exclaimed.

“Certainly I do.” And Mrs. Baines turned her back. “Florence, are not you of my opinion?”

“Well, Aunt Anne, I hardly know——” And happily the entrance of the men prevented any further discussion. Somehow conversation flagged a little, and silence threatened to fall on the party. Florence felt uneasy.

“Are we to have some music?” Walter asked presently. In these days music after dinner, unless it is very excellent or there is some special reason for introducing it, is generally a flag of distress, a sign that dulness is near. Florence knew it, and looking at Ethel tried to cover it by asking for a song.

“Ethel sings German songs delightfully, Aunt Anne,” she said; “I think you would enjoy listening to her.”

“I should enjoy listening to any friend of yours,” the old lady answered. But Miss Dunlop pleaded hoarseness and did not stir.

Mr. Wimple roused himself a little. “I am sure Mrs. Baines plays,” he said, standing before her. Aunt Anne gave a long sigh.

“My playing days are over,” she answered.

“Oh no, Aunt Anne,” laughed Walter, “we cannot allow you to make that excuse.”

In a moment she had risen.

“I never make excuses, Walter,” she said proudly; “if it is your wish—if it will give you pleasure I will touch the keys again, though it is long since I brought myself even to sit down before an instrument.”

She took her place at the piano; she pulled out her handkerchief, not one of the black-bordered ones that Florence had sent her a week ago, but a dainty one of lawn and lace, and held it for a moment to her forehead; then suddenly, with a strange vibrating touch that almost startled her listeners, she began to play “Oft in the stilly night.” Only for a moment did the fire last, her fingers grew feeble, they missed the notes, she shook her head dreamily.

“I forget—I forget them all,” she said to herself rather than to any one else, and then quickly recovering she looked round and apologized. “It is so long,” she said, “and I forget.”

She began softly some variations on “I know a bank,” and played them through to the end. When they were finished she rose and, with a little old-fashioned bow to the piano, turned to Florence, and, saying, with a sweet and curious dignity, “Thank you, my dear, and your friends too, for listening to me,” went back to her seat.

Mr. Wimple was near her chair, he bent down to her.

“You gave us a great treat,” he said, as if he were stating a scientific fact.

Mrs. Baines listened to his words gravely, she seemed to revolve them in her mind for a moment before she looked up.

“I am sure you are musical, Mr. Wimple,” she said, “I can see it in your face.”

“Aunt Anne,” Walter said, passing her, “should you mind my opening this window?”

“No, my darling, I should like it,” she answered tenderly.

Mr. Wimple gave a long sigh.

“Lucky beggar he is; you are very fond of him?”

“Oh yes,” she answered, “he is like my own son;” and she nodded at Walter, who was carrying on a laughing conversation with Ethel Dunlop, while his wife was having what seemed to be a serious one with Mr. Fisher. She looked round the room, her gaze rested on the open window. “I think the carriage must be waiting,” she said, almost to herself.

“I will tell you;” and Mr. Wimple went on to the balcony. “It is a lovely night, Mrs. Baines,” he said, and turning back he fastened his strange eyes upon her. Without a word she rose and followed him.

“Aunt Anne,” Florence said, “you will catch your death of cold; you mustn’t go out. Walter dear, get my thick white shawl for Aunt Anne.”

“Oh no, my love, pray continue your conversation; I have always made a point of looking up at the sky before I retire to rest, therefore it is not likely to do me harm.”

“I wouldn’t let it do you harm for the world,” Mr. Wimple whispered.

She heard him; but she seemed to digest his words slowly, for she nodded to herself before, with the manner and smile that were so entirely her own, she answered—

“Pray don’t distress yourself, Mr. Wimple, I am accustomed to stand before the elements at all seasons of the year, and this air is not likely to be detrimental to me; besides,” she added, with a gentle laugh, “perhaps though I boasted of my age just now I am not so old as I look. Oh, dear Walter, you are too good to me—dear boy;” and she turned and let him wrap the thick white shawl about her. He lingered for a moment, but there fell the dead silence that sometimes seems to chase away a third person, and, feeling that he was not wanted, he went back to Ethel Dunlop. It was a good thing Aunt Anne liked Alfred, he thought. He had been afraid the latter would not wholly enjoy his evening, but the old lady seemed to be making up for Florence’s rather scanty attentions.

“It is impossible to you to be old,” Mr. Wimple said, still speaking almost in a whisper.

The old lady appeared not to hear him; her hands were holding the white shawl close round her neck, her eyes were following the long row of street lamps on the right. The horses, waiting with the carriage before the house, moved restlessly, and made their harness clink in the stillness. Far off, a cornet was playing, as cornets love to do, “Then you’ll remember me.” Beside her stood the young man watching. Behind, in the drawing-room, dimly lighted by the shaded lamp and candles, the others were talking, forgetful of everything but the subject that interested them. Cheap sentimental surrounding enough, but they all told on the old lady standing out on the balcony. The stars looking down on her lighted up the soft white about her throat, and the outline of the shawl-wrapped shoulders, almost youthful in their slenderness. Mr. Wimple went a little closer, the tears came into her eyes, they trickled down her withered cheeks, but he did not know it.

“It is like years ago,” she whispered, “those dear children and all—all—it carries me back to forty—more—eight-and-forty years ago, when I was a girl, and now I am old, I am old, it is the end of the world for me.”

He stooped and picked up the handkerchief with the lace border.

“No,” he said, “don’t say that. It is not the end; age is not counted by years, it is counted by other things;” and he coughed uneasily and waited as if to watch the effect of his speech before continuing. “In reality,” he went on, in the hard voice that would have jarred horribly on more sensitive nerves—“in reality I am older than you, for I have found the world so much colder than you can have done.” He said it with deliberation, as if each word

were weighed, or had been learnt beforehand. “I wish you would teach me to live out of the abundance of youth that will always be yours.”

She listened attentively; she turned and looked towards her left, far ahead, away into the distance, as if puzzled and fascinated by it, almost as if she were afraid of the darkness to which the distance reached. Then she gave a little nod, as if she had remembered that it was only the trees of the Regent’s Park that made the blackness.

“If you would teach me to live out of the abundance of youth that will always be yours,” he said again, as if on consideration he were well satisfied with the sentence, and thought it merited a reply.

She listened attentively for the second time, and looked up half puzzled —

“I should esteem myself most fortunate, if I could be of use to any friend of Walter’s,” she answered, with an almost sad formality.

“You have so many who love you——” The voice was still hard and grating.

“No,” she said, “oh no——”

“There is Sir William Rammage.” He spoke slowly.

“Ah!” she said sadly, “he forgets. And old association has no effect upon him.”

“Has he any brothers and sisters?” he asked.

“They are gone. They all died years and years ago.”

“It is remarkable that he never married.”

“I suppose his inclinations did not prompt him to do so.”

“He seems to have no one belonging to him.”

“There are hardly any left,” she answered, with a sigh, “and unhappily he does not appreciate the companionship of those——”

“Aunt Anne, dear Aunt Anne,” Florence said, “do come in, you will catch your death of cold.”

“My love, the carriage is waiting and you must excuse me; it is growing late. It has been delightful to be with you, and to meet your friends.”

She shook hands with Mr. Fisher, and bowed to Ethel Dunlop; then she went slowly out of the room on Walter’s arm, the long train of Madame

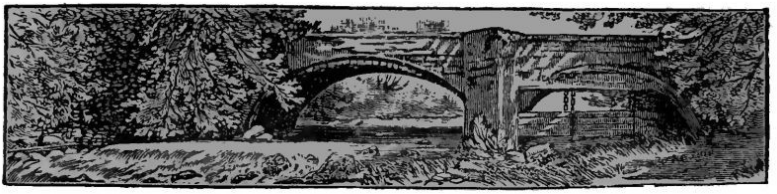
Celestine's dress sweeping behind her.

"Good-night, Mrs. Hibbert," Mr. Wimple said, and, shaking hands quickly with the air of a man who has many engagements and suddenly remembered one that must be instantly kept, he too was gone.

He was just in time to reach the carriage door.

"Mrs. Baines," he said, "I think you said you were going to South Kensington—could you take me as far as Queen's Gate?"

"I wonder where he is going," Walter said to himself as he went upstairs again; "I don't believe he knows a soul in Queen's Gate."



# CHAPTER V.

WALTER was going to India for the winter. It had all been arranged while Aunt Anne sat out on the balcony with Mr. Wimple. Mr. Fisher had explained to Florence that the paper wanted a new correspondent for a time, and that it would be an excellent thing for Walter to get the change and movement of the new life. He was to go out by P. and O., making a short stay at Gibraltar, for business purposes, as well as one at Malta. He had looked anxiously enough at his wife when they were alone again that evening; but she had put out her hands as if in congratulation.

"I am very glad," was all she said, "it will do you good and make you strong."

"To live for you and the chicks, my sweet."

And so they arranged the getting ready; for he was to start by the very next boat, and that sailed in ten days' time.

"If your mother had been in England you might have gone with me as far as Gib," Walter remarked. "I suppose you would be afraid to leave the servants in charge?"

"I should like to go," she answered, as she poured out the coffee—it was breakfast time—"but I couldn't leave the children."

"By Jove," Walter exclaimed, not heeding her answer, "there's Aunt Anne in a hansom! I say, Floggie dear, let me escape. What on earth does she mean by coming at this hour of the morning? Say I'm not down yet, and shall be at least three hours before I am; but keep the breakfast hot somehow."

"Couldn't you see her?"

"No, no, she would want to weep over me if she heard that I was going, and I know I should laugh. Manage to get rid of her soon." And he flew upstairs as the street door was opened.

"My dear Florence," Mrs. Baines said, as she walked in with a long footstep and a truly tragic air, "let me put my arms round you, my poor

darling."

"Why, Aunt Anne, what is the matter?" Florence asked cheerfully, and with considerable astonishment.

"You are very brave, my love," the old lady said, scanning her niece's face, "but I know all; an hour ago I had a letter telling me of Walter's departure. My dear, it will break your heart."

"But why?"

"My love, it will."

"Oh no," Florence said, "I am not so foolish. Life is full of ordinary events that bring out very keen feelings, I have been thinking that lately, but one must learn to take them calmly."

"You do not know what you will suffer when he is gone."

"No, Aunt Anne, I shall miss him, of course; but I shall hope that he is enjoying himself."

"My dear Florence, I expected to find you broken-hearted."

"That would be cruel to him. I am glad he is going, it will do him good, and really I have not had time to think of myself yet, I have been so busy."

Mrs. Baines considered for a moment.

"That is the reason, I knew there was an explanation somewhere," she said in an earnest emotional tone. "I knew how unselfish you were from the first moment I saw you, Florence. It is like you, my darling, not to think of yourself. Try not to do so, for you will feel your loneliness bitterly enough when he is gone."

"But don't tell me so," Florence said, half crying, half laughing. "How did you know about it, Aunt Anne?"

"Mr. Wimple told me."

"Mr. Wimple—have you seen him then?"

"My love, he is one of the most cultivated men I ever met; we have many tastes and sympathies in common. He wrote to ask me to meet him by the Albert Memorial."

"To meet him!" Florence exclaimed.

"Yes," answered the old lady solemnly. "He agrees with me that never was there in any age or country a more beautiful work than the Albert

Memorial. We arranged to meet and examine it together; he wrote to me just now and mentioned that Walter was going to India; I telegraphed instantly that I could see no one else to-day, for I thought you would welcome my loving sympathy. I came to offer it to you, Florence." She said the last words in a disappointed and injured voice.

"It was very kind of you, Aunt Anne; but indeed I have only had time to be glad that he would get a rest and pleasant change of work."

"I must see him before he goes; I may never do so again," Mrs. Baines said, after a pause.

"Oh yes, you will, dear."

"I have brought him two little tokens that I thought of him as I hastened to you after hearing the news. I know they will be useful to him. These are glycerine lozenges, Florence; they are excellent for the throat. The sea mist or the desert sand is sure to affect it."

"Thank you, it was very kind of you; you are much too generous—you make us quite uneasy." Florence was miserable at the two evils suggested.

"My love, if I had thousands a year you should have them," Aunt Anne answered, and, intent on her present-making, she went on, "and here is a little case of scissors, they are of different sizes. I know how much gentlemen"—Aunt Anne always said "gentlemen," never "men," as do the women of to-day—"like to find a pair suited to their requirements at the moment; I thought they might be useful to him on the voyage." She gave a sigh of relief as though presenting her gifts had removed a load from her mind. "I suppose Walter is not down yet, my love?"

"He is upstairs," Florence said, a little guiltily, "I am afraid he will not be down just yet."

Aunt Anne gave a reflective wink, as though she perfectly understood the reason of Walter's non-appearance; but if she did she had far too much tact to betray it.

"If it be your wish, my dear, I will forego the pleasure of saying a last good-bye to him."

"Well, dear Aunt Anne, when he does come down he will have a great deal to do," Florence answered still more guiltily, for she could not help feeling that Aunt Anne saw through the ruse.

"My love, I quite understand," Mrs. Baines said solemnly, "and he will know that it was from no lack of affection that I did not wait to see him. Tell

him that he will be constantly in my thoughts;" and she slowly gathered her cashmere shawl round her shoulders, and buttoned her black kid gloves.

"Poor Aunt Anne," Florence thought when she had gone, she would wring a tragedy from every daily trial if she were encouraged. "Oh, you wicked coward," she said to Walter, "to run away like that."

"Yes, my darling; but I am starved, and really, you know, Floggie, confound Aunt Anne."

"Oh, but she is very kind," Florence said, as she displayed the presents. "How did Mr. Wimple know that you were going to India?" she asked.

"I met him yesterday at the office. He went to see Fisher; it was arranged that he should the other night."

"It is very extraordinary his striking up a friendship with Aunt Anne."

"Yes, very extraordinary," he laughed and then the old lady was forgotten.

The days flew by and the last one came. To-morrow (Thursday) Walter was to start by an early train for Southampton. All his arrangements were complete, and on that last day he had virtually nothing to do, "therefore, Floggie dear," he pleaded, "let us have a spree."

"Yes," she answered, willingly enough, though her heart was heavier than his. "How shall we manage it?"

"Let us stroll about all day or go to Richmond, and come back and have a cosy little dinner somewhere."

"Here," she pleaded, "let us dine here, in our own home on this last evening; we'll have a very nice dinner."

"Very nice indeed?"

"Very nice indeed, you greedy thing."

"All right, darling, suppose you go and order it. Then get ready and let's start as soon as possible; we'll amuse ourselves well, and forget that we have not a month to do it in. Live and be happy in the present day, dear Floggie," he went on in a mock-serious tone; "for there is always a chance that to-morrow will not declare itself."

So they went off, like the boy he was in spite of his more than thirty years, and the girl that she sometimes felt herself to be still in spite of the

two children and the eight years of matrimony. They walked a little way. Then Walter had a brilliant idea.

"Let's get into a hansom," he said, "drive to Waterloo and take the first train that is going in any pleasant direction; I think Waterloo is the best place for that sort of speculation. This beggar's horse looks pretty good, jump in."

As they drove up to the station, a four-wheel cab moved away, the cabman grumbling at the sum that had been given him by two people, a man and a woman, who still stood on the station steps looking after him.

"Why, there's Wimple!" Walter exclaimed; "and who's that with him, I wonder?"

Florence looked up quickly. Mr. Wimple wore a shabby grey coat, and round his neck and over his mouth there was a grey comforter, for the October morning was slightly chilly. In his hand he carried a worn brown portmanteau. Beside him stood a tall good-looking young woman of five-and-twenty, commonly, almost vulgarly dressed. She looked after the departing cab with a scowl on her face that told it was she who had paid the scanty fare. As they stood together, they looked poor and common and singularly unprepossessing; it was impossible to help feeling that they were nearly connected. They looked like husband and wife, and of an indefinite and insignificant class. Suddenly Alfred Wimple caught Walter's eye, he nodded gravely without the least confusion, but he evidently said something quickly and in a low tone to his companion, for they hurried away through one of the station doors.

"That horrid Mr. Wimple seems to possess us lately," Florence thought.

As they went from the ticket office she saw Mr. Wimple and his friend hurrying along the platform. A minute later they had entered a Portsmouth train which was on the point of starting.

"If that's his Liphook friend I don't think much of the looks of her. Alfred always picked up odd people," Walter thought; but he kept these reflections to himself; all he said aloud was, "I say, Floggie dear, if Wimple turns up while I'm away, don't be uncivil to him, and give him food if you can manage it. Somehow he always looks half starved, poor beggar. Fisher is going to give him some reviewing to do, perhaps that will help him a bit."

There was a train starting to Windsor in ten minutes; so they went by it, and strolled down by the river and lingered near the boats, and went into the town and looked at the shops and the outside of the castle. Then they lunched at the confectioner's, an extravagant lunch which Walter ordered,

and afterwards, while they were still drowsy and happy, they hired an open fly and drove to Virginia Water. They hurried back to Windsor in time to catch the 6 p.m. train for town by half a minute, and congratulated themselves upon finding an empty carriage.

"I shall always remember this dear day," Florence said, as they sat over their last little dinner at home.

"That's a good thing," Walter said, "and so will I, dear wife. When I come back we'll have another like it in memory of this one's success." Then he remembered Alfred Wimple. "I should like to know who that girl was," he thought; "wonder if she's the daughter of another tailor he doesn't want to pay, and if I met him to-morrow I wonder what lie he would tell me about her—he always lied, poor beggar." And this shows that his thoughts were sometimes not as charitable as his words.

The next day very early Walter departed for Southampton. Florence went to see him safely on board.

"We shall have the good little journey together," he said dismally, for he was loth enough to leave her now that the parting time had come.

But it seemed as if the train flew along the rails in its hurry to get near the sea, and the journey was over directly. There was all the bustle of getting on board; and almost before she knew it, Florence was on her way back to London alone. As if in a dream she walked home from the station, thinking of her husband watching the sea as it widened between him and England. She was glad she had seen the ship, she could imagine him seated at the long table in the saloon, with the punkahs—useless enough at present—waving overhead, or in his cabin, looking out through the porthole at the white crests to the waves. Yes. She could see all his surroundings plainly. She gave a long sigh. She was a brave little woman, and had tried so hard not to break down before Walter, though in the last moment on board, when she had felt as if her heart would break, she had not been able altogether to help it. And now, as she walked home in the dusk without him, she felt as if she could not live through the long months of separation.

"But I will—I will," she said to herself while the tears trickled down her face; "only it *is* hard, for there is no one in the world like him, no one—no one; and we have never been parted before."

Every moment, too, she remembered, took him farther away. She told herself again and again how much good the journey would do him, how glad she was that he would get the change; but human nature is human nature

still, and will not be controlled by argument. So she quickened her pace, resolving not to give way till she was safe in the darkness of her own room, hidden from the eyes of the servants, and then she would let her feelings have their fling.

She looked up at the house with a sigh. It would be so still without Walter. There was a flickering light in the drawing-room. Probably the servants had put a lamp there, for the days were growing shorter; it was nearly dark already. The children would be in bed, but they were certain not to be asleep, and she thought of the little shout of welcome they would give when they heard her footstep on the stair as she went up to kiss them. She let herself in with Walter's latchkey—she kissed it as she took it from her pocket, and nearly cried again—and then, having entered, stood still and wondered. There in the hall were two square boxes—boxes of the sort that were used before overland trunks came into fashion, and when American arks were unknown. They were covered with brown holland, bordered with faded red braid, and corded with thick brown cord. Stitched on to each cover was a small white card, on each of which was written, in a hand Florence knew well, *Mrs. Baines, care of Mrs. Walter Hibbert*. While she was still contemplating the address, a servant, who had heard her enter, came up.

"Mrs. Baines has been here since eleven o'clock, ma'am," she said; "she's in the drawing-room, and has had nothing to eat all day except a cup of tea, and a little toast that nurse made her have at four o'clock. She's been waiting to see you."

It was evident that there had been some catastrophe. Florence went wearily upstairs, and, after a moment's hesitation to gather courage, entered the drawing-room.

"Aunt Anne!" she exclaimed, "what has happened?"

The old lady had been standing by the fireplace. Her thin white hands were bare, but she still wore her cloak and black close-fitting bonnet, though she had thrown aside the crape veil. Her face looked worn and anxious, but a look of indignation came to her eyes when she saw Florence, a last little flash of remembered insult: then she advanced with outstretched hands.

"Florence," she said, "I have come to you for advice and shelter, I have been insulted—and humiliated"—a quaver came into her voice, she could not go on till indignation returned to give her strength. "Florence," she begun again, "I have come to you. I—I——"

“Aunt Anne, dear Aunt Anne!” Florence said, aching with fatigue, and feeling ruefully that her longing for rest and quiet was not likely to be satisfied, yet thinking, oddly enough too, even while she spoke, of Walter going on, farther and farther away across the darkening sea, “what is the matter? tell me, dear.” There was a throbbing pain in her head. It was like the thud-thud of the screw on board his ship.

Aunt Anne raised her head and spoke firmly—

“My love, I have been insulted.”

“Insulted, Aunt Anne, but how?”

“Yes, my love, insulted. I frequently had occasion to reprove the servants for their conduct, for the want of respect they showed me. The cook was abominable, and a reprimand had no effect upon her. To-day her impertinence was past endurance, I told Mrs. North so, and that she must be dismissed. Mrs. North refused—refused, though her servant had forgotten what was due to me, and this morning—— I can’t repeat her words.”

“Well,” said Florence, “but surely you did not let a servant drive——”

“No, dear Florence, it was not the cook who drove me away, I should not allow a subordinate to interfere with my life; it was Mrs. North. She has behaved cruelly to me. She listened to her servants in preference to me. I told her that they showed me no respect, that they entirely forgot what was due to me, and unless she made an example, and dismissed one of them, it would be impossible for me to stay in her house, and then, my love, I was told that—that,” she stopped for a moment, “I can’t tell you,” she went on suddenly; “I can’t repeat it all, Florence; but, my love, there were other reasons—that are impossible to repeat; and I am here—I am here, homeless and miserable, and insulted. I flew to you, I knew you would be indignant, that your dear heart would feel for me.”

“But you were so happy.”

“Yes, my love, I was.”

“And Mrs. North was so kind to you,” Florence went on regretfully; “could you not have managed——”

“No, my love, I must remember what is due to myself.”

“Oh, but, dear Aunt Anne, don’t you think it would have been better to have put up——”

“Florence, if you cannot sympathize with me I must ask you not to discuss the matter,” the old lady answered, raising her head and speaking in a tone of surprise; “there is no trouble you could have come to me with that I should not have felt about as you did.”

Aunt Anne had a remarkable gift for fighting her own battles, Florence thought.

“But don’t you see, Aunt Anne, that——”

“I would prefer not to discuss the matter, my love,” the old lady said loftily. “You are so young and inexperienced that perhaps you cannot enter into my feelings. Either the cook or I had to leave the house. There were other reasons too, I repeat, why I deemed it unadvisable,—why it was impossible to remain. Mrs. North has lately shown a levity of manner that I could not countenance; her sister is no longer with her, and her husband has been thousands of miles away; is away still, yet she is always ready for amusement. I cannot believe that she loves him, or she would show more regret at his absence. I have known what a happy marriage is, Florence, and you know what it is too, my love. You can therefore understand that I thought her conduct reprehensible. I felt it my duty to tell her so.”

“Yes,” Florence said wearily, “I know, I know;” but she could not help thinking that Aunt Anne had behaved rather foolishly.

Then she rang the bell and ordered tea to be made ready in the dining-room, a substantial tea of the sort that women love and men abhor.

“Now rest and forget all the worries,” she said gently. “You are tired and excited, try and forget everything till you have had some tea and are rested. The spare room is quite ready, and you shall go to bed early, as I will, for it has been a long day.”

“I know what you must have gone through,” and Mrs. Baines shook her head sadly, “and that you want to be alone to think of your dear Walter. But I will only intrude on you for one night, to-morrow I will find an apartment.”

“You must not talk like that, for you are very welcome, Aunt Anne,” Florence said gently, though she could not help inwardly chafing at the intrusion, and longing to be alone.

“Tell me, love, did Walter go off comfortably?” Mrs. Baines asked, speaking with the air people sometimes speak of those who have died rather to the satisfaction of their relations.

“Yes, he sailed a few hours ago. I have just come back from Southampton.”

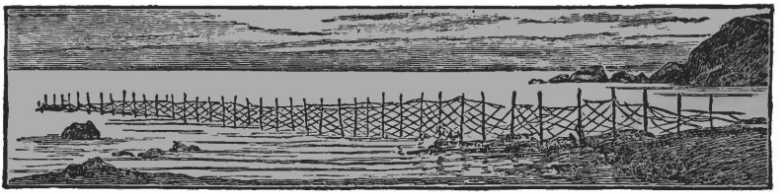
“I know it,” Aunt Anne answered, her voice full of untold feeling; “did he take my simple gifts with him, dear?”

“Yes, he took them,” Florence answered gratefully; “but come downstairs, Aunt Anne, you must be worn out.”

Then in a moment Aunt Anne recovered her old manner, the manner that had some indefinable charm in it, and looked at Florence.

“Yes, my love,” she said, “I am very much fatigued but I am thankful indeed to enjoy your hospitality again. Before I retire to rest I must write some letters, if you will permit your servant to post them.”

Florence had to write one or two letters also. She gave three to the little housemaid to post; as she did so, one of Aunt Anne’s caught her eye. It was addressed to Alfred Wimple. “Perhaps she wanted to tell him something about the Albert Memorial,” she thought, and dismissed the matter from her mind.



# CHAPTER VI.

 HEN it was that Florence discovered that Aunt Anne was really a charming person to have in the house, especially with children. She was so bright, so clever with them, so full of little surprises. In her pocket there always lingered some unexpected little present, and at the tip of her tongue some quaint bit of old-world knowledge that was as interesting to grown-up folk as to the children. To see her prim figure about the place seemed to Florence like having lavender among her linen. She was useful too, ready with her fingers to darn some little place in a tablecloth that every one else had overlooked, to sew a button on Monty's little shoe, or to mend a tear in Catty's pinafore. Above all, she was so complimentary, so full of admiration, and it was quite evident that she meant with her whole heart all the pretty things she said. She did too. Walter was the son of her favourite brother, and to Florence she had really taken a fancy from the beginning.

"I loved you from the first moment, my love," she said. "I shall never forget the look of happiness on your face that morning at Brighton when I met you and your dear Walter together. It endeared you to me. It was a happy day," she added, with a sigh.

"Yes, a very happy day," Florence answered, affectionately remembering how ungrateful both she and dear Walter had been at the time. This was at breakfast one morning, a week after Walter's departure. She was pouring out the coffee very quickly because she longed to open her letters, though she knew it was not possible to get yet the one he had posted from Gibraltar.

Aunt Anne meanwhile was undoing a little packet that had come by post addressed to her. Catty and Monty having finished their porridge were intently watching. She stopped when she noticed the gravity of their faces.

"My love," she said, in the tone of one asking a great favour, "have I your permission to give these dear children some bread and jam?"

"Oh yes, of course," Florence answered, not looking up from the long letter she was reading.

Aunt Anne, quick to notice, saw that it had a foreign postmark and an enclosure that looked like a cheque. Then she cut some bread and took off

the crust before she spread a quantity of butter on the dainty slices, and piled on the top of the butter as much jam as they could carry.

"Oh!" cried the children, with gleeful surprise.

"Dear Aunt Anne," exclaimed Florence, looking up when she heard it, "I never give them quite so much butter with quite so much jam. It is too rich for them, and we don't cut off the crusts."

"The servants will eat them."

"Indeed they will not," laughed Florence; "they don't like crusts."

"You are much too good to them, love, as you are to every one. They should do as they are told, and be glad to take what they can get. I never have patience with the lower classes," she added, in the gentlest of voices.

But the words gave Florence a sudden insight into the possible reason of Aunt Anne's collapse at Mrs. North's, a catastrophe to which the old lady never referred. The very mention of Mrs. North's name made her manner a little distant.

"And then, you know," Florence said, for she was always careful, and now especially, in order to make the very short allowance on which she had put herself in her husband's absence hold out, "we must not let the children learn to be dainty, must we? So they must try to eat up the crusts of their bread; and we only give them a little butter when they have jam. I never had butter and jam together at all at home," and she stroked Catty's fat little hand while she went on reading her letter. "Grandma has written from France, my babes," she said, looking up after a few minutes; "she sends you each a kiss and five shillings to spend."

"I shall buy a horse and be a soldier," Monty declared.

"I shall buy a present for mummy and a little one for Aunt Anne," said Catty.

"Bless you, my darling, for thinking of me," the old lady said fervently, and suddenly opening a tin of Devonshire cream, she piled a mass of it on to the bread and butter and jam already before the astonished children. Aunt Anne's nature gloried in profusion.

"Why," said Florence, not noticing anything at table, "here is a letter from Madame Celestine—her name is on the seal at least. I don't owe her anything. Oh no, it isn't for me. *Mrs. Baines, care of Mrs. Walter Hibbert.* It is for you, Aunt Anne."

“Thank you, my love.” Mrs. Baines took it, with an air of slight but dignified vexation. “It was remiss of your servant not to put all my letters beside me. I am sorry you should be troubled with my correspondence.”

“But it doesn’t matter,” Florence answered. “I hope you have not found her very expensive; she can be so sometimes?” and through Florence’s mind there went a remembrance of the dress in which Aunt Anne had appeared on the night of the dinner-party. A little flush, or something like one, went across the old lady’s withered cheek.

“My love,” she said, almost haughtily, “I have not yet given her charges my consideration. I have been too much engaged with more important matters.”

“I sincerely hope she does not owe for that dress,” Florence thought, but she did not dare ask any questions. “Madame Celestine is not a comfortable creditor, nor usually a small one.”

Then she understood Catty’s and Monty’s remarkable silence of the past few minutes. It had suddenly dawned upon her how unusual it was.

“Why, my beloved babes,” she exclaimed, “what are you eating?” and she looked across laughingly at Aunt Anne. “Where did those snowy mountains of cream come from?”

“They came by post, just now, my love,” Mrs. Baines said firmly.

“Oh, you are much too kind, Aunt Anne. But you will spoil the children, you will indeed, as well as their digestions. You are much too good to them; but we shall have to send them away if you corrupt them in this delicious manner.”

“It is most nutritious, I assure you,” Aunt Anne answered, with great gravity, while with dogged and desperate haste she piled more and more cream on to Monty’s plate. “I thought you would like it, Florence. I have ordered three pounds to be sent in one-pound tins at intervals of three days. I hoped that you would think it good for the dear children, that they would have your approbation in eating it.”

“Of course, and I shall eat some too,” Florence answered, trying to chase away Aunt Anne’s earnestness; “only you are much too good to them.”

The old lady looked up with a tender smile on her face.

“It is not possible to be good enough to your children, my darling—yours and Walter’s.”

“Dear Walter,” said Florence, as she rose from the table, “I shall be glad to get his letter. Now, my monkeys, my vagabonds, my darlings, go upstairs and tell nurse to take you out at once to see the trees and the ducks in the pond; go along, go along,” and she ran playfully after the children.

“May I go and buy my horse?” asked Monty; “and I think I shall buy a sword too. I want to kill a man.”

“He is just like his father!” exclaimed Aunt Anne. “What is Catty going to do with her money?” she asked.

“Give it to mummy,” the child answered softly.

“And she is just like you, dear Florence,” said the old lady, in a choking voice.

“She is just like herself, and therefore like a dickie-bird, and a white rabbit, and a tortoiseshell kitten, and many other things too numerous to mention,” Florence laughed, overtaking Catty and kissing her little round face. “But go, my babes, go—go and get ready; your beloved mummy wants to turn you out of doors;” and shouting with joy the children scampered off.

Florence took up *The Centre*.

“Won’t you have the paper, Aunt Anne, and a quiet quarter of an hour?”

“Thank you, no, my love; I rarely care to peruse it until a more leisure time of the day. With your permission I will leave you now, I have some business to transact out of doors; are there any commissions I could execute for you?”

“No, thank you.”

Aunt Anne was always thoughtful, Florence said to herself. Every morning since she came this question had been asked and answered in almost the same words.

“By the way, Aunt Anne, Mr. Wimple called yesterday. I am sorry I was not at home”—and this she felt to be a fib.

“He told me that he intended to do so before he left town.”

There was a strange light on Aunt Anne’s face when she spoke of him; her niece saw it with wonder.

“I dare say she takes a sort of motherly interest in him,” she said to herself. “He is delicate and she has no belongings; poor old lady, how sad it must be to have no belongings, no husband, no children, no mother, no

anything. I don't wonder her sympathies go out even to Mr. Wimple." Then aloud she asked, "Is he going away for long?"

"He is going to some friends near Portsmouth by the twelve o'clock train to-day," and Mrs. Baines glanced at the clock; "from Waterloo," she added.

"Are you going to see him off, Aunt Anne?"

"My love, I have an engagement in the City at one o'clock. I am going out now, but I cannot say what my movements will be between this and then."

In a moment Aunt Anne's voice was a shade distant. Florence had only asked the question as a little joke, and with no notion that Aunt Anne would take it seriously.

"I didn't mean to be curious," she said, and stroked the old lady's shoulder.

"I know you did not, my darling. You are the last person in the world to commit a solecism,"—and again there came a smile to Aunt Anne's face. It made Florence stoop and kiss her.

"And you told me of your expedition to the Albert Memorial, remember," she went on wickedly; "and I know that you and Mr. Wimple are very sympathetic to each other."

"You are right, Florence. We have many tastes and sympathies in unison. We find it pleasant to discuss them altogether. Good-bye, my love; do not wait luncheon for me. I shall probably partake of it with a friend"—and she left the room. Florence took up *The Centre* again, but she could not read for thinking uneasily of the bill which she felt convinced Madame Celestine had just sent to Aunt Anne.

"I wish I could pay it," she thought; "but I can't, in spite of mother's present this morning. It is probably at least fifteen pounds. Besides, Aunt Anne is such a peculiar old lady that the chances are she would be offended if I did."

She put down the paper and sat thinking for a few minutes. Then she went to the writing-table in the corner by the fireplace, unlocked the corner drawer and took out a little china bowl in which she was in the habit of keeping the money she had in the house. Four pounds in gold and a five-pound note. She took out the note, put in a cheque, locked the drawer and waited.

When she heard the soft footsteps of Aunt Anne descending the stairs she went to the door nervously, uncertain how what she was going to do would be received. Mrs. Baines was dressed ready to go out. She was a little smarter than usual. Round her throat there was some soft white muslin tied in a large bow that fell on her chest and relieved the sombreness of her attire. The heavy crape veil she usually wore was replaced by a thinner one that had little spots of jet upon it.

"Aunt Anne, you look as if you were going to a party."

The old lady was almost confused, like a person who is found out in some roguish mischief of which she is half, but only half, ashamed.

"My love, I only go to your parties," she said; "there are no others in the world that would tempt me."

"Can you come to me for five minutes before you start? I won't keep you longer."

"Yes, with pleasure," Aunt Anne answered; "but it must only be for five minutes, if you will excuse me for saying so, for I have an appointment that I should deeply regret not being able to keep."

Florence led the old lady to an easy-chair and shut the door. Then she knelt down by her side, saying humbly but with a voice full of joy, for she was delighted at what she was going to do—if Aunt Anne would only let her do it.

"I want to tell you that—that I had a letter from my mother this morning."

"I know, my love. I hope she is well, and that you have no anxiety about her."

"Oh no."

"She must long to see you, Florence dear."

"She does; she is such a dear mother, and she is coming to England in two or three weeks' time."

"Her society will be a great solace to you."

"Yes; but what I wanted to tell you is that she has sent me a present."

"I hope it is a substantial one," Aunt Anne said, courteously.

"Indeed it is."

“It rejoices me greatly to hear it, my love.”

“It is money—a cheque. My mother says she sends it to cheer me up after losing Walter.”

“She knew how your tender heart would miss him, my darling;” but she was watching Florence intently with a hungry look that a second self seemed trying to control.

“And as I have had a present of filthy lucre, Aunt Anne, and am delighted and not too proud to take it, so I want you to have a present of filthy lucre and not to be too proud to take it; but just to have this little five-pound note because you love me and for any little odd and end on which you may find it convenient to spend it. It would be so sweet of you to let me share my present as my children shared the cream with you.”

Florence bent her head and kissed the old lady’s hands as she pushed the bit of crisp paper into them. Aunt Anne was not one whit offended, it seemed for a moment as if she were going to break down and cry; but she controlled herself.

“Bless you, my darling, bless you indeed. I take it in the spirit you offer it me; I know the pleasure it is to your generous heart to give, and it is equally one to mine to receive. I could not refuse any gift from you, Florence,” she said, kissing Mrs. Hibbert; and when she departed, it was with an air of having done a gracious and tender deed. But besides this, her footstep had grown lighter, there was a joyfulness in her voice and a flickering smile on her face that showed how much pleasure and relief the money had given her.

“I am so glad,” Florence thought, as she noticed it; “poor old dear. I wonder if it will go to Madame Celestine, or what she will do with it. And I wonder where she is gone.”

# CHAPTER VII.

FLORENCE'S speculations concerning Aunt Anne were brought to an end by the arrival of Mr. Fisher. She was surprised at his paying her so early a visit, and for a moment feared lest it should mean bad news from Walter. But his benevolent expression reassured her.

"I hope you will forgive my intruding on you at this hour, Mrs. Hibbert," he said. "My visit is almost a business one, if I may venture to call it so, and I hope its result may be pleasant to us both." His manner was a faint echo of Aunt Anne's. "I would have written to ask you to see me, but the idea that brings me only occurred to me an hour or two ago."

"But of course I would see you," she answered brightly. "And I think the morning is a delicious time of day to which we devote far too much idleness."

"I thoroughly agree with you," he said, and looked at her approvingly, for he was quite alive to the duties of domesticity. In his short married life it had been an everlasting irritation to him that his wife was a slattern and wholly indifferent about her home. It had made him keen to observe the ways of other women; though the sight of a well-kept house always depressed him a little, for it set him thinking of the denials in his own life, of what he might have had and could have been; it made him also a little extra deferential and gracious to the woman who presided over it. He was so to Florence this morning. He had noticed quickly that all signs of breakfast had vanished, he divined that the children were out of doors, and that she herself, with her slate and account-books, was deep in household matters. It was thus he thought that a woman should chiefly concern herself. Her husband, children, and home were her business in life. The rest could be left to the discretion and management of men. He felt that it was almost a duty on his part, in the absence of her husband, to discreetly manage Florence. Moreover, in the intervals of editing his paper, he had a turn for editing the lives of other people, and he felt it almost an obligation to give a good deal of time to the consideration of the private affairs of his staff. He liked the Hibberts too, and was really anxious to be good and useful to them. He had come to the conclusion that it was a pity that Florence and her children

should stay in London while Walter was away. “She would be much better in the country,” he thought; “the children could run about; besides, what is the good of keeping that cottage near Witley empty?” and then he remembered his own mother, who was seventy years old and lived far off in the wilds of Northumberland. Her sole amusement appeared to be writing her son letters, lamenting that he never went to stay with her, and that since he lived in small and inconvenient bachelor chambers, she could not go and stay with him. It had been her desire that he should marry again. She had told him that it was foolish not to do so, that she could die happy if he had a wife to take care of him. But he never answered a word. “It would not be a bad idea if I had the old lady up for a couple of months, and took the Hibberts’ house,” he said to himself. The idea grew upon him. He imagined the dinners he could give to his staff and their wives—not to the outside world, for it bothered him. “We might ask Ethel Dunlop occasionally,” he thought; “a nice girl in her twenties, fond of pleasure, would brighten up the old lady.” He remembered the twenties with regret, and wished they were thirties; then he would not have felt so keenly the difference in years between them. But he reflected that after all he was still in the prime of life, as a man is, if he chooses, till he is fifty; and he struggled to feel youthful; but struggle as he would, youthful feelings held aloof. They were coy after forty, he supposed, and looking back he consoled himself by thinking that they had been rather foolish. Then he thought of Ethel’s cousin; confound her cousin! she seemed to like going about with him. Perhaps he made love to her; yet he was too much of a hobble-de-hoy for that, surely—three-and-twenty at most—a very objectionable time of life in the masculine sex, a time of dash and impudence and doing of things from sheer bravado at which wisdom, knowledge, and middle age hesitated. Ethel was probably only amusing herself with him. To fall in love with a cousin would show a lack of originality of which he was slow to suspect her. He wondered what the cousin did, and if he wanted a post of any sort; if he had a turn for writing and adventure. Perhaps he could be sent as special correspondent to the Gold Coast, where the climate would probably sufficiently engross him. Ethel at any rate might be invited to see his mother, it would cheer the old lady up to have a girl about her. Yes, he had quite made up his mind. Mrs. Hibbert should go to her country cottage with her two children; he would take the house near Portland Road for a couple of months, and the rest would arrange itself.

“I don’t know whether Walter would like it,” Florence said, when Mr. Fisher had explained his errand.

“I’ll answer for Walter,” Mr. Fisher said concisely. Of course he, a man, knew better than she did what Walter, also a man, would like; that was plainly conveyed in his manner. “It will be better for you and the children,” he went on, with gracious benevolence, for as he looked at Florence he thought how girlish she was. He felt quite strongly that in her husband’s absence it was his duty to look after her, and to teach her, pleasantly, the way in which she should go. It was absurd to suppose that a woman should know it without any direction from his sex, and he was now the proper person to give it. “I will send you plenty of novels to read, and if you would allow me to introduce you to her,” he added, with a shade of pomposity in his voice, “there is a friend of mine at Witley—Mrs. Burnett. You would be excellent companions for each other, I should say, for her husband comes up to town every morning, and——”

“I know her a little,” Florence said, “a tall, slight woman with sweet grey eyes.”

“I never looked at her eyes,” Mr. Fisher said quickly, and Florence felt reproved for having mentioned them. Of course, he would not look at the eyes of a married woman. Mr. Fisher had clear and distinct views about the proprieties, which he thought were invented especially for married and marriageable women. “Perhaps Miss Dunlop would pay you a visit,” he suggested.

“She has her father to take care of. Besides, Mrs. Baines is staying with me.”

“I saw Mrs. Baines with Wimple the other day. Has she adopted him?”

“With Mr. Wimple,” Florence said, bewildered at the sudden mention of the name again; and then remembering Walter, she added loyally, “she likes him because he is Walter’s friend.”

“He writes well,” Mr. Fisher answered, as if he were making a remark that surprised himself. “He has done some work for us, and done it very well too.”

Then he unfolded the details in regard to the taking of the house.

Florence found to her surprise that he had arranged them all carefully.

“Let me see,” he said, “this is Monday. You can go on Saturday, I suppose? I think that would be the best day for my mother to arrive.”

“Oh yes. There are things to get ready and to put away, of course.”

“They won’t take you long,” he answered shortly.

“I dare say it will do the children good,” she said, reluctantly.

“Of course it will.”

“I might ask Aunt Anne to take the children to-morrow—I am sure she would—then I could soon get the place ready.”

“Mrs. Baines? Yes, it would be an excellent plan to send her on first.”

“It is very kind of you; don’t you think that you are really paying too much rent, Mr. Fisher?”

“Not at all, not at all; it is a fair one, and I shall be very glad to have the house.”

She was really a nice little woman, he thought, docile, and far from stupid; she only wanted a little managing. He had a suspicion that Walter was too easy-going, and if so, this little experience would be excellent for her; it would teach her that after all men were the governing race. It was so foolish when women did not recognize it.

“Very well then, you will go on Saturday? Good-bye. Oh, I should like to ask Miss Dunlop to come and see my mother; do you think she would mind cheering her up sometimes?”

“Oh no. She is a nice girl too.”

“We might make a party to the theatre one night perhaps. By the way, Mrs. Hibbert,” he exclaimed, a sudden thought striking him, “I shall write to Walter as soon as I get to the office and tell him of this arrangement. I might as well enclose a note from you. The mail goes out to-day from Southampton, so that it would be too late to post, but I am sending specially by rail. I will wait while you write a note, and enclose it in mine.”

“I wrote by this mail last night,” she answered. “But I should like to tell him about the house—he might be angry.” She laughed at the last words. She only said them to keep up Walter’s dignity.

“Oh no, he won’t be angry,” Mr. Fisher laughed back, and Florence thought he was quite good-looking when he was not too grave. He did not look more than forty either; perhaps Ethel might be happy with him. Then, when she had written a few lines, he departed, satisfied with the result of his visit.

An odd thing happened about that note. He went straight to the office and found a dozen matters of business awaiting his attention, and all remembrance of the Hibberts fled from him. Suddenly, an hour later, he

dived into his pocket for a memorandum, and pulled out an unopened white envelope. He did not look at the address. "What's this?" he said in utter forgetfulness, and tore it open; and—for his own name caught his eye—he read a passage in Mrs. Hibbert's note to her husband:—

"——*he is a kind old fogey, and I think he likes Ethel D. Would it not be funny if he married her?*"

He folded it up quickly for fear he should read more. "Why should it be funny?" he said to himself. The word haunted him all day.

Meanwhile Aunt Anne was deeply engaged. She was delighted with Florence's unexpected gift; it would enable her to do a few things that only an hour or two ago she had felt to be impossible. She had not the least intention of paying Madame Celestine. She looked upon her as an inferior who must be content to wait till it was the pleasure of her superior to remember her bill, and any reminder of it she resented as a liberty. She spent a happy and very excited hour in Regent Street, and at eleven o'clock stood on the kerbstone critically looking for a hansom. She let several go by that did not please her; but at last with excellent instinct she picked out a good horse and a smart driver, and a minute later was whirling on towards Waterloo Station. She liked driving in hansoms; she was of opinion that they were well constructed, a great improvement on older modes of conveyance, and that it was the positive duty of people in a certain rank of life to encourage all meritorious achievements with their approval. She never for a moment doubted that she was one of those whose approval was important. She felt her own individuality very strongly, and was convinced that the world recognized it. She was keenly sensible of making effects, and it was odd, but for all her eccentricities, there was in her the making of a great lady; or it might have seemed to a philosophical speculator that she was made of the worn-out fragments of some past great lady, and dimly remembered at intervals her former importance. She had perfect control over her manner, and could use it to the best advantage; she had reserve, a power of keeping off familiarity, a graciousness, a winsomeness when she chose, that all belonged to a certain type and a certain class. As she went on swiftly to the station she looked half-disdainfully, yet compassionately, at the people who walked and the people who passed in omnibuses. She told herself that the last were excellent institutions, she wondered what the lower class would do without them; it rejoiced her to think that they had not got to do without them, it was a satisfaction to feel that she could enjoy her own superior condition without compunction.

At Waterloo, with an air of decision that showed a perfect knowledge of her own generosity, she gave the cabman sixpence over his fare and walked slowly into the station. She looked up and down the platform from which the Portsmouth train would depart, but saw no one she knew. She stood for a moment hesitating, and winked slowly to herself. Then she went to the bookstall and bought a *Times* and a *Morning Post*. The one cost threepence and the other was fashionable. She disliked penny papers. Again her mania for present-giving asserted itself, and quickly she bought also a pile of illustrated papers and magazines. "Gentlemen always like the *Field*," she said to herself, and added it to the heap. She turned away with them in her arms, and as she did so Alfred Wimple stood facing her.

"I have ventured to get you a few papers, hoping they would beguile you on your journey," she said.

Mr. Wimple was as grave as ever and as rickety on his legs. His face showed no sign of pleasure at the sight of the old lady, but his manner was deferential; he seemed to be trying to impress certain indefinite facts upon her.

"I never read in a train," he answered, "but I shall be glad of them at the end of the journey. Thank you."

He said the last two words with a sigh, and put them in the corner he had already secured of the railway carriage. He looked at the clock. Twenty minutes before he started. He seemed to consider something for a moment, looking critically at the old lady while he did so.

"Cannot I persuade you to give me your address in Hampshire?" He coughed a little. "Have you your glycerine lozenges with you?" she asked hurriedly.

"Yes," he answered, "they are in my pocket. I will write to you, Mrs. Baines; I may have something of importance to say."

"Everything that you say is important," she answered nervously.

He got into the train and sat down.

"I am tired," he said; "you must excuse me for not standing any longer." He shivered as he opened the window. "I dislike third class," he added, "but I go by it on principle; I am not rich enough to travel by any other, Mrs. Baines," and he looked at her fixedly.

She was silent, she seemed fascinated, she looked at him for a moment and winked absently; then a thought seemed to strike her and she started.

“Wait!” she exclaimed; “I will return in a moment,” and she hurried away.

In five minutes she came back breathless with excitement. “I have taken a great liberty,” she said humbly, “but you must forgive me. I have ventured to get you this ticket; will you please me by changing into a first-class carriage? You must imagine that you are my guest,” and she looked at him anxiously. “The guard is waiting——”

“I cannot refuse you anything, Mrs. Baines.” And with a chastened air he pulled his portmanteau from under the seat. The guard was waiting outside for it, and took it to an empty carriage. Mr. Wimple followed, Aunt Anne carrying the papers. He took his place and looked round satisfied. The guard touched his hat to the old lady and went his way. Mrs. Baines gave a sigh of satisfaction.

“Now I shall feel content, and you will not be disturbed,” she added triumphantly. “I have spoken——” She stopped, for his hacking cough came back; she seemed to shrink with pain as she heard it.

“I am quite an invalid,” he said impressively.

“I wish I were going with you to nurse you.”

“I need nursing, Mrs. Baines,” he answered sadly. “I need a great many things.”

“I wish I could give them to you.”

He looked at her curiously; as if the words came from him without his knowledge, he said suddenly, “I see Sir William Rammage is a little better.”

“I am going to inquire after him this morning,” she answered, and then she drew a little parcel from beneath her shawl. “I want you to put this into your pocket,” she said, “and to open it by-and-by; it is only a trifling proof that I thought of you as I came along.”

“I always think of you,” he said, almost reproachfully, as, without a word of thanks, he put the parcel out of sight.

“Not more than I do of you,” she said, in a low choking voice. “I hear you cough in my sleep; and it grieves me to think how hard you have to work.”

“I can’t take care of myself,” he said; “I was always careless, Mrs. Baines, and I must work. Fisher is a very fidgety man to work for; it has

taken me three days to review a small book on American law, and even now I am not sure that he will be satisfied."

His voice never varied, the expression of his eyes never changed save once for a moment. She had taken off her gloves and was resting her hands, thin and dry, on the ledge of the carriage window while she leant forward to talk to him, and suddenly he looked down at them. They seemed to repel him, he drew back a very little; she saw the movement and followed his eyes; she understood perfectly; for she had quick insight, and courage to face unflinchingly even truths that were not pleasant. She drew her hands away and rubbed them softly one over the other, as if by doing so she could put young life into them. Suddenly with a jerk the train moved.

"Good-bye," she said excitedly. "Good-bye; if I write to the address in town will the letter be forwarded?"

But he could only nod. In a moment he was out of sight. He did not lean forward to look after her, he sat staring into space. "She must be seventy," he said. "I wonder——" Then he felt in his pocket for the third-class ticket he no longer needed. "Probably they will return the amount I paid for it." A sudden thought struck him. He looked at the ticket Mrs. Baines had given him. "It is for Portsmouth," he said grimly. The one he had taken himself had been for Liphook.

# CHAPTER VIII.

It was not at all a bad thing to do, Florence thought, as she sat and considered the arrangement Mr. Fisher had so suddenly made in regard to the house in town and the cottage at Witley. The country would do the children good, and Aunt Anne would probably enjoy it. Of course the latter would consent to go with them. Indeed, she had clearly no other resource. Florence wondered if she would like it.

But Mrs. Baines was so full of news herself when she returned that she had no time to listen to any one else.

"My love," she said, "I have passed a most important day."

"Relate your adventures, Aunt Anne." But at this request Mrs. Baines winked and spoke slowly.

"I had an engagement in the morning," she began, and hesitated. "When I had fulfilled it," she went on, "I thought it right, Florence, to go and call on Sir William Rammage. He has been ill, and I wanted to assure him of my sympathy. Besides, I felt that it was due to you—that it was an imperative duty on my part to ask him for an allowance, and that it was his duty to give it to me."

"But, Aunt Anne——"

"Yes, my love. I am living now on your generous kindness; don't think that I am insensible to it. But for your tenderness, my darling, I should have been alone in a little lodging now, as I was when—when I was first left a widow."

"I should not like to think of you in a little lodging, Aunt Anne," Florence said gently; and then she added gaily, "but continue your adventures."

Mrs. Baines gave a long sigh, and was silent for a moment. She sat down on the easy-chair and, as if she had not heard Florence's interruption, went on with a strange tragic note in her voice—

“I never told you about that time, Florence. I had three pounds in the world when I came to London; just three pounds to maintain my position until I could find something to do. I had a little room at Kilburn—a little room at the top of the house; and I used to sit day after day, week after week, waiting. I had no coals, only a little spirit-lamp by which I made some water hot, then poured it into a jug and covered it over and warmed my hands by it; it was often an hour before it grew cold, my love.”

“But why did you not come to us?”

“I couldn’t,” the old lady answered in an obstinate tone. “I felt that it would not be treating you properly to present myself before you while I was so poor and miserable”—she paused and looked into the fire for a moment, then suddenly went on: “The woman at the corner where I went every morning to buy a newspaper, saw that I was poor, and presumed upon it. Once she said I looked nipped up, and asked me to sit down and get warm. I reproved her for familiarity, and never went to the shop again.”

“But perhaps she meant it for kindness?”

“She should have remembered her position, my love, and asked me in a different manner. There is nothing more painful to bear than the remembrance of one’s own rank in life when one has to encounter the hardships that belong by right to a lower class.” Aunt Anne paused again for a moment, and gave a long sigh before she went on: “We won’t go over it, my dear. If Mrs. North had shown less levity in her conduct and more consideration to me, I should have been there still instead of living on your charity.”

“Oh no, Aunt Anne.”

“Yes, my love, it is so; even though you love me and I love you, it is charity; and I felt it keenly when you resented my little offering of cream this morning—you, to whom I would give everything I possess.”

“Oh no, Aunt Anne——” interrupted Florence.

“And so—and so,” continued the old lady with a little gasp, “I went to Sir William Rammage once more. I told him—I told him”—she stopped—“I told him how our mothers had stood over us together, years and years ago.”

“Yes, I know,” Florence said soothingly. She had heard this so often before. “I hope he was good to you?”

“My dear, he listened with compunction, but he saw the force of what I said. He will write and tell me how much he will allow me,” she added

simply.

"I am very glad, Aunt Anne; I hope he will write soon, and be generous. I know it will make you happier."

"It will, indeed," and Mrs. Baines gave another long sigh. "I shall not be dependent on any one much longer."

"Except upon him," Florence said unwittingly.

"No, I shall not feel that I am dependent even upon him," and she looked up quickly. "He will give it and I shall take it for the honour of the family. I told him how impossible it was that I could go on living upon you and Walter, that it would be a disgrace. I could not live upon him either. He has shown me so little sympathy, my love, that I could not endure it. I shall take the allowance from him as I should take an inheritance, knowing that it is not given to me for my own sake. I could not take it in any other spirit; but it would be as wrong in him to forget what is due to us, as it would be in me to let him do so. It would shed dishonour on his name."

And again she was silent; she seemed to be living over the past, to be groping her way back among days that were over before Florence was even born, to be seeing people whose very names had not been heard for years.

"They would rise in their graves if I were left to starve," she continued; "I have always felt it; and it was but right towards them that I should go to William; it was due to them even that I should live on you and Walter, my darling, till I received an adequate income."

Suddenly her voice changed again, the wonderful smile came back—the happy look that always seemed as if it had travelled from the youth she had left long years behind.

"You understand, my love?" she asked. "Bless you for all your kindness, but I am not going to intrude upon you much longer. I have already seen an apartment that will, I think, suit my requirements."

"Oh no."

"Yes, my love, it will be much better. You cut me to the quick this morning, Florence," and her voice grew sad; "you said that you would have to send away your dear children because my influence would spoil them."

"Aunt Anne!"—Florence began in consternation.

"Yes, dear, yes," the old lady said solemnly; "it gave me the deepest pain, as I sat and thought it over in the privacy of my own chamber. But

when I came downstairs and you shared your dear mother's gift with me, I knew that you loved me sincerely."

"I do," said Florence, soothingly.

"I am sure of it, my darling," with even more solemnity, "but it will be better that I should take an apartment. It will rejoice your tender heart to know that by your gift you have helped me to secure one, and when I receive my allowance from Sir William I shall feel that I am independent once more. You must forgive me, my love; it is not that I do not appreciate your hospitality—yours and Walter's—I do. But I feel that it would sadden all my dear ones who are gone, if they knew that I was alone in the world, without a home of my own. That is why I went to Sir William Rammage, Florence; and though he said little, I feel sure that he saw the matter in a proper light, and felt as I do about it."

"What did he say?"

"He said he would think it over, and when he had made up his mind he would write to me. My love, would you permit me to ring the bell?"

"Yes, of course. Why do you always ask me? Don't you feel at home here, dear Aunt Anne?" Florence asked, thinking that Sir William's answer had, after all, committed him to little.

"I hope I shall never so far forget myself as not to treat you with the courtesy that you have a right to expect, my darling. I will never take advantage of our relationship.—Jane," she said, with quite another manner, and in a cold and slightly haughty tone, to the servant who had entered, "would you have the goodness to divest me of my cloak? and if your mistress gives you permission, perhaps you would carry it up to my room?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Jane, respectfully, but without much willingness in her manner. The servants had learnt to resent the tone in which Mrs. Baines usually spoke to them. "She treats us like dirt," the housemaid explained to the cook; "and if were made of dirt, I should like to know what she's made of? She give me a shilling the other day, and another time a new apron done up in a box from the draper's; but I don't care about her for all her presents. I know she always sees every speck of dust that others would be blind to; it's in her wink that she does."

"And now that you have told me all your news, I want you to listen to mine," Florence said.

Then she gave an account of Mr. Fisher's visit, and of the letting of the house for a couple of months.

“So, Aunt Anne,” she continued triumphantly, “I want you to be very, very good, and to go with the children and two of the servants to the cottage at Witley to-morrow, and to be the mistress of the great establishment, if you will, and mother to the children till I come; that proves how bad I think your influence is for them, doesn’t it, you unkind old dear?”—and she stooped and kissed Mrs. Baines.

Aunt Anne was delighted, and consented at once.

“I shall never forget your putting this confidence in me. You have proved your affection for me most truly,” she said. “My dear Florence, your children shall have the most loving care that it is in my power to give them. I will look after everything till you come; more zealously than you yourself could. Tell me, love, where do you say the cottage is situated?”

“It is near Witley, it is on the direct Portsmouth road; a sweet little cottage with a garden, and fir woods stretching on either side.”

“And how far is it from Portsmouth, my love?” Mrs. Baines asked eagerly.

Florence divined the meaning of the question instantly.

“Oh, I don’t know, Aunt Anne; after Witley comes Hindhead, and then Liphook, and then Petersfield, and then—then I don’t know. Liphook is the place where Mr. Wimple”—the old lady winked to herself—“has friends, and sometimes goes to stay.”

“And how far is that?”

“About six miles, I think—six or seven.”

“Thank you, my love; and now, if you will allow me, I will retire. I must make preparations for my journey, which is indeed a delightful anticipation.”

Florence never forgot the October morning on which she took Aunt Anne and the children to Witley. They went from Waterloo. She thought of Walter and the day they had spent at Windsor, and of that last one on which they had gone together to Southampton, and she had returned alone. “Oh, my darling,” she said to herself, “may you grow well and strong, and come back to us soon again.”

Mrs. Baines, too, seemed full of memories. She looked up and down the platform; she stood for a moment dreamily by the bookstall before it occurred to her to buy a cheap illustrated paper to amuse Catty and Monty on the journey.

“My love,” she said to Florence, with a little sigh, “a railway station is fraught with many recollections of meeting and parting——”

“And meeting again,” said Florence, longingly thinking of Walter.

“Yes, my love,” the old lady answered tenderly; “and may yours with your dear one be soon.”

There were three miles to drive from Witley to the cottage. A long white road, with fir woods on either side. Gaps in the firs, and glimpses of the Surrey hills, distant and blue, of hanging woods and deep valleys. The firs came to an end; and there were cliffs of gravel full of the holes of sand-martins. More woods, then hedges of blackberry-bushes, bare enough now; gorse full of late bloom, heather faded and turning from russet to black. Here and there a solitary house, masses of oak and larch and fir, patches of sunshine, long wastes of shade; and the road going on and on.

“Here we are at last,” Florence said, as they stopped before a red-brick cottage that stood only a few yards back from the road. On either side of it was a fir plantation. There was a gravel pathway round the house, but the other paths were covered with tan. Behind stretched a wilderness of garden almost entirely uncultivated. There was a little footway that wound through it in and out among beeches and larches and firs and oaks, and stopped at last on the ridge of a dip that could hardly be called a valley.

“Sometimes,” said Florence, as they walked about, half an hour later, while the servants were busy within, “we go down the dip and up the other side, and so get over to Hindhead. It is nearer than going there by the road.”

“Our house is over there,” the children said.

“Their house,” explained Florence, “is a little, lonely, thatched shed, half a mile away. We don’t know who made it. It is in a lovely part on the other side of the dip, among the straggling trees. Perhaps some one tethered a cow in it once. The children call it their house now, because one day they had tea there. After I return next week we must try and walk across to it.”

But the old lady’s eyes were turned towards the distance.

“And the road in front of the house,” she asked, “where does that go to?”

“It winds round the Devil’s Punch Bowl, and over Hindhead, and on through Liphook and Petersfield to Portsmouth.”

Aunt Anne did not answer, she looked still more intently into the distance, and gave a long sigh.

“It is most exhilarating to be out of London again, my dear Florence,” she said. “I sincerely trust it will prove beneficial to your dear ones. I was born in the country, and I hope that some day I shall die in it. London is most oppressive after a time.”

“I like London,” Florence answered; “still it does now and then feel like a prison.”

“And the rows and rows of houses are the prison bars, my love. May we enter the cottage?” she asked suddenly. She was evidently tired; she stooped, and looked older and more worn than usual.

“Poor old dear,” Florence thought. “I hope she is not worrying about Madame Celestine’s bill, and that she will soon hear from Sir William Rammage. Then she will be happier.”

It was a little house, simple inside as well as out, with tiny rooms, plainly furnished. The dining-room had been newly done up, with cretonne curtains and a dado, and a buttery-hatch in which Florence took a certain pride as something rather grand for so small a place. The drawing-room was old-fashioned; a stiff roomy sofa with hard flat cushions at one end; at the other a sweet jangling piano. There were corner cupboards with china bowls of pot-pourri on them; on either side of the fireplace a gaunt, high-backed easy-chair, and on the left of each chair an old-fashioned screen on which was worked a peacock. Aunt Anne stopped on the threshold.

It seemed to Florence as if the room recognized the old lady, as if it had been waiting, knowing that she would come. There was something about it that said more plainly than any words could have said that the hands were still that had first arranged it, and many footsteps had gone out from its doorway that would never come in at it more.

“It always depresses me,” Florence explained; “but it is just as we found it. We refurnished the dining-room, and sit there a good deal. It is more cheerful than this. Come upstairs”—and she led the way.

The bedrooms were all small too, save one in front, that seemed to match the drawing-room. It looked like a room to die in: Florence thought so, as she entered it for the first time with Aunt Anne. A quaint four-post bedstead with dark chintz curtains, a worm-eaten bureau, a sampler worked in Berlin wool and framed in black cherry-wood hanging over the fireplace.

“This is the best room,” she said, “and we keep it for visitors. There is a little one, meant to be a dressing-room, I suppose, leading out of it,” and she went to a bright little nook with a bed in it. “I always feel that the best

bedroom and the drawing-room belong to a past world, and the rest of the house to the present one."

"It is like your life and mine, my darling; mine to the past and yours to the present."

"I think you ought to sleep in the best room, Aunt Anne."

"No, my love," the old lady interrupted, "let me have this little one which is next it. When you require the other, if I am still with you, I can lock the door between. The best one is too grand for me; but sometimes while it is empty I will go in, if you have no objection, and look out at the fir trees and the road that stretches right and left——"

"I like doing that," Florence interrupted. "It always sets me thinking—the road from the city to the sea."

"From the city to the sea," the old lady repeated; "from the voices to the silences."

"Aunt Anne, we mustn't grow sentimental," Florence began. There was the sound of a tinkling bell. It seemed to come at an opportune moment. "Oh, happy sound," she laughed; "it means that our meal is ready. Catty, darling," she called, "Monty, my son, roast chicken is waiting downstairs. Auntie and mummy are quite ready; come, dear babes"—and patter, patter, came the sound of the little feet, and together they all went down.

An hour later the fly came to the door; it was time for Florence to start on her way back to town.

"I shall be with you at latest on Tuesday. Perhaps, dear Aunt Anne, if you don't mind taking care of the bad children so long, I may go on Saturday for a day or two to an old schoolfellow," she said. "Then I should not be here till the middle of next week."

"Dear child, you do indeed put confidence in me," Mrs. Baines answered quaintly.

"And, Aunt Anne, I have ordered most things in, but the tradespeople come every day if there is anything more you want. What you order is, of course, put down, but here is some money for odds and ends. Four pounds, I think, will carry you through; and here is a little book in which to put down your expenses. I always keep a most careful account of what I spend; you don't mind doing so either, do you?"

"My love, anything you wish will be a pleasure to me."

“If you please, ma’am,” said Jane, entering, “the driver says you must start at once if you want to catch this train.”

“Then good-bye, dear Aunt Anne; good-bye, dear dickie-birds; be happy together. You shall see me very soon again; send me a letter every other day;” and with many embraces Florence was allowed to get out of the door. But Aunt Anne and the children ran excitedly after her to the gate, and helped her into the little waggonette, and kissed their hands and waved their handkerchiefs as she drove off, and called “Good-bye, good-bye;” and so, watching them, Florence went along the white road towards the station.

# CHAPTER IX.

THE days that followed were busy ones for Florence—busy in a domestic sense, so that the history of them does not concern us here. Mr. Fisher called one afternoon; by a strange coincidence it was while Ethel Dunlop was helping Florence with an inventory of china. Miss Dunlop readily promised to visit his mother, but she did not show any particular interest in the editor.

"He has been so kind," Florence said, "and don't you think he is very agreeable?"

"Oh yes; but you know, Florrie dear, he has a very square jaw."

"Well?"

"It is a good thing he never married again; he would have been very obstinate."

"But why do you say never did?—as if he never would. He is only forty-odd."

"Only forty-odd!" laughed Ethel—"only a million. If a man is over eight-and-twenty he might as well be over eighty; it is mere modesty that he is not."

"Walter is over thirty, and just as fascinating as ever."

Florence was rather indignant.

"Ah, yes, but he is married, and married men take such a long time to grow old. By the way, Mr. Fisher said something about a theatre-party, when his mother is here. Do you think I might ask him to invite George Dighton as well? George is very fond of theatres."

Before Florence could reply, a carriage stopped at the door; it looked familiar, it reminded her of Aunt Anne in her triumphant days. But a strange lady descended from it now, and was shown upstairs to the drawing-room, in which Aunt Anne had sat and related her woes and known her triumphs.

"Mrs. North, ma'am," said the servant; and then Florence understood.

She left Ethel in the dining-room with the inventory, and went up to receive the visitor. Mrs. North was as pretty as Aunt Anne had declared her to be; a mere girl to look at, tall and slim. Florence thought it was quite natural that her husband should like her to have a chaperon.

"I came to see Mrs. Baines," she said, coming forward in a shy, hesitating manner, "but hearing that she was in the country I ventured to ask for you. What have you done with the dear old lady?" and she laughed nervously. Florence looked at her, fascinated by her beauty; by her clothes, that seemed to be a mixture of fur and lace and perfume, by the soft brown hair that curled low on her forehead, by the sweet blue eyes—by every bit of her. "She told you, probably, that she was very angry when she left me; I know it has all been very dreadful in her eyes; but she was always kind to me, and I thought by this time that she would, perhaps, forgive me and make it up; so I came." She said it with a penitent air.

"I am afraid she is very angry," Florence answered, laughing, for the pretty woman before her did not seem like a stranger. "Do you want her again?"

"Oh no!" and Mrs. North shook her head emphatically. "She would not come, I know; besides, it would be impossible: she led us a terrible life. But we loved her, and wanted just to make it up with her again. I think we could have put up with anything if she had not quarrelled with the servants."

"I was afraid it was that," Florence answered.

"Oh yes!" sighed Mrs. North; "she was horribly autocratic with them —'autocratic' is her own word. At last she quarrelled with Hetty, and wanted me to send her away—to send away Hetty, who is a born treasure, and cooks like an angel. It would have broken our hearts—a woman who sends up a dinner like a charm; we couldn't let her go, it was impossible, and the old lady fled."

"I am very sorry. You were so kind to her; she always said that."

"I loved her," Mrs. North answered, with a little sigh. "She was so like my dear dead mother grown old—that was the secret of her attraction for us; but she ruled us with a rod of iron that grew more and more unyielding every day. And yet she was very kind. She was always giving us presents."

"Oh yes," Florence said, in a despairing voice.

"We have had the bills for them since," Mrs. North went on, with a comical air. "She used to say that I was very frivolous," she added suddenly. "She thought it wicked of me to enjoy life while my husband was away. But

he is old, Mrs. Hibbert; one may have an affection for an old husband, but one can't be in love with him."

"If she were very nice she would not have made that remark to me, whom she never saw before," Florence thought, beginning to dislike her a little.

"Of course I am sorry he is away," Mrs. North said, as if she perfectly understood the impression she was making; "he is coming back now. He has telegraphed suddenly." There was something like fright in her voice as she said it. "I did not expect him; but he is coming almost directly. I suppose I ought to be very glad," she added, with a ghostly smile. "I am, of course; but I am surprised at his sudden return. I took Mrs. Baines because he wished me to have an old lady about me; but I wanted my own way. I liked her to have hers when it amused me to see her have it, when it didn't I wanted to have mine." Mrs. North's whole expression had altered again, and she looked up with two blue eyes that fascinated and repelled, and laughed a merry, uncontrolled laugh like a child's. "Oh, she was very droll."

"Perhaps it is very rude of me to say it," Florence said primly, for deep in her heart there was a great deal of primness, "but I can understand Mr. North wishing you to have a chaperon; you are very young to be left alone."

"Oh yes, and very careless, I know that. And Mrs. Baines used to provoke me into shocking her. I could shock her so easily, and did—don't you know how one loves power for good or ill over a human being?"

"No, I don't," Florence answered, a little stiffly.

"I do; I love it best of all things in the world, whether it leads me uphill or downhill. But I am intruding," for she saw a set cold look coming over Florence's face. "Let me tell you why I asked for you. I have been so embarrassed about Mrs. Baines. She gave us presents, and she bought all sorts of things: but she didn't pay for them. These bills came, and the people wanted their money." She pulled a little roll out of her pocket. "She probably forgot them, and I thought it would be better to pay them, especially as I owed her some money when she left which she would not take;" and she laughed out again, but there was the odd sound like fright in her voice. "They are from florists and all sorts of people."

Florence looked over the bills quickly and almost guiltily. There were the pots of fern and the flowers that had been sent to her and the children after Aunt Anne's first visit; and there were the roses with which she had

triumphantly entered on the night of the dinner-party. “Oh, poor old lady!” she exclaimed sadly.

“They are paid,” Mrs. North said. “Don’t be distressed about them and many others—lace-handkerchiefs, shoes, all sorts of things. Don’t tell her. She would think I had taken a liberty or committed a solecism,” and she made a little wry face. “But what I really wanted to see you about, Mrs. Hibbert, was Madame Celestine’s bill. I am afraid I can’t manage that all by myself; it is too long. Madame Celestine, of course, is sweetly miserable, for she thinks the old lady has vanished into space. She came to me yesterday. It seems that she went to you a few days ago, but you were out, and she was glad of it when she discovered that Mrs. Baines was your aunt, for she doesn’t want to offend you. She came to me again to-day. She is very miserable. I believe it will turn her hair grey. Oh, it is too funny.”

“I don’t think it is at all funny.”

“But indeed it is, for I don’t believe Mrs. Baines will ever be able to pay the fifteen pounds; in fact, we know that she won’t. Probably it is worrying her a good deal. I have been wondering whether something could not be done; if you and I, for instance, were to arrange it between us.”

“You are very good, Mrs. North,” Florence said, against her will.

“Oh no, but I am sorry for her, and it vexes and worries me to think that she is annoyed. I want to get rid of that vexation, and will pay something to do so. That is what most generosity comes to,” Mrs. North went on, with mock cynicism, “the purchase of a pleasant feeling for one’s self, or the getting rid of an unpleasant one. There is little really unselfish goodness in the world, and when one meets it, as a rule, it isn’t charming, it isn’t fascinating; one feels that one would rather be without it.” She rose as she spoke. “Well,” she asked, “what shall we do? I’ll pay one half of the old lady’s bill if you will pay the other half.”

“You are very good,” Florence repeated, wonderingly.

“No; but I expect you are,” and Mrs. North showed two rows of little white teeth. “I should think you are a model of virtue,” she added, with an almost childlike air of frankness, which made it impossible to take offence at her words, though Florence felt that at best she was only regarded as the possessor of a quality that just before her visitor had denounced.

“Why,” she asked, smiling against her will, “do I look like a model of virtue?”

“Oh yes, you are almost Madonna-like,” Mrs. North said, with a sigh. “I wish I were like you, only—only I think I should get very tired of myself. I get tired now; till a reaction comes. But a reaction to the purely good must be tame at best.”

“You are very clever,” Florence said, almost without knowing it, and shrinking from her again.

“How do you know? My husband says I am clever, but I don’t think I am. I am alive. So many people are merely in the preface to being alive, and never get any farther. I am well in the middle of the book; and I am eager, so eager, that sometimes I long to eat up the whole world in order to know the taste of everything. Do you understand that?”

“No. I am content with my slice.”

“Ah, that is it. I am not content with mine. You have your husband and children.”

“But you have a husband.”

“Yes, I have a husband too; a funny old husband, a long way off, who is rapidly—too rapidly, I fear—coming nearer”—Florence hated her—“and no children. I amused myself with the old lady—Mrs. Baines—till she fled from me. Now I try other things. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye,” Florence said.

As Mrs. North was going out of the door she turned and asked, “Have you many friends—women friends?”

“Yes, a great many, thank you,” Mrs. Hibbert said, with a little haughty inclination of the head. The haughtiness seemed to amuse Mrs. North, for the merry look came over her face again, but only for a moment.

“I thought you had,” she answered. “I have none; I don’t want them. Good-bye.”

It was nearly dark, and the one servant left to help Florence get the house ready had neglected to light the lamp on the staircase. Mrs. North groped her way down.

“I want to tell you something,” she said. “You said just now that I was clever. I don’t think I am, but I can divine people’s thoughts pretty easily. You are very good, I think; but consider this, your goodness is of no use if you are not good to others; good to women especially. The good of goodness is that you can wrap others inside it. It ought to be like a big cloak that you

have on a cold night, while the shivering person next to you has none. If you don't make use of your goodness," she went on with a catch in her breath, "what is the good of it?—I seem to be talking paradoxes—you prove how beautiful it is, perhaps, but that is all; you make it like the swan that sings its own death-song. One listens and watches, and goes away to think of things more comprehensible, and to do them. Good-bye, Mrs. Hibbert," she said gently, and almost as if she were afraid she held out her hand. Florence took it, a little wonder-struck. "You are like a Madonna, very like one, as I said just now; but though you are older than I am, I think I know more about some things than you do—good and bad. Madonnas never know the world very well. Give my love to the old lady, and say I hope she has forgiven me. I am going to Monte Carlo the day after to-morrow, only for three days, to brace myself up for my husband's return; tell her that too. It will shock her. Say that I should like to have taken her," and with a last little laugh she went out—into the darkness, it seemed to Florence.

But the next minute there were two flashing lamps before the house; there was the banging of a door, and Mrs. North was driven away.

Florence went slowly back to the dining-room and the inventory. Ethel Dunlop had gone. She was glad of it, for she wanted to think over her strange visitor.

"I don't understand her," she said to herself. "She is unlike any one I ever met; she fascinated and repelled me. I felt as if I wanted to kiss her, and yet the touch of her hand made me shiver." Then she thought of Madame Celestine's bill, and of Aunt Anne, and wished that the dress had not been bought, especially for the dinner-party; it made her feel as if she had been the unwitting cause of Mrs. Baines's extravagance. She looked into the fire, and remembered the events of that wonderful evening, and thought of Walter away, and the bills at home that would have to be paid at Christmas. And she thought of her winter cloak that was three years old and shabby, and of the things she had longed to buy for the children. Above all she thought of the visions she had had of saving little by little, and putting her savings away in a very safe place, until she had a cosy sum with which some day to give Walter a pleasant surprise, and suggest that they should go off together for "a little spree," as he would call it, to Paris or Switzerland. The fire burnt low, the red coals grew dull, the light from the street lamp outside seemed to come searching into the room as though it were looking for some one who was not there. She thought of Walter's letter safe in her pocket. He himself was probably at Malta by this time—getting stronger and stronger in the sunshine. Dear Walter, how generous he was; he too was a little bit reckless

sometimes. She wondered if he inherited this last quality from Aunt Anne. She thought of her children at Witley having tea, most likely with cakes and jam in abundance; and of Aunt Anne in her glory. She wondered if Mr. Wimple had turned up. "Poor Aunt Anne," she sighed, and there was a long bill in her mind. Presently she rose, lighted a candle, drew down the blind—shutting out the glare from the street lamp—and going slowly to the writing-table in the corner, unlocked it, opened a little secret drawer, and looked in. There were three five-pound notes there—the remainder of her mother's gift. "I wonder if Mrs. North had Madame Celestine's bill," she thought. "But it doesn't matter; she said it was fifteen pounds. I can send her the amount."

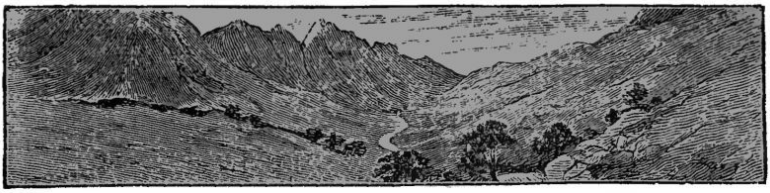
A couple of hours later, while she was in the very act of putting a cheque into an envelope, a note arrived. It had been left by hand; it was scented with violets, and ran thus:—

"Dear Mrs. Hibbert,

"I have ventured to pay Madame Celestine. I determined to do so while I was with you just now; but was afraid to tell you, that was why I changed the conversation so abruptly. Please don't let the old lady know that it is my doing, for she might be angry; but she was very good to me, and I am glad to do this for her. Forgive all the strange things I said this afternoon, and don't trouble to acknowledge this.

"Yours sincerely,
"E. North.

"P.S.—I enclose receipt."



# CHAPTER X.

IT was not till Tuesday afternoon in the week following that Florence went back to Witley.

Mrs. Burnett was at the station, sitting in a little governess-cart drawn by a donkey.

"I am waiting for my husband," she explained; "he generally comes by this train, and I drive him home, donkey permitting. It is a dear little donkey, and we are so fond of him."

"A dear little cart too," Florence answered as she stood by its side, talking. "I have been hoping that you would come and see me, Mrs. Burnett; we are going to be here for six or seven weeks."

"I know, Mr. Fisher told me," Mrs. Burnett replied in her sweet and rather intense voice, "and we are so sorry that your visit takes place just while we are away. I am going to Devonshire to-morrow morning to stay with my mother while my husband goes to Scotland. I am so-o sorry,"—she had a way of drawing out her words as if to give them emphasis. Florence liked to look at Mrs. Burnett's eyes while she spoke, they always seemed to attest that every word she said expressed the absolute meaning and intention in her mind. Her listeners gained a sense of restfulness which comes from being in the presence of a real person from whom they might take bitter or sweet, certain of its reality. "I hoped from Mr. Fisher's note that you had arrived before, and ventured to call on Saturday."

"Did you see Mrs. Baines?"

"Only for a moment. What a charming old lady—such old-fashioned courtesy; it was like being sent back fifty years to listen to her. She wanted me to stay, but I refused, for she was just setting off for a drive with your children and her nephew."

"Setting off for a drive?" Florence repeated.

"Yes, she had Steggall's waggonette from the Blue Lion, and was going to Guildford shopping. She said she meant to buy some surprises for you."

“Oh,” said Florence meekly, and her heart sank. “Did you say that she had a nephew with her?”

“Well, I supposed it was a nephew, unless she has a son—a tall fair young man, who looks delicate, and walks as if his legs were not very strong.”

“Oh yes, I know,” Florence answered, as she signed to the fly she had engaged to come nearer to the donkey-cart, so that she might not waste a minute. “He is a friend; he is no relation. Good-bye, Mrs. Burnett; I am sorry you are going away. I suppose you are waiting for the fast train, as Mr. Burnett did not come by the last one?”

“Yes, it is due in twenty minutes. Good-bye; so sorry not to have been at home during your visit. Oh, Mrs. Hibbert, do you think your children would like to have the use of this cart while we are away? The donkey is so gentle and so good.”

“It is too kind of you to think of it,” Florence began, beaming; for she thought of how Catty and Monty would shout for joy at having a donkey-cart to potter about in. And in her secret soul, though she felt it would not do to betray it, she was nearly as much pleased as they would be: she often had an inward struggle for the dignity with which she felt her matronly position should be supported.

“It will be such a pleasure to lend it them. It’s a dear little donkey, so good and gentle. It doesn’t go well,” Mrs. Burnett added, in an apologetic tone; “but it’s a dear little donkey, and does everything else well.” And over this remark Florence pondered much as she drove away.

When she came in sight of the cottage she wondered if she had been absent more than half an hour, or at all. She had left it in the afternoon more than a week ago, and the children had stood out in the roadway dancing and waving their handkerchiefs till she could see them no longer. As she came back, they stood there dancing and waving their handkerchiefs again. They shouted for joy as she got out of the fly.

“Welcome, my darling, welcome,” cried Aunt Anne, who was behind them, by the gate. “These dear children and I have been watching more than an hour for you. Enter your house, my love. It is indeed a privilege to be here to receive you.”

“It is a privilege to come back to so warm a welcome,” Florence said when, having embraced her children and Aunt Anne, she was allowed to enter the cottage; “and how comfortable and nice it looks!” she exclaimed,

as she stopped by the dining-room doorway. There was a wood fire blazing, and the tea set out, and the water in the silver kettle singing, and hot cakes in a covered dish in the fender. Flowers set off the table, and in the pots about the room were boughs of autumn leaves. It was all cosy and inviting, and wore a festival air—festival that Florence knew had been made for her. She turned and kissed the old lady gratefully. "Dear Aunt Anne," she said, and that was thanks enough.

"I thought, my love, that you would like to partake of tea with your dear children on your return. Your later evening meal I have arranged to be a very slender one."

"But you are too good, Aunt Anne."

"It is you who have been too good to me," the old lady answered tenderly. "And now, my darling, let me take you up to your chamber; it is ready for your reception."

There was a triumphant note in her voice that prepared Florence for the fire in the grate and the bouquet on the dressing-table, and all the little arrangements that Mrs. Baines had devised to add to her comfort. It was very cheery, she thought when she was alone; Aunt Anne had a knack of making one enjoy a home-coming. She sat for a few moments over the fire, and pulled out Walter's letter and read it and kissed it and put it back into her pocket. Then she looked round the cosy room again, and noticed a little packet on the corner of the drawers. Aunt Anne must have placed it there when she went out of the room. On it was written, *For my darling Florence*. "Oh," she said, "it's another present," and regretfully her fingers undid the string. Inside the white paper was a little pin-cushion covered with blue velvet, and having round it a rim of silver filigree work. Attached to it was a little note which ran thus—

> "My Darling,—Accept this token of my love and gratitude. I feel that there is no way in which I can better prove how much I appreciated your generous gift to me than by spending a portion of it on a token of my affection for you. I trust you will honour my little gift with your acceptance."

"Oh," said Florence again, in despair, "I wonder if she has once thought of Madame Celestine's bill or the others. What is the good of giving her money if one gets it back in the shape of presents?"

But she could not bear to treat the old lady's generosity with coldness. So Aunt Anne was thanked, and the cushion admired, and a happy little

party gathered round the tea-table.

"And have you had any visitors except Mrs. Burnett?" Florence asked artfully, when the meal was over.

"We have had Mr. Wimple," Aunt Anne said; "he is far from well, my love, and is trying to recruit at Liphook."

"Oh yes, he has friends there."

"No, my love, not now. He is at present lodging with an old retainer."

"And have you been to see him?"

"No, dear Florence, he preferred that I should not do so."

"We took him lots of rides," said Monty.

"And Aunt Anne gave him a present," said Catty, "and he put it into his pocket and never looked at it. He didn't know what was inside the paper,—we did, didn't we, auntie?"

"My dear children," Mrs. Baines said, "if your mother will give you permission you had better go into the nursery. It is past your hour for bed, my dear ones."

The children looked a little dismayed, but did not dream of disobeying.

"Was it wrong to say you gave him a present?" asked Catty, with the odd perception of childhood, as she put up her face to be kissed.

"My dears," answered Aunt Anne, sweetly, "in my day children did not talk with their elders unless they were invited to do so."

"We didn't know," said Monty, ruefully.

"No, my darlings, I know that. Bless you," continued the old lady sweetly; "and good night, my dear ones. Under your pillows you will each find a chocolate which auntie placed there for you this morning."

"And did you enjoy the drives?" Florence asked, when the children had gone.

"Yes, my dear, thank you." Mrs. Baines was silent for a moment. Then she raised her head, and, as if she had gathered courage, went on in a slightly louder tone, "I thought it would do your dear children good, Florence, to see the country, and, therefore, I ventured to take them some drives. Occasionally Mr. Wimple was so kind as to accompany us."

“And I hope they did him good, too,” Florence said, trying not to betray her amusement.

“Yes, my love, I trust they did.”

Then Florence remembered the bills paid by Mrs. North. They were all in a sealed envelope in her pocket, but she could not gather the courage to deliver it. She wanted to ask after Sir William Rammage, too, to know whether he had written yet and settled the question of an allowance; but for that, also, her courage failed—the old lady always resented questions. Then she remembered Mr. Fisher’s remark about Alfred Wimple’s writing, and thought it would please Aunt Anne to hear of it.

“Mr. Fisher says that Mr. Wimple writes very well; he has been doing some reviewing for the paper.”

Mrs. Baines winked with satisfaction.

“I am quite sure he writes well, my love,” she answered quickly; “he is a most accomplished man.”

“And is there no more news to relate, Aunt Anne?” Florence asked; “no more doings during my absence?”

“No, my love, I think not.”

“Then I have some news for you. I hope it won’t vex you, for I know you were very angry with her. Mrs. North has been to see me. She really came to see you, but when she found you had gone out of town she asked for me.”

Mrs. Baines looked almost alarmed and very angry.

“It was most presumptuous of her,” she exclaimed.

“But I don’t understand; why should it be presumptuous?” Florence asked, astonished.

“She had no right; she had not my permission.”

“But, dear Aunt Anne, she came to see you; and why should it be presumptuous?”

“I should prefer not to discuss the subject. I have expressed my opinion, and that is sufficient,” Mrs. Baines said haughtily. “I repeat that it was most presumptuous of her, under the circumstances, to call upon you—a liberty, a —Florence,” she went on, with sudden alarm in her voice, “I hope you did not promise to go and see her.”

"She never asked me."

"I should have put my veto on it if she had. My dear, you must trust to my mature judgment in some things. I know the world better than you do. Believe me, I have my reasons for every word I say. I treated Mrs. North with the greatest clemency and consideration, though she frequently forgot not only what was due to herself, but what was due to me. I was blind while I stayed with her, Florence, and did not see many things that I do now; for I am not prone to think ill of any one. You know that, my love, do you not? I must beg that you will never, on any account, mention Mrs. North's name again in my presence."

Florence felt as if the envelope would burn a hole in her pocket. It was impossible to deliver it now. Perhaps, after all, the wisest way would be to say nothing about it. She had an idea that Aunt Anne frequently forgot all about her bills as soon as she had come to the conclusion that it was impossible to make them any longer. She searched about in her mind for some other topic of conversation. It was often difficult to find a subject to converse upon with Aunt Anne, for the old lady never suggested one herself, and except of past experiences and old-world recollections she seldom seemed sufficiently interested to talk much. Happily as it seemed for the moment, Jane entered with the housekeeping books. They were always brought in on a Tuesday, and paid on a Wednesday morning. Florence was very particular on this point. They usually gave her a bad half-hour, for she could never contrive to keep them down as much as she desired. That week, however, she reflected that they could not be very bad; besides, she had left four pounds with Aunt Anne, which must be almost intact, unless the drives had been paid out of them; but even then there would be plenty left to more than cover the books. The prospect of getting through her accounts easily cheered her, and she thought that she would set about them at once.

"They are heavy this week, ma'am," Jane said, not without a trace of triumph in her voice, "on account of the chickens and the cream and the company."

"The chickens and the cream and the company," laughed Florence, as Jane went out of the room; "it sounds like a line from a comic poem. What does she mean?"

Aunt Anne winked as if to give herself nerve.

"Jane was very impertinent to me one day, my love, because I felt sure that after the fatigue of the journey from town, and the change of air, you would prefer that your delicately-nurtured children should eat chicken and

have cream with their second course every day for dinner, instead of roast mutton and milk pudding. White meat is infinitely preferable for delicate digestions."

"Yes, dear Aunt Anne," Florence said sweetly, and she felt a sudden dread of opening the books, "you are quite right." But what did a few chickens and a little cream matter in comparison to the poor old lady's feelings? she thought. "And if you had company too, of course you wanted to have a smarter table. Whom have you been entertaining, you dear and dissipated Aunt Anne?"

"My dear Florence, I have entertained no one but Mr. Wimple. He is a friend of yours and your dear Walter's, and I tried to prove to him that I was worthy to belong to you, by showing him such hospitality as lay in my power."

"Yes, dear, and it was very kind of you," Florence said tenderly. After all, why should Aunt Anne be worried through that horrid Mr. Wimple? Walter would have invited him if he had found him in the neighbourhood, and why should not Aunt Anne do so in peace, if it pleased her? Of course, now that she herself had returned she could do as she liked about him. She looked at the books. They were not so very bad, after all.

"Shall we make up our accounts now, and get it over, or in the morning?" she asked.

"I should prefer the morning," Aunt Anne said meekly. "To-night, love, you must be tired, and I am also fatigued with the excitement consequent on seeing you."

"What a shame, poor Aunt Anne!" Florence said brightly. "I have worn you out."

"Only with happiness, my dear," said the old lady, fondly.

Florence put away her books, and stroked Aunt Anne's shoulder as she passed.

"We will do our work in the morning," she said.

"Yes, my darling, in the morning. In the afternoon I may possibly have an engagement."

Florence longed to ask where, but a certain stiffness in Aunt Anne's manner made it impossible.

“Have you any news from London?” she ventured to inquire, for she was longing to know about Sir William Rammage.

“No, my love, I have no news from London,” Mrs. Baines answered, and she evidently meant to say no more.

In the morning much time was taken up with the arrival of the donkey-cart and the delight of the children. A great basket of apples was inside the cart, and on the top was a little note explaining that they were from Mrs. Burnett’s garden, and she hoped the children might like them. Aunt Anne was as much pleased with the donkey as the rest of the party.

“There is a rusticity in the appearance of a donkey,” she explained, “that always gives me a sense of being really in the country.”

“Not when you meet him in London, I fear,” Florence said.

Mrs. Baines considered for a moment. She seemed to resent the observation.

“No, my love, of course not in London; I am speaking of the country,” she said reprovingly; then she added, “I should enjoy a little drive occasionally myself, if you would trust me with the cart, my love. It would remind me of days gone by. I sometimes drove one at Rottingdean. You are very fortunate, my dear one, in having so few sorrows to remember—for I trust you have few. It always saddens me to think of the past. Let us go indoors.”

Florence put her arm through the old lady’s, and led her in. Then she thought of the books again; it would be a good time to make them up.

“I am always particular about my accounts, you know, Aunt Anne,” she said in an apologetic tone.

“Yes, my love,” answered the old lady; “I admire you for it.”

Florence looked at the figures; they made her wince a little, but she said nothing.

“The bill for the waggonettes, Aunt Anne?” she asked.

“That belongs to me, my dear.”

“Oh no, I can’t allow that.”

“My love, I made an arrangement with Mr. Steggall, and that is sufficient.”

Again Aunt Anne's tone forbade any discussion. Florence felt sure that one day Steggall's bill would arrive, but she said nothing.

"Do you mind giving me the change out of the four pounds?" she asked, very gently. Mrs. Baines went slowly over to her work-basket, and took up a little dress she was making for Catty.

"Not now, my love; I want to get on with my work."

"Perhaps I could get your account-book, Aunt Anne; then I should know how much there is left."

Mrs. Baines began to sew.

"I did not put anything down in the account-book," she said doggedly. "I considered, dear Florence, that my time was too valuable. It always seems to me great nonsense to put down every penny one spends."

"It is a check on one's self."

"I do not wish to keep a check on myself," Mrs. Baines answered, scornfully.

"Could you tell me how much you have left?" Florence asked meekly. "I hope there may be enough to help us through the week."

She did not like to say that she thought it must be nearly untouched.

"Florence," burst out the old lady, with the injured tone in her voice that Florence knew so well, "I have but ten shillings left in the world. If you wish to take it from me you must do so; but it is not like you, my darling."

"Oh, Aunt Anne," Florence began, bewildered, "I am sure you—— I did not mean—I did not know——"

"I'm sure you did not," Mrs. Baines said, with a sense of injury still in her voice, "but there is nothing so terrible or so galling to a sensitive nature like mine—and your dear Walter's takes after it, Florence, I am sure—as to be worried about money matters."

"But, indeed, Aunt Anne, I only thought that—that——" but here she stopped, not knowing how to go on for a moment; "I thought that perhaps the unpaid books represented the household expenses," she added at last. Really, something must be done to make the old lady careful, she thought.

"My love," Mrs. Baines said, with an impatient shake of her head, "I cannot go into the details of every little expense. I am not equal to it. Everything you do not find charged in the books has either been paid, or will

be charged, by my request, to my private account, and you must leave it so. I really cannot submit to being made to give an explanation of every penny I spend. I am not a child, Florence. I am not an inexperienced girl; I had kept house before, my love—if you will allow me to say so—before you were born." The treble note had come into Aunt Anne's voice; it was a sign that tears were not far off.

But Florence could not feel as compassionate as she desired. She smarted under the loss of her money; there was nothing at all to represent it, and Aunt Anne did not seem to have the least idea that it had been of any consequence. Florence got up and put the books away, looking across at Aunt Anne while she did so. The expression on the old lady's face was set, and almost angry; her lips were firmly closed. She was working at Catty's little dress. She was a beautiful needle-woman, and embroidered cuffs and collars on the children's things that were a source of joyful pride to their mother. But even the host of stitches would not pay the week's bills. If only Aunt Anne could be made to understand the value of money, Florence thought—but it was no use thinking, for her foolish, housekeeping heart was full of domestic woe. She went upstairs to her own room, and, like a real woman who makes no pretence to strong-mindedness, sat down to cry.

"If Walter were only back," she sobbed, as she rubbed her tearful face against the cushions on the back of the basket-chair by the fireside. "If he were here I should not mind, I might even laugh then. But after I have tried and tried so hard to save and to spend so little, it is hard, and I don't know what to do." She pulled out Walter's letter and read it again by way of getting a little comfort, and as she did so, felt the envelope containing the receipts of the bills Mrs. North had paid. She did not believe that Aunt Anne cared whether they were paid or not paid. She always seemed to think that the classes, who were what she pleased to consider beneath her, were invented simply for her use and convenience, and that protest in any shape on their part was mere impertinence.

The day dragged by. The children prevented the early dinner from being as awkward as it might have been. Mrs. Baines was cold and courteous. Florence had no words to say. She would make it up with the old lady in the evening, when they were alone, she thought. Of course she would have to make it up. Meanwhile, she would go for a long walk, it would do her good. She could think things over quietly, as she tramped along a lonely road between the hedges of faded gorse and heather. But it was late in the afternoon before she had energy enough to start. On her way out, she put her head in at the dining-room door. Mrs. Baines was there with the morning

paper, which had just come. She was evidently excited and agitated, and held the paper in one hand while she looked out towards the garden. But she seemed to have forgotten all the unpleasantness of the morning when she spoke.

"My love, are you going out?" she asked.

"I thought you had an engagement, Aunt Anne, and would not want me."

"That is true, my dear, and I shall be glad to be alone for a little while, if you will forgive me for saying it. There is an announcement in the paper that gives me the deepest pain, Florence. Sir William Rammage is ill again—he is confined to his room."

"Oh, poor Aunt Anne!"

"I must write to him instantly. I felt sure there was some good reason for his not having told me his decision in regard to the allowance." Then, as if she had suddenly remembered the little scrimmage of the morning, she went on quickly, "My love, give me a kiss. Do not think that I am angry with you. I never could be that; but it is unpleasant at my time of life to be made to give an exact account of money. You will remember that, won't you, dear? I should never expect it from you. If I had hundreds and hundreds a year I would share them with you and your darlings, and I would ask you for no accounts, dear Florence. I should think that the money was as much yours as mine. You know it, don't you, my love?"

"Yes, dear, I think I do," Florence answered, and kissed the old lady affectionately, thinking that perhaps, after all, she had made rather too much fuss.

"Then let us forget about it, my darling," Mrs. Baines said, with the gracious smile that always had its influence; "I could never remember anything long of you, but your kindness and hospitality. Believe me, I am quite sure that you did not mean to wound me this morning. It was your zealous care of dear Walter's interests that caused you for a moment to forget what was due to me. I quite understand, my darling. Now go for your walk, and be assured that Aunt Anne loves you."

And Florence was dismissed, feeling as the children had felt the evening before when they had been sent to bed and told of the chocolate under their pillows.

# CHAPTER XI.

THE grey sky and the dim trees, the black hedges and the absolute stillness; all these proved excellent comforters to Florence. They made her philosophical and almost smiling again. It was only when an empty waggonette of Steggall's passed her that she remembered the vexations of the morning. "Poor old lady," she said to herself with almost a laugh, "in future she must not be trusted with money, that is all. If she only would not scold me and treat me like a child, I should not mind it so much. Of course when Walter does it, I like it; but I don't like it from Aunt Anne."

She had walked a long way. She was getting tired. The messengers of night were abroad, the stray breezes, the dark flecked clouds, the shadows loitering by the trees, the strange little sounds among the hedges by the wayside. Far off, beyond the wood, she heard a clock belonging to a big house strike six. It was time to hurry home. If she walked the two miles between herself and the cottage quickly, she would be in by half-past six. At seven, after the children had gone to bed, she and Aunt Anne were to sit down to a little evening meal they called supper. They would be very cosy that night; they would linger over their food, and Aunt Anne should talk of bygone days, and the quaint old world that always seemed to be just behind her.

It was rather dull in the country, Florence thought. In the summer, of course, the outdoor life made it delightful, but now there was so little to fill the days, only the children and the housekeeping, wonderings about Walter, and the writing of the bit of diary on very thin paper which she had promised to post out to him every week. She was not a woman who made an intellectual atmosphere for herself. She lived her life through her husband, read the same books, and drew her conclusions by the light of his. Now that he had gone the world seemed half empty, and very dull and tame. There was no glamour over anything. Perhaps it was this that had helped to make her a little unkind to Aunt Anne, for gradually she was persuading herself that she had been unkind. She wished Aunt Anne had an income of her own, and the home for which she had said she longed. It would be so much better for everybody.

When she was nearly home, a sudden dread seized her lest Mr. Wimple should be there, but this, she reflected, was not likely. It was long past calling-time, and Aunt Anne was too great a stickler for etiquette to allow him to take a liberty, as she would call it. So Florence quickened her steps, and entered her home bravely to the sound of the children's voices upstairs singing as they went to bed. A fire was blazing in the dining-room, and everything looked comfortable, just as it had the night before. But there was no sign of Aunt Anne. Probably she was upstairs "getting ready," for a lace cap and bit of white at her throat and an extra formal, though not less affectionate, manner than usual Aunt Anne seemed to think a fitting accompaniment to the evening meal. Florence looked round the dining-room with a little pride of ownership. She was fond of the cottage, it was their very own, hers and Walter's; and how wise they had been to do up that particular room, it made every meal they ate in it a pleasure. That buttery-hatch too, it was absurd that it should be so, but really it was a secret joy to her. Suddenly her eye caught a package that had evidently come in her absence. A parcel of any sort was always exciting. This could not be another present from Aunt Anne? and she drew a short breath. Oh no, it had come by rail. Books. She knew what it was—some novels from Mr. Fisher. "How kind he is," she said gratefully; "he says so few words, but he does so many things. I really don't see why Ethel should not love him. I don't think she would find it difficult to do so," she thought, with the forgetfulness of womanhood for the days of girlish fancy.

"Mrs. Baines has not yet returned," the servant said, entering to arrange the table.

"Not returned. Is she out, then?"

"Yes, ma'am, she started half an hour after you did. Steggall's waggonette came for her."

Florence groaned inwardly.

"Do you know where she has gone?"

"I think she has gone to Guildford, ma'am, shopping; she often did while you were away. I heard her tell the driver to drive quickly to the station, as she feared she was late."

"Oh. Did any one call, Jane?"

"No, ma'am."

Then, once more, Florence delivered herself over to despair. Aunt Anne must have gone to buy more surprises, and if she had only ten shillings in

the world it was quite clear she would have to get them on credit. Something would have to be done. The tradespeople would have to be warned. Walter must be written to, and, if necessary, asked to cable over advice. Perhaps Sir William Rammage would interfere. In the midst of all her perturbation seven o'clock struck, and there was no Aunt Anne.

Florence was a healthy young woman, and she had had a long walk. The pangs of hunger assailed her vigorously, so, after resisting them till half-past seven, she sat down to her little supper alone. Food has a soothing effect on an agitated mind, and a quarter of an hour later, though Aunt Anne had not appeared, Florence had come to the conclusion that she could not get very deeply into debt, because it was not likely that the tradespeople would trust her. Perhaps, too, after all, she had not gone to Guildford. Still, what could keep her out so late? The roads were dark and lonely, she knew no one in the neighbourhood. It was to be hoped that nothing had happened to her, and, at this thought, Florence began to reproach herself again for all her unkindness of the morning. But while she was still reviewing her own conduct with much severity there was a soft patter, patter, along the gravel path outside, and a feeble ring at the bell. "That dissipated old lady!" laughed Florence to herself, only too delighted to think that she had returned safely at last.

A moment later Aunt Anne entered. She was a little breathless, her left eye winked more frequently than usual, there was an air of happy excitement in her manner. She entered the room quickly, and seated herself in the easy-chair with a sigh of relief.

"My darling," she said, looking fondly at Florence, "I trust you did not wait for me, and that I have not caused you any inconvenience. But if I have," she added in an almost cooing voice, "you will forgive me when you know all."

"Oh yes, dear Aunt Anne, I will forgive you," and Florence signed to Jane to bring a plate. "You must be shockingly hungry," she laughed. "Where have you been, may I know?"

"I will tell you presently, my darling; you shall know all. But I cannot eat anything," Aunt Anne answered quickly. Even the thought of food seemed to make her impatient. "Jane," she said, with the little air of pride that Jane resented, "you need not bring a plate for me. I do not require anything." Then, speaking to Florence again, she went on with half-beaming, half-condescending gentleness, "Finish your repast, my darling; pray don't let my intrusion—for it is an intrusion when I am not able to join in your meal—hurry you. When you have finished, but not till then, I have a

communication to make to you. It is one I feel to be due to you before any one else; and it will prove to you how much I depend on your sympathy and love." She spoke with earnestness, unfastening her cloak and nervously fastening it the while. Florence looked at her with a little pity. Poor old lady, she thought, how easily she worked herself into a state of excitement.

"Tell me what it is now, dear Aunt Anne," she said. "Has anything occurred to worry you? Where have you been—to Guildford?"

"To Guildford? No, my dear. Something has occurred, but not to worry me. It is something that will make me very happy, and I trust that it will make you very happy to hear it. I rely on your sympathy and Walter's to support me." Florence was not very curious. Aunt Anne had always so much earnestness at her command, and was very prodigal of it. Besides, it did not seem likely that anything important had happened; some trifling pleasure or vexation, probably; nothing more.

At last the little meal was finished, the things pushed through the buttery-hatch, the crumbs swept off the cloth by Jane, who seemed to linger in a manner that Mrs. Baines in her own mind felt to be wholly reprehensible and wanting in respect towards her superiors. But the cloth was folded and put away at last, the buttery-hatch closed, the fire adjusted, and the door shut. Aunt Anne gave a sigh of relief, then throwing her cloak back over the chair, she rose and stood irresolute on the hearth-rug. Florence went towards her.

"Have you been anywhere by train?" she asked.

"No, my love. I went to the station to meet some one." She trembled with excitement while she spoke. Florence noticed it with wonder.

"What is it, Aunt Anne?" she asked gently.

The old lady stretched out her two thin hands, and suddenly dropped her head for a moment on Florence's shoulder; but she raised it quickly, and evidently struggled to be calm.

"My darling," she said, "I know you will sympathize with me, I know your loving heart. I knew it the first day I saw you, when you were at Rottingdean, and stood under the pear-tree with your dear Walter——"

"Yes, oh yes, dear——" Florence had so often heard of that pear-tree. But what could it have to do with the present situation?

—"I shall never forget the picture you two made," the old lady went on, not heeding the interruption; "I knew all that was in your dear heart then,

just as I feel that you will understand all that is in mine now." Her face was flushed, her eyes were almost bright, and there were tears in them; the left one winked tremulously.

Florence looked at her in amazement. "What is it, Aunt Anne? Do tell me; tell me at once, dear?" she said entreatingly. "And where you have been, so late and in the dark." For a moment Aunt Anne hesitated, then, with a gasp and a strong effort to be calm and dignified, she raised her head and spoke.

"My dear—my dear, all this time I have been with Alfred Wimple. He loves me."

"He loves you," Florence repeated, her eyes full of wonder; "he loves you. Yes, of course he loves you, we all do," she said soothingly, too much surprised to speculate farther.

"Yes, he loves me," Aunt Anne said again, in an almost solemn voice, "and I have promised to be his wife."

"Aunt Anne!—to marry him!"

"Yes, dear, to marry him," and she waited as if for congratulations.

"But, Aunt Anne, dear——" Florence began in astonishment, and then she stopped; for though she had had some idea of the old lady's infatuation, she had never dreamt of its ending in matrimony. Mrs. Baines was excited and strange; it might be some delusion, some joke that had been played on her, for Mr. Wimple could not have seriously asked her to marry him. She waited, not knowing what to say. But Aunt Anne's excitement seemed to be passing, and with a tender, pitiful expression on her face, she waited for her niece to speak. "But, Aunt Anne, dear," was all Florence could say again in her bewilderment.

"But what, Florence?" Mrs. Baines spoke with a surprised, half-resentful manner. "Have you nothing more to say to me, my love?"

"But you are not really going to marry him, are you?" Florence asked, in an incredulous voice.

The old lady answered in a terribly earnest one.

"Yes, Florence, I am; and never shall man have truer, more loving help-meet than I will be to him," she burst out heroically, holding herself erect and looking her niece in the face. There was something infinitely pathetic about her as she stood there, quivering with feeling and aching for sympathy, yet old, wrinkled, and absurd, her poor scanty hair pushed back

and her weak eyes full of tears. For a moment there was silence. Then bewildered Florence broke out with—

"But, Aunt Anne, but, Aunt Anne——"

"Well, my love?" the old lady asked with calm dignity.

"He—he is much younger than you," she said at last, bringing out her words slowly, and hating herself for saying them.

"Age is not counted by years, my darling; and if he does not feel my age a drawback, why should I count his youth one? He loves me, Florence, I know he loves me," Aunt Anne broke out in a passionate, tearful voice, "and you would not have me throw away or depreciate a faithful heart that has been given me?"

Then the practical side of Florence's nature spoke up in despair. "But, Aunt Anne, he—is very poor."

"I know he is poor, but he is young and strong and hopeful; and he will work. He says he will work like a slave for me; and if he is content to face poverty with me, how can I be afraid to face it with him?"

"But you want comforts, and——"

"Oh no, my love. My tastes are very simple, and I shall be content to do without them for his sake."

"But at your time of life, dear Aunt Anne, you do want them—you are not young—as he is." Then Mrs. Baines burst into tears, tears that were evidently a blessed relief, and had been pent up in her poor old heart, waiting for an excuse to come forth.

"Florence, I did not think you would tell me of my age. If I do not feel it, and he does not, why should you remind me of it? And why should you tell me that he is poor? Do you suppose that I am so selfish or—or so depraved that I would sell myself for comfort and luxury? If he can face poverty with me, I can face it with him."

"Yes, yes, but——" The old lady did not heed her, and went on breathlessly—

"I did think, Florence, that you would have been kind to me, and understood and sympathized. I told him that on your heart and Walter's I could rely. You know how lonely I have been, how desolate and how miserable. But for your bounty and goodness I should have died——"

"Oh no——"

“And now, in this great crisis—now, when a young, brave, beautiful life is laid at my feet, now that I am loved as truly as ever woman was loved in this world, as tenderly as Walter loves you, Florence, you fail me, as—as if”—she put her hand to her throat to steady her quivering voice—“as if you would not let me taste the cup of happiness of which you drink every day.”

“But, Aunt Anne, it isn’t that indeed,” Florence answered, thinking despairingly of Walter, and wishing that she could begin writing that very minute, asking him what on earth she ought to say or do. “It is that—that—it is so unexpected, so strange. I knew, of course, that you liked him, that you were good friends; but I never dreamt that he was in love with you.” Aunt Anne’s tears seemed to vanish as if by magic, her left eye winked almost fiercely, her lips opened, but no sound came. With a great effort she recovered her voice at last, and with some of her old dignity, dashed with severe surprise, she asked—

“My darling, is there any reason why he should not love me?”

She stood gravely waiting for a reply, while Florence felt that she was managing badly, that she was somehow hurting and insulting Aunt Anne. After all, the old lady had a right to do as she liked; it was evident that she was incapable of taking in the absurdity of the situation.

“But, Aunt Anne——” she began and stopped.

“My dear Florence,” Mrs. Baines repeated still more severely, “will you tell me if there is any very obvious reason why he should not love me? I am not an ogress, my darling—I am not an ogress,” she cried, suddenly breaking down and bursting into floods of tears, while her head dropped on to her black merino dress.

She looked so old and worn, so wretched and lonely as she stood there weeping bitterly, that Florence could stand it no longer, and going forward she put her arms round the poor old soul, and kissed her fondly.

“No, dear Aunt Anne,” she said, “you are not an ogress; you are a sweet old dear, and I love you. Don’t cry—don’t cry, you dear.”

“My love, you are cruel to me,” Aunt Anne sobbed.

“Oh no, I am not, and you shall marry any one you like. It was a little surprising, you know, and of course I didn’t—I didn’t think that marrying was in your thoughts,” she added feebly, for she didn’t know what to say.

“Bless you, my darling, bless you,” the old lady gasped, grateful for even that straw of comfort; “I knew you would be staunch to me when you

had recovered from the surprise of my communication, but——" and she gently disengaged herself from Florence's embrace and spoke in the nervous quivering voice that always came to her in moments of excitement—"but, Florence, since the first moment we met, Alfred Wimple and I have felt that we were ordained for each other."

"Yes, dear," Florence said soothingly.

"He says he shall never forget the moments we sat together on your balcony that night when your dear Walter fetched the white shawl—of yours, Florence—to put round my shoulders," the old lady went on earnestly. "And the sympathy between us is so great that we do not feel the difference of years; besides, he says he has never liked very young women, he has always felt that the power to love accumulated with time, as my power to love has done. Few of the women who have been loved by great men have been very young, my darling."

"I didn't know," Florence began, for Aunt Anne had paused, almost as if she were repeating something she had learned by heart.

"He asked me to-night," she went on with another little gasp, "if I remembered—if I remembered—I forget——but all the great passions of history have been concentrated on women in their prime. Petrarch's Laura had eight children when the poet fell in love with her, and Helen of Troy was sixty when—when—I forget," she said again, shaking her head; "but he remembers; he went through them all to-night. Besides, I may be old in years, but I am not old at heart; you cannot say that I am, Florence."

She was getting excited again. Almost without her knowledge Florence led her to the easy-chair, and gently pushing her on to it, undid the strings and tried to take off her bonnet; but the old lady resisted.

"No, my dear, don't take off my bonnet," she said, "unless you will permit me to ring," she added, getting back to her old-fashioned ways, "and request Jane to bring me my cap from upstairs."

But Florence felt that Jane might look curiously at the wrinkled face that still showed signs of recent agitation, so she put her hand softly on the one that Aunt Anne had stretched out to touch the bell.

"I will get it for you, dear," she said, and in a moment she had flown upstairs and brought down the soft lace cap put ready on the bed, and the cashmere slippers edged with fur and lined with red flannel, in which Aunt Anne liked to encase her feet in the evening. "There, now, you will feel better, you poor dear," she said when they were put on and the old lady sat

silent and composed, looking as if she were contemplating her future, and the new life before her. Florence stood by her silently for a moment, thinking over the past weeks in which Aunt Anne, with her poverty and dignity, her generosity and recklessness, had formed so striking a figure. Then she thought of the lonely life the poor old lady had led in the Kilburn lodging.

After all, if she only had even a very little happiness with that horrid Mr. Wimple, it would be something; and of course, if he didn't behave properly, Walter could take her away. The worst of it was she had understood that Mr. Wimple had no money. She had heard that he lived on a small allowance from an uncle, and the uncle might stop that allowance when he heard that his nephew had married an old woman who had not a penny.

"Aunt Anne," she asked gently, "does he know that you are not rich?"

"Florence, I told him plainly that I had no fortune," the old lady answered, with a pathetic half-hunted look on her face that made Florence hate herself for her lack of sympathy. But she felt that she ought to ask some questions. Walter would be so angry if she allowed her to go into misery and fresh poverty without making a single effort to save her.

"And has he money, dear—enough to keep you both, at any rate?"

The tears trickled down Aunt Anne's face again while she answered—

"If I did not ask him that question, Florence, it is not for you to ask it me. I neither know nor care what he has. If he is willing to take me for myself only, so am I willing to take him, loving him for himself only too. I am too old to marry for money, and he is too noble to do so. We are grown-up man and woman, Florence, and know our own hearts; we will brook no interference, my darling, not even from you." She got up tremblingly. "I must retire; you must allow me to retire, and in the privacy of my own room I shall be able to reflect."

The long words were coming back; they were a sign that Aunt Anne was herself again.

"Yes, dear Aunt Anne; I am sure you must want to be alone, and to think," Florence said gently.

The old lady was not appeased.

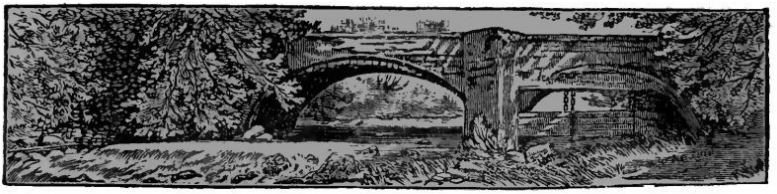
"You know—you remember what you felt yourself when your Walter first loved you, Florence," she said distantly. "Yes, I must be alone; my heart is full—I must be alone."

Florence led her upstairs to her room. Mrs. Baines stood formally in the doorway.

“Good-night, my love,” she said, with cold disappointment in her voice.

“May not I help you, Aunt Anne?” Florence asked, almost entreatingly.

“No, my love, I must be alone,” Mrs. Baines repeated firmly, and shut the door.



# CHAPTER XII.

THE next morning Aunt Anne did not appear. She sent word that she would like her breakfast carried up, a fire lighted in her room, and to be left alone for a couple of hours.

Florence was distracted. She had written to Walter, but as the mail did not go out till three days later, nothing was gained by her haste. She had considered things all round, and the more she did so the more amazing did Mr. Wimple's proposal seem. It was all nonsense to suppose, as Aunt Anne evidently believed, that he was in love with a woman more than twice his age. Florence mentally reviewed Aunt Anne's charms. She was not even a round, plump old lady with rosy cheeks, and a stray dimple that seemed to have found her company so good it was loath to vanish altogether. She was wrinkled, and thin, and feeble-looking. Her eyes were small and weak, the left one had the nervous affection that so often provided an almost droll accompaniment to her talk. Her skin was withered and sallow. Florence tried to feel like a young man about to marry Aunt Anne, and the idea was not pleasant. She felt that it was almost a duty to prevent the marriage if possible—that Aunt Anne owed it to her past years, to her own dignity, to her relations, to every one and everything not to make a fool of herself.

The children went out at ten o'clock. Florence listened to their shouts of joy as they drove off in the donkey-cart. Then, hurrying through her domestic affairs, she sat down on one of the gaunt easy-chairs by the drawing-room fire to think matters over again. It somehow seemed fitting to sit in the old-world little room while she considered Aunt Anne's romance. She could hear the old lady moving about overhead, but was afraid to go up, for she had been refused admittance two hours ago. Jane, who was overwhelmed with curiosity, had managed to go in and out once or twice, and reported that Mrs. Baines was dressed and looking through the contents of her trunks "just as if she was packing up." Florence wondered what it meant, and a dim suspicion of the truth crossed her mind. She felt too as if in the little cottage by the lonely roadside a tragedy was beginning in which Aunt Anne would play the central figure. She shut her eyes for a moment, and, as if in a dream, could see the old lady wringing her thin hands, and

stretching them out almost imploringly. “Oh, dear Aunt Anne,” she cried, “something must be done. No good can come of this wild nonsense.”

Suddenly on the gravel footpath outside she heard a footstep, just as she had heard Aunt Anne’s footstep the night before. She got up quickly and looked out. It was Mr. Wimple. He must have come up from the dip at the end of the garden, the short way from Hindhead and the Liphook Road. He was going round the house. Florence darted out and opened the front door before he had time to ring. All in a moment it had struck her that if she could get a talk with him, some explanation, perhaps some good, might come of it. Yet her heart ached, she felt cruel and treacherous, as if she were trying to cheat Aunt Anne of a promise—even though it was a ridiculous promise—of happiness. She thought of the poor old lady’s tears, of her pleading, of her piteous, “as if you grudged me the cup of happiness of which you taste every day.” After all, she had a right to do as she pleased; but that was a foolish argument. She had a right to put herself on the kitchen fire if she pleased, but it would be distinctly the duty of the nearest person to pull her off and prevent her from being burnt.

Mr. Wimple stared at Florence. “How do you do, Mrs. Hibbert?” he said with extreme gravity. He did not hold out his hand or look as if he expected to enter, but stood still on the door-step.

“I saw you coming and wanted to speak to you, Mr. Wimple,” she said almost breathlessly. “Won’t you come in?” Without a word he entered. She led the way to the drawing-room and shut the door. She pointed to one of the chairs beside the screen with a peacock on it, and he sat down, still without a word, and waited for her to speak. She took the other chair and faced him. The light was full upon him, but there was no expression in his eyes, not even one of inquiry.

“Mr. Wimple,” she said, in a low voice, for she was afraid of Aunt Anne above hearing the hum of conversation, “I wanted to speak to you about Aunt Anne—Mrs. Baines.” He looked at her then, but still he said nothing. “I am very fond of her,” she added, as if in excuse for her interference.

“I am sure you are,” he answered, and waited. Florence was forced to go on.

“She came home last night, and she surprised me so—she told me—oh, Mr. Wimple, it can’t be true?”

“What cannot be true, Mrs. Hibbert?” he asked, speaking like an automaton.

“That—that—you had asked her to marry you?”

“It is quite true,” he said, and looked at her unflinchingly; his face wore an expression of slight surprise.

“But it is so strange and unsuitable; she is so much older than you.”

“I know she is much older.” He seemed to unlock his lips every time he spoke.

“She is quite old and feeble,” Florence said compassionately.

“Yes, she is quite old and feeble,” he repeated.

“And, Mr. Wimple, do you know that she is not rich, that—that she has no money, nothing. She is poor.”

“I know she is poor, Mrs. Hibbert.” He seemed to be afflicted with an utter destitution of language, an incapacity to say anything but the shortest, most cut-and-dried sentence. It affected Florence. But again she struggled on; though she felt her words come with difficulty.

“And you—forgive me, but I am fond of her—and you, I believe, are not rich. Walter told me that you were not, and—and——” She was beginning to despair of making any way with Mr. Wimple, his eyes were dull and uninterested, he seemed insensible to everything except the burden of his own gravity.

“I am not rich, Mrs. Hibbert,” he said. The manner in which he repeated her name at the end of every sentence irritated Florence.

“And oh, Mr. Wimple,” she went on, “it is so—so absurd.” But he said nothing, though she waited. “It is so strange, and Walter will be very angry.”

“It is not Walters affair, Mrs. Hibbert, it is mine,” he said.

“And hers, and Aunt Anne’s too.”

“And hers,” he repeated.

“And she is old, she wants comforts and luxury; and oh, I cannot bear to think of it. It seems cruel.”

“We have talked it all over, Mrs. Hibbert; she knows best herself what she wants,” he answered, without the slightest change in his manner.

“But are you really in love with her?”

“I am very fond of her,” he said blankly.

Florence put her hand to her throat to steady her utterance.

“But you are not in love with her? You can’t be; she is old enough to be your mother. She is a dear, sweet old lady, but you can’t be in love with her.”

“I don’t see the necessity of our discussing this,” he said, still with extreme gravity.

“But she is my aunt, at least she is Walter’s, which is all the same.” He gave a little dry cough.

“Mrs. Baines and I have settled our affairs, Mrs. Hibbert,” he said. “There is no necessity to go over them.”

“But it is so ridiculous.”

“Then we will not talk about it.” Suddenly he looked at her; there was no change in his tone, but he opened his eyes a little wider as if to impress upon her the importance of his next words. “We don’t wish our private affairs made known to the world,” he said. “There is no necessity to talk of them at all; they are of no importance except to ourselves. We don’t wish to talk about them or to hear of their being talked about. Will you remember this, Mrs. Hibbert?” It was quite a relief to get three consecutive sentences out of him.

“But, Mr. Wimple, do tell me that, if you persist in marrying her, you will make her happy, you will be good to her, and—that you can keep her in some sort of comfort,” Florence said in despair.

“I will talk to her about this, Mrs. Hibbert. It is her affair,” he said solemnly; and Florence felt altogether worsted, left out in the cold, put back, and powerless. She sat silently by the fire, not knowing what to do or say. Mr. Wimple made no sign. She looked up at him after a minute or two. What could Aunt Anne see to like in him, in his dull eyes, his thin lips, his straggling sandy hair and whiskers, his pink-and-white, yet unhealthy-looking complexion? He met her gaze steadily. “Is there anything more you wish to say to me?” he asked; “I have not much time.”

“No,” she answered, chokingly, “there is nothing—if you would only be a son to her, a friend, anything, rather than marry her. Oh, Mr. Wimple, if you really do care for her, don’t make her ridiculous in her old age, don’t make her unhappy. Happiness cannot come of an absurd marriage like this. You ought to marry a girl, a young woman. One day Walter and I saw you at Waterloo——”

He fixed his eyes upon her, and there was a slight look of curiosity in them now, but he was absolutely calm.

“Well, Mrs. Hibbert?” he said.

“We thought that perhaps she was—was some one you liked; she was young, it would have been much more suitable.”

“I must know what I desire, and what is most suitable for myself, Mrs. Hibbert,” he answered, without a shade of vexation, but with quiet determination in his voice. Then Jane, evidently to her own satisfaction, entered.

“If you please, ma’am, Mrs. Baines says she would like to speak to Mr. Wimple when you have quite finished with him.”

“Tell Mrs. Baines I will go up to her in a moment; I want to see her.” She turned to Mr. Wimple again when Jane had gone. He rose as if to signify that he considered their conversation at an end. “I fear there is nothing more to say,” she said lamely, for this man, with his silence and utter lack of response, had made every word that suggested itself seem weak and hopeless.

“I think not, Mrs. Hibbert.”

“But for your own happiness, Mr. Wimple,” she said suddenly, struck with a new way of putting it, “you surely can’t want to marry Mrs. Baines for the sake of your own happiness.”

“I want to marry Mrs. Baines as much for my own sake as for hers,” and he looked at her in a manner that was almost a dismissal. It had an influence over her she could not help; almost against her will she rose, feeling that there was no excuse for prolonging the interview.

“I will send Mrs. Baines to you,” she said, in despair.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hibbert, if you will,” and he held open the door for her to pass out.

Aunt Anne heard the drawing-room door open and Florence coming up. She waited eagerly on the top of the stairs. She wore her best dress; round her throat there was a white silk handkerchief, in her manner more than the usual nervous agitation. Glancing in at the bedroom Florence could see that she had been packing, and making ready for a journey.

“Oh, Aunt Anne——” she began.

“Yes, my love, I am going to town,” the old lady said, with a cold reserve in her tenderness that showed clearly she was displeased. “I cannot stay longer under your roof. You must not ask me to do so,” she went on. “I

was cut to the quick by your want of sympathy last night. I cannot recover from it; I could not expose myself to it again. My luggage is ready, and when I have seen my dear Alfred I shall be able to tell you the time of my departure."

"Oh, Aunt Anne, it is cruel," Florence said, dismayed.

"No, my love, it is not cruel; but I must respect myself. I would not hurt you for the world, Florence; but you have hurt me."

"I wouldn't hurt you either for the world, but——"

"Where is Mr. Wimple, my love?" the old lady asked, interrupting her niece with a long sigh.

"He is downstairs; I have been talking to him."

"Yes, my love, I understand. I appreciate all your solicitude for my happiness; but you should allow those who are older and wiser than you to know what is best for themselves. I will see you again when he is gone, Florence," and almost imperiously Mrs. Baines went downstairs.

She entered the drawing-room and shut the door. Mr. Wimple was standing on the hearth-rug. She looked at him for a moment nervously, and winked solemnly as usual with her left eye.

"My darling," she said, and putting her arms round his neck she kissed his face on both sides, "my darling Alfred, are you glad to see me?" He submitted to her caress half reluctantly, then drew back a little. His manner was no warmer than it had been to Florence.

"Yes, I am glad to see you," he said, and looked at her with his eyes wide open, as if to show that he perfectly understood the position.

"My darling, I have suffered terribly. Florence had no sympathy for us; she said it was an unsuitable marriage; that you had no fortune, and that I had none; as if my poverty was not hard enough to bear without being told of it. What did she say to you? Alfred, my dear one, she has not turned your love from me?" She put out her arms again as if to gather him to her, but he looked blindly past her.

"Sit down," he said, and pushed her gently on to the chair beside the peacock-screen.

"She has not taken your love from me, tell me that," Mrs. Baines said entreatingly. "A few hours ago you assured me of your devotion. She has not taken it from me?"

"No."

"I am just the same to you?" she asked. He turned his eyes on her again.

"You are just the same," he said, with a gulp, but there was no tenderness in his manner. He seemed to be speaking almost under compulsion.

"My darling, my darling," she said softly, "bless you for those dear words. I will be truer to you, Alfred, than ever woman was to man before. But I cannot stay here; you must take me away. I have already packed my things, I cannot remain another night, not knowing to what treatment I may be subjected. I love Florence most sincerely; she and Walter and their children are very dear to me. But after her coldness to me last night when I came in full of your love and my own happiness, and she denied me her sympathy, I cannot stay. You must not ask me to do that, Alfred." There was more interest in his manner now, though his gravity never relaxed.

"Where will you go?" he asked.

"I shall go to London, my darling," she said, stretching out her hands. "But I cannot go alone, after all I have suffered during the last twenty-four hours?" He looked at her questioningly.

"Suffered? What have you suffered?" he asked. "I thought you were happy about it."

"About you? Yes, my darling; but Florence has tortured me."

"It does not take much to torture you," he interrupted. "What did she say?"

"I have told you already; I cannot go over it again. Don't ask me to do so. You could torture me, Alfred, with a word or a look—if you ceased to love me."

"We need not discuss that improbability now," he said solemnly. "What about your going to London?"

"I shall go by the quarter-past one o'clock train this afternoon," she answered. "You will take me, will you not?"

"I cannot go to-day," he said firmly. "I must get back to Liphook now." He pulled out his watch, a dull worn Waterbury one, at which Aunt Anne looked keenly. "But I will go to-morrow; I want to see my uncle." His thoughts seemed to be intent on business matters. She waited a moment after he had finished speaking, and winked slowly to herself before she answered.

“Alfred,” she asked, “you do truly love me?” He looked at her steadfastly.

“Yes,” he answered, “I told you so last night.” She half rose from her chair again, but he waved her back. “Sit down,” he said, and she obeyed.

“I know you did, and I will never doubt it. In bygone days, my darling, I was foolish and wicked, and played with the truest love ever given to woman. But I am wiser now. You must never doubt me. Promise me that you never will.”

“I promise you,” he said, and closed his lips.

“My dear, my dear,” she said softly to herself, and stopped for a moment before she went on aloud, “I must go to town this afternoon, and you must take me. My courage is not equal to encountering the journey alone. Do take me, my darling.”

“Where will you go when you get to London?” he asked.

“I know of some apartments—two rooms—I saw them the day before I came away. If they are still unlet, I shall rent them. But when we arrive I shall go straight to Sir William Rammage. I have business with him. He is very ill, Alfred, it was in the paper yesterday; but he will see me, and when he knows all——”

“You will tell him nothing about me,” he said, in his slow determined voice. She looked up indignantly.

“Alfred,” she answered, “I must tell him. I shall tell him that you love me; that I have won a true and noble heart, and that we are going through life together.”

“You will tell him nothing,” Mr. Wimple repeated, with something like fright in his dull eyes. “If you did my uncle would hear of it, and would think I was mad.” He added the clause about his uncle as if he thought an explanation due to her.

“Mad to marry me?” she asked.

“Mad to think of marriage at all. He objects to it on principle.”

“But if he knew how tenderly and truly I loved you——”

“You must not say one word about it, to him or to any one,” came the firm hard voice.

“Is it because you are—you are ashamed of loving me, Alfred?” she asked, quivering.

“No. But it is my wish. That should be enough.”

She was silent for a moment.

“It is enough,” she answered slowly, “your wish shall be my law in this as in all things. But you will take me up to town?” she pleaded. “You can go to the Blue Lion, to Steggalls’, and tell them to drive you back to Liphook now.”

“I have no money with me,” he said firmly.

“It will go down to my account, darling,” she continued, as if she had not heard the interruption. “You can take the quarter to one train from Liphook to London; it stops at Witley. I will be on the platform, and we will go on together.” She ventured to stand now, and held out her hands again, almost entreatingly.

“You will say nothing to Sir William?”

“Alfred, you are my lord and master,” and she bowed her head on to her breast. But he was wholly untouched.

“Very well,” he said, “I will drive back at once—there is not too much time—and meet you as you say. Good-bye.” He kissed her forehead, and as before, swiftly drew back again.

“Will you order a waggonette for me too, Alfred?” she asked as she followed him to the door. “I shall want one to take me to the station. Tell them to put it all down to me.” He did not answer till the door was open, and he saw the dark trees against the sky, and the withered leaves beneath lying on the garden pathway. Then a smile crossed his lips, his face wore an air of relief, he looked like a free man. He crossed the threshold with a light step, and stopped and looked over his shoulder at her.

“Good-bye,” he said. “I will order the waggonette. It is lovely weather. We shall enjoy the journey to town.”

“My darling,” she said, with a world of tenderness in her voice, “I shall enjoy anything with you as long as I live.” He looked at her for a minute with the strange dumb expression that was so peculiarly his own, and walked away.

Mrs. Baines went back to the drawing-room, and shut the door with a manner that conveyed to the whole house that she wanted to be alone for a

little space. She stood thoughtfully beside the chair on which he had sat. Suddenly she caught sight of her own face in the chimney-glass. She looked at it critically and winked slowly, she pulled the white handkerchief up a little higher round her throat and turned away satisfied. “He loves me,” she said, “I know he loves me, and no power on earth shall separate me from him. I will marry him if I walk to church without my shoes. I was faithless once, but this time I will be true.” She crept softly upstairs, and when she came down an hour later she was dressed and ready to depart. She went to the dining-room, where Florence in despair had had a little luncheon-tray brought in with sandwiches and biscuits on it.

“My love,” she said, “I have finished the preparations for my journey; will you permit your servants to bring down my luggage? Steggalls’ man is coming immediately to drive me to the station. Thank you, but I do not need any refreshment.”

“Aunt Anne, I can’t bear you to go,” poor Florence said in dismay.

“I must go—I cannot stay,” the old lady answered solemnly, “and I beg you not to ask me to do so again.”

“But you will come back?” Florence entreated.

“No, I cannot,” Aunt Anne answered in the same voice. “You did not mean it, but you cut me to the quick last night; I have had no sleep since, my love. I must go away, I want to be alone. Besides, I have private business to transact. Thank you for all your goodness and hospitality to me, yours, and your dear ones. It has been a great privilege to be with you and the dear children since Walter went away, and to come here and see your second home.” She sat down for a moment by the buttery-hatch, turning a quick sharp glance as she did so to see that it was well closed, for one of her firm beliefs was that “servants were always ready to listen to the private speech of their employers.” As she seated herself, she looked as if she were trying to practise some of Mr. Wimple’s firmness.

But Florence knelt lovingly by the old lady’s side, and put her pretty head down on the black merino dress. “I would not be unkind to you for the world,” she said, “you know I would not.”

Mrs. Baines winked sorrowfully, but did not falter.

“You were very unkind. You hurt me more than I can say,” she said coldly.

Florence turned her lips towards the old lady’s hands, and kissed them. “Aunt Anne dear,” she said very softly, “you have no money——” Mrs.

Baines stiffened herself, her voice became polite and distant.

"Thank you, my love, but I have sufficient to defray the expenses of my journey; and at the other end I shall be in a position to make arrangements."

"Let me lend you a little," her niece said humbly.

"No, my love"—and Mrs. Baines shook her head—"I cannot take it."

But Florence thought of the ten shillings that constituted all the old lady's funds, and felt miserable.

"You could pay me back," she pleaded. "And don't be angry, dear Aunt Anne, but you told me how poor you were in that lodging last year, and how cold; it makes my heart ache every time I think of it; and the winter and the cold are coming again. Oh, do stay here. You shall do anything in the world that makes you happy. I cannot bear to think of you in London; and it's unkind of you to go, for we shall miss you so much, the children and I——" and she burst into tears.

Then Aunt Anne melted.

"Florence," she said tenderly, "that was like your dear self."

"Then stay with us. You shall do as you like in all ways."

"Thank you, my love; and bless you for your goodness. But I cannot stay. I do love you, and I will believe that your heart feels for me in this great crisis of my life. You must not think that because I love him I shall love you less; that would be impossible. But you must allow me to terminate my visit now. I want to be alone, to be in retirement for a little while; besides I have, as I said just now, imperative business to transact in town. You must not ask me to prolong my time here, love."

"Let me, at any rate, be a little useful to you, Aunt Anne. I know you are not rich."

For a moment Aunt Anne was silent. Then she winked her left eye very slowly, and looked up.

"Florence," she said, "I know that you always mean your words, and I should not like to hurt your generous heart. I will prove my affection for you by letting you lend me two sovereigns. Don't ask me to take more, my love, for it would be impossible. There——" and she gave a long sigh as she put the coins into her glove. "Now I hope you are satisfied. Remember I only take them to prove my affection for you. Let me kiss those dear children;" and quickly opening the door she called them by their names, and laughed in

an absent, excited manner, as they came running down the stairs. “Come, my darlings,” she said; “Aunt Anne is going away, and wants to say good-bye.”

“But we don’t want you to go,” said Monty.

“We don’t want you to go at all,” echoed Catty.

“You dear children,” the old lady said, “I must go; but I shall not forget you, and to-night when you look under your pillows you will find some chocolates as usual. I have put them there ready for you, so that some day you might remember that, even in the midst of her own happiness, Aunt Anne thought of you.” She said the last words almost mechanically, while with one eye she watched her trunks being carried out, and with the other looked at the children. Suddenly she turned to Florence. “I should like to wish you good-bye alone; there is something I want to say to you.” She turned quickly and entered the drawing-room. The fire had burnt low, the room had grown chilly, and Florence shivered a little as she stood waiting for Aunt Anne to speak. “My dear,” the old lady said, “will you try not to think me ungrateful for all your care of me, for all your solicitude for my happiness? I know you think that I am in my dotage——”

“Oh no——”

“—That I am doing a foolish thing in marrying a man so much younger than myself, that——”

“You must do as you like, Aunt Anne; it is a free country, and we can all do as we like.”

“Yes, my love,” Mrs. Baines answered with a sudden wink, which showed that this was a new bit of argument to her, and one that she would try to use to her own advantage if she had the opportunity; “we can all do as we like, as you did when you married your dear Walter, as I shall when I marry Alfred Wimple, for, as you say, it is a free country.”

“I only hope that you may be happy,” Florence said earnestly.

“Yes, my love,” Mrs. Baines said, and her eyes filled with tears, “I hope so too, and that I may make him happy.” She was silent for a minute, and then it seemed as if what she said were forced from her. “I wanted to tell you,” she began with a little gasp, “I want you to know something in my past life, so that you may better understand the reason of what I am doing. When I was a girl, Florence, a very true love was given to me. I won it heedlessly, and did not know its value. I played with it and threw it away—a fresh young life like Alfred Wimple’s. It was in my power to make him happy; but I made him miserable. He was taken ill and died. Sometimes I

think that I am answerable to God for the loss of that life; had I acted differently it might have been in the world now. I never had a young love offered to me again; I thought that God had denied it to me as a punishment; for Mr. Baines's youth had gone when I married him; it was the marriage of his middle age. But through all the years I have not grown old, and all things that have youth in them are precious to me. One reason why I love you all—you, and Walter and the children—is that I am young too, at heart. It is only the lines on my face that make me look old, and the years I can count that make me feel so. I am young still in all else." She stopped for a moment, as if waiting for some response, but Florence could think of nothing to say; she looked at the old lady wonderingly, and put her hand on the nervous ones that rested on the chair-back. "I remember the night of your party," Mrs. Baines went on. "I thought of the past all the evening while I sat there—your guest, my darling—it came back again and again, it enveloped me, one year after another. I went on to the balcony, and all my dear ones who had gone gathered round me in the darkness. I heard your fresh young voices behind, but the years had set a mark on me that cut me off from you, and death had taken most of those I remembered, but left my heart young and longing for love, longing to live again just as you loved and as you lived. I said to myself, 'I am old, I am old!' Alfred Wimple was standing by me, and whispered, 'You are not old.' He was like my dead come back, like the one who had loved me when I was young; I felt as if through all the years I had been waiting by a dead man's side, but that now perhaps out of his life that loved me this other had grown, or else that God had sent him, my dear one, into the world again to love me once more, and to prove I was forgiven. Do you understand, Florence? I could not refuse the beautiful life that was laid at my feet, the love that has come to bless me once more after all the long years. We are young man and young woman to each other, and we love each other with all our hearts. It is like you and your dear Walter. I wanted to say this to you; I thought it would help you to understand, to sympathize with me. You cannot be sorry that I am going to be less lonely, or grudge me the love that will make my life happier. That is all. And now, my darling, I must go; and good-bye once more."

Florence could not speak—she felt the hot tears filling her eyes again—a lump had come to her throat.

"God bless you, Aunt Anne," she said at last, with something almost like a sob.

"And God bless you, dearest Florence," the old lady said, and kissed her niece's face and stroked her head. "You know I always admire your hair, my

love," she said, and pulling her forward she kissed it. Then she went out to the waggonette. Jane held open the door. "This is for you," Mrs. Baines said haughtily, and slipped half a crown into the servant's hand. "There are some old slippers in my bedroom; I don't know if you will deem them worthy of your acceptance."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Jane, unwillingly.

"I trust you will study your mistress's comfort and interests in every way," Mrs. Baines continued as she put a shawl over her knees, "and that you will be good to those dear children." The next moment she was on her way to Witley Station.

## END OF VOL. I.

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# TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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[The end of *Aunt Anne*, Vol. 1, by Mrs. W. K. Clifford]