

AUNT ANNE

VOL. 2

Mrs. W. K. Clifford

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AUNT ANNE.

By Mrs. W. K. Clifford,

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

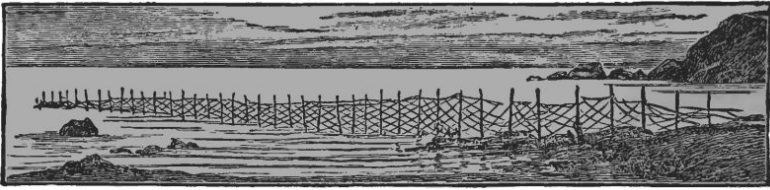
“As less the olden glow abides,
And less the chillier heart aspires,
With driftwood beached in past spring-tides
We light our sullen fires.”

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

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AUNT ANNE.

CHAPTER I.

PORTSEA PLACE, CONNAUGHT SQUARE, is composed of very small houses, most of which are let out in apartments. It was to one of these that Mrs. Baines drove on her arrival in town. Her two canvas-covered boxes, carefully corded, were on the top of the cab, her many small packages piled up inside. Mr. Wimple was not with her. He had left her at Waterloo, but it had been arranged that he was to see her later on in Portsea Place, and that if she failed to take rooms there, she was to leave a message where she was to be found.

“Well, Mrs. Hooper,” she said to the landlady, smilingly, but with the condescending air of a patroness, “you see I have not forgotten you, and if your rooms are still at liberty I should like to inspect them again.”

“Yes, ma’am, certainly they are at liberty,” said Mrs. Hooper, who felt convinced that, in spite of the shabby cloak with the clasp, the spare old lady must be some grand personage in disguise. “I shall be only too glad if they please you.”

Mrs. Baines inspected them carefully, two little rooms on the drawing-room floor, a bedroom and a sitting-room. She looked at the pictures, she winked at herself in the looking-glass, she gently shook the side-table to see if it was rickety. She tried the springs of the easy-chair, and the softness of the sofa cushions. She asked if the chimney had been properly swept, and whether there was a draught from the windows.

“I think a guinea a week is an ample rent, Mrs. Hooper, considering that it is not the season,” she said. “However, I will take the rooms for a week.”

“I don’t usually let them for so short a time,” the landlady began meekly.

“I might not require them for longer,” answered Mrs. Baines distantly, “but I can make them suit my purpose for a week.”

“Very well, ma’am,” and Mrs. Hooper gave way, overawed by Aunt Anne’s unflinching manner. “Would you like a fire lighted?”

“Certainly, and at once; but first will you be good enough to have the luggage carried in? And tell the cabman to wait; he can drive me to Portman

Square. There will be a gentleman here to dinner to-night.”

“I didn’t think you would want late dinner, ma’am; ladies so often have tea and something with it—and company the first night——” but the landlady stopped with a little dismay in her voice, for Mrs. Baines looked displeased.

“I am accustomed to dining late,” she said haughtily, feeling acutely the superiority of her own class, “and I have frequent visitors. Cabman, will you put those boxes into the bedroom?—and be careful not to knock the walls. They are so often careless,” she said, with a smile to the landlady that completely subjugated her, “and it is so very annoying to have one’s place injured.”

“Yes, ma’am, it is,” Mrs. Hooper replied gratefully. “If you will give your orders we will get in what you want for this evening while you are gone to Portman Square.” The address had evidently impressed her.

“I must consider for a moment,” and Aunt Anne sat down and was silent. Then she ordered a little dinner that she thought would be after the heart of Mr. Wimple, and gave many domestic directions; and with “I trust to you to make everything exceedingly comfortable, Mrs. Hooper,” departed in a four-wheeled cab.

Sir William Rammage lived in a big house in Portman Square. The windows looked dull, the blinds dingy, the door-step deserted. Half the square seemed to hear the knock which Mrs. Baines gave at the double door. A servant in an old-fashioned black suit appeared with an air of surprise.

“Is Sir William Rammage at home?” Mrs. Baines asked. The man looked her swiftly up and down.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I wish to see him,” she said, and walked into the wide stone hall, before the servant could prevent her.

“It’s quite impossible, ma’am,” he said firmly; “Sir William keeps his room, and is too ill to see any one.”

“You will be good enough to take him my card,” Mrs. Baines said. “If he is able to do so, you will find that he will see me.”

“I’ll take it to Mr. Boughton, ma’am,” said the man hesitatingly, for he was overcome by the visitor’s imperious manner; “he has been with Sir William just now, and will know if it is possible for any one to see him.”

“Who is Mr. Boughton?” she asked, almost contemptuously.

“He is Sir William’s solicitor.”

“Very well, that will do,” said Mrs. Baines, and she was shown into a large empty dining-room, that looked as grim and gloomy as the outside of the house had promised that all should be within. In a few minutes he returned.

“Mr. Boughton will be with you directly, ma’am,” he said respectfully.

In five minutes’ time there appeared a little dried-up man, bald and shrewd-looking, but with a kindly expression in his pinky face.

“Mr. Boughton,” Mrs. Baines said, “I am most glad to make your acquaintance;” and she shook hands. “Is it possible to see Sir William Rammage? He is my cousin, and we have known each other since we were children together.”

“Quite impossible, my dear madam, quite impossible,” the lawyer answered briskly.

“Is he very ill?”

“Very seriously ill.”

“Dear William,” the old lady said tearfully, “I feared it was so. I knew him too well to suppose that he would leave my letters unanswered had it been otherwise.”

“If it is any business matter, madam, I am his confidential lawyer, and have been for thirty years.”

“Mr. Boughton, I am Sir William’s own first cousin; our mothers were sisters,” Mrs. Baines said with deep emotion.

“Dear me, dear me,” answered the lawyer thoughtfully.

“When we were children we were rocked in the same cradle.”

“Most touching, I am sure;” and still he appeared to be turning something over in his mind.

“I know that he has a sincere affection for me, but of late years he has been so frequently indisposed that he has not been able to show it as he wished.”

“Frequently the case, my dear lady, frequently the case,” Mr. Boughton said soothingly. “May I ask you to tell me what other members of his family

survive? I am a little uncertain in the matter.”

“Mr. Boughton, I am his mother’s sister’s child, and the nearest relation he has in the world. The others have been dead and gone these many years. There may be some distant cousins left, but we have never recognized them.”

“I understand,” he said; “most interesting. And you wish to see him on family business, I presume?”

“I did.”

“I am sorry to refuse you, my dear lady, but I am afraid he is too ill to see you.”

“I am not rich,” Aunt Anne began, and her voice faltered a little; “and he promised to make me an allowance.”

“He has never done so yet?”

“No,” she said sadly, “he has had it under consideration. Perhaps he was reflecting what would be an adequate sum to defray my necessary expenses.”

“Perhaps so,” Mr. Boughton said thoughtfully. “If you will excuse me one moment, I will inquire if by any possibility my client can see you;” and he left the room.

But in a few minutes he returned.

“It is quite out of the question,” he explained, “quite. I don’t wish to distress you, but I fear that our friend is much too ill to attend for some time to his worldly affairs.”

“I have been waiting many months for his decision,” the old lady said, with a world of pain in her voice; “it has been most difficult to maintain my position.”

“Quite so, quite so, my dear lady, and I feel sure that Sir William would wish this matter to be attended to without delay. I think I understand you to be the daughter of his mother’s sister——”

“His dear mother’s sister Harriet.”

“Quite so,” and Mr. Boughton nodded approvingly. “Well, my dear lady, suppose I take it upon myself, having the management of his affairs for the present, to allow you just a hundred a year, say, till he is able to settle matters himself. Would that enable you to await his recovery, or——”

A little lump came into Aunt Anne's throat, a slow movement of satisfaction to her left eye; her voice was unsteady when she spoke.

"Mr. Boughton," she said, "I know Sir William will be most grateful to you. My circumstances must have been the cause of much anxiety to him."

"Then we will consider the matter arranged until he is in a condition to attend to it himself or—by the way, would you like to have a cheque at once?"

"Perhaps it would be advisable," Aunt Anne said, but she seemed unable to go on. Try to conceal it as she would, the sudden turn in her fortune was too much for her.

"You must forgive me," she said gently, sitting down, "I have had a journey from the country, and I am not so young as I was years ago;" she looked up with a little smile, as if to belie her words.

"Of course," answered Mr. Boughton, feelingly. "Age is a malady we all inherit if we live long enough. Let me get you a glass of wine; there is some excellent port in the sideboard;" and in a moment he found a decanter and, having filled a glass, handed it to her. But she shook her head while she looked up at him gratefully.

"You must forgive me," she said, "port wine is always pernicious to me." But he persuaded her to take a little sip, and then the glass was set down beside her while he wrote the cheque.

"You will tell dear William," she said, "when he is well enough, with what solicitude I think of him. And, Mr. Boughton, you must permit me to say how much indebted I feel to your courtesy, and to the consideration with which you have treated me."

Five minutes later Mrs. Baines was walking along Portman Square, feeling like a woman in a dream, or a millionaire carrying his entire capital. She bought some flowers, on her way back, to put on the little dinner table in Portsea Place, and two little red candle-shades, for with characteristic quickness she had noticed the old-fashioned plated candlesticks on the mantelpiece, and remembered that gas above the table was unbecoming; and then she bought a yard or two of lace to wear round her throat, feeling a little ashamed and yet happy while she did so. She thought of her lover, and looked longingly round the shop; but there was nothing that even she could imagine would be an acceptable present to a man.

"Welcome, my darling," she said to him, when he arrived an hour or two later; "this is the first time I have had the happiness of receiving you in a

place of my own. I trust our repast will be ready punctually.”

“How is Sir William Rammage?” he asked.

“In a most precarious condition.”

“No better?”

“From what I could gather, Alfred, he must be worse,” and she spoke solemnly.

“Whom did you see?”

“I saw a solicitor, Mr. Boughton.”

“That is my uncle; and he said he was worse?”

“He was so ill, Alfred, that Mr. Boughton even paid me my quarter’s income out of his own pocket.” A little smile hovered on Mr. Wimple’s face.

“You didn’t say anything about me?”

“No, my darling; you had desired me not to mention your name and that was sufficient.”

“And he paid you out of his own pocket?”

“Yes, my love, he was most anxious that I should not be inconvenienced; but our repast is ready. Come,” and she motioned him to the place opposite her, and with happy dignity went to the head of the table. “I hope you will do it justice.”

Mr. Wimple ate his dinner with much solemnity. He always accepted his food as if it was a responsibility that demanded his most serious attention. Presently he looked at her across the dinner-table, at the lace about her throat, at the little crinkly gold brooch, which Florence had seen first years before at Rottingdean, at the lines and wrinkles that marked the tender old face, at the thin white hands with the loose skin and the blue veins; but no expression came into his dull full eyes. When the meal was over he got up and stood by the fireplace.

“My dear one,” she said, “are you tired with the journey?”

“No.”

“Did you find your rooms quite comfortable and ready for you?” she asked, and went over to his side.

“Yes,” he answered with the little gulp peculiar to him. He seemed to be considering something of which he was uncertain whether to speak or be

silent. But he kept his eyes fixed full upon her.

“Are they in the Gray’s Inn Road, dear Alfred?”

“Near there,” he said, and his lips closed. For a minute he was silent. Her eyes dropped beneath his gaze, she seemed to be trembling, and fragile—oh, so fragile, a little gust of wind might have swept the slight thin form away. He opened his lips to speak, but no sound came from them.

“You are so thoughtful,” she asked gently; “I have not vexed you?”

“No;” and there was a long pause. Then he spoke again.

“Anne,” he said, and went a little further from her, “I think perhaps it would be as well if we were married at once.” The tears came into her eyes, her mouth twitched, there was a pause before she found words to speak.

“My dear one,” she said, “is it really true that all your heart is mine; you are sure, dear Alfred?”

“Yes,” he answered, in a voice he tried to make gentle, but that, oddly enough, sounded half defiant, “I told you so last night.”

“I know,” she answered; “only I have not deserved such happiness,” and the tears stole down her cheeks. “I have lived so long alone, my dear one; but all my life is yours, Alfred, all my life, and the truest love that woman can give I will give you,” and she clasped her hands while she spoke—she seemed to be making the promise before some unseen witness to whom she owed account of all her doings.

A week later Alfred Wimple and Mrs. Baines were married from the little lodging in Portsea Place. It was a sensation in Mrs. Hooper’s monotonous life. She would have laughed and made fun of the wedding, but that Aunt Anne’s dignity forbade almost a smile. The old lady seemed to be in a dream, the beginning of which she hardly remembered—to be living through the end of a poem, the first part of which she had learned in her youth. Her poor weak eyes looked soft and loving, and the smile that came and went about her mouth had something in it that was pathetic rather than ridiculous. She had conjured a grey wedding-dress from somewhere, and a grey bonnet to match, but the cold caused her to wrap herself round in the big cloak she always wore. She pulled on her gloves, which were large and ill-fitting, and stood before the glass looking at herself, but all the time her thoughts were straying back to forty years and more ago. If only time could be conquered, and its cruel hand held back—if flesh and blood could change

as little as sometimes do the souls they clothe, how different would be the lives of men and women! The woman who went down the stairs was old and wrinkled outwardly, but within she was as full of tenderness as any girl of twenty going forth to meet her lover. She stepped into the four-wheel cab alone, the biting wind swept maliciously over her face, and quickly she pulled up the window. It was but a little way to the church. It stood in the middle of an open space; she started when she caught sight of it, then turned away her head for a moment with a strange dread: and her courage almost gave way as she stopped before the deserted doorway. Alfred Wimple heard her arrive, and came to meet her with the hesitating, half-doubtful look that his face always wore when he was with her. There was no tenderness in his manner, there was something almost like shame. But he seemed to be impelled by fate and unable to turn back. The old lady's heart was full; the tears came into her eyes. She took his arm, and together they walked up the empty aisle. The two odd people who had been pressed into service as witnesses came forward, the clergyman appeared, he looked for a moment at the couple before him, but it was no business of his to interfere, and slowly he began the service.

A quarter of an hour later Aunt Anne and Alfred Wimple were man and wife.

"I think we had better walk back," were the first words he said when they were outside. His manner was almost cowering, little enough like a bridegroom.

"My darling, don't you think people would guess?" she whispered.

"You need not be afraid. We don't look much like a wedding-party," he answered grimly.

"No, my love, I fear not. But you do not mind?"

"No," and they walked on in silence. Then she spoke again, her voice tremulous with emotion—

"I feel, my darling, as if I could not have borne it if there had been more signs of our joyousness. It is too sacred; it is the day of my life," she whispered to herself.

"I hope there will be some sunshine at Hastings," he said, as if he did not in the least understand what she was talking about. He had hardly listened to her.

"I hope so, my darling," she answered gently; "and in your life too. I will try to put it there, Alfred."

He turned and looked at her with an expression that seemed half shame and half shrinking.

“It will be warmer at Hastings,” he said, as if at a loss for words.

Aunt Anne had arranged a honeymoon trip. It was she who made all the arrangements, and he who reluctantly consented to them. They were to go to Hastings by a late afternoon train, stay there a few days, and then return to town; but everything was vague beyond.

“It will be better to wait,” Mr. Wimple said, when she wanted to settle some sort of home. “I must consider my work, Anne. I cannot be tied down: you must understand that.”

There was a little wedding-breakfast set out in the drawing-room. A cold chicken and a shape of jelly, and a very small wedding-cake with some white sugar over it, put almost shyly on one side. In the middle of the table was a pint bottle of champagne. The gold foil over the cork made the one bright spot in the room, and gave it an air of festivity. A cheerless meal enough on a winter’s day, but not for worlds would Aunt Anne have had an ordinary one on such an occasion. And so they sat down to their cold chicken and the cheap stiff jelly; and Alfred Wimple opened the champagne, and Aunt Anne, quick to see, noticed that he gave her three quarters of a glass and drank the rest himself, and she felt that she was married indeed.

“Bless you, my dear one, bless you,” she said, as she always did, when she raised her glass to her lips. “And may our life be a happy one.”

“Thank you,” he answered solemnly—and then, as if he remembered what was expected of him, he drank back to her.

“Good health, Anne, and good luck to us,” he said.

The meal ended, the things were taken away by Mrs. Hooper herself, and they were left alone.

Mr. Wimple loitered uneasily round the room.

“I think we must go to Hastings by a later train,” he said; “I shall have to get to my chambers presently.”

“Must you go to your chambers again to-day?” she asked meekly.

“Yes,” he answered. “I shan’t be long, but there are some things I must see to.”

“Couldn’t I go with you, Alfred, in a cab?”

“No;” and his lips locked.

“Are the rooms in the Gray’s Inn Road?” she asked again.

“They are near there,” he said once more; he looked at her steadfastly, and something in his eyes told her that he did not mean to give her the address. For a few moments there was silence between them. He stood on the hearth-rug by the fire. She sat a few paces from him, seemingly lost in thought. Suddenly she looked up.

“Alfred, my darling,” she cried sadly, “you do love me, do you not? You seem so cold to me to-day, so reserved and different. I have taken this great step for you, and you have not said a tender word to me since we returned from the church, yet this is our wedding-day,” and she stopped.

“I am not well, and it’s so cold, and I am worried about money matters, Anne.”

“I will take care of you,” she said, and stood up beside him, “and nurse you, and make you strong; I will study your every wish. If I had millions of money, they should all be yours, my darling; I should like to spread out gold for your feet to walk on.”

“I believe you would,” he said, with something like gratitude in his voice, and he stooped and kissed her forehead.

Even this meagre sign of affection overcame her, she put her head thankfully down on his shoulder and let it rest there a minute from sheer weariness and longing. He put his arm round her and his face touched her head, but it was as a man caresses his mother. Still, for a moment the weary old heart found rest.

“You are all my world,” she whispered.

“I’m not good enough for you, Anne,” he said uneasily. “You are a fool to care about me.” Then she raised her head and the bright smile came back.

“Oh yes,” she said joyfully, “you are much too good. It shall be the study of my life to be good enough for you.” The enthusiasm of youth seemed to flash back upon her for a moment. “I am not a fool to care for you. I am the wisest woman on earth. My darling Alfred,” she went on after a pause, “I have a wedding-present for you; you must have thought me very remiss in not giving you one already.”

“I have nothing for you,” he answered. But she did not hear him. She was fumbling in a travelling-bag at the end of the room. Presently she came back with a large old-fashioned gold watch.

“This belonged to my brother John, who died,” she said. “I want you to wear it in memory of to-day.”

“It’s a very handsome watch,” he said. “I never saw it before. Where has it been?”

She was silent for a moment and her left eye winked.

“My love,” she said, “I had it kept in a place of safety till I required it,” and he asked no more questions.

He put on his great coat to go out; but he hesitated by the door and half reluctantly came back. “Anne,” he said, “even if we have no money, we ought to be prudent and business like; I meant to have told you so yesterday.”

“Yes, my darling,” she said, half wonderingly.

“People usually sign their wills on their wedding-day. You see I am not strong and might die.” And he looked at her keenly.

“Yes, my love, or I might die, which would be far more natural.”

“I have made a will leaving you all I have. How do you wish to leave anything that you possess?”

“To you, of course, Alfred—everything I have in the world.”

“I don’t wish to influence you,” he said, “but I thought you might wish to make your will in substance the same as mine. So after I left you yesterday I had them both drawn up. They are in my great coat pocket now, we might as well get them signed and done with. The landlady and the servant will witness them.” He produced two long envelopes from his pocket, and Mrs. Hooper and the servant were called.

“Alfred,” Aunt Anne said, when they were alone again, and she read over the documents, “your name is in my will, but in yours you only say you ‘leave everything to my wife.’ ”

“Surely that is sufficient?” he said shortly.

“Of course, dear, for I am”—the voice dropped, as almost a blush came upon the withered cheek—“your wife now.” Mr. Wimple put his lips together again after his favourite manner and said nothing. She watched him curiously, a little fear seemed to overtake her, her hands, half trembling, sought each other. “Have I displeased you, Alfred,” she asked gently; “my darling, have I displeased you?”

“No,” he answered drily; “but I am not very sentimental, Anne. Perhaps you had better remember that,” and he put the wills carefully into his pocket. “We will go by the 5.35 train. By the way, you might meet me at the station,” and he looked at her steadfastly.

“If you do not come back for me I shall not go at all,” and something like an angry flash came from her eyes. He hesitated a moment.

“Very well,” he answered, “I will come back for you.” She watched him go down the stairs, she listened while he opened the street door and closed it—to his footsteps growing fainter along the pavement outside; then she went back into the little drawing-room and shut herself in, and put her head down on the lumpy sofa-cushion and sobbed with the bitter disappointment and hopelessness that had suddenly opened itself out before her.





CHAPTER II.

SIX months later. Walter was back in England, better in health, brown and handsome. Florence was in a seventh heaven of happiness. Her husband was her very devoted lover; the children were as good as gold; the little house near Regent's Park was decorated with all manner of Indian draperies and *bric-à-brac*—what more could the heart of woman desire?

"Really," she said, "it was worth your going away to know the delight of getting you back again."

"Yes, darling; shall I go away again?"

"No, you dear stupid! Walter, why doesn't Mr. Fisher come and see us? He has only been once since you returned, and then he seemed most anxious to go away again."

"I suppose he was afraid Ethel Dunlop would come in."

"I wish he hadn't fallen in love with her," Florence said; "I shall always reproach myself about it. But, really, he was so good and kind that I half hoped she would like him."

"A woman under thirty doesn't marry a man merely because he is good and kind, unless matrimony is her profession."

"I can't help thinking it might have been different if he had spoken to her," Florence said; "it is so absurd of a man to write. I wouldn't have accepted you if you had proposed in a letter."

"Oh, wouldn't you?" he laughed; "that was a matter in which you wouldn't have been allowed to decide for yourself. One must draw the line somewhere. It is all very well to let women do as they like in little things; but in a big one like marrying you, why——"

"Don't talk nonsense," Florence laughed, putting her hand over his mouth. He kissed it, and jerked back his head.

"I wonder what Fisher said in his letter, Floggie?"

"I should think it was very proper and respectful."

“The sort of letter a churchwarden or an archbishop would write. Poor chap, I expect he feels a little sore about it. He hadn’t a very good time with his first wife, I fancy. Probably he wanted to make a little sunshine for his sober middle-age. I dare say he would have been awfully good to her if she had taken him.”

“I wish she had, and I wish he would come here again,” Florence said; “he was so very kind about taking the house, and I always liked him.”

“I am afraid,” Walter said, with a sigh, “he hasn’t quite forgiven me for putting Wimple on to him. It really was a ghastly thing for *The Centre* to get reviews from other papers palmed off on it as fresh ones. I can’t think, setting aside the lowness of cheating, how Wimple could be such a fool as to suppose that Fisher wouldn’t find out that they had been prigged.”

“He was quite taken in at first. I remember his telling me that Mr. Wimple wrote very well.”

“You see, those Scotch papers are uncommonly clever. How Wimple expected not to be found out I can’t imagine. If he had prigged from the *Timbuctoo Journal*, of course he might have escaped. Fisher must have sworn freely. It made him look such an ass”—and Walter laughed, in spite of himself.

“Is there a *Timbuctoo Journal*?” Florence asked innocently.

“No, you sweet idiot—perhaps there is, though. Should think it would be interesting. Probably gives an account of a roast-missionary feast now and then.”

“You horrid thing!” said Florence. “I wish Mr. Wimple were in Timbuctoo, and that I knew how poor Aunt Anne was getting on.”

“Poor, dear old fool!—we never dreamed what would come of that introduction, either, did we?”

“Oh, Walter, I shall never forget what I suffered about her at the cottage when she told me she was going to marry Mr. Wimple. And then, after she had vanished, there were the bills at Witley and Guildford. I can’t imagine what she did with all the things she bought, for she was only at the cottage a week or so without me.”

“Probably sent them to Wimple at Liphook.”

“She couldn’t send him chickens and claret, and cakes and chocolate, and a dozen other things.”

“Oh yes, she could—trust her,” laughed Walter. “It is very odd,” he went on, “but I have always had an idea, somehow, that there was a feminine attraction at Liphook. If it was the young lady we saw with him that morning at Waterloo Station, I don’t think much of her. How did you manage to pay all the bills, Floggie dear? You didn’t owe a penny when I came back, and had saved something too—I never knew such a frugal little woman.”

“Steggall’s bill was the worst,” Florence said; “there were endless waggonettes.”

“Probably she spent her time in showing Wimple the beauties of the country. How did you manage to pay them all, Floggie?”

“Lived on an egg one day, and nothing the next.”

“That’s what a woman always does. A man would have robbed Peter to pay Paul. You ought to have a reward. It is too cold at Easter, but if I could get away for a fortnight this Whitsuntide we might take a run to Monte Carlo.”

“Monte Carlo makes me think of Mrs. North. I should like to see her again; she was very fascinating.”

“Why didn’t you go and see her?”

“I was not sure that you would like it. There was evidently something wrong.”

He was silent for a few minutes. “Do you know,” he said presently, “when there is something wrong with a woman I think it is a reason for going, and not for staying away. It’s the only chance for setting it right. What is the use of goodness if it isn’t used for the benefit of other people?”

“Walter,” Florence said, and she stood up and clasped her hands—“she said nearly the same thing to me that evening she was here. There was something almost desperate in her manner; it has haunted me ever since; and I should have gone to see her but that I was afraid of your being angry.”

“What, at your going to see a woman who perhaps needed your help? If she were up a moral tree, you might have done her some good.”

“I can’t bear to think I missed a chance of doing that. Walter,” she added, with a sigh, “sometimes I fear that I am very narrow.”

“No, dear, you are only a little prim Puritan, and I love you for it as I love you for everything; so please, Floggie, will you take me to Monte Carlo

this Whitsuntide, or may I take you?"

"You are a wicked spendthrift, as bad as Aunt Anne; I believe it runs in the family. What is to be done with the children while we go to Monte Carlo?"

"We'll leave them with the mother-in-law."

"I wish you wouldn't call my mother that horrid name."

"I thought it would make you cross. I say, I really do wish we knew what had become of the Wimples."

"I think they must be all right, somehow," Florence said, "or else——"

"Or else she would have arrived to borrow a five-pound note. I wonder how Wimple likes it. Well, darling, I must be off to the office. It's all agreed about Whitsuntide, then, Fisher permitting."

"Go away," Florence laughed; "go to the office, you bad person."

"Very well, I will," he said, in a patient voice; "but I really do wish Aunt Anne would turn up. I want some more scissors; I lost all those she gave me, and some one stole the case."

"And Catty broke my velvet pincushion. It is, clearly, time that she turned up."

When Walter had gone, Florence thought of Mrs. North again. "It was rather unkind of me not to be nice to her, for she was generous to Aunt Anne," she said to herself. "I wonder whether I could go and call upon her now. I might explain that I never dared to mention Madame Celestine's bills."

But she had no more time in which to think of Mrs. North, for there were the inevitable domestic matters to arrange; and then Ethel Dunlop came in, full of her engagement to George Dighton.

"I always imagined it was merely friendship," Florence said, thinking regretfully of the editor.

"Did you?" said Ethel, brightly. "We thought so ourselves for a long time, I believe; but we found out that we were mistaken. By the way, Florence, you can't think how good Mr. Fisher has been to us."

"Mr. Fisher? Well, you don't deserve anything from him."

"No, I don't. Still, it wasn't my fault that he proposed; I never encouraged him. How droll it was of him to come and pour out his troubles

to you.”

“I think it was manly and dignified,” Florence said; “it proved that he wasn’t ashamed of wanting to marry you. Did he write a nice letter, Ethel?”

“Yes, very, I think.”

“How did he begin?”

“He began, ‘My dear Miss Ethel,’ and ended up, ‘Yours very faithfully.’ ”

“I am afraid you did lead him on a little bit.”

“Indeed I did not. He asked me to come and see his mother when she had this house, and he was always here.”

“That was very nice of him,” Florence said; “it shows that he is very fond of his mother.”

“Oh yes, it was very nice of him,” Ethel answered, “and he is very fond of his mother; but I found that he generally came a little before I did, and he always saw me home. I couldn’t refuse to let him do so, because he evidently thought it a matter of duty to see that I arrived safely at my own street door. Middle-aged men always seem to think that a girl must get into mischief the moment she is left to her own devices.”

“How did he know of your engagement?”

“I wrote and told him. He had been so kind that I felt it was due to him. I told him we should be as poor as church mice, as George would be in a government office all his life, with little to do and less to spend, after the manner of those officials; and he wrote back such a nice letter, inquiring into all our affairs and prospects—you would have thought he was our godfather, at least.”

“He does that sort of thing to everybody,” Florence said; “he is astonishingly kind. He always seems to think he ought to do something for the good of every one he knows.”

“Perhaps he mistakes himself for a minor providence, and goes about living up to it.”

“Oh, Ethel!”

“And then,” Ethel went on, altogether ignoring the slightly shocked look on her friend’s face, “he said that, perhaps, a word might be put in somewhere and something done for George. He didn’t say any more, but I

gathered that cabinet ministers occasionally range themselves round a newspaper office, seeking whom they may oblige.”

“Oh, Ethel!” exclaimed Florence again, “that is just your little exaggerated way.”

“Well, at any rate, he thinks he can do something, and he evidently wants to be good to us.”

“He seems to delight in doing kind things,” Florence answered; “you know how good he was about Walter.”

“He ought to have married Mrs. Baines. He would have been much better than Alfred Wimple”—with which wise remark Ethel went away, full of her own happiness, and Florence sat down and thought over Mr. Fisher’s generosity.

“He is always doing kind things,” she said to herself. “It was he who sent Walter to India, and perhaps set him up for the rest of his life; and he who gave that horrid Mr. Wimple work, only to find himself cheated and insulted in return. I can’t think what I shall do whenever I meet Mr. Wimple.” But she swiftly dismissed that disagreeable person from her mind, and returned to the consideration of Mr. Fisher’s virtues. “He is so unselfish,” she thought. “It isn’t every one who would try to help on the man for whom he had been refused. Yet it is very odd that, with all his goodness, Mr. Fisher is not a bit fascinating; I quite understand Ethel’s refusing him. I have an idea that few go out of their way to be good to him. Some people seem to live in the world to give out kindness, and others only to take it in.” The reflection felt like a self-reproach. She did so little for others herself, and yet she was always longing to do more in life than merely to take her own share of its enjoyment. She wanted most to help Aunt Anne; she longed to see her, to comfort and soothe her, and perhaps to lend her a little money. She felt convinced that Aunt Anne must want some money by this time, and that she was miserable with Mr. Wimple. “I am so afraid he isn’t kind to her,” she said to herself; “I am certain he hasn’t married her for love—there is some horrid reason that we are not clever enough to guess. I only wish she had never left Mrs. North; she was so happy there, and looked so grand driving about and giving presents; and perhaps if she had stayed she might, eventually, have been able to pay for them.” Then, almost against her will, Mrs. North’s face was before her again. She could see it quite plainly, lovely and restless, but with a sad look in the blue eyes that was like an appeal for kindness. “I feel as if there were an aching in her heart for something she has missed in life. But perhaps that is nonsense, or it is only that I don’t

understand her—we are so different. I have half a mind to go and call on her. I wonder if she would care to see me?”

Some more hesitation, some curiosity and kindly feeling, and then Florence put on her prim little bonnet and her best furs, for she remembered Mrs. North’s magnificent array and felt that it would not do to look shabby. She took the train from Portland Road to South Kensington, and walked slowly to Cornwall Gardens.

“I won’t leave Walter’s card,” she thought, “or any cards at all if she is out; for, though I am glad to go and see her, I don’t want to be on visiting terms.”

But Mrs. North was at home, and Florence was shown into a gorgeous drawing-room, all over draperies, and bits of colour, and tall palms, and pots of lovely flowers. In the midst of them sat Mrs. North, a little lonely figure by a piled-up wood fire, for the early spring day was cold and dreary. She rose as her visitor entered, and came just a step forward. She was lovelier than ever. With a cry of joyful surprise, she held out her hands to Florence.

“*You!*” she exclaimed. “Oh, Mrs. Hibbert, I never thought you would come and see me at all; but now—oh, it is good of you! Did you think how glad I should be?”

“I didn’t know whether you would care to see me or not,” Florence said, surprised at her delight.

“Care?” Mrs. North almost gasped, and Florence fancied that her lip quivered; “indeed I do, only no one—won’t you sit down?”—and she made a cosy corner on a low couch, with a pile of soft, silk-covered cushions.

“I was so sorry not to be able to come and see you last year——”

“I quite understand,” Mrs. North said, and the colour rushed to her face. “I did not expect it.”

“You were so kind about Madame Celestine”—Florence went on, thinking that she, too, would have a heap of down cushions in her drawing-room, and not noticing Mrs. North’s confusion—“and about all those dreadful bills.”

“Yes, I remember. Then you did not stay away on purpose?” Mrs. North leaned forward while she spoke, and waited breathlessly for the answer.

“Why, of course not.” A happy look came over the girlish face.

“And did you come now to tell me about Mrs. Baines? I should love to hear about her. Of course I knew she would not write. Was she very angry at my paying the bill?”

“Well, no——” and Florence hesitated.

“Do tell me. I don’t in the least mind if she was. How furious she would be with me now, and how she would gather her scanty skirts and pass me by in scornful silence.” Mrs. North laughed, an almost shrill laugh that seemed to be born of sorrow and pain. She was very strange, Florence thought, and her manner was oddly altered. “Do tell me,” she asked again—“was she very angry?”

“I am ashamed to say that she never knew you had paid it.”

“You were afraid to tell her?”

“I never had a good opportunity.”

“It doesn’t matter a bit. It saved her from being worried, poor thing,—that was the chief point. So long as a thing is done, it doesn’t matter who does it—unless it’s a bad thing. It matters then very much—especially to the person who does it,” Mrs. North added, with a little bitter laugh. “The pain of it”—she stopped again, and went on suddenly, “Tell me more about Mrs. Baines. Where is she?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you not seen her lately?”

“Not for a long time.”

“But what has become of her?”

Florence hesitated again. “I cannot tell you.”

“Dear lady!” said Mrs. North, her face merry with sudden fun. “You have not quarrelled with her? A Madonna doesn’t quarrel, surely? Oh, how rude I am—but you will forgive me, won’t you?” She got up from the other end of the couch and rang the bell. “Bring some tea,” she said to the servant, “and quickly.”

“Don’t have tea for me, please——” Florence began.

“Oh yes, yes,” Mrs. North said entreatingly. “I feel, dear Mrs. Hibbert, that we are going to talk scandal—therefore we must have tea. I have had enough scandal lately,” she added, with a sigh, “but still when it isn’t about

one's self it is so exhilarating, as Mrs. Baines would have said; now, please, go on."

"Go on with what?"

Mrs. North pulled out a little scented lace handkerchief and twirled it into a ball in her excitement.

"About Mrs. Baines. There is some exciting news—I know it; I feel it in the air. Ah, here's the tea. I will pour it out first, and then, while we drink it, you must tell me all about her. Some sugar and cream?—there, now we look more cosy. Where is the old lady? What have you done with her? You have not locked her up?" she asked quickly.

"No," laughed Florence, thinking how good the tea was, and how pretty were the cups and the little twisted silver spoons. "I have not locked her up."

"And you have really not quarrelled with her?"

"No," answered Florence, a little doubtfully. "Though I sometimes fear that she is angry with me for what she called my lack of sympathy. Really, Mrs. North, I don't know how to tell you; but the fact is,—she is married again."

"No, no?" cried Mrs. North. "Oh, it's too lovely! And who is the dear old gentleman?"

"It's a young one," and Florence laughed, for she could not help being amused. "I don't know if you ever saw him—Mr. Wimple?" Mrs. North rocked to and fro, with wicked delight, till the last words came; then she grew quite grave.

"Oh, but I am sorry," she said, "for I have seen him; and he didn't look nice; he looked—rather horrid."

"I am afraid he did," Florence answered regretfully.

"Do tell me all about it"—but the only account that Florence was able to give did not satisfy Mrs. North. "You must have seen something of the love-making beforehand?" she said.

"I am afraid I saw nothing of that either," Florence explained, "for I was in London, and she was at the cottage."

"I thought she liked him when she was here," Mrs. North said; "but, of course, I never dreamed of her being in love with him. She used to meet him and go to contemplate the Albert Memorial. Sometimes, when I was out alone, I drove by them; but I pretended to be blind, for I did not want to

invite him here—he was so unattractive. He called once, but I did not encourage him to come again. I would give anything to see them together. If I knew where she lived, I would brave everything, and call upon her, though she probably wouldn't let me in."

Then Florence began to be a little puzzled. What did Mrs. North mean? Had she done anything—anything bad? Almost without knowing it she looked up and asked, "Is Mr. North quite well?" The colour flew to Mrs. North's face again.

"Oh yes, I suppose so," she answered coldly. "Naturally I don't inquire after his health."

"You had had a telegram last time I saw you——"

"I remember"—it was said bitterly. "I wondered why he was coming back so suddenly."

"I thought perhaps he was at home still."

"At home! He may be. I don't know where he is. I have not the least idea. It is no concern of mine."

"Then he did not return after all?" Florence said, bewildered. Mrs. North looked at her for a moment in silence. Then she got up and stood leaning against the mantelpiece, which was covered with flowers and *bric-à-brac*.

"Mrs. Hibbert," she said, and it seemed as if her lips moved reluctantly, but she showed no other sign of emotion—"you know—what has happened to me, don't you?"

"No," answered Florence, breathlessly, and she stood up too. Mrs. North glanced quickly at the door, almost as if she expected to see her visitor flee towards it.

"Mr. North divorced me," she said, very slowly.

"I didn't know," Florence answered, and began to put on her glove.

"I thought you didn't," and there came a bitter little laugh. "I knew you didn't; and yet, deep down in the bottommost corner of my heart, I hoped you did."

"You must forgive me for saying that, if I had, I should not have come, though I am very, very sorry for you."

"As a judge is when he sends a prisoner into solitary confinement, or to be hanged, and turns away to his own comfortable life?" Florence buttoned

her glove. "And you will never come and see me again, of course?" she added, with another little burst.

"I do not think I can," Florence said gently.

"I don't want you," Mrs. North answered quickly, while her cheeks burned a deeper and deeper red. "It was only a test question."

"I am very sorry for you," Florence said again, "very, very. You are so young; and you seem to have no one belonging to you. But there are some things that are impossible, if——"

"Oh, I know," burst out Mrs. North again; "I know. My God! and this is a Christian country—yes, wait," she said, for she fancied Florence was going. "I know you are kind and gentle, and you are—good," she added, almost as an afterthought; "and you and the women like you try very hard to keep your goodness close among yourselves, and never to let one scrap of it touch women like me. Tell me," she asked—"did you marry the man you loved best in the world?"

"Yes," Florence answered unwillingly, afraid of being dragged into an argument.

"Then you have never known any temptation to do wrong. Where does the merit of doing right come in?"

"I would rather not discuss it," Florence said, gently but coldly.

"Oh, let me speak—not for my own sake, for I shall be strong enough to make some sort of life for myself after a time; but for the sake of other women who may be in my position and judged as you judge me. When I was eighteen I was persuaded to marry a man old enough to be my father."

"But if you didn't care for him——"

"So many of us think that love is half a myth till our own turn comes. They said I should be happy, and I wanted to be. Of course I wasn't: human nature is not so easily satisfied. He was rather kind at first. But after a time he grew tired of me. I suppose I wasn't much of a companion to him. He went abroad and left me alone, again and again. At first my sister was with me; she married and went away. Mrs. Baines came a little while before that——" She stopped, as if unable to go on without some encouragement.

"Yes?" Florence said, listening almost against her will.

"And I was young and inexperienced. How could I know the danger in so many things that amused me? At last I fell in love; I had been so lonely, I

was so tired, and I had never cared for any one in my whole life before.”

“But you knew that it was wrong. You were married.”

“Oh yes, but the paths of virtue had been deadly dull, and trodden with a man I did not love and whom I had been made to marry. The man I did love was young and handsome,—he is a soldier. The rest of the story was natural, even if it was wicked.”

“And then?” asked Florence, wonderingly.

“Then my husband came back, and there were the usual details. He heard something that sent him flying home to look after his honour. He had forgotten to look after mine—or my happiness.”

“And the man?”

“He had gone to India with his regiment. He telegraphed over, ‘No defence,’ and that was the end of it.”

“I hope he will come back and make you reparation.”

“He has not written me a line,” Mrs. North said, and the tears came into her eyes for a moment—“not a word, not a sign. Perhaps he is dead—India is a country that swallows up many histories; or, perhaps,” she added desperately, “he, too, despises me now. People flee from me as if I had the plague,” she added, with the bitter laugh again. “Oh, there are no people in the world who encourage wickedness as do the strictly virtuous.”

“Don’t say that,” Florence answered, “for, indeed, it is not true.”

“But it is,” Mrs. North said eagerly. “I have proved it: once do wrong, and men and women seem to combine to prevent you from ever doing right again. You can’t make a Magdalen of me”—and she held out her hands. “I am young; I am a girl still; you can’t expect me to go in sackcloth and ashes all my life—and that in solitude. I want to be happy; I am hungry—and aching for happiness.”

“I hope you will get some still, but——”

“How can I? Men shun me, unless they want to make me worse; and women fly from me, as if they feared their own respectability would vanish at the mere sight of me. It seems to be made of brittle stuff.”

“It is not that,” Florence interrupted—“but a difference must be made; there must be some punishment—something done to prevent——”

“That is why so many women go on doing wrong,” Mrs. North continued, as if she had not heard the interruption; “they cannot bear the treatment of that portion of the world which has remained unspotted or unfound-out. Oh, the cruelty of good women! I sometimes think it is only the people who have sinned or who have suffered who really know how to feel.”

“That is not true——” Florence began, but still Mrs. North did not heed her.

“Do you know,” she said, speaking under her breath, “I am so sorry for women now that I believe I could kneel down beside a wicked, drunken creature in a gutter, and kiss her, and bring her back, and be tender to her in the hope of making her better. For I understand not only the sin, but the pain and the misery, and the good people, and all else that have driven her there.”

“But some difference must be made—you cannot expect to be received as if people thought you now what they thought you once?”

“I know that,” Mrs. North said scornfully. “People can’t ask me to their parties. I don’t want to go to them. They may not want me for the friend of their daughters, though I should not harm them——” and she burst into tears.

“It isn’t possible,” Florence said helplessly.

“But need men and women flee from me as if I were a leper? People who have known me for years, and might make me better, women especially, who might make me a little happier and ashamed of having done wrong. But no—no; they gather their skirts, and do not see me as they pass, though a year ago they crowded here. They are waiting to hear that I am dead, or have grown wicked still. They would feel a sort of pleasure in hearing it, and be glad they did not risk their spotless reputations by trying to prevent it.”

“I think you must let me go away,” Florence said gently, determined to end the interview.

“Oh yes, you had better go!”—and Mrs. North put the backs of her hands against her flushed cheeks to cool them. “My tea has not poisoned you, and I have not ‘contaminated you,’ as Mrs. Baines would say. If you ever think of me in the midst of your own successful life, believe this, that if I had had all that you have had, I might have been as good as you—who knows? As it is, I have my choice between isolation, with a few breaths of

occasional scorn, or the going farther along a road on which, no doubt, you think I am well started.”

“Please let me go,” Florence said gently, almost carried away by Mrs. North’s beauty when she looked up at her face, but feeling that she ought to stand by the principles that had been a part of her religion. “This has been so painful, I am sure you must want to be alone.”

“Oh yes, it has been painful enough, but it has been instructive also,” Mrs. North said; and then she added gently, “I think I would rather you go now. Yes, please go,” she entreated suddenly, while a sob choked her, and she dabbed her tears with her little lace handkerchief, vainly struggling to laugh again.

“I think it would be better,” Florence said; “but perhaps some day, if I may—I will——” She stopped, for she felt that she ought to consult her husband before she promised to come again.

“Oh yes, I understand,” Mrs. North said. “You will come again if you can; but if you don’t, it will only increase my respect for goodness. I shall think how precious it is, how valuable—it has to be guarded like the Koh-i-noor. Good-bye, Mrs. Hibbert, good-bye.” She rang the bell and bowed almost haughtily, so that Florence felt herself dismissed.

“Good-bye,” the latter said, and slowly turned from the room. Somehow she knew that Mrs. North watched her until the door had half closed, and then threw herself, a little miserable heap, among the silk cushions. But she was halfway down the stairs before she realized it, and the servant was waiting to show her out.

“Oh, I was cold and cruel,” she thought, when the street door had closed behind her, “but I could not help it; there is no sin in the world so awful as that one.”





CHAPTER III.

“**I** CAN understand what you felt,” Walter said, when he heard of Florence’s interview with Mrs. North; “still, I wish we could do something for her.”

“It has made me miserable; but I don’t quite see what we can do. We can’t invite her here—who would come to meet her? As for my going to see her again, I would go willingly if I thought I should do her any good; but I don’t think she would care about seeing me. She imagines I am good and disagreeable.”

“Poor Floggic! Perhaps you might write her a little letter, and then let it drop.”

“I’ll wait till I hear some news about Aunt Anne; then I will write, and try to make my letter rather nice.”

This excuse was soon given her.

Mrs. Burnett, Mr. Fisher’s Whitley friend, called to see Florence one afternoon.

“I thought perhaps you would come for a drive with me,” she said; “it is lovely in the Park to-day—such beautiful sunshine.”

“It would be delightful,” Florence answered, for she always liked Mrs. Burnett; “but I am afraid I must go to tea with a cousin in Kensington Gore. I promised to meet Walter there, and go for a walk afterwards.”

“Let me drive you there, at any rate.”

“That would be very kind,” Florence said, and in five minutes they were on their way.

“Have you seen Mr. Fisher lately?” Mrs. Burnett asked, as they went across the Park.

“I saw him two or three weeks ago.”

“He has grown very grave and silent. I have an idea that he fell in love with a rather handsome girl who used to come and see his mother. I think

she was a friend of yours, Mrs. Hibbert.”

“He doesn’t look like a man to fall in love,” Florence said, trying not to betray Mr. Fisher’s confidence.

“Oh, but you never know what is going on inside people—their feelings are so often at variance with their appearance. My husband said once that he sometimes thought people drew lots for their souls, because they are so seldom matched with their bodies.”

“Perhaps they do, and for their hearts as well. It would account for the strange capacity some people have for loving, though you have only to look at them to see it is hopeless that they should be loved back again.”

“I know, and it is terrible that love should so often depend, as it does, on the chance arrangement of a little flesh and blood—for that is what beauty amounts to.”

“Oh, but we don’t always love beauty.”

“No, not always,” Mrs. Burnett answered; “but the shape of a face, for instance, will sometimes prevent our love going to a very beautiful soul.”

“And a few years and wrinkles will make love ridiculous or impossible,” Florence said, thinking of Aunt Anne. Oddly enough, Mrs. Burnett evidently thought of her too, for she asked—

“Has your aunt been at the cottage at Witley lately?”

“No,” answered Florence; but she did not want to discuss Aunt Anne. “My children so often remember the donkey-cart,” she said; “it was a great joy to them.”

“Oh, I’m very glad. When you go to Witley again, I hope you will use the pony.”

“What has become of the donkey?”

“We were obliged to sell it. It would not go at all at last. We are not going to Witley ourselves till July; so, meanwhile, I hope you will use the pony. Only, dear Mrs. Hibbert, you won’t let him go too fast uphill, for it spoils his breath; and we never let him gallop downhill, for fear of his precious knees.”

“I will be very careful,” Florence said, rather amused.

“I’m afraid we don’t let him go too fast, even on level ground,” Mrs. Burnett added; “for he’s a dear little pony, and we should be so grieved if he

came to any harm.”

“Perhaps he would be safer always standing still,” Florence suggested.

“Oh, but he might catch cold then; but do remember, dear Mrs. Hibbert, when you are going to Witley, that you have only to send a card the night before to the gardener, and he will meet you at the station.”

“Thank you, only I should be rather afraid to use him for fear of accidents.”

“Oh, but you needn’t be; and we are so glad to have him exercised. Perhaps Mrs. Baines would like to drive him? Why, we are at Kensington Gore already. It has been delightful to have you for this little drive. Good-by, dear Mrs. Hibbert.”

Walter was waiting for Florence at her cousin’s. He gave her a sign not to stay too long.

“We so seldom get a walk together,” he said, when they were outside, “that it seemed a pity to waste our time under a roof. Let us get into the Park;” and they crossed over.

“How lovely it is,” Florence said, “with the tender green coming out on the trees. The brown boughs look as if they were sprinkled with it. And what a number of people are out. The Park is beginning to have quite a season-like look.”

“Do you remember how Aunt Anne used to come here and contemplate the Albert Memorial?” Walter asked. “By the way, Fisher was talking of Wimple to-day; he is very sore about him.”

“It was very vexing; I wish we had never seen him, don’t you?”

“What, Wimple? I should think so. I asked Fisher if he knew the fellow’s address; he says the last time he heard of him he was somewhere near Gray’s Inn Road. I wonder if she was with him?”

“Walter!” exclaimed Florence, and she almost clutched his arm, “I believe she is over there. Perhaps that is why she has been running in our thoughts all day.”

A little distance off, on a bench under a tree, sat a spare black figure, with what looked like a cashmere shawl pulled round the slight shoulders. Limp and sad the figure looked: there was an expression of loneliness in every line of it.

“It is very like her,” Walter said. They went a little nearer; they were almost beside her; but they could not see her face, which was turned away from them.

“Oh, it must be she,” Florence said, in a whisper. Perhaps she heard their footsteps, for the black bonnet turned slowly round, and, sure enough, there was the face of Aunt Anne. It looked thin and woebegone.

“Aunt Anne! Dear Aunt Anne! Why have you left us all this time without a sign?” and Florence put her arms round the slender shoulders.

“Aunt Anne! Why, this is real good luck!” Walter exclaimed.

“My dear Florence, my dear Walter,” the old lady said, looking at them with a half-dazed manner; “bless you, dear children; it does me good to see you.”

“You don’t deserve it, you know,” he said tenderly, “for cutting us.”

“It wasn’t my fault, dear Walter,” she answered; “you and Florence and the dear children have been constantly in my thoughts; but we have had many unavoidable anxieties since our marriage; besides, I was not sure that you desired to see me again.”

“Why, of course we did. But you don’t deserve to see us again after leaving us alone all this long time. Where is Wimple?”

“He is at Liphook,” she answered. “He is not strong, and finds the air beneficial to him.”

“It was always beneficial to him,” Walter said dryly, as he sat down beside her.

“He ought not to leave you alone, dear Aunt Anne; you don’t look well,” Florence said.

“I am very frail, my love, but that is all. London air is never detrimental to me, as it is to Alfred. He finds that Liphook invigorates him, and he frequently goes there for two or three days; but, as our means are not adequate to defray the expenses of much travelling, I remain in town. Walter,” she asked, looking up with a touch of her old manner, “did you enjoy your visit to India? I hope you have most pleasant recollections of your journey.”

“I’ll tell you what, Floggie dear,” Walter said, not answering Aunt Anne’s question, “we’ll take her back with us at once.”

“Oh no, my love,” the old lady began; “it is impossible——”

“How can it be impossible?” Florence said gaily; “you are evidently all alone in London; so we’ll run away with you. The children are longing to see you, and I want to show you all the things Walter brought from India. There is a little ivory elephant for you.”

“It was just like him to think of me,” the old lady said, with a flicker of her former brightness; but in a moment her sadness returned, and Walter noticed that there was almost a cowed expression on her face. It went to his heart, and gave him a mighty longing to thrash Wimple.

“You must come at once,” he said, putting on an authoritative manner; “then you can tell us all your news, and we will tell you all ours. There, put your arm in mine, and Florence shall go the other side to see you don’t escape.”

“He is just the same. He makes me think of his dear father,” she said, as she walked between them; “and of that happy day at Brighton, years and years ago now, when I met you both on the pier. Do you remember, my dear ones?”

“Of course we do!” said Walter; “and how victoriously you carried us off then, just as we are carrying you off now.”

“Oh, he’s just the same,” the old lady repeated.

“Here’s a four-wheeler,” he said, when they reached the Bayswater Road. “This is quite an adventure; only,” he added gently, “you don’t look up to much.”

“I shall be better soon,” she said, and dropped into silence again. She looked, almost vacantly, out of the cab window as they went along, and they were afraid to ask her questions, for, instinctively, they felt that things had not gone well with her. Presently she turned to Florence. “Did you say the children were at home, my love?”

“Yes, dear.” The old lady looked out again at the green trees in the Park, and almost furtively at the shops in Oxford Street. Then she turned to Florence.

“My love,” she said, “I must take those dear children a little present. Would you permit the cabman to stop at a sweetmeat-shop? We shall reach one in a moment.”

“Oh, please don’t trouble about them, dear Aunt Anne.”

“I shouldn’t like them to think I had forgotten them, my love,” she pleaded.

“No, and they shan’t think it,” Walter said, patting her hand. “Hi! stop, cabby. Stay in the cab; I’ll go and get something for them.” In a few minutes he reappeared with two boxes of chocolates. “I think that’s the sort of thing,” he said. She looked at them carefully, opened them, and examined the name of the maker.

“You have selected them most judiciously, dear Walter,” she answered.

“That’s all right. Now we’ll go on.” She looked at the boxes once more, and put them down, satisfied.

“It was just like you, to save me the fatigue of getting out of the cab,” she said to her nephew. “I hope the children will like them; they were always most partial to chocolates. You must remind me to reimburse you for them presently, my dear.” And once more she turned to the window.

“Aunt Anne, are you looking for any one?” Walter asked presently.

“No, my love, but I thought the cabman was going through Portman Square, and that he would pass Sir William Rammage’s house.”

“That worthy was at Cannes the other day, I saw.”

“He stays there till next month,” she explained, and then they were all silent until they reached the end of their journey. It was impossible to talk much to Aunt Anne; it seemed to interrupt her thoughts. Silence seemed to have become a habit to her, just as it had to Alfred Wimple. She was a little excited when they stopped at the house, and lingered before the entrance for a moment. Almost sadly she looked up at the balcony on which she had sat with Alfred Wimple, and slowly her left eye winked, as if many things had happened since that happy night of which only she had a knowledge.

They sat her down in an easy-chair, and gave her tea, and made much of her, and asked no questions—only showed their delight at having her with them again. Gradually the tender old face looked happier, the sad lines about the mouth softened, and once there was quite a merry note in her voice, as she laughed and said, “You dear children, you are just the same.” Then Catty and Monty were brought in, and she kissed them, and patronized them, and gave them their chocolates, and duly sent them away again, just as she always used to do.

“I began to work a little hood for Catty,” she said, “but I never finished it; it was not that I was dilatory, but that my eyes are not as good as they were.” She said the last words sadly, and Florence, looking up quickly, wondered if they were dimmed from weeping.

“Poor Aunt Anne,” she said soothingly; “but you are not as lonely as formerly?”

“No, my love, only Alfred has a great deal of work to do. It keeps him constantly at his chambers; and his health not being good, he is obliged to go out of town very often, so that, unwillingly”—and she winked sadly—“he is much away from me.”

“What work is he doing?” Walter asked.

“My dear,” she said, with gentle dignity, “you must forgive me for not answering that question, but I feel that he would not approve of my discussing his private affairs.”

“Have you comfortable rooms in town?” Florence asked, in order to change the subject.

“No, my love, they are not very comfortable, but we are not in a pecuniary position to pay a large rent.” She paused for a moment, and her face became grave and set. Florence, watching her, fancied that there was a little quiver to the upper lip.

“Aunt Anne, dear Aunt Anne, I am certain you are not very happy—tell us what it is. We love you. Do tell us—is anything the matter? Is Mr. Wimple kind to you? Are you poor?”

“Yes, do tell us!” Walter said, and put his arm round her shoulder, and gave it a little affectionate caress.

She hesitated for a moment. “My dears,” she said gratefully, but a little distantly, “Alfred is very kind to me, but he is very much tried by our circumstances. He is not strong, and he is obliged to be separated from me very often. It causes him much regret, although he is too unselfish to show it.”

“But you ought not to be very poor, if Wimple has lots of work,” Walter said.

“I fear it is not very profitable work, dear Walter, and though I have an allowance from Sir William Rammage, it does not defray all our expenses”—and she was silent. Walter and Florence were silent too. They could not help it, for Aunt Anne had grown so grave, and she seemed to lose herself in her thoughts. Only once did she refer to the past.

“Walter, dear,” she asked, “did you find my little gifts useful when you were away?” Aunt Anne always used to inquire after the wear and tear of her presents.

“Indeed I did,” he answered heartily. “I was speaking of them only to-day—wasn’t I, Floggie?” But he concealed the fact that all the scissors were lost, lest she should want to give him some more.

“Aunt Anne,” Florence asked, “isn’t there anything we could do for you? You don’t look very well.”

“The spring is so trying, my love,” the old lady said gently.

“I expect you want a change quite as much as Mr. Wimple.”

“Oh no, my love. I have been a little annoyed by my landlady, who was impertinent to me this morning. It depresses me to have a liberty taken with me.” Perhaps the rent was not paid, Florence thought, but she did not dare to ask. Aunt Anne shivered and pulled her shawl round her again, and explained that she had not put on her warm cloak, as it was so sunny and bright, and the people in the Park might have observed that it was shabby; and while she was talking a really brilliant idea came to Walter.

“Aunt Anne,” he exclaimed, “why should not you and Wimple go to our cottage at Witley for a bit? Oh! but I forgot—he stays with friends at Liphook, doesn’t he?”

“No, my love, he lodges with an old retainer.”

“Oh,” said Walter, shortly, remembering a different account that Wimple had given him the year before, on the memorable morning when they met in the Strand. “Well, I think it would be an excellent thing if you and he went to our cottage. It is standing empty; we don’t want it just yet, and there you could be together.” Aunt Anne looked up with keen interest.

“Yes, why not?” exclaimed Florence. “I wish you would. You would be quite happy there.”

“My love,” said the old lady, eagerly, “it would be delightful. But I’m afraid there are reasons that render it impossible for me to accept your kindness.”

“What reasons?—do speak out,” they said entreatingly, “because, perhaps, we can smooth them away.”

“My dears,” said the old lady, “I must be frank with you. I am indebted to some of the tradespeople there, and I am not in a position to pay their bills.”

“They are all paid,” Walter said joyfully, “so don’t trouble about them; and, moreover, we told them that they were never to give us any credit, so I

am afraid they won't give you any next time, any more than they will us, but you won't mind that."

"And then, my love," the old lady went on, to Florence, "I have no servants."

"I can arrange that," said Florence. "I can telegraph to Jane Mitchell, the postman's sister, who always comes in and does for us when we go alone, from Saturday to Monday, and take no servant. Do go, Aunt Anne; it will do you a world of good. I shall take you back to your lodgings, and get you ready, and send you off to-morrow morning."

Aunt Anne stood up excitedly. "My dears," she said, "I will bless you for sending me. I can't bear this separation. I want to be with him, and he wants me—I know he does; it makes him cross and irritable to be away from me." There was almost a wild look in her eyes. They were astonished at her vehemence. But suddenly she seemed to remember something, and all her excitement subsided. "I cannot go until Sir William Rammage returns to town, or his solicitor does. My quarter's allowance is not due for some weeks, and unfortunately——"

"We'll make that all right, Aunt Anne; leave it to us," said Walter. "Florence will come round in the morning and carry you off, and Wimple will be quite astonished when you send for him."

Aunt Anne looked up almost gaily. "Yes, my love, he will be quite astonished. You have made me happy," she added, with something like a sob; "bless you for all your goodness. Now, my dear ones, you must permit me to depart; I shall have so many arrangements to make this evening. Bless you for all your kindness."

"I am going to take you back in a hansom," said Walter. And in a few minutes they were driving to the address she had given, a florist's shop in a street off the Edgware Road.

"I think her rooms were on the top floor," he told Florence, when he returned, "for she looked up at the windows with a mournful air when we arrived. The house seemed neglected, and the shop had a dead-and-gone air; nothing in it but some decayed plants and a few stray slugs. It is my opinion that she is left in a garret all by herself, poor dear; and that Wimple takes himself off to his chambers, or to his Liphook friends, and has a better time."

"He's a horrid thing!"

“Floggie, do you know that he is our uncle Alfred?” her husband asked wickedly. She looked at him for a moment in bewilderment, then she understood.

“Walter,” she said, “if you ever say that again I will run away from you. I shall go and write a line to Mrs. Burnett’s gardener,” she added, “and tell him to meet us with the pony to-morrow; she said I was to use it, and I think it would be good for Aunt Anne not to be excited by the sight of Steggall’s waggonette. I am certain she is very unhappy.”

“I don’t know how she could expect to be anything else,” he answered. “Poor thing, what the deuce did he marry her for? There is some mystery at the bottom of it.”

Walter had divined rightly. Aunt Anne’s lodging was at the top of the house. When he left her she went slowly up the dark staircase that led to it. On the landing outside her door were her two canvas-covered boxes, one on top of the other. She looked at them for a moment, half hesitatingly, as if she were thinking of the journey they would take to-morrow, and of the things she must not forget to put into them. She turned the handle of the front-room door and walked in. Alfred Wimple was sitting by a cinder fire, over which he was trying to make some water boil. He looked up as she entered, but did not rise from the broken cane-bottomed chair.

“Why did you go out, Anne?” he asked severely, without giving her any sort of greeting.

“My dear one,” she said excitedly, going forward, “I did not dream of your being here; it is, indeed, a joyful surprise.” She put her hands on his shoulder and leaned down. He turned his head away with a quick movement, and her kiss brushed his cheek near the ear; but she pretended not to see it. “When did you come, my darling?”

“Two hours ago,” he said solemnly; “and I wanted some tea.”

“I am so sorry, but I did not dream of your coming. Are you better, my dear one?” She tried to pull the fire together with the little poker.

“I am a little better,” he answered. “You will never make the water boil over that fire.”

“Yes, I will”—and she looked into the coal-scuttle. “Have you come up to town for good, dear Alfred?” The scuttle was empty, but she found some little bits of wood and tried to make a blaze.

“I don’t know; I am going back to my chambers presently to do a night’s work.”

“And to-morrow?” she asked anxiously.

“Perhaps you will see me to-morrow,” he answered. “Can you give me something to eat? I wish you would make a decent fire.”

“I will, my dear one. If you will rest here patiently for a few minutes, I will go downstairs and ask the landlady to let me have some coals.”

“I have no money,” he said sullenly; “understand that.”

“But I have, my darling,” she answered joyfully; “and I am quite sure you require nourishment. Will you let me go out and buy you a chop?”

“Give me some tea. I can get dinner on my way back.”

“Won’t you stay with me this evening, Alfred? I have some news for you, and I have been so lonely.” She looked round the shabby room, as if to prove to him how impossible it was to find comfort in it.

“No, I can’t stay,” he answered shortly. “How much money have you got?”

“I have a sovereign. Walter slipped it into my glove just now. I have been to see them both, Alfred.”

“What did they say about me?”

“They spoke of you most kindly, my darling,” she answered, and winked very timidly.

“Why couldn’t he give you more? A sovereign isn’t much,” Wimple said discontentedly. “I see Ramage is not coming back from Cannes just yet,” he added.

“My dear,” she said gravely, “you are fatigued with your journey, and hungry, and I know you are anxious. If you will excuse me a moment, I will make some little preparations for your comfort.” And, with the dignity that always sat so quaintly upon her, she rose from the rug and left the room. She returned in a few minutes, followed by the landlady with a scuttleful of coals. Then she made some tea, and cut some bread and butter, and set it before Alfred Wimple, all the time putting off, nervously, the telling of her great bit of news. She looked at him while he ate and drank, and her face showed that she was not looking at the actual man before her, but at some one she had endowed with a dozen beauties of heart and soul: she wished he

could realize that he possessed them; they might have given him patience and made him happier.

“Did you enjoy the country?” she asked gently.

“Yes”—he coughed uneasily—“but I was not well. I shall go there again soon.”

“What do you do all day?” she asked. “Have you any society?”

He was silent for a moment, as if struggling with the destitution of speech that always beset him. “I can’t give you an account of all my days, Anne,” he said, and turned to the fire.

“I did not ask it, Alfred; you know that I never intrude upon your privacy. I had some news,” she went on, with a pathetic note in her voice, “and hoped it would be pleasing to you.”

“What is it?” The expression of his face had not changed for a moment from the one of sulky displeasure it had worn when she entered, and her manner betrayed a certain nervousness, as if she felt that he was with her against his will, and only by gentle propitiation could she keep him at all.

“Walter and Florence have offered to lend us their cottage at Witley. We can go to it to-morrow—if it is convenient to you, dear Alfred,” she added meekly.

“I shall not go there,” he said sullenly; and for a moment he looked her full in the face with his dull eyes.

“I thought the air of that locality was always beneficial to you,” she said, in the same tone in which she had last spoken.

“Thank you, I don’t wish to go to that ‘locality,’ and be laughed at.” He half mocked her as he spoke.

“Why should you be laughed at?” she asked, with almost a cry of pain in her voice, for she knew what the answer would be, beforehand; but the words were forced from her, she could not help them. He coughed and looked at her again.

“People generally laugh at a young man who marries an old woman, Anne.” She got up and went to the end of the room, and came back again, and put her hand upon his shoulder.

“No one is there to laugh,” she said. “There is no one there to know. We need not keep any society.” She did not see the absurdity of the last remark, and made it quite gravely. “There are only a few people in the

neighbourhood at all, and those of an inferior class. It does not matter what they think.”

“It matters to me what every one thinks.”

“We cannot remain here much longer,” she went on. “The landlady was most impertinent to-day. I think Florence and Walter would help to pay her if we went to the cottage to-morrow. They said they would arrange everything.”

“It is a long way from Liphook,” he said, almost to himself; “if any one saw us, they wouldn’t suspect that we were married. They would think you were my aunt, perhaps.”

“They may think what they please, Alfred,” she answered, “if you are only with me.” Then her voice changed. “My dear one, I cannot bear life unless you are gentle to me,” she pleaded; “and I cannot bear it here alone any longer, always away from you, day after day. I am your wife, Alfred, and, if I am an old woman, I love you with all the years I remember, and all the love that has been stored up in me since my youth. I want to be near you, to take care of you, to see that you have comforts. You can say that I am your aunt, if it pleases you. I never feel that I am your wife, only that it is my great privilege to be near you and to serve you.” She stopped, as if unable to go on, and he was silent a moment or two before he answered.

“It might be a good idea; as you say, there is no one about there to know.”

“Are you ashamed of me?”

“I don’t want to look ridiculous.” Then a flash came into her eyes, and the old spirit asserted itself.

“Alfred,” she said, “if you do not love me, I think at least you should learn to treat me with respect. If I am so distasteful to you we had better separate. I cannot go on bearing all that I have borne patiently for months. Let me go to Florence and Walter; they will be kind to me, and I will never be a burden upon you. The allowance that Sir William Rammage gives me would keep me in comfort alone, and it struck me the other day that, when he dies, perhaps he will leave me something.”

He looked at her with sudden alarm. The cowed look seemed to have gone from her face to his, and as she saw it she gathered strength, and went on, “I cannot be insulted, Alfred; I cannot and will not.”

“Don’t be foolish, Anne; I am irritable sometimes, and I am not strong
_____”

“That is why I have borne so much from you.”

“I will go to Witley with you,” he said, ignoring her remark altogether;
“that is, if you like, and can raise the money to go. I have none.”





CHAPTER IV.

“**F**ISHER was quite pleased when I asked him if we could get off to Monte Carlo at Whitsuntide for a fortnight,” Walter told Florence a few weeks later.

“Wasn’t he shocked at your gambling propensities?”

“Not a bit. He looked as if he would like to go too; said, in rather a pompous manner”—and Walter imitated his editor exactly—“‘Certainly, certainly; I think, Hibbert, your wife deserves a little treat of some sort after your long absence in the winter, and I am very glad if it is in my power to help you to give it to her.’ He looked like the King of the Cannibal Islands making an Act of Parliament all by himself.”

“You are a ridiculous dear.”

“Thank you, Floggie. Fisher’s a nice old chap, and I am very fond of him.”

“Do you know,” she said, in rather a shocked tone, “Ethel Dunlop said one day that she believed he looked upon himself as a sort of minor providence?”

“Well, he does go about minor-providencing a good deal—which reminds me that he said he was coming, in a day or two, to ask you to take him out to buy a wedding-present for Ethel.”

“He’ll buy her a Crown Derby tea-set, or a sugar-basin with a very large pair of tongs, see if he doesn’t. Ethel said he ought to have married Aunt Anne.”

“He would have been a thousand times better than Wimple. I wonder how those gay young people are getting on at Witley, and whether they want anything more before we start.”

“I think they must be all right at present,” Florence said. “We sent them a good big box of stores when they went to the cottage; and I know you gave her a little money, dear Walter, and we paid up her debts, so that she cannot

be worried. Then, of course, she has her hundred a year from Sir William to fall back upon, and Mr. Wimple probably has something.”

“Oh yes, I suppose they are all right; besides, I don’t feel too generous towards that beggar Wimple.”

“I should think not,” Florence said virtuously. “Do you know, Walter, once or twice it has struck me that perhaps he won’t live; he doesn’t look strong, and he is always complaining. Aunt Anne said that he wanted constant change of air.”

“Oh yes, I remember she said Liphook was ‘beneficial’ to him.”

“If he died she would have her allowance, and be free.”

“No such luck,” said Walter. “Besides, if he died, there would be nowhere for him to go to—he’d have to come back again. Heaven wouldn’t have him, and, after all, he isn’t quite bad enough for the devil to use his coals upon.”

“Walter, you mustn’t talk in that way—you mustn’t, indeed;” and she put her hand over his mouth.

“All right,” he said, struggling to get free; “I won’t do it again.”

Mr. Fisher duly arrived the next afternoon. He was a little breathless, though he carefully tried to conceal it, and wore the air of deference, but decision, which he always thought the right one to assume to women. With much gravity he and Florence set out to buy the wedding-present. It resolved itself into a silver butter-dish with a silver cow on the lid, though Florence tried hard to make him choose a set of apostle spoons.

“A butter-dish will be much more useful, my dear lady.”

“It will be very useful,” Florence echoed, though she feared that Ethel would be a little disappointed when she saw the cow.

“And now,” said Mr. Fisher, in a benevolent voice, as they left the silversmith’s in Bond Street, “we are close to Gunters—if you would do me the honour to eat an ice?”

“I will do you the honour with great pleasure.” And she thought to herself, “His manner really is like Aunt Anne’s this afternoon. If she had only married him instead of that horrid Mr. Wimple, we would have called him uncle with pleasure.”

She sat eating her very large strawberry ice, while he tasted his at intervals, as if he were rather afraid of it. “Did the white cockatoo die?” she

asked.

He almost started, he was so surprised at the question. "The white cockatoo?"

"You spoke of it last year—that night when Mrs. Baines dined with us."

"I remember now," he said solemnly. "Yes; it died, Mrs. Hibbert. For five years it was perhaps my most intimate friend, and the companion of my solitude."

"Why did it die?"

"It pulled a door-mat to pieces, and we fear it swallowed some of the fibre. My housekeeper, who is a severe woman, beat it with her gloves, and it did not recover." He spoke as if he were recounting a tragedy, and became so silent that Florence felt she had ventured on an unlucky topic. But it was always rather difficult to make conversation with Mr. Fisher when she was alone with him; there were so few things he cared to discuss with a woman. Politics he considered beyond her, on literary matters he thought she could form no opinion, and society was a frivolity, it was as well not to encourage her to consider too much. Suddenly a happy thought struck her.

"I am so happy about our holiday," she said; "it is a long time since Walter and I had a real one together."

"I am delighted that it has been arranged. I feel sure that Walter will enjoy it with so charming a companion," he answered, with an effort at gallantry that touched her.

"Are you going away this Whitsuntide?" she asked.

"No. I seldom go away from London, or my work."

"I wish you were going to have a holiday, with some one you liked," she said.

"My dear lady," and he gave a little sigh as he spoke, "I fear the only society I am fitted for is my own."

"Oh no, you are much too modest"—and she tried to laugh. "Some day I hope to buy you a butter-dish. I shall like going to get it so much, dear Mr. Fisher."

"I think not," he answered almost sadly.

"Ethel says you have been very kind to her about George," Florence said in a low voice, for she was almost afraid to refer to it; "but you are kind to

everybody.”

Mr. Fisher turned and looked at her with a grateful expression in his clear blue eyes; but she knew that he did not want to make any other answer. Gradually he put on his editorial manner, as if to ward off more intimate conversation, and when he left her at the door of her house, for he refused to come in, she felt, while she looked after him, as if she had been present at the ending of the last little bit of romance in his life.

The Hibberts were in high spirits when they started for their holiday.

“Two days in Paris,” he said, as they drove to the hotel; “and then we’ll crawl down France towards the south, and I will introduce you to the Mediterranean Sea. It’s a pity we can only eat one dinner a night, considering the number of good ones there are to be had here. To be sure, if we manage carefully, we can do a little supper on the Boulevard afterwards; still, that hardly counts. But I don’t think we can stay any longer, dear Floggie, even to turn you into a Parisian.”

Forty-eight hours later saw them in the express for Marseille, where they stayed a night, in order to get the coast scenery by daylight, as they went on to Monte Carlo.

“It’s a wonderful city,” Walter said, with a sigh, as they strolled under the trees on the Prado. “The Jew, and the Turk, and the Infidel, and every other manner of man, has passed through it in his turn. Doesn’t it suggest all sorts of pictures to you, darling?”

“Yes,” she answered, a little absently; “only I was thinking of Monty and Catty.”

“We ought to wait a day, and go to see Monte Christo’s prison.”

“Yes”—but she was not very eager. Her thoughts were with her children. Walter was able to enjoy things, and to garnish them with the right memories. “I wonder if we shall find letters from home when we get to Monte Carlo?” she said.

“I hope so,” he answered gently, but he said no more about the associations of Marseille.

As they were leaving the big hotel on the Cannebière, the next morning, a lady entered it. She had evidently just arrived—her luggage was being carried in.

“I shall be here three nights,” they heard her say to the manageress. “I leave for England on Thursday morning.”

At the sound of her voice Florence turned round, but she had gone towards the staircase. The Hibberts had to catch their train, and could not wait.

“It was Mrs. North, Walter,” Florence said, as they drove to the station; “I wish I could have spoken to her. She looked so lonely entering that big hotel.”

“But there was no time,” he answered; “if we lost our train we should virtually lose a day.”

“I wonder why she has come here?”

“The ways of women are inscrutable.”

“I meant to have written and told her about Aunt Anne, but I had so much to do before we left London that I really forgot it.”

“You might send her a line from Monte Carlo; you heard her say that she was to be at Marseille three days: and then, perhaps, it would be better to leave her alone.”

“I should like to write to her just once, for I am afraid I was not very kind that day; but she took me by surprise.”

“Very well, then; write to her from Monte Carlo. It will give her an idea that we are not such terrible patterns of virtue ourselves, and perhaps she’ll find that a consolation; but I don’t see what more we can do for her. It is very difficult to help a woman in her position. She has put out to sea in an open boat, and, even if she doesn’t get wrecked, every craft she runs against is sure to hurt her.”

The letter was duly written and sent to the hotel at Marseille. It found Mrs. North sitting alone, in her big room on the first floor. She was beside the open window, watching the great lighted *cafés* and the happy people gathered in little groups round the tables on the pavement.

“Oh, what a pity it is,” she said to herself, “that we cannot remember. I always feel as if we had lived since the beginning and shall go on till the end—if end there is; but if one only had a memory to match, how wonderful it would be. If I could but see this place just once as it was hundreds of years ago, with the Greek people walking about and the city rising up about them.

Now it looks so thoroughly awake, with its great new buildings and horrible improvements; but if it ever sleeps, how wonderful its dreams must be. If one could get inside them and see it all as it once was." . . . She turned her face longingly towards the port, at the far end of the Cannebière. "I am so hungry to see everything, and to know everything," she said to herself—"so hungry for all the things I have never had.—I wonder if I shall die soon—I can't go on living like this, longing and waiting and hoping and grasping nothing.—I wish I could see the water. If I had courage I would drive down and look at it—or walk past those people sitting out on the pavement, and go down to the sea. There might be a ship sailing by towards England, and I should know how his ship will look if it, too, ever sails by. Or a ship going on towards India, and I could look after it, knowing that every moment it was getting nearer and nearer to him. To-morrow I will find out precisely where the P. & O.'s sail from for Bombay; then I shall be able to guess what it all looked like when he set his foot on board, a year ago. Oh, thank God, I may think of him a little—that I am free—that it is not wickedness to think of him—or to love him," she added, with almost a sob.

She got up and looked round the room. It was nearly dark. She could see the outline of the furniture and of her own figure dimly reflected in the long glass of the wardrobe.

"The place is so full of shadows they frighten me; but I am frightened at everything." She flung herself down again on the couch at the foot of the bed. "I wonder if the people who have always done right ever for a moment imagine that the people who have done wrong can suffer as much—oh, a thousand times more than themselves. They seem to imagine that sin is a sort of armour against suffering, and it does not matter how many blows are administered to those who have gone off the beaten track." She pillowed her head on her arms and watched the moving reflection of the light from the street. In imagination she stared through it at the long years before her, wondering, almost in terror, how they would be filled. "I am so young, and I may live so long." There was a knock at her bedroom door.

"Come in," she cried, thankful for any interruption.

"A letter for Madame."

"For me!" She seized it with feverish haste and looked at the direction by the window while the candles were being lighted. "I declare," she said, when the door was closed behind the *garçon*, "it is from the immaculate Mrs. Hibbert. May the saints have guarded her from contamination while

she wrote it to me.” Her happy spirits flashed back, and the weary woman of five minutes ago was almost a light-hearted girl again.

“It is rather a nice letter,” she said, and propped up the wicks of the flickering candles with the corner of the envelope. “I believe she wrote merely out of kindness; it proves that there is some generosity in even the most virtuous heart. I’ll write to Mrs. Wimple——” She stopped and reflected for a minute or two. “Poor old lady, she was very good to me; she was like a mother—no woman has called me ‘my love’ since she went away.” She walked up and down the room for a moment, and looked out again at the wide street and the flashing lights. Suddenly she turned, seized her blotting-book, and knelt down by the table in the impulsive manner that characterized her. “I’ll write at once,” she said. “Of course it will shock her sweet old nerves; but I know she’ll be glad to hear from me, though she won’t own it even to herself.”

“DEAREST OLD LADY—

“I have been longing to know what had become of you. I only heard a little while ago that you were a happy bride, and I have just succeeded in getting your address. A thousand congratulations. I hope you are very much in love, and that Mr. Wimple is truly charming. He is, indeed, a most fortunate man and to be greatly envied by the rest of his sex.

“I fear you will be shocked to hear that Mr. North has divorced me. I never loved him, you know. I told you that when you were so angry with me that day in Cornwall Gardens, and it was not my fault that I married him. I have been very miserable, and I don’t suppose I shall ever be happy again. But the world is a large place, and I am going to wander about; I have always longed to see the whole of it: now I shall go to the east and west, and the north and the south, like a Wandering Jewess. But before I start on these expeditions I shall be in England for a few weeks and should like to see you. Would you see me? But I don’t suppose you would come near me or let me go near you, though I should like to put my head down on your shoulder and feel your kind old arms round me again.

“I am afraid you have eaten up all your wedding-cake, dear old lady, and even if you have any left you would, no doubt, think it far too good for the likes of me. I wonder if you would accept a very little wedding-present from me, for I should so much like to

send you one? My love to you, and many felicitations to both you and Mr. Wimple.

“Yours always,
“E. NORTH.”

When it was finished, her excitement gave way; her spirits ran down; she went, wearily, back to the sofa and pillowed her head on her arms once more. “I wonder what the next incident will be, and how many days and nights it is off.” She shut her eyes, and in thought hurried down the street to the old port. She saw the masts of ships, and the moving water, and the passing lights in the distance. “O God!” she said to herself, “how terrible it is to think that the land is empty for me from end to end. Though I walked over every mile of it, I should never see his face or hear his voice, and there is not a soul in the whole of it that cares one single jot for me. And the great sea is there, and the ships going on and on, and not a soul on board one of them who knows that I live or cares if I die. It frightens me and stuns me, and frightens me again. I am so hungry, and longing, and eager for the utter impossibilities. Oh, my darling, if you had only trusted me; if you could have believed that the sin was outside me and not in my heart; if you had written me just one little line to tell me that some day, even though it were years and years ahead, you would come to me and take me into your life for ever, I would have been so good—I would have made myself the best woman on earth, so that I might give you the best love that ever Heaven sent into a human heart.” There was another knock at the door, and something like a cry escaped from her lips.

“Come in”—and again the *garçon* entered with a letter. This time it was a thick packet.

“This is also for Madame,” he said; “it is from England.” She waited until the door had closed behind him before she opened it.

The envelope contained a dozen enclosures. They looked like bills and circulars sent on from her London address. Among them was a telegram.

“I suppose it is nothing,” she said, as, with trembling hands, she opened it. It was from Bombay, and contained five words—

“Sailing next month in *Deccan*.”

She fell down on her knees by the table and, putting her face on her hands, burst into passionate weeping.

“O dear God,” she prayed, “forgive me and be merciful to me. I have not meant to do wrong, I have only longed to be happy—let me be so. I will try to do right all my life long, and to make him do right, too—only let him love me still. I have never been happy, and I have suffered so. O dear God, is it not enough? Forgive me and let me be happy.”



CHAPTER V.

IT was chilly as only an English spring knows how to be. The fir-woods were deserted—the pathways through them wet and slippery. But overhead there was fitful sunshine and patches of blue sky, though the Surrey hills were misty and the fields were sodden with many rains. The leaves were beginning to unfold, fresh and green; the primroses were thick in the hedges; and here and there the little white stitchwort showed itself, tearful and triumphant. The thrushes and blackbirds were making ready for summer, though as yet there was not a sign of it.

Alfred Wimple and Aunt Anne had been more than a month at the cottage. The latter potted about the garden, looking at every up-coming plant with absent recognition; but that was all. She was too sad to care any more for the delights of the country. She had grown feeble, too, and could not walk very far—even the garden tired her. Mrs. Burnett's governess-cart had been her great comfort. She had no fear of doing the pampered pony, as she called it, any harm, and had driven herself for hours along the lonely roads between the fir-trees, and the hedges of awakening gorse and heather. The straggling population for three miles round knew her well—the lonely old lady, with the black bonnet and the long black cloak fastened with the steel clasp. Alfred Wimple never went with her; he had refused from the very first. But he had a way of disappearing by himself for long hours together. Where he went she could never divine; and to ask him questions, she told herself once, was like trying to look at the bottom of the sea by pushing away the water with her two hands. Still it was a mystery she was determined to unravel sooner or later: she felt that the solution lay at Liphook, and dreaded to think what it might be. Into her heart, against her will, lately there had sometimes crept a suspicion that was shame and agony; but she would not own, even in the lowest, most secret whisper, that it was possible. She never went to Liphook, though it would have been easy enough to drive there; she never dared: something seemed to hold her back from that which she felt to be only a few miles away, on the other side of Hindhead. She would not try to put into any shape at all what her dread was: least of all would her pride let her for a single moment imagine that it was the one thing of which the humiliation would kill her. But, silently, she

watched, and hour after hour she sat wondering what was in the heart of that strange, inscrutable young man, who spoke so few words, and seemed to be always watching and waiting for the accomplishment of some mysterious plan he revolved again and again in his mind, but to which he had no intention of giving a clue.

He could hire no more waggonettes at Steggall's without paying for them, or without her knowledge; but once or twice she had seen him going along a by-path towards the station, so that he would arrive there just about the time there was a train to Liphook. She remembered that on the first occasion, he had pulled a shilling out of his pocket an hour or two before he started and looked at it, as if wondering whether it would be enough for a return ticket.

"Alfred," she asked one day, "will you take me to see your country quarters, my love? I should like to visit the place which has been of so much benefit to you?"

"No," he answered, looking at her steadfastly, as he always did; "I don't wish you to go there."

"May I ask your reason?"

"My wish should be sufficient."

"It is," she said gently; "for I know, dear Alfred, that you always have a reason for what you wish, and you would not prevent me from seeing a place for which you have such a preference if you had not a good one."

He was soothed by her conciliatory manner.

"I owe some money there," he said, "and if you went they might expect you to pay it"—an answer which satisfied her for a time on account of its obvious probability. But still his disappearances tormented her, and his silence stifled all questions she longed to ask.

She liked being at the cottage; she liked being the virtual mistress of a certain number of rooms and of a servant of her own; and, on the whole, the first month had gone smoothly. Florence and Walter had been generous, and made many provisions for their comfort, and she had been separated less from Alfred than when she was in town. And here, too, she was better able to keep some account of his movements. Moreover, if he disappeared for hours together now, it had been for days together then. He always went off silently, without warning or hint, and as silently reappeared.

“Have you been for a walk, my love?” she asked him one evening. He turned and looked at her: there was no anger in his dull eyes, but he made her quail inwardly, though outwardly she showed no sign.

“Yes”—and she knew, perfectly, he would tell her no more. Still, hopelessly, she persevered.

“In what direction did you bend your steps, dear Alfred?”

“I dislike being asked to give an account of my movements, Anne,” he said, and locked his lips in the manner that was so peculiar to him.

“I quite understand, my love,” she answered gently; “it is also extremely repugnant to me to be questioned. I merely asked, hoping that you felt invigorated by your walk.” He looked at her again, and said nothing.

It was nine o’clock. Jane Mitchell, the postman’s sister, who acted as their daily servant, came in to say she was going home till the morning. Aunt Anne followed her, as she always did, to see that the outer door was made fast. She looked out at the night for a moment, with a haunting feeling of mistrust—of what, she did not know—and listened to the silence. Not a sound—not even a footstep passing along the road. The fir-trees stood up, dark and straight, like voiceless sentinels. She looked at the stars and thought how far they were away. They gave her a sense of helplessness. She was almost afraid of the soft patter of her own feet as she went back to the drawing-room. She winked nervously, and looked quickly and suspiciously round, then sat down uneasily before the fire and watched Alfred Wimple. She knew that again and again his eyes were fixed upon her, though his lips said no word.

“Are you sleepy, my love?” she asked.

“I am very tired, Anne; good-night”—and, taking up a candlestick, he went slowly upstairs while she stayed below, looking at the deadening fire, knowing that one night, suddenly, everything would be changed; but how and when it would be changed she could not guess. She did not dare look forward a single day or hour. She extinguished the lamp and shut the drawing-room door and locked it, remembering for a moment the unknown people, in the bygone years, who had gone out of the room never to enter it more.

Gradually the money in their possession was coming to a sure and certain end. She knew it, and her recklessness and extravagance vanished. She guarded every penny as if it were her heart’s blood, though she still did her spending with an air of willingness that concealed her reluctance. Hour

after hour she racked her brains to think of some new source of help; but no suggestion presented itself, and he and she together faced, in silence, the bankruptcy that was overtaking them. He went less often towards the station now; he stayed discontentedly in the drawing-room, sitting uneasily by the fire on one of the easy-chairs with the peacock screen beside it. Sometimes, after he had brooded for a while in silence, he would get up and write a letter, but he always carefully gave it himself to the postman, and no letters at all ever arrived for him to Aunt Anne's knowledge.

"Alfred," she asked one day, "what has become of your work in town?—the work you used to go to your chambers to do?"

"I am resting now, and do not wish to be questioned about it. I require rest," he said: and that was all.

Then a time came when he took to walking in the garden, and she knew that while he did so he kept a watch on the house, and especially on the window of the room in which she was sitting. When he thought she did not see him he disappeared down the dip behind and along the pathway between the fir-trees and larches towards the short cut to Hindhead. She remembered that the way to Hindhead was also the way to Liphook. It was, of course, too far to walk there, but perhaps there were some means of obviating that necessity. She said nothing, but she waited. It seemed to her as if Alfred Wimple waited too. For what? Was it for her to die? she sometimes asked herself, though she reproached herself for her suspicions. Then all her tenderness would come back, and she hovered round him lovingly, or stole away to commune with herself.

"I am sure he loves me," she would think, as she sat vainly trying to comfort herself—"or why should he have married me? His love must be the meaning of mine for him, and the forgiveness of the past, after all the long years of waiting. It is different from what it was then; he is changed, and I am changed too. I am old with waiting, and he does not yet understand the reason of his own youth. I wonder which it is," she said one day, almost in a dream, as she rocked to and fro over the fire—"is he disguised with youth of which he does not know the meaning; or am I disguised with years, so that he does not know that under them my youth is hidden?"

Closer and closer came the ills of poverty. The tradespeople trusted them to some extent, in spite of the warning they had received from the Hibberts, but at last they refused to do so any longer. The stores that Florence had sent in, too—Aunt Anne had said, "you must allow me to remain in your debt for them, my dear"—had gradually run out. Dinner became more and more of a

difficulty, and at the scanty meal it was Alfred Wimple who ate, and Aunt Anne who looked on, pretending she liked the food she hardly dared to taste. He knew that she was starving herself for his sake, but he said nothing. It gave him a dull gratification to see her doing it. In his heart there was a resentment that death had not sooner achieved for his benefit that which from the first he had meant it to accomplish. Not that it was within his scheme to let Aunt Anne die yet; but when he married her he had not realized the awful shrinking that would daily grow upon him—the physical shrinking that youth sometimes feels from old age. In his nature there was no idealism, no sentiment. He could not give her the reverence that even mere age usually provokes, or the affection, as of a son, that some young men in his position might possibly have bestowed. He saw everything concerning her years with ghastly plainness—the little lines and the deep wrinkles on her face, the tremulous eyelids, the scanty hair brushed forward from places the cap covered. Even the soft folds of muslin round her withered throat made him shiver. He thought once, in one mad moment, how swiftly he could strangle the lingering life out of her. Her hands with the loose dry skin and the bloodless fingers and wrists that were always cold, as if the fire in them were going out, sent a thrill of horror through his frame when she touched him. The mere sound of her footstep, the touch of her black dress as she passed him by, insensibly made him draw back. He had played a daring game, but he had an awful punishment. He lived a brooding secret life, full of dread and alertness lest shame should overtake him, and his heart was not less miserable because it was incapable of generosity or goodness.

At last it became a matter of shillings.

“You had better go to London, Anne,” he said, “and borrow some money.”

“Of whom am I to borrow it?” she asked. “Florence and Walter are at Monte Carlo.”

“Walter is very selfish,” he answered; “I nursed him through an illness, years ago, at the risk of my own life.”

“I know how tender your heart is, dear Alfred.”

“I believe he resents my having borrowed some money from him once or twice. He forgets that if he were not in a much better position than I am he couldn't have lent it.”

“Of course he could not, my love,” she said, agreeing with him, as a matter not merely of course but of loyalty and affection.

He gave one of his little gulps. “We can’t go on staying here, unless we have enough to eat; I cannot, at any rate. You must get some money. You had better go to London.” He looked at her fixedly, and she knew that he wanted to get rid of her for a space.

“Go to London, my love?” she echoed, almost humbly.

“Yes, to get money.”

“Alfred,” she asked, “how am I to get money? We disposed of everything that was available before we came here.”

“You must borrow it; perhaps you can go and persuade my uncle to let you have some.”

“If you would let me tell him that I am your wife,” she pleaded.

“I forbid you telling him,” he said shortly. “But you might ask him to advance your quarter’s allowance.”

“I might write and request him to do that, without going to town.”

“No. It is easy to refuse in a letter, and he must not refuse.”

“But if he will not listen to me, Alfred?” she asked, watching him curiously.

“Tell him that Sir William Rammage is your cousin, and that he has no right to refuse.”

“But if he does?” she persisted.

“Then you must get it elsewhere. There are those people you stayed with in Cornwall Gardens.”

She looked up quickly. “I cannot go to Mrs. North,” she said firmly. “There are some things due to my own self-respect: I cannot forget them even for you.”

“You can do as you like,” he answered. “If you cannot get money, I must go away.”

“Go away!” she echoed, with alarm; he saw his advantage and followed it up.

“I shall not stay here to be starved,” he repeated.

“I should starve, too,” she said sadly; “are you altogether oblivious of that fact, Alfred?”

“If you choose to do so it is your own business, and no reason why I should. I have friends who will receive me, and I shall go to them.”

“Would they not extend a helping hand to us both?”

“No,” he said doggedly.

“They cannot love you as I do,” she pleaded.

“I cannot help that. I shall go to them.”

“I give you all I have.”

“I want more—more than you give me now,” he answered; “and if you don’t give it me, I shall not stay here. You had better go to London to-morrow, and look for some money. My uncle will let you have some if you are persistent.”

“I think I will go to-day,” she said, with an odd tone in her voice. “I should be in time for the twelve o’clock train.”

“You will go to-morrow,” he replied decisively.

“Very well, my love”—and she winked quickly to herself. “I will go to-morrow.”

“Unless you bring back some money, I shall not stay here any longer. You must clearly understand that, Anne. I am tired of this business,” he said, in his hard, determined voice.

“It’s not worse for you than it is for me, Alfred. I can bear it with you; cannot you bear it with me?”

He looked at her—at her black dress, her white handkerchief, at the poverty-stricken age of which she seemed to be the symbol; and he shuddered perceptibly as he turned away and answered, “No, I cannot, and I want to go.”

“Alfred!” she said, with a cry of pain, and going to his side she put her hand on his arm; but he shook her off, and went a step farther away.

“Stay there,” he said sternly.

“Why do you recoil from me?” she asked; “am I so distasteful to you?”

But he only shuddered again, and looked at her with almost terror in his eyes, as though he dumbly loathed her.

“Have I forfeited your love, Alfred?” she asked humbly.

“I dislike being touched.”

“You will break my heart,” she cried, with a dry sob in her throat. “My dear one, I have given you all—all I possess; I have braved everything for you. Has all your love for me gone?”

“I don’t want to talk sentiment,” he said, drawing back still a little farther from her, as though he shrank from being within her reach.

“Do you remember that night when we walked along the road by the fir-trees, and you told me you would always love me and take care of me? What have I done to make you change? I never cease thinking of you, day or night, but it is months since you gave me a loving word. What have I done to change you so?”

He looked down at her; for a moment there was an expression of hatred on his face.

“You are old—and I am young.”

“My heart is young,” she said piteously. Still he was merciless.

“It is your face I see,” he said, “not your heart.”

She let her hands fall by her side. “I cannot bear it any more,” she said quickly; “perhaps we had better separate; these constant scenes will kill me. You must permit me to retire; I cannot bear any more”—and she walked slowly away into the little drawing-room, and shut the door. She went up to the glass, and looked at her own face, long and sadly; she put her wrists together, and looked at them hopelessly.

“Oh, I am old!” she cried, with a shiver; “I am old!”—and she sat down on the gaunt chair by the fireplace, still and silent, till cold and misery numbed her, and all things were alike.

Presently, she heard his footsteps; he had left the dining-room, and seemed to be going towards the front door; she raised her head and listened. He hesitated, turned back, and entered the drawing-room. He stood for a moment on the threshold and looked round the little room—at the hard, old-fashioned sofa, at the corner cupboard with the pot-pourri on it, the jingling piano, the chair on which she sat. He remembered the day of his interview with Florence, and afterwards with Aunt Anne, and he looked at the latter now half doubtfully. She did not move an inch as he entered, or raise her eyes.

“Anne!” There was no answer. She turned a little more directly away from him. “Anne,” he said, “we had better make it up. It is no good quarrelling.”

“You were very cruel to me, Alfred,” she said, with gentle indignation; “you forgot everything that was due to me. You frequently do.”

“I cannot always be remembering what is due to you, Anne. It irritates me.”

“But you cut me to the quick. I sometimes wonder whether you have any affection at all for me.”

“Don’t be foolish,” he said, with an effort that was rather obvious; “and don’t let us quarrel. I dislike poverty—it makes me cross.”

“I can understand that,” she said, “but I cannot understand your being cruel to me.”

“I didn’t mean to be cruel,” he answered; “we had better forget it.” She stood up and faced him, timidly, but with a slight flush in her face.

“You said I was old; you taunted me with it; you often taunt me,” she said indignantly.

“Well, but I knew it before we were married.”

“Yes, you knew it before we were married,” she repeated.

“Then I couldn’t have minded it so much, could I?” he said, with a softer tone in his voice, though it grated still.

“No, my love”—and she tried to smile, but it was a sad attempt.

“Well, is it all right?” he asked. “We won’t quarrel any more.”

“Yes, my love, it is all right,” she said lovingly, and, half doubtfully, she put up her face to his.

Involuntarily he drew back again, but he recovered in an instant and forced himself to stoop and kiss her forehead.

“There,” he said, “it’s all right. To-morrow you shall go to London, and we will be more sensible in future.” He touched her hand, and went out into the garden. When she had watched him out of sight, she sat down once more on the chair by the fire.

“I am old!” she cried; “I am old, I am old”—and, with a quick movement, as if she felt a horror of herself, she hid her thin hands out of

sight. "I cannot bear it—I am old."





CHAPTER VI.

BEFORE nine the next morning, Aunt Anne was ready to set out on her journey to London. Mrs. Burnett's governess-cart was at the gate with Lucas, the gardener, to drive her to the station. Alfred Wimple looked on at her preparations to go with an anxiety that was almost eagerness; and, stealthily, the old lady watched his every movement.

"Jane can prepare the dinner after my return. I shall bring back some little dainty with me, hoping that it may tempt you, my love."

"I am very tired of the food we have had lately," he said ungraciously. "What train are you coming back by?"

"That will depend on my occupations in town," she answered, after a moment's consideration.

"I will go to the station at half-past six. You can leave Waterloo Station at five fifteen." Aunt Anne winked slowly.

"I will try to come by an earlier train, my darling, if you will be there to relieve me of the packages with which I hope to be burdened."

"No. Come by the five fifteen," he said decisively. "I have some letters to write."

"Very well, my love," she answered, with tender courtesy. "It is always a pleasure to study your wishes, even in trifles. Would you assist me with my cloak, dear Alfred?"

"It isn't cold, and you have your shawl. Why are you taking this heavy cloak?"

"I have my reasons."

He understood perfectly. He felt a gleam of almost fiendish triumph as, one by one, she divested herself of her belongings to buy him food and comfort. As she was going out of the doorway an idea seemed to strike him.

"Anne," he said, "remember it is no good bringing back a few shillings—you must bring back a few pounds at least."

“Have you any anxieties?—any payment it is imperative that you should make?” she asked anxiously.

“Yes,” he answered, with a little smile to himself, as if an idea had been suggested to him. “I have a payment to make.”

“I will do all I can—more for your sake than my own, dear Alfred,” and she turned to go. They were in the drawing-room.

She hesitated for a moment by the door. “My love,” she said, going up to him doubtfully, “will you kiss me? You will never know how much I love you—you are all I have in the world.” The cashmere shawl clung to her and the heavy cloak swung back from her arms as she put them up round his neck and kissed him, first on one side of his face and then on the other; but even as she did so, and though for once he strove to hide it, she felt that, inwardly, he was shrinking.

“I will be back by half-past six o’clock,” she said, with a hopeless tone in her voice, and, slowly letting go her hold, she went out of the house.

On her way to the cart she stopped for a moment to look at a pile of faggots that were stacked in a partly concealed corner inside the garden gate.

“Jane,” she said, “I think there have been some depredations among the wood lately.”

“I saw two lads stealing a bit the other morning,” Jane answered.

“We must take steps to prevent it occurring again.”

“There’s plenty of wood, too, about here,” said Jane; “I don’t see why they should take ours; but I think they were tramps and wanted to make a fire. I thought I’d speak to the policeman—but I couldn’t catch him when he went by on his beat last night.”

“I should like to speak to him myself: at what time does he pass?”

“Well, ma’am, he is generally pretty punctual at about half-past eight.”

“If you see him this evening you can tell me”—and she got into the governess-cart. “Jane,” she said, looking back, “I forgot to tell you that your master and I will dine at half-past seven. I shall probably bring back a chicken.” She said the last words almost recklessly as she set off to the station.

She looked back towards the cottage, but though Alfred Wimple had strolled down to the gate after she had left it, his face was turned towards

Liphook. There was something almost fierce in her voice as she spoke to the gardener, who was driving.

“The pony seems inclined to procrastinate—you had better chastise him.”

“They have spoiled him up at the house,” said Lucas, “till he won’t go nohow unless he gets a bit of the whip.”

“He goes very well with me,” she snapped.

“He knows your hand, most likely—they do get to know hands; do you find him shy much?”

She made no answer, but looked at the holes of the sand martens in the cutting on one side of the road—they always fascinated her—and at the bell heather, which was just beginning to show a tinge of colour. “He’s a bad ’un to shy, he is,” Lucas went on; “and he’s not particular what it’s at—wheelbarrows, and umbrellas, and perambulators, and covered carts, and tramps—he don’t like tramps, he don’t—and bicycles, and children if there’s a few of ’em together, and bits of paper on the road—he’s ready to be afraid of anything. There’s Tom Mitchell coming along with the letters—would you like to stop?”

“I do not expect any, but I may as well put the question to him,” the old lady said, very distantly, for she was of opinion that Lucas talked too much for his station. But he was not to be abashed easily.

“Them beeches is coming on,” he said. Aunt Anne looked up, but made no answer. “Everything is so late this year on account of the cold. Tom, have you got any letters for Mrs. Wimple at the cottage?”

“There’s one, I know, with a foreign postmark.” The man stopped and took a packet out of the leather wallet by his side.

Aunt Anne, leaning over the cart, saw, as he pulled out the letter with the French stamps on it for her, that there was another beneath, directed, in an illiterate-looking hand, to “A. Wimple, Esq.,” but it was a woman’s writing and it had the Liphook postmark. Her eyes flashed; she could hardly make her voice steady as she said—

“I see you have one there for Mr. Wimple; you will find him at the cottage.” Then she drove on. She looked at her own letter, a little bewildered. “It is not from Walter or Florence,” she said, “yet I know the handwriting.” She gazed vacantly at the hedges again, while Peter the pony, urged by arguments from the whip, went on more swiftly towards the

station. Lucas's remarks fell unheeded on her ears. Something was tightening round her heart that made her cheeks burn with a fire they had not felt for long years past.

"I think we'll have more rain—they clouds over there seem like it," the man said, wondering why she was so silent, for she generally liked a chat with him. "Maybe she wanted to drive him herself," he thought; "I forgot to offer her the reins, and it's no good changing now, we are so near the station. The train's signalled," he said, as they pulled up; "but you are in plenty of time."

"I calculated that I should have sufficient time," she answered.

"Would you like me to meet you this afternoon? I will, if you tell me what train you are coming down by." She was silent for a minute, then, suddenly, she seemed to find courage.

"I shall leave London by the four thirty train," she said. "It is due at Witley at a quarter to six, and I shall expect to find you there." She walked into the station, with almost a hunted look.

She managed to get into an empty carriage, shut the door, and stood up by the window, winking sternly at the passengers who, in passing, hesitated whether or not to enter. As the train moved off she shut the window, and, sitting down with a sigh, stared out at the fir-woods and the picturesque Surrey cottages. She did not see them; she saw nothing and heard nothing but the rattle of the train, that gradually shaped itself into the word Liphook—Liphook—Liphook—till she was maddened. "It might have been some one writing to importune him for money," she said, thinking of the letter. But if the difficulty at Liphook were only a debt, she felt certain that Alfred Wimple would not have spared her the annoyance of knowing it. It was a mystery of which her indomitable pride refused her even the suggestion of one solution, which yet seemed gradually, and from without, to be getting burned upon her brain. A despair that was half dread was taking possession of her. A desperate knowledge was bearing down upon her that the only chance she had of keeping the man to whom she had bound herself was by giving him money. He was evidently at his wit's end for it, and had no resource of his own, for whatever was the attraction at Liphook it did not seem to include money. Her one chance was to give it him, and to let him see that she would not fail to give it him—then, perhaps, he would stay with her. She stretched out her arms for a moment as if she were drowning, and trying to save herself by holding on to him, but she stretched them only into space, and clutched nothing. "Perhaps he thinks because I am old I cannot

love properly. Oh, my dear one, if you would only speak to me out of your own heart, or if you could only look into my heart—for that is not old; it is young. Age makes no difference if he did but know it—I feel the same as when I was twenty, and we walked between the chestnuts to the farm. It is only the years that have marked me.” And then anger and pride chased away her misery and tenderness. “I will have it settled,” she said; “I will know what it means; and if he has not treated me properly he shall be called to account. If Walter and Florence were only in England, I should not be in this sad dilemma.” The mention of their names made her remember the letter in her pocket. She pulled it out and opened it; it was the one Mrs. North had written from Marseille. At another time she would have liked the congratulations, or have been indignant at the divorce. Now she passed the news by with little more than a scornful wink. “It is most presumptuous of her to have written to me; she has taken a great liberty; she has committed a solecism,” she said, almost mechanically. As she put the letter back into her pocket her hand touched something she did not remember to have placed there. She looked puzzled for a moment, then drew it out. It was a little necktie of Alfred Wimple’s, blue with white spots on it. She understood—it was faded and frayed; she had put it into her pocket to mend. She looked at it wonderingly for a moment, then kissed it with a vehemence that was almost passion.

“He thinks I cannot love,” she said; “I am convinced that is it. If he did but know—if he did but know.”

The servant who opened the door at Portman Square instantly recognized her, and was disposed to treat her with more respect than on a former occasion.

“Mr. Boughton is not here, ma’am,” he said, in answer to her inquiry.

“Would you give me the address of his office?”

“I can give you the address, but he is away in Scotland, and not expected back for another fortnight.” Aunt Anne stood dumbfounded for a moment, then slowly she looked up at the servant, with a little smile that had its effect.

“It is very unfortunate,” she said; “my business with him is most pressing. Have you good accounts of Sir William?”

“Sir William is back, ma’am. He returned last week, but he is confined to his room with another attack.”

“Does he keep his bed?”

“Well, he is sitting by the fire just now, ma’am, writing some letters.” In a moment Aunt Anne had whisked into the house; she felt quite exhilarated.

“Be good enough to take my name to him, and ask if he is sufficiently well to see his cousin, Mrs.—Mrs. Baines”—she hesitated over the last word; “say that I am extremely solicitous to have a few minutes’ conversation with him.”

“I am afraid he won’t be able to see you——” the servant began.

“Have the goodness to take up my name.”

“I am afraid——” the servant began again.

“And say I wish to see him on a matter of great importance,” she went on imperiously, not heeding the interruption. She walked towards the dining-room door, as if she had a right to the entire house, but suddenly turned round.

“I feel certain Sir William will see me,” she said, “and I will follow you upstairs.”

Helplessly the servant obeyed her, and unfalteringly the soft footstep pattered after him up to the second floor. Then he entered the front bedroom, while she remained on the landing.

“Mrs. Baines wishes to know if she can speak to you, sir,” she heard him say.

“Tell her I am too ill to see any one,” a thin, distinct voice answered.

“She says it is a matter of extreme importance, sir.”

“I am writing letters, and don’t wish to be disturbed: bring my chicken-broth in twenty minutes.”

But a moment later, and Aunt Anne had whisked also into the room, passing the servant who was leaving it.

“William,” she said, “you must not refuse to let me see you once again. I cannot believe that you are too ill to shake hands with your cousin Anne.” As she spoke she looked round the room, and took in all its details at a glance. It had three windows, a writing-table and a book-case between them, facing them, a big four-post bedstead with dark hangings. To the left was a tall wardrobe of rosewood that had no looking-glass let into its panelled doors. By the fireplace was a roomy easy-chair, in which sat Sir William Rammage. He was dressed in a puce woollen dressing-gown, and half rolled up in a coloured blanket. By his side was an invalid table, with writing

materials on it, and a flap at the side that stretched over his knees. In the large fireplace blazed a cheerful fire, and on the other side of the fireplace, and facing Sir William, there was a second easy-chair. He was evidently a tall man—thin, nervous, and irritable. His manner was cold and disagreeable, but it conveyed a sense of loneliness, a remembrance of long, cheerless years, that in a manner excused it. He looked like a man who had probably deserved respect, but had made few friendships. He was not nearly as old as he appeared at the first glance; illness, and work, and lack of human interests had aged him more than actual years.

“How do you do?” he said dryly.

“I have been so grieved to hear of your illness, William. I hope you received my letters—I wrote three or four times to tender you my sympathy.” She looked at the servant in a manner that said, “Go away”—and he went, carefully shutting the door.

“I am not well enough to receive visitors,” Sir William said, in the same dry voice.

“My dear William, you must let me stay with you five minutes; I will not intrude longer on your privacy”—and she seated herself on the chair facing him.

“If what you have to say is of a business nature, I am not well enough to enter upon it now.”

“Did you derive benefit from your stay at Cannes?—you were constantly in my thoughts.”

“Thank you, thank you.”

“I fear you have had to abandon many of your city occupations,” she went on, in a sympathetic voice; “it must be a great regret to the corporation. I was speaking of your mayoralty some months ago to Mr. Fisher, the editor of *The Centre*.” Aunt Anne was talking to gain time. Her throat was choking; her mouth twitched with restrained excitement.

“Where did you meet him?” Sir William asked, in a judicial manner, tapping the arm of his chair with his thin fingers.

“I met him at Walter Hibbert’s.”

He was silent, and seemed to be waiting for her to go. For a few moments she could not gather courage to speak again. He looked up at her.

“I am much obliged for this visit,” he said coldly, “but I cannot ask you to prolong it.”

“William,” she said, “I came to see you on a matter of necessity. I would not have intruded had it been otherwise. On the occasion of my last visit I saw Mr. Boughton, but I understand that he is now away.”

“He will be back in two or three weeks: you will then be able to see him.”

She hesitated for a moment, and then went on doubtfully, “I have been deeply touched by your kindness.”

“Yes?” he said inquiringly.

“That it has been the greatest help to me I need hardly say; but I have had so many expenses this winter, it was inadequate to meet them all.”

“I don’t quite understand?” He was becoming interested.

“There are some weeks yet before the next quarter is due. I am staying in a country-house, and the expenses I have to meet——”

“What country-house?”

“Walter and Florence Hibbert’s. It is a cottage most charmingly situated in Surrey.”

“I suppose it costs you nothing to stay there?”

“They have been most kind. But they are now abroad, and, naturally, I have appearances to maintain and the necessities of the table to provide.”

“For whom? Only for yourself, I suppose? You have not a large establishment.” His thin fingers wandered beneath the papers on the table, as if they were seeking for something. They found it, and drew it a little forward. Aunt Anne, following the movement with her eyes, saw the corner of a cheque-book peep out from beneath the blotting-paper. “You have not a dozen servants?” he asked ironically.

“I have only one servant”—she was getting a little agitated.

“And yourself?”

“And some one who is with me.”

“And doesn’t the some one who is with you keep you? or do you keep her?” and he pushed back the cheque-book. Aunt Anne was silent for a

moment. "I suppose it doesn't cost you anything to live. What do you want money for?" He put his hands on the arms of his chair and looked at her.

"William," she said, "I cannot discuss all my expenditures, or enter into every detail of my household"—and there was as much pride in her tone as she dared put into it. "I came to ask you if you would have the great kindness to advance the quarter's allowance you are so kind as to give me. It will be due——"

"Quarter's allowance I give you? I don't understand. I told you some time ago that I was not in the habit of giving away money. I believe you had some of your own when you started in life, and if you made away with it that is your own business."

"But, William, I am speaking of the hundred a year you have allowed me lately through Mr. Boughton."

He was fairly roused now, and turned his face full upon her. There were cruel, pitiless lines upon it, though she fought against them bravely.

"I have allowed you no hundred a year," he said angrily, "and I intend to allow you none. Do you mean to tell me that Boughton has paid you a hundred a year on my account?"

"I understood so," she gasped, shaking with fright.

"I suppose he had some reason for it. If he has done it out of his own money, it is his own business. If he has done it out of mine, I shall have a reckoning up with him, and probably you will have one, too."

"But, William, have you been under the impression that I was left to starve?"

"I was under no impression at all concerning you. Once for all, Anne, you must understand that it is not my intention to give away the money for which I have worked to people who have been idle."

"I have not been idle," she said; "and you forget that I am your cousin, that our mothers——"

"I know all that," he said, interrupting her; "your people and you had your own way to make in life, and so had I and my people."

"But if you do not help me"—she burst out, for she could bear it no longer—"if you do not help me, I shall starve."

"I really don't see what claim you have upon me."

“I am your cousin, and I am old, and I shall starve,” she repeated. “I must have money to-day. If I don’t take back money this afternoon my heart will break.” Again his fingers went for a moment in the direction of the cheque-book and tantalized her. She stood up and looked at him entreatingly. “I am not speaking only for myself,” she pleaded, “but for another——” and she broke down.

“For whom else are you speaking?” he asked, withdrawing his fingers.

“I do not wish to tell you, William.”

“For whom else?” he repeated, glaring at her.

“For one who is very dear to me, and who will starve, too, unless you help us. William, I entreat you to remember——”

“But who is this pauper you are helping, and why should I help her, too?”

“It is not a pauper,” she said indignantly. “It is some one who is dearer than all the world to me; and, once more, I entreat you to help us.”

“Well, but who is it?—is it a child?”

“No,” she answered, in a low voice, full of infinite tenderness, and she clasped her hands and let her chin fall on her breast.

“Who is it?” he asked sternly.

“It is my husband”—and almost a sob broke from her.

“Your husband!—I thought he was dead?”

“Mr. Baines is dead—long ago; but—I have married again.”

“Married again?” he repeated, as if he could hardly believe his ears.

“Yes, married again, and that is why I implore you to help me, so that I may give the young, tender life that is joined to mine the comforts that are necessary to him,” she said, with supplicating misery.

“Do you mean to say”—and he looked at her as if he thought she was mad—“that some young man has married you?”

“Yes,” she answered, in a low voice; “we have been married nearly eight months.”

“And has he got any money?—or does he do anything for a living?”

“He is a most brilliant writer, and has given the greatest satisfaction to Mr. Fisher; but he has been ill, and he requires country air and nourishment

and luxuries—and I implore you to help me to preserve this young and beautiful life that has been confided to me.”

“Is he a cripple or mad?”

She looked up in astonishment.

“He is a fine, tall young man!” she said, with proud indignation. “I should not have married a cripple, William, and I have already told you that he is a writer on *The Centre*, though he is not able at present to do his talents justice.”

“So you have to keep him?”

“He kept me when he had money; he gave me himself, and all he possessed in the world.”

“What did he marry you for?” Sir William asked, gazing at her in wonder, and almost clutching the arms of his chair.

“He married me”—her voice trembled and she drooped her head again—“he married me because—because he loved me.”

“Loved you! What should he love you for?”

“William, do you wish to insult me? I do not see why he should not love me, or why he should pretend to do so if he did not.”

“And I suppose you love him?” he said, pulling the blanket farther up over his knees and speaking in a scornful, incredulous voice.

“Yes, William, I do—I love him more than all the world; and unless you will help me so that I may give him those things that he requires and make our little home worthy of his residence in it, you will break my heart—you will kill him, and you will break my heart,” she repeated passionately. “I will conceal nothing from you—we are starving. We have not got a pound in the world—we have not even food to eat. He is young, and requires plenty of nourishment; he is not strong, and wants luxuries.”

“And you want me to pay for them?”

But she did not seem to hear him, and swept on—

“He must have them or he will die. We have spent every penny we had—I have even borrowed money on my possessions. I can conceal things from strangers, but you and I belong to the same family, and what I say to you I know is sacred—we are starving, William, we are starving, and I implore you to help me. He says he cannot stay unless I take back money—

that he will go and leave me.” Something seemed to gather in her throat—there was a ring of fright and despair in her voice as she said the last words. “He will leave me, and it will break my heart, for he is all the world to me. It will break my heart if he goes, and unless I take back money he will leave me!”

“And let you starve by yourself?—a nice man to marry.”

“William,” she said, “he must remember what is due to himself. He cannot stay if he has not even food to eat.”

“And, pray, who is this gentleman?”

“I have told you that he is a brilliant writer.”

“What is his name?”

“I don’t think I am justified in telling you—he does not wish our marriage to be known.”

“I can quite understand that,” Sir William answered ironically. “Did he tell you to come to me for money?”

“Yes, he told me to do so,” she said, tragically; “he knew your good heart.”

“Knew my good heart, did he?” There was a deadly pallor spreading over Sir William’s face that frightened her. For a moment his lips moved without making a sound, then he recovered his voice, “Tell me his name—what is it?”

“William——” she began.

“What is it?” he cried, and his breath came short and quick.

She was too scared to demur any longer.

“It is Alfred Wimple”—and her heart stood still.

He gazed at her for a moment in silence.

“Wimple,” he said—“what, Boughton’s nephew? That skunk he had to turn out of his office?”

“He is Mr. Boughton’s nephew; and he left his uncle’s office because the duties were too arduous for his health.”

“He left his uncle’s office because he was kicked out of it. Do you mean to tell me that you have married him—a man who never did a day’s work in his life, or paid a bill that he owed? And as for writing, I don’t believe one

word of it. It's not a month ago that his uncle told me of some old woman, his landlady, forsooth! who had been to him with a long bill——”

“It was for his professional chambers. A man in his position requires them.”

“Yes; and he'd been sponging on the woman's mother, too, in the country. Were you with him?”

“No, William, I was not”——and, suddenly, a load was lifted from Aunt Anne's heart. The mystery of Liphook appeared to be solved, and Alfred Wimple's account of his debts to be verified. A world of tenderness rushed back into her heart and gave her strength and courage to fight her battle to the end. “No, I was not with him,” she repeated; and as she looked up a smile, a look of almost happiness, was on her face, that made her cousin more wonder-struck than ever. “He required country air to invigorate him, and our means would not admit of——”

“Boughton has been allowing you a hundred a year,” said Sir William; “and this Wimple has married you,” he went on, a light seeming to break upon him. “I am beginning to understand it. I presume he knows that you are my cousin?”

“Yes, I told him that you were—he spoke of you with admiration,” Aunt Anne added, always more anxious to say something gratifying to her listener than to be strictly veracious.

“I have no doubt he did. Pray, when did this fine love-making begin?” Sir William asked scornfully.

“Nearly a year ago,” she answered, in a faltering voice, for she was almost beaten, in spite of the relief that had been given her a minute or two ago.

“And when did Boughton begin to allow you this hundred a year?”

“About the time of my marriage.”

“I perfectly understand. I'll tell you the reason of your marriage and of his love for you in a moment.” With an effort he stretched out his hand and touched the bell. “Charles,” he said, when the servant entered, “unlock my safe.”

The man pulled back a curtain that had been drawn across a recess to hide an iron door. “On the top of the shelf to the left you will see a blue envelope labelled ‘Last Will and Testament.’ Give it to me,” Sir William said.

A scared look broke over Aunt Anne's face; and she watched the proceedings breathlessly.

"Lock the safe and go—no, stop—give me some brandy first."

The servant poured a little into a glass from a bottle which stood on the writing-table between the windows. The old man's hand shook while he took it. Aunt Anne, looking at him like a culprit waiting for punishment, noticed a blackness round his mouth, and that the lines in his face were rigid.

"Shall I bring you some chicken-broth, Sir William?" the servant asked.

"When I ring. Go." Then he turned to Aunt Anne. "Now I will tell you why this young man loved you." He said the last words with an almost fiendish chuckle. "He loved you because, being a clerk in his uncle's office, the office from which he had to be kicked, he probably knew—in fact, I am certain that he knew, for he came to ask me your Christian name when the instructions were being given—that I had provided for you in my will. I do not choose to pauperize people while I live, but I considered it my duty to leave some portion of my wealth to my relations, no matter how small a claim they had upon me. He knew that you would get a fourth share of my money—probably he reckoned it up and calculated that it would amount to a good many thousand pounds, so he and Boughton concocted a scheme to get hold of it together."

"Mr. Boughton knew nothing of our marriage."

"I tell you it was all a scheme. What should Boughton allow you a hundred a year for?" He was grasping the will while he spoke.

"He knew nothing about it, William—neither did Alfred."

"Well, we'll put his disinterestedness to the test"—and he tried to tear the will in half, but his fingers were too weak.

"Oh no," she cried; "no—no——"

"Do you suppose a young man would marry an old woman like you for any reason but gain? That you should have been such a fool! and for that unwholesome-looking cur, with his long, rickety legs and red hair—why, he looks like a stale prawn," the old man said derisively, and made another effort to tear the will.

"I cannot bear it—William, I implore you"—and she clasped her hands with terror.

He leaned forward with an effort, and put the will on the fire.

“Oh no, no—” she cried again, and, dropping on her knees, she almost snatched it from the flames.

He took the poker between his two white hands, and held the paper down with it.

“It is cruel—cruel——” she began, as she watched it disappear from her sight.

“I think I have made the case clear,” he said; “and you will see that there is nothing to be gained by staying. My money was not made to benefit Mr. Alfred Wimple. I shall make another will, and it will not contain your name.” He rang the bell again.

“You have treated me cruelly—cruelly—but Heaven will frustrate you yet——” she said tremblingly, as she rose from her knees. Anguish and dignity were strangely blended in her voice, but after a moment it seemed as if the latter had gained the victory, “You and I will probably never meet again, William; you have insulted me cruelly, and you will remember it when it is too late to ask my forgiveness. You have insulted me and treated me heartlessly, yet it was beside us when we were children that our mothers——” the servant entered with a cup of chicken-broth.

“Good-bye, Mrs. Alfred Wimple,” Sir William said politely. “Charles, show Mrs. Wimple downstairs.”

The man was bewildered at the strange name, and looked at Aunt Anne doubtfully. Sir William clutched at the arms of his chair again, and his head sank back upon the pillow.


“William——” she began.

“Go!” he said hoarsely. For a moment she hesitated, a red spot had burned itself on her cheek, and then slowly she followed the servant down.





CHAPTER VII.

 UNT ANNE went slowly along Portman Square. She felt, and it was a cruel moment to do so, that she was growing very old. Her feet almost gave way beneath her; her hands had barely strength to hold her cloak together over her chest. There was a little cold breeze passing by; as it swept over her face she realized that she was half stunned and sad and sick at heart. But she dragged on, step by step, stopping once, to hold by the iron railings of a house, before she could find strength enough to turn into a side-street.

“I won’t believe it,” she said; “it was not for the money. He could not have known; his uncle would not have told him—it is not likely that he would have betrayed the confidence of a client.” And then she remembered what Sir William had said about the debt to the landlady in the Gray’s Inn Road and to the mother in the country. Of course that meant Liphook. It gave her a world of comfort, had lifted a terrible dread from her heart, so that, even in spite of the insults of the last hour, she felt that her morning’s visit had not been wholly thrown away. She had not the faculty of looking forward very far, and it did not occur to her as yet that, by revealing her marriage, she had ruined her prospects with her cousin. It was the insults that had enraged her; the going back to Witley, the day’s dinner, and the very near future, that perplexed her. A month, even a week hence, might take care of itself, provided to-day were made easy; it had always been so with her.

She was bewildered, staggered, for want of money; she had just two shillings in the world. Florence and Walter were still away; she could think of no one of whom to borrow. She came to a confectioner’s shop, and looked at it hesitatingly, for she was tired and exhausted. Even though Alfred Wimple waited at the other end, mercilessly ready to count the coins with which she returned, she felt that she must buy a few minutes’ rest for herself. She wanted to sit down and think. She tottered into the shop, and having asked for a cup of tea, waited for it, with a sigh of relief, in a dark corner. But she was too much stupefied and beaten to think clearly. When the tea came, hot and smoking, in a thick white cup, to which her lips clung gratefully, she felt better. She began to burn with indignation, which was an

excellent sign; she crushed Sir William Rammage out of her thoughts, and winked almost savagely, as though she had felt him under her foot. She told herself again that Alfred could not have known about the will, and had not deceived her about Liphook. She even tried to think of him affectionately, though that was difficult, with the dread of his face before her if she returned empty-handed. But she did not think of the money question as despairingly now as she had done a few minutes since; she had a firm belief in her own power of resource. She felt certain that when she had reflected calmly, something would suggest itself. She remembered Mrs. North; but it was not possible to borrow of her, for she had forfeited all consideration to the regard Aunt Anne thought it necessary to feel for any one from whom she could accept a loan.

“I cannot do that, even for Alfred,” she said. “I have always held my head so high; I cannot lower it to Mrs. North, even for him.” But she took the letter from her pocket and read it over again. “She does not seem to comprehend the difference in our positions,” she said, as she put it back into the envelope, though not before she had noticed, with a keen eye, that Mrs. North had said she would be back in England very soon, and calculated that that could not mean just yet. “If Walter and Florence were in London, I should be relieved of this anxiety immediately,” she thought. Then a good idea occurred to her. She considered it from every point of view, and felt at last that it was feasible. “I am quite sure,” she told herself, “that Florence would say I was justified in going to her mother in her absence. I will explain to her that there are some things her daughter would wish me to buy, and ask her to let me have sufficient money to defray their cost. Besides,” she added, as an afterthought, “I must see those dear children; Florence, I know, would wish me to do so; and it is an attention I ought not to omit, after all the regard and kindness that she and dear Walter have always shown me.” She got up and looked longingly at the buns and tarts in the window; though she had only one unbroken shilling left, she could not wholly curb her generosity.

“Would you put me a couple of sponge-cakes into a bag?” she said to the young woman, “I hope they are quite fresh; I prefer them a little brown.” She walked away, justified and refreshed, holding the paper bag by the corner.

But when she arrived at the house near Regent’s Park, it was only to be told that Florence’s mother had gone out for the day, and that the children had not yet returned from their morning walk. The servant, seeing how disappointed she looked, begged her to come in and wait for a little while. “I

don't think they'll be long, ma'am," she said almost gently. "For," as she explained to her fellow-servants afterwards, "I could not help being sorry for an old lady who had made a stupid of herself like that." Aunt Anne hesitated a moment. "There's a nice fire in the dining-room," the servant continued, and having persuaded her to enter, she turned the easy-chair round, and asked if she should make a cup of tea.

"Thank you, no," said Aunt Anne, in a tone that showed she was sensible of the desire to please her, but was, nevertheless, aware of her own position in society. "I do not require any refreshment; I have just partaken of an early lunch." She turned, gratefully, to the fire when she was alone, and, putting her feet on the fender, faced her difficulties once more. She could not remember any human being in London from whom, under any pretext whatever, she could borrow. She was baffled and at bay. The memory of Sir William's taunts vanished altogether as, with a fright that was gradually becoming feverish, she went over in her mind every possible means of raising even a few shillings—though a few shillings, she knew, would be virtually useless against the tide she had to stem. Of a very small sum she was already certain, for she had devised a means of raising it, but she feared it would only be sufficient to provide food for the evening, and perhaps for to-morrow—and then? She folded her hands and looked into the fire, shaking her head once or twice, as if various schemes were presenting themselves, only to be rejected. The clock on the mantelpiece struck half-past one; at half-past four her train left Waterloo Station. There was little time to lose. She got up, took off her cloak, and examined it carefully, then put it round her once more, fingering the clasp, while she fastened it, as if it were a thing she treasured. As she did so, her eye caught a little pile on the mantelpiece; it consisted of seven shillings in silver, with a half-sovereign on the top. She looked at it as if fascinated, and calculated precisely all it would buy. She remembered, with dismay, that Jane Mitchell's weekly wages were due that evening, that Jane's mother was ill, and the money was necessary. She heard again the hard voice in which Alfred had said, "Unless you bring back money, I shall not stay here any longer." She could see his eyes, dull and unrelenting.

"I know they would give it to me; I know that Walter and Florence would deny me nothing that was really for my happiness," she thought, and rang the bell. "I fear I shall not be able to stay and see the children," she said haughtily to the servant, but with a little excitement she could not keep out of her voice; "my train is, unfortunately, an early one. And would you tell their grandmother that I have ventured to borrow this seventeen shillings on

the mantelpiece? I came up to town with less money than I find I require; I will write to her in a day or two, and return it.”

“It’s the children’s money, ma’am; I heard their grandmother say they were to save it up for Christmas.”

“Dear children,” said the old lady, with a little smile; “they will be delighted to hear that I have borrowed it. Tell them that Aunt Anne is their debtor. Give them these two sponge-cakes, they will think of me while they eat them.” She snapped her purse as she put the money into it, and left the house with a light footstep.

She walked on towards Portland Road. There was only one thing more to do, and that must be done quickly. It would add perhaps ten shillings to her purse, but even that would be a precious sum. She hesitated a moment. A threat of rain was in the air, but she did not feel it. The chilly wind touched her face, but it did not make her shiver, now that her courage had returned. She looked up and down Great Portland Street doubtfully, then went slowly, but with decision, towards a street she knew well.

A quarter of an hour later she was in an omnibus, going to Waterloo Station. The cloak with the steel clasp had disappeared; on her face was an expression that betrayed she had gone through an experience that depressed her. She watched the people hurrying by in hansoms, and remembered the day she had driven in one herself to see Alfred Wimple off to the country—the day on which Florence had given her the five-pound note. She was very weary, and beginning to long for home. She planned the evening dinner, and got out a little before she reached Waterloo, in order to buy it at the shops near the station. There had been concealed beneath her cloak all the morning a square bag, made of black stuff, which now she carried on her arm. When she stood on the platform waiting for her train it was no longer flat and empty, but bulged into strange shapes that were oddly suggestive. In her hand she carried three bunches of primroses, and a smaller one of violets; under her arm were some evening papers. She looked satisfied, and almost happy, for she felt that a few hours at least of contentment were before her. She entered her third-class carriage, thinking of the day she had seen Alfred Wimple off to Liphook; she remembered, with a little triumph, how she had exchanged his ticket. “I am sure the papers will be a solace to him,” she said; “writing for the press must give him a deep interest in public affairs—it must have been a great deprivation to him not to know all that was going on. My dear Alfred! these violets shall be my offering to him as soon as I arrive; I cannot do enough to compensate him for William’s cruel aspersions on his

character. My darling, if I only had thousands, I would give them to you; I would make them into a carpet for you to walk upon.”

She was alone in the carriage; she put her bag carefully down beside her on the seat, and shut the windows, for the drizzling rain was coming in aslant, and chilled her. Once or twice a sharp pang of pain darted through her shoulders, but she did not mind; she was dreaming among illusions, and found a passing spell of happiness that brought a smile to her lips and a wink of almost merry anticipation to her eye, as she saw the little dinner she had devised set out, and Alfred facing her at table. She imagined him saying, in the solemn manner in which he said everything, “I feel better, Anne,” when he had finished, and she knew that in those few words she would find a balm for all the insults and misery of the last few hours. She repented now that she was returning by the early train; it seemed like treachery to him. It had been almost noble of him to conceal from her the embarrassing debt he had at Liphook. “He has evidently been reticent,” she thought, “from a desire to save me pain. My dear one,—I have wronged him lately, but I will make it up to him this evening. I will tell him that there is no poverty or sorrow I should not think it a privilege to share with him.” She peered out of the window at the landscape dulling with the rain. “I hope he is not in the garden,” she thought. “He will catch cold, and his cough was so bad last week. I am glad I remembered to bring some lozenges for him.”

The train sped on past Woking and the fir-woods beyond; they reminded her of the trees round the cottage at Witley. When it was dark to-night, she would look up at them before she bolted the door after Jane Mitchell. And then she and Alfred would sit over the fire and talk; he would feel so much better after his dinner, she was sure he would be kind to her. He had been worried lately with poverty, but just for a little while he should forget it. With the future she did not concern herself, for she had already devised a plan that would make it easy. She would go and see Mr. Boughton, and of course he would help them when he heard that Alfred was her husband. He would continue the allowance he had given them, and when Sir William Rammage made a new will he would take care that it was not an iniquitous one. It had never seriously occurred to her that William would leave her money, though, once or twice, the possibility had crossed her mind. But she had never been able to look forward at all for herself. “Now,” she thought, “I must give the future my consideration. I must think of it for my dear Alfred. Luxuries are necessary to him; he cannot divest himself of his longing for them. Perhaps when Mr. Boughton returns he will make William ashamed of his conduct to me to-day, and he will do something for us before he dies; it would be very detrimental to his pride that we should starve, and I did not

mince words to-day.” The train passed Milford Station; in a few minutes she would be at Witley. “I hope Alfred won’t be angry with me for coming by the earlier train,” she thought, with some misgiving. “I will explain to him that I had finished my commissions in town sooner than I had anticipated, and, seeing that the weather was not likely to improve, I thought it better to return, even at the risk of his displeasure.”

The governess-cart was waiting for her.

“I brought an umbrella,” Lucas said, “as it was raining. I noticed you went without one this morning, and the weather has come on that unexpected bad, I was afraid you would get wet through.”

“I am most grateful for your thoughtfulness,” Aunt Anne said, with distant graciousness. She put her bag out of reach of the rain, and cared little for herself. She was too full of other matters to trouble about the weather. As she went along the straight road, of which by this time she knew every yard, she mentally counted up the shillings in her pocket, and considered that she ought to give one of them to Lucas. “He has been most attentive,” she said, and she managed to extract the coin from her pocket, and put it into her black silk glove, ready for the end of the journey, which she considered would be the right moment to present it. The rain came down steadily. It was no longer aslant or fitful, and in the sky overhead there were no changing clouds. “I fear you have had an unfavourable day,” she said to Lucas.

“It has rained mostly all the time. I hope you won’t catch cold, ma’am. I thought I saw you with a cloak this morning; have you left it behind?”

Aunt Anne resented the question; she thought it was unduly familiar, and she answered coldly,

“I have left it behind—for a purpose. It required renovating,” she added.

“I might have brought you a shawl, or something, if I had known. I called at the house as I passed to see if Mr. Wimple would like to come and meet you. But he wasn’t in.”

“I hope he is not out in the rain,” she thought. “Did the servant say if he had been out long?” she asked.

“She said he had been gone about an hour. It’s a pity I missed him.”

“He probably had an engagement,” she said, and a little uneasiness stole over her. Another mile. She could scarcely conceal her impatience. “Couldn’t the pony run up this little hill?” she asked.

“It could,” said Lucas, rather contemptuously; “but Mrs. Burnett don’t like him to run uphill, she don’t—she thinks it’s bad for him.” Aunt Anne was too much engrossed in her own thoughts to answer. “He goes faster than the donkey did last year, anyhow, ma’am; do you mind the donkey?”

“I frequently drove him.”

“He was a deal of trouble, he was,” Lucas went on; “and they didn’t do well by him—gave four pound ten for him, and when they come to sell him a year later they only got two pound five.”

“So that they were mulcted of just half the sum for which they had purchased him,” she said absently, having quickly reckoned up the loss in her head. “Was there any reason for that?”

“Well, you see, this was it,” said Lucas—“when gentry first come to live about here they took to keeping donkeys, so donkeys went up; then after a bit they found they wouldn’t go, and they took to selling them and buying ponies, so donkeys went down. I am afraid you are getting very wet, ma’am. I wish I had thought to bring a rug to cover you. But here we are at the house, and you’ll be able to dry yourself by the fire.”

“Thank you, Lucas, thank you,” and she slipped the shilling into his hand, and, taking her bulging bag from under the seat, walked into the house by the back door.

“Jane,” she asked, the moment she crossed the threshold, “where is Mr. Wimple?”

“He went out an hour and a half ago, ma’am, or a little more perhaps.”

“Do you know in what direction he went?”

“Well, last time I saw him he was in the garden; then I see him going down the dip.”

She was silent for a moment, then she asked gently—

“Was he at home all the morning?” and received an answer in the affirmative. She was silent, and seemed to turn something over in her mind.

“You are quite sure he went down the dip, and not much more than an hour and a half ago?” She stood by the kitchen fire, and she spoke absently. “I have brought a sole for dinner,” she said. “I must ask you to cook it more carefully than you did the last one, Jane. Mr. Wimple is most particular about fish—he cannot eat it unless it is quite dry. After the sole there is a chicken and some asparagus. Give me my bag—there are some other things

in it, and a bottle of claret at the bottom, which I wish put on the dining-room mantelshelf for an hour. I trust you have made a good fire, Jane?"

"Yes, ma'am; but I had to do it of wood, for the coals are nearly out."

"I prefer wood; it is not my intention to have in more coal just yet," said Aunt Anne, firmly. "Where have you put the primroses I brought? I wish to arrange them in a bowl for the centre of the table."

"Hadn't you better take off your shawl first, ma'am—it's wringing wet—and let me make you a cup of tea?"

"No, thank you, I will not trouble you to do that," Aunt Anne said gently. "But put Mr. Wimple's slippers by the fire in the dining-room." She went into the drawing-room and held a match to the grate, and stood beside it while the paper blazed and the wood crackled, thinking that she and Alfred would sit over the fire cosily that evening after dinner.

"I am sure he is worried about money," she said to herself, "and that he is in debt; but he shall not have these anxieties long—it is much better that his uncle should know about our marriage." Her eyes turned towards the window and the garden and the trees with the rain falling on them. "I wonder if he has gone far; I hope he is not depressed. I fear he worries himself unduly," she said, and went into the dining-room. The slippers were toasting in the fender; she turned the easy-chair towards the fire and put beside it a little table from the corner of the room. Then she went for the papers she had brought from London, and arranged them on the table, and put the bunch of violets in a glass and set it by the papers. She drew back and looked at the cosy arrangement with satisfaction. "My darling Alfred!" she said to herself; and then, softly, as if she were afraid of Jane hearing her, she crept out of the front door and under the verandah that went round the house, and looked out at the weather. The rain had nearly stopped, but the sky was grey and the air was cold. She pulled her shawl closer, and, trying to shake off the chill that was overtaking her, went swiftly down the garden pathway. At the far end the grass was long and wet; the drops fell from the beeches and larches above. She found the narrow pathway that led to the dip, and went along it. She looked anxiously ahead, but there was no sign of Alfred. "I know he will be glad to see me," she thought. "I know the silent tenderness of his heart—my darling—my darling, you are all I have in the world!"

On she went among the gorse, between the firs, and over the clumps of budding heather, a limp black figure in the misty twilight. She had no definite reason for supposing he would return that way; but she knew it to be

a short cut from the Liphook direction, and some strange instinct seemed to be sending her on: she did not hesitate or falter, but just obeyed it. The pathway was very narrow, the wet growth on either side brushed her skirts as she passed by—down and down—lower and lower—towards the valley. On the other side, a quarter of a mile away, she could see the little thatched shed the children called their “house,” where perhaps in past days a cow had been tethered. There was not a sign of Alfred. “Perhaps he is a little farther on, over the ridge,” she said, and sped on. A miserable aching was upon her; she had been out of doors many hours; she was wet and cold through and through. Every moment the long grasses and the dead bracken of a past year swept over her feet. The mist stole up to her closer and closer. The drops fell from the leaves above on to her shoulders. “He must be so cold and wet,” she thought; “I know he will make his cough worse; I am glad I kept the lozenges in my pocket.” She hesitated at the bottom of the valley for a moment, and then began the upward path. “I know he wants me,” she said aloud, with an almost passionate note in her feeble voice; “I can feel that he wants me.” She looked through the straggling firs that dotted the ground over which she was now making her way. Still, there was not a sign of Alfred. Only the trees and the undergrowth, sodden with the long day’s rain.

Suddenly there was the sound of a woman’s laughter. She stopped, petrified. It came from the little thatched shed twenty yards away. The side of the shed was towards her and only the front of it was open, so that she could not see who was within it. But she knew that two people were there. One was a woman, and something told her that the other was Alfred Wimple. For a minute she could not stir. Then, as if it had been waiting for a signal, the rain began to fall, with a soft, swishing sound, upon the thatched roof of the shed, upon Aunt Anne’s thin cashmere shawl, upon all the drooping vegetation. The mistiness grew deeper, and from the distances the night began to gather. The black figure standing in the mist knew that a few yards off there was hidden from her that which meant life or death. She went a little nearer to the shed, but her feet almost failed her, her heart stood still, a sickening dread had laid hold of her. “I will go round and face them,” she thought, and dragged herself up to the shed. But as she reached the corner she heard Alfred Wimple’s voice—

“You know it’s only for her money that I stay with the old woman, Caroline.” She stopped, and rested her head and hands against the back and sides of the shed, from sheer fright at what was coming next.

“Well, but you don’t give me any of it,” the woman answered.

“I don’t get any myself now.”

“Then what do you stay with her for?”

“Because it won’t do to let her slip.”

“It’s mother that makes such a fuss—it’s not me; though, of course, it’s hard, you always being away like this.”

“Tell her she won’t gain anything by making a fuss,” Alfred Wimple said, in the hard voice Aunt Anne knew so well.

“She says all the four years we have been married you have not kept me decently three months together.”

Aunt Anne held on to the shed for dear life, and her heart stood still.

“I shall keep you decently by-and-by, Caroline.”

“And then she’s always going on about what you owe her. I daren’t go up to London any more, she leads me such a life.”

“Tell her I’ll pay her by-and-by,” Alfred Wimple said.

“I’m sure if it wasn’t for grandmother being at Liphook, I don’t know what I’d do. Sometimes I think I’d better get a place of some sort—then I’d be able to help you.”

“But your grandmother doesn’t lead you a life, Caroline, does she?”

“Well, you see, it was she made us get married, so she can’t well, and she has kept mother quiet on that account; but couldn’t you come to us again, Alfred? I don’t believe grandmother would mind. She thinks you are very wise to stay with your aunt if you’re going to get her money, and often tells me I am impatient, but I can’t bear being parted like this.”

“And I can’t bear it either”—something that was equivalent to tenderness came into his voice. Aunt Anne drew her breath as she heard it. “You know I am fond of you; I never was fond of anybody else.”

“Mother says when you first had her rooms in the Gray’s Inn Road, there was some girl you used to go out with?”

“She was fond of me,” he said; “I didn’t care about her.”

“My goodness! look at the rain,” said the woman, as it came pouring down; “we must stay here till it’s over a bit. Alfred, you are sure you are as fond of me as ever?”

“I am just as fond of you; I am fonder. You don’t suppose I stay with an old woman from choice, do you? I do it just as much for your sake as mine,

Caroline.”

“Call me your wife again—you haven’t said it lately—and kiss me, do kiss me.”

“You are my wife,” he said, “and you know I am fond of you, and——” Aunt Anne heard the sound of his kisses. “I like holding you again,” he went on; “it’s awful being always with that old woman.”

“Well, you don’t have to kiss her, as she’s your aunt,” she said with a laugh.

“I have to kiss her night and morning,” he answered; “but I get out of her way as much as possible—you can bet that.”

“Mother and grandmother are always saying, perhaps she will give you the slip and leave her money to somebody else.”

“I don’t think she’ll do that,” he said; “but that’s one reason why I keep a sharp look-out.”

“Hasn’t she got anything now? You don’t seem to get much out of her, if she has.”

“She’s a close-fisted old woman. Come up closer on my shoulder—I like feeling your face there.”

“Suppose she died to-morrow,” the woman said—“where would you be then?”

“Of course there’s that danger. One must risk something.”

“And is she sure to get money when this—what is it—her cousin—dies?”

“She’ll get five and twenty thousand pounds. I have seen his will, so I know it’s true.”

“Does she know herself?”

“No”—and he laughed a little short laugh.

Aunt Anne, listening and shuddering, remembered, oddly, that she had hardly ever heard him laugh in her life before.

“But how did you manage to see the will?”

“I told you before, Caroline, I saw it in my uncle’s office; so there is no mistake about it, if that is what you mean.”

Aunt Anne nodded her weary head to herself. "William Rammage is right," she thought; "he is justified. I might have known that at least he would not deceive me."

"And has she left it all to you, Alfred?" the girl's voice—for it was a girl's voice—asked.

"Every penny. I took good care of that; and I'll take good care she doesn't alter it, too."

"But when do you think she'll get it?"

"As soon as this cousin of hers dies. He has been dying these ever so many months," Alfred Wimple said discontentedly; "only he's so long about it."

"But she won't give it to you right away when she has got it herself. You'll have to wait till she dies."

"I don't think she'll live long," he said grimly; "I'm half afraid, sometimes, that she won't last as long as he will, unless he makes haste."

"We'll have good times, Alfred, once we've got our money?"

"Yes, we will," he answered with determination.

"You mustn't think that I care only for the money," the girl went on; "it's your being away that I care about most."

"I care about money; I want money, Caroline. I don't like being poor."

"You see, I have always been poor, and don't mind so much."

"You won't be poor by-and-by, when the old woman is dead. I hope she'll be quicker than her cousin over it, for I can't stand it much longer."

"Isn't she kind to you?"

"I suppose she means to be kind," he said gratingly. "But she whines about me so, and is always wanting to kiss me"—and he made a harsh sound in his throat. "I can't bear being kissed by an old woman."

"It doesn't matter when she is your aunt; it isn't as if you were married to her. Wouldn't it be awful to be married to an old woman?"

"Ugh! I think I should kill her, Caroline. Let's talk about something else."

"Let's say all we'll do when we get our money, Alfred dear," the girl said in a wheedling voice. "I am glad of this rain, for we can't go back till it

leaves off a bit; let's say all we'll do when we get her money."

"I believe you care more about her money than you do about me," he said, in the grumbling voice Aunt Anne knew well.

"No, you don't"—and she laughed a little; "you don't think that a bit. I am fonder of you than the day I was married."

"You were fond enough then," he said almost tenderly; "I remember seeing you kiss your wedding-gown as you sat and stitched at it the night before."

"I thought I'd never get it done in time."

"You were determined to have a new one, weren't you?"

"I thought it would be unlucky if I didn't, though there wasn't anybody but you to see it. It isn't that I care for money, Alfred," she went on—"don't think it. It's only mother that makes the fuss. We'll pay her up quick when we've got it, and we'll be awfully good to grandmother; but, as for me, I wouldn't care if you hadn't a penny. It's only you I want."

"And it's only you I want," he said, with a little cough that belied his words.

"What is that rustling, Alfred—is there any one about?"

"It's only the rain among the grass and leaves; I wish it'd leave off—I ought to be getting in."

"What time is she coming from London?"

"I expect she'll be here soon now. You had better give me that money, Caroline."

"It's hidden in my dress—wait till I get it out. I hope mother won't hear I was paid, or she'll wonder what I've done with it."

"I can't do without a little money," he said, in the tone Aunt Anne had often heard; "and the old woman is so close-fisted she expects me to account for everything she gives me."

"Well, there it is—twenty-two shillings and sixpence. I don't want grandmother to know, for she said last time she wondered you liked taking it."

"A man has a right to his wife's earnings," he said firmly.

“Well, I’ve got three dresses in the house to do; they’ll come to a good bit. It isn’t that I mind giving it. Alfred! there’s some one against the back of the shed.”

“It’s only the branches of the trees brushing against it,” he said. “I must go back—the old woman will be coming home.”

“Don’t go till it stops raining a bit,” she pleaded; “and put your arms tighter round me, I am not with you so often now. Aren’t you glad I am not an old woman?”

“Ugh!”—and he made a sound of disgust again. “Old women make me sick.”

“Well, you’ll be old long before I am,” she said, with a triumphant laugh. “My goodness! look at the rain.”

Aunt Anne went slowly along the narrow pathway, down into the valley, and up towards the larch and fir-trees again. Her strength was almost spent when she reached the garden. She bent her head beneath the downpour, and dragged herself, in such frightened haste as she could manage, to the house. She stopped for a moment beneath the verandah, as if to be sure that she was awake. She looked, half incredulously down at her wet and clinging clothes, and then into the darkness and distance. Beyond the trees and across the valley she knew that two people were saying their good-byes. She imagined their looks and words, and their caresses. It seemed as if the whole world were theirs—it had been pulled from under her feet to make a heaven for them. She was trembling with cold and fear, but she told herself that there was one thing left at which she must clutch a little longer—her self-control and dignity.

“I thought,” she said bewildered, and with the strange hunted look on her face, as she entered the cottage—“I thought God had forgiven me and sent him back, but it is all a mistake. Perhaps it is part of my punishment.” Everything looked strange to her; as if years had passed since she had gone out only an hour ago. She stood by the drawing-room door for a moment, looking in at the fire that had burned up and made a cheerful blaze, but she was afraid to go nearer to it. She felt like an outcast from everywhere; there was no place for her in the world, no one who wanted her, nothing left to do. And there was no love for her, and no forgetfulness; she had to bear pain—that alone was her portion. She wanted most of all to lie down and die, but death and love alike are often strangely difficult to those who need them most. She meandered into the kitchen, without any settled plan of what she was going to do.

“Jane,” she said, “the moment you have finished taking in the dinner, I want you to go upstairs and follow the directions I will give you.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jane answered, with some astonishment when she had listened to them; “but do you mean to-night?”

“Yes, I mean to-night,” Aunt Anne said, and turned away.

“Let me take your shawl, ma’am; it is wringing wet.”

“I shall be glad if you will divest me of it,” the old lady said gently, “and if you will bring me my cap and slippers; I am fatigued, and cannot ascend the stairs.” She sat down for a minute, and listened to Jane’s footsteps going and returning. It seemed as if the whole house were full of shame and agony; a single step in any direction might take her into its midst—she did not dare venture there till she had finished the task that was before her. She went into the dining-room, with a strange, bewildered air still upon her, as if she were doubtful whether it was the room that she had known so well, or if it had, somehow, been changed in the last hour. The cloth was laid; the primroses were in their place; the candles were lighted, for it was nearly dinner-time; the blinds were down, and the curtains drawn. She looked at the easy-chair she had put ready for Alfred, with the little table beside it, and the papers and the violets. Then she went up to the mantelpiece and rang a hand-bell that stood on it.

“Jane,” she said, “take away Mr. Wimple’s slippers—he will not require them; put them with the other things as I told you.” She pushed the easy-chair to its place, away from the fire, put the little table back into the corner, and hid the papers and the violets out of sight, for she could not bear to see them. She looked at the cloth again, and taking up the things that had been laid for her carried them to the sideboard.

“You need not set a place for me,” she said to Jane, who still lingered, half wondering. “I dined early in town; it is only for Mr. Wimple”—and she went back to the drawing-room. She hesitated for a moment by the door; she felt as if the dead people who had known it in bygone years were softly crowding into it now, as if they would witness the scene that was before her, and look on at all she had to bear, just for a little while, before she became one of them. She gathered courage to walk to one of the chairs; she put the peacock screen beside her and waited. A quarter of an hour went by, while she stared at the fire with her hands clasped and her head drooping, or at the darkness outside the windows that looked towards the garden. But she could scarcely bear to turn her head in that direction. All the time she was

listening, curiously and with a shrinking dread, for the sound of footsteps. Jane came to her.

“The dinner is ready,” she said; “it’s a pity Mr. Wimple don’t come—I wanted to get home to mother a bit early to-night. Her cough was worse this morning.”

“You can go as soon as you have finished your duties,” Aunt Anne said; “and remind me to pay you your wages, for I am often oblivious——”

The words died away on her lips. She heard the handle of the hall-door turn.





CHAPTER VIII.

THE rain showed no signs of abating, but Alfred Wimple was chilly and hungry. Moreover, he was tired of the *tête-à-tête* in the shed, and he had a dull curiosity to hear the result of Aunt Anne's visit to town. It was certain to provide some sort of excitement for the evening. If she had brought back money he would reap the benefit of it; if she had not, he could at least make her suffer, and to watch her suffer would provide him a satisfaction over which he gloated more and more with every experience of it. He buttoned his coat, turned up the bottoms of his trousers, and looked for his umbrella; then he hesitated a moment and looked out at the weather. He hated rain.

"I wish I had thought to bring myself an umbrella," his companion said; "it's a long way across. Joe Pook is over at the King's Head with his cart, and he'll drive me back; but it's a good bit to there."

Alfred Wimple coughed.

"I can't let you have mine"—and he held it firmly; "my chest is not strong."

"I wasn't saying it for that," she answered; "I was only thinking it was a pity I didn't bring one. Good-bye; you'll take care of yourself, won't you?"

"I will try," he said, in his most sombre manner, as though he felt it to be an important undertaking. "Good-bye, Caroline."

Before they were many yards apart she turned and went after him. Her jacket was already wet with rain; her black straw hat was shining. There was an anxious excitement in her manner.

"Alfred"—she put her hand on his shoulder and looked at his face while she spoke—"you care about me really, don't you?"

"Why do you ask that now?" he asked severely.

"I don't know. Mother said once that you had love for nothing but yourself. It isn't true, is it? Sometimes I think I would have done better if I had married Albert Spark. I believe he's fonder of me now than you are."

He looked impatient and at a loss what to do. He could not understand unselfish love; self-protection was his own strongest feeling; everything else was merely a means, a weapon to be used in attaining it.

“You mustn’t keep me in the rain,” he said; “the old woman will be back by this time. Why do you think I don’t care for you?”

“I don’t know,” and as she spoke the tears came into her eyes; “I think it was because you just let me go in the rain and didn’t see that I’d get wet through. It doesn’t matter, but I’d like you to have seen it.”

“You are stronger than I am. It is dangerous for me to get wet: I came out in the rain to meet you.”

“And then, perhaps I oughtn’t to say it, but you took the money and didn’t offer me a shilling to keep for myself.”

“I didn’t know you wanted it. You can’t expect me to go without anything in my pocket?”

“No,” and she burst into tears; “it’s only sometimes I get dissatisfied,” she added apologetically.

“You should have done it in the shed. You ought not to keep me here in the rain. You know that.”

“No, I oughtn’t; you go on, dear”—there was sudden repentance in her voice. “Just kiss me and say you are fond of me again.” He leaned over her, and for a moment his eyes flashed, as he kissed her with a loathsome eagerness that left the woman’s heart more hungry than before.

“I am fond of you,” he said; “you know I am fond of you—when I see you. But I can’t come to Liphook to be dunned for money.”

“I always do the best I can to get things for you; and if I have plenty of work I’ll take care it’s more comfortable, if you’ll only come. There, go now, Alfred dear. I don’t want to keep you in the wet. It’s only that we have been married these four years, and, somehow, we never seem to have got any good of it yet.” She put her arms round his neck for a moment “I am awful fond of you,” she said, and turned away.

Something in her voice touched him; or it might have been that he was fonder of her than he supposed, for as he went by the pathway that poor Aunt Anne had hurried along, bowed down with insult and despair, only twenty minutes before, there was a less sullen expression than usual on his face. He thought of the clinging hands and tearful eyes, and the undisguised love written on her face, with something like satisfaction. He would settle

down with her, once he possessed the money. He liked the idea of it; it would be good to be waited upon by her, to go abroad with her perhaps, to buy comfort and luxury, and to feel her hanging about him. He lingered in thought over her caresses; he remembered Aunt Anne's and shuddered. He had said truly enough that he could not bear the latter much longer; toleration had grown to endurance, endurance to dislike, and dislike to loathing. He was sensible of even being beneath the same roof with her; her voice irritated him, her touch produced a feeling that was almost fear. Every step he made now towards the house that contained her was reluctant and almost shrinking. He could just bear life with her if she gave him good food and comfort and money he could not obtain elsewhere; but unless she gave him these things, which he counted worth any price that could be paid, he felt it would be impossible to stay with her longer. Warmth and idleness and comfort were gods to him; but his loathing for the poor soul who had struggled for months to give them to him was developing into horror. He waited, doggedly, day after day for Sir William Rammage's death. When that happened he would seize the money that would be hers and, without mercy, leave her to her fate; he and Caroline could easily keep out of her reach. If she would not give him the money he would make life impossible for her to bear. He had not the least intention of murdering her, but in imagination he often put his hands round her throat, and all his fingers felt her life growing still beneath them. He resented everything she did: her voice, her footstep, her tender, wrinkled face; he felt as if her winking left eye were driving him mad—as if there were poison in her breath. He considered her life an offence against him, except as a means of giving him money. When once she had done that, when she had given him the thousands for which he had married her, he wanted her for ever out of his sight, and underground; he gloated in imagination over the deepness of the grave into which he would have her put, and the silence and darkness that would surround her.

He was at the bottom of the dip. He reflected, with triumph, that it was too late for any question of going to the station to meet the half-past six o'clock train. He thought of the rain that would fall upon her as she drove to the cottage. He wondered if she had left her cloak behind, and imagined the cold and pain she would suffer without it. He could see her in the open cart, bending her head and shoulders beneath the grey storm, carrying the bag that contained the dinner for him, and he imagined the bulging condition in which the bag would return. If she had not brought back all he considered necessary for his comfort, she would tremble to see him, and he would not spare her one single pang. He was among the firs and larches, within sight of

the cottage windows. He hated to think that she was behind them—that almost immediately he would be in the same room with her, sitting opposite to her at table. He thought of himself as a martyr, and of her as a loathsome burden, a presence that had no right to be inflicted on him; one that he would be justified in using any means within his power to remove. His feeling for her had grown in intensity till it threatened to burst the bonds of reserve and silence in which he had wrapped himself. It was only with an effort that he could keep in all the lashing words that hatred could suggest. He went up the pathway, as slowly as she herself had done, and walked round the house under the verandah. Unknowingly, in putting the easy-chair back into its place, Aunt Anne had pushed aside a little bit of the dining-room curtain. He looked in and saw the table laid, the candles burning, and the bowl of primroses; they were a sign that she had returned, and had not returned empty-handed. He noticed that only one place was laid, and he wondered vaguely what it meant. He thought of Aunt Anne's face, and a sickening feeling came over him. If it had only been a girl's face to which he was going in, a young woman who would come to meet him, and put her arms round his neck, and call him endearing names, instead of the old woman, shrivelled and wrinkled, to whom in a moment or two he would have to submit himself? He went towards the front door, vaguely determining that he would make her miserable that night. He had a right to everything she could give, but she had no right to intrude herself upon his sight, and he would make her feel it.

There was a click at the gate. Some one had entered the garden from the road. He stopped. A boy came up to him through the darkness.

“Wimple? A telegram, sir. There is sixpence for portorage.” He felt in his pocket among the silver the woman had given him in the shed; he found a sixpence, and the boy departed. He opened the yellow envelope, and stood still for a moment, with the telegram in his hand. He guessed what it meant. He took a match from his pocket, struck a light, and, protecting it from the wind with his hat, read:

“Died at five o'clock from sudden attack.”

He screwed it up into a ball and put it carefully into his pocket. His feeling for Aunt Anne changed in a moment: he felt that for this one evening, at any rate, he would endure her—he would even be civil—since it was through her that he was about to gain all he wanted. He looked up at the cottage before he entered it with the almost pleasant feeling with which a

prisoner sometimes looks at his cell before he departs into freedom. Aunt Anne was sitting by the drawing-room fire; he lingered by the doorway.

“You are home, then?” he said. There was something exalted in his voice, that at another time would have made her look up at him lovingly, as he expected to see her do now. But, instead, she answered coldly and without any words of greeting—

“Yes, Alfred, I am home.”

“What did you do in town?” She winked haughtily and did not speak. “What did you do?” he repeated.

“I did a great deal, and learned many things of which I will tell you when you have finished your dinner. It is quite ready—you will be good enough to go to it, Alfred.”

He looked at her searchingly, and felt a little uneasiness.

“Are you coming?” he asked, seeing that she did not move.

“No, I have dined; but I trust you will be satisfied with what I have provided for you,” she said coldly. Something in her manner forced him reluctantly to obey. He went into the dining-room; she shut the door that led into it and waited in the drawing-room. Jane came in after she had served the sole, and drew down the blinds and arranged the curtains and threw some wood on the fire.

“There is only one candle left,” she said, “till the two in the dining-room are done with.”

“It is quite sufficient; you can light it and put it on the table. As soon as you have finished waiting upon Mr. Wimple you will go upstairs and do what I have told you”—and she was left alone again. While she looked at the fire she could almost imagine Alfred Wimple eating his sole; she knew when it was finished; she listened while Jane entered and pushed his plate through the buttery-hatch; she heard the chicken arrive, and imagined Alfred Wimple solemnly carving it. Her heart beat faster as he went on towards the end of his feast; she was impatient for the crisis to begin. At last he rose from the table, opened the door, and stood looking at her curiously. She rose too and waited, facing him, on the rug.

“Did you bring a paper from town, Anne?” he asked, without a word of gratitude for his dainty dinner.

“Yes, I brought some papers; but you will not require them.” She hesitated a moment, and then went on firmly, “I wish you to know, Alfred,

that you are about to leave this house never to enter it again.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, and fastened his eyes on her with only a little more expression in them than usual.

“I mean that I know everything.”

“Have you seen my uncle?” he asked, betraying no surprise and not moving from the doorway.

“He is in Scotland for a fortnight—but I know everything. I know that you have insulted and defamed me.” She spoke in a low voice and so calmly that he looked at her as if he thought she did not understand the meaning of her own words. “Till I met you,” she went on, “I bore an unsullied name and reputation.”

“What have I done to your name and reputation?” he asked, and closed his lips as though he were almost stupefied with silence. But he went a step towards her, with a shrinking, defensive movement. She retreated towards the table on which the candle stood, a flickering witness of the scene between them—a scene full of shame and suffering and unconfessed fear for her, and of cruelty and loathing and bewilderment for him; but for both strangely destitute of fire and passion.

“You have ruined both,” she said. “You have dared to make a pretence of marriage with me, though you were married already to an inferior person whom you had known at your lodgings.”

“Who told you this?”

“I shall not tell you my informant, but I know everything. You will retire from my presence this evening and never enter it again.”

“It is not true,” he said shortly, and made another step towards her, and again she retreated.

“It is true. To-morrow I shall go to Liphook and expose your infamous behaviour.”

“If you dare,” he said, almost fiercely, and then, suddenly, he changed his note. “I was obliged to do it, Anne,” he added, as if he had suddenly seen that the game was up, and lying would serve him nothing. “But I was fond of you; I told you there were many difficulties the night I asked you to marry me.”

“No, Alfred”—and for the first time her lips quivered—“you were not fond of me, even then. You were under the impression that you would get

the money Sir William Rammage had left me in his will.”

“What should I know about his will?”

“You were aware of its contents. You went to him in regard to the instructions. I have heard everything from his own lips.” He was silent for a moment, and still there was no expression in his dull eyes.

“Rammage could not tell you that I was married,” he said presently. “Where did you get that ridiculous story from?”

“It is not a ridiculous story. You have married a common dressmaker, and you presumed after that to insult and impose on me.”

“What are you going to do—what do you want me to do?” he asked, almost curiously.

“I shall not treat you with the severity you deserve, but you will leave this house to-night and never enter it again.”

“I should go to Liphook. You would not like that, Anne.”

“Alfred,” she said indignantly, “I could not accept shame and degradation, even from a man I love. Besides, I have no longer any love for you. You will not dare to offer me that. Every moment that you stay in my presence is an insult. I must insist on your leaving this house at once.”

“Where am I to go?” he asked, still curiously.

“That is for your consideration. You and I are apart.”

“I have no money,” he said, too much astonished, though he made no sign of it, to fight her fairly.

“You have sufficient money for your present necessities, Alfred. You must not think that you can deceive me any longer. I know everything about you.”

Suddenly an idea occurred to him, and he asked, in a manner that was almost a threat, though it had no effect upon her—

“Have you been to Liphook?”

“I shall not tell you where I have been, Alfred; I have discovered your baseness, and that is sufficient. I know that our marriage was a mockery, that you dared to offer me what you had already given to another woman. You will go back to her, and at once. You came to me solely for my money, and of that you will not have one penny piece.”

Still he stood looking at her speechlessly, while with each word she said his loathing for her increased and his anger grew more difficult to control. His lips parted and showed his teeth, white and clenched together.

“I will have the money yet; and you shall suffer,” he said.

“You will not,” she answered, with a determined wink. “I have taken care of that.”

“You have left it to me.”

For a moment she was silent; then a light broke upon her, and she spoke quickly.

“Alfred,” she said, “I know now why you put your name in my will without mentioning the relationship in which I supposed you stood to me, and why you did not put my name in yours, but only said that you left everything to your wife. You were deliberately insulting me, and deceiving me most cruelly even then, on the day I thought most sacred.”

“I thought you were fond of me,” he said, as if he had not heard her last speech. For a moment she could not answer him. Only a few hours before, and the deceptions of which she had known him then to be guilty had but made him dearer to her. She had loved him with all her own strength, and supposed him to possess it. She had idealized him with her own goodness, till she had mistaken it for his. It had never occurred to her that any comfort she gathered in through him was but her own feeling returning to soothe her a little with its beauty. Now all the glamour had vanished, she loathed and shrank from him, just as he had done from her. It was like a death agony.

“I was fond of you,” she said. “I loved you more than all the world, and I would have given you my life, I would have worked for your daily bread. I wanted nothing in the world but you, Alfred; but I am undeceived. You must go; you must leave me, and at once. I have desired Jane to pack your things _____”

“I shall stay,” he said, in a tone that made her look up quickly. “I do not mean to go until I have the money that old Rammage has left you.”

“You will not have one penny piece of it,” she answered.

“I will,” he said, with a quiet, determined look she knew well in his dull eyes. “He has left it to you, and you have left it to me. I mean to have it.”

“It is no use trying to intimidate me, Alfred,” she said; “it is too late. Tomorrow I shall make another disposition of my property.”

“No, you will not,” he said; “for I shall not let you out of my sight till you are dead, and you will be dead soon.”

“You will gain nothing by that, Alfred. William Rammage also will make another disposition of his property to-morrow, for I told him of our marriage.”

“No, he will not, Anne” and he looked at her with awful triumph—“for he is dead already.”

“Dead already? You are trying to hoodwink me, Alfred; and if it is true it will not alter my intention or prevent me from carrying it out,” she answered, determined not to let him know that her promised wealth had vanished. There was a sound of footsteps, and then the back door closed. Aunt Anne quaked when she heard it, for she knew that Jane had gone home without coming to say the usual good-night. He heard it, too, and his tone altered in a moment.

“You will have no chance of altering your intention, Anne,” he said, and went another step towards her.

“Why?” she asked, with a fearless wink.

“Because you shall not live to do it”—and he went still a little nearer; but she did not quail for a moment. “Do you hear?” and he showed his teeth while he spoke, “you shall not live to do it.”

“And you think when I am dead that you will go and spend my money with the woman at Liphook?”

“Yes,” he said; “I like her, and I loathe you.” He drew the word out as if he gloated over the sound of it, and an awful look came into his eyes again.

“Heaven has frustrated your design,” she said. “Alfred, if you kill me you will gain nothing by it, and the law will punish you. William Rammage has burnt his will. He burnt it to-day before my eyes, when he heard that I had disgraced my family and my name by a marriage with you.”

“Burnt it!” He clenched his hands, and struggled to control himself. “Then I shall go; I shall go—when it suits me. I only wanted your money. A young man does not marry an old woman for anything but money, Anne. You are loathsome—loathsome and unwholesome,” he repeated, watching the effect of every word upon her—“and I have loathed being with you. I shall go to the other woman. She is my wife; I like her—she is young, not old and loathsome like you. I only married you for the sake of your money.” Aunt Anne never moved an inch; she only watched him steadily, as slowly

he brought out his sentences, pausing between each one. “You have kept me from her all these months,” he went on, concentrating himself on every word he said; “and now you have taken from me the money I deserved for being with you—for being with a wrinkled, withered old woman.”

She did not move or speak. For a moment he showed his teeth again, then slowly lifted his hands.

“Anne,” he said, with a fiendish look in his eyes, but with the calm gravity of a just avenger, “I am going to strangle you”—and he went nearer and bent over her. He had no intention of carrying out his threat, it was a luxury he dared not afford himself, but he wanted to torture and frighten her till she quailed before him. For only one moment was his desire satisfied.

“If you dare to touch me——” she said, and a shriek burst from her. There was the sound of a door opening and of footsteps entering.

“Jane!” shouted Aunt Anne, “Jane!”

Jane opened the door and looked in.

“If you please, ma’am, I heard Mr. Knox, the policeman, go by, and you said you wanted him.”

Alfred Wimple stared at her in astonishment, and his face blanched. Aunt Anne recovered her self-possession in a moment, though she trembled from head to foot.

“If you will ask him to stay in the kitchen, I will speak to him,” she said. Then she turned to Alfred Wimple again.

“You will only get yourself laughed at,” he said.

She was silent a moment; she saw what was in his thoughts and took advantage of it.

“You do not deserve my clemency,” she said, “but I will extend it to you, provided you go from the house this minute. If you do not I shall take measures to punish you.”

He was trembling, and could not speak.

She opened the door. “Jane,” she called, “get Mr. Wimple’s portmanteau; have you put everything into it?”

“Everything but the slippers. It’s raining, ma’am,” Jane added, not in the least understanding what was going on. But Aunt Anne had shut the door, and turned to Alfred Wimple again.

“Now you will go,” she said.

“I cannot go in the rain,” he answered, and made a sound in his throat; “you know how bad my cough is. You cannot turn me out in this weather. I was angry just now; but I did not mean it. I was only trying to frighten you.”

“You will go immediately,” she said; “you shall not remain another hour under my roof.”

“It will kill me to go in this rain,” he said doggedly.

“You would have killed me when you thought you would get William Rammage’s money by it; and just now you threatened me, Alfred. You are not fit to remain another hour in the same house with the woman you have wronged, and you shall not. Your coat is in the hall, ready for you”—and she went towards the door. “You will go this very moment, and you will never venture to come near me again.”

“I have been coughing all day,” he almost pleaded, utterly confounded by the turn things had taken.

“I brought you some lozenges from London, before I knew all your baseness”—and she fumbled in her pocket. “Here they are, and you can take them with you.” She put them down before him on the table, and went slowly out to the kitchen. “Officer,” she said, “I will not detain you about the wood this evening. I want you to walk with Mr. Wimple as far as Steggall’s, and see him into a waggonette; and there,” she added, in a low voice, “is a half-crown to recompense you for your trouble.”

“It’s very wet, ma’am; is the gentleman obliged to go to-night?”

“Yes”—and, winking sternly, she opened the street door wide. “Yes, he is obliged to go to-night.” With a puzzled air Jane picked up the portmanteau. Alfred Wimple took it from her with sulky reluctance. For a moment they all stood looking out at the blackness of the fir-trees and listened to the falling rain. Aunt Anne turned to the little hat-stand in the hall. “Here is an umbrella, Alfred,” she said, “and you have your lozenges. Good-night, officer”—and she did not say another word. Alfred Wimple gave her a long look of cowed and baffled hatred, as he went out, followed by the policeman. She shut the door, double-locked it, and drew the bolts at the top and bottom—it was the last sound that Wimple heard as he left the cottage.

For a moment she stood still, listening to his footsteps; she waited to hear the click of the gate as it shut behind them. Then, with a strange, dazed

manner, as if she were not quite sure that she was awake, she went back to the drawing-room.

“If you please, ma’am,” asked the servant, “isn’t Mr. Wimple coming back to-night?—for you won’t like being left alone, and I don’t know what to do about mother.”

“You can go to her,” Aunt Anne answered. A desperate longing to be alone was upon her; she wanted to think quietly, and it seemed impossible to do so while any one remained beneath the same roof with her. She was impatient for a spell of loneliness before she died. She felt that she was going to die, that she had heard her death-sentence in the shed beyond the valley. There was no gainsaying it—shame and agony were going to kill her. But first she wanted to be alone, to realize all that had happened, and how it had come about. She remembered suddenly, but only for a moment, that Alfred had stated that Sir William Rammage was dead. It was untrue, of course—Alfred could not have known. Besides, William Rammage’s life or death concerned her no longer; in his money she took no further interest. She only wanted to be alone and to think. “You can go to your mother, Jane,” she repeated; “I wish to be left alone; I have a predilection for solitude.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the girl answered hesitatingly—“and you said I was to remind you about the wages; I wouldn’t, only mother’s bad.”

“I will pay them.” She opened her purse and counted out the few silver coins left in it. “I must remain a sixpence in your debt; this is all the change I have for the moment.” She put her empty purse down on the table, and knew that she had not a penny left in the world. For a moment she was silent; she looked puzzled, as if she were doing a mental sum. Then she looked up. “Jane,” she said, “you can take the remains of the chicken and the sole to your mother, and anything else that was left from dinner. I shall not require it.” She dreaded seeing the things that Alfred Wimple had touched. She felt that, even down to the smallest detail, she must rid herself of all that had had to do with her life of shame and disgrace, and there was not much time left her in which to do it. She must begin at once: when she had made her life clean and spotless again she would look up and meet death unabashed.

“I am ready, ma’am,” Jane said presently, and looked in, with her basket on her arm. Aunt Anne got up and followed her to the back door, in order to see that it was made fast. She shook with fear when she beheld the night. Under that sky and through the darkness Alfred Wimple was making his

way to Liphook. The very air seemed to have pollution in it. She retreated thankfully to the covering of the cottage; but the stillness appalled her, once she was wholly alone in it. She stood in the hall for a moment and listened: there was not a sound. She waited for a moment at the foot of the stairs and remembered Alfred's room above, from which every trace of him had been removed, but she had not courage to mount the stairs. She went back into the little drawing-room and shut the door, and taking up her empty purse from beside the candlestick put it into her pocket. As in the morning, her hand touched something that should not be there; but she knew what it was this time, and pulled it out quickly. It was the blue tie that she had kissed in the train. With almost a cry of horror, as if it were a deadly snake, she threw it on the fire and held it down with the poker, as William Rammage had held down his burning will. As she did so her eyes caught the wedding-ring on her left hand; in a moment she had pulled it off her trembling finger and put it in the fire too. The flame blazed and smouldered and died away, and her excitement with it. But she had not strength to rise from the floor on which she had been kneeling; she pulled the cushion down from the back of the easy-chair, and sank, a miserable heap, upon the rug.





CHAPTER IX.

DURING the days that followed she was shut up in the cottage alone; and no one entered save Jane Mitchell, who came in the morning to light the fire while the remnant of coal lasted, and then was sent away.

“I shall not require you any more,” she said to Lucas, when he came to ask if she wanted the pony. She was covered with shame, and could never drive along the roads again.

“No, I do not need any provisions,” she said to Jane Mitchell, who offered to do some shopping for her; “I have sufficient in the house, and I will not trouble you to come again, Jane, until this day week”—and, having securely fastened the outer doors, she went to the drawing-room.

“I shall be dead by then,” she thought, “and Jane will find me.”

She was terribly ill, but she did not know it. The cold and the damp of that long day in London and afterwards had laid hold on her. She coughed, and knew that swift pains went through her, and a load was on her chest, but she had no time to notice these things. She had had no food for days. Save a little milk in a cup, and some bread, there was nothing left when Jane Mitchell took her departure. She was being slowly starved; she knew it, and did not care. The awful shame, the misery, the agony, that had overtaken her, stifled all other feelings, and were killing her; she knew that, too, and waited for death. Everything had gone out of her life; there was nothing to come into it more. She had been proud of her memories, her unsullied past, her own spotlessness—“Now it is all gone,” she said to herself. Every memory was a reproach or was hideous. She sat on one of the chairs before the drawing-room fireplace, and thought and thought and thought, till she could bear it no longer. It seemed as if pain were stamping the life out of her, as if she must be dying; she could feel that she was dying; but life remained by a little, and grew keen, and tortured her again. The key was turned in the lock of Alfred Wimple’s room, but his touch was on everything in the house; and a shrinking from it was her strongest feeling concerning him. Even the sight of a cup from which he had drunk made her shudder more than the bitter cold. “The place is contaminated,” she said to herself; “it is poisoned.” Sometimes for a few minutes a little tenderness would try to push its way

into her heart again, but she shrank from that most of all, and with horror and loathing of herself. She was bowed down with disgrace. She felt as if by even living she was committing an offence against the whole world. There was no one she was fit to see; she had no right of any sort left, no business to be in the light; and there was no place in which she could hide. The nights were worst of all, they were so long and still; and when she had used the two candles left in the dining-room she had no means of shortening them even by an hour. Then, quaking, she lay on the hard sofa in the drawing-room, while the darkness gathered round, and the cold fastened its sharpest fangs into her. In those long hours she suffered not only her own reproaches, but the reproaches of the dead—of the dear ones she had loved in bygone years. From every corner they seemed to come—through the closed door and in at the curtained windows; troops of them—till she could bear it no longer, and dared not see the darkness that seemed to be growing white with their faces. But when she closed her eyes it was no better: they came a little closer and touched her with their hands, as if they would push her a little farther into space; she was not fit to be among them. The friends of her girlhood, with whom she had played and shared her little secrets, came from the strange world into which they had carried the memory of their own blameless lives. They looked at her reproachfully, and went away; she would never be one of them now, even in eternity. And there was one more; she could see him coming softly through the shadows. He stood beside her, and she cowered and hid her face. Then she knew that he was sorry and understood that, in some grotesque manner, it had been done half for love of him. It comforted her a little to think this, while she turned her face down to the cushion, and sobbed, “Forgive me, I am so ashamed—so ashamed.” At last, perhaps, she would ache with fever and cold, and the sharp pains went through her again. She welcomed these almost lovingly, thinking that perhaps they meant the coming of the end; and gradually, as the morning broke, she would doze off into a weary sleep.

Sometimes a ghastly fear would seize her that Alfred Wimple was coming back. She could hear his footsteps going round the house; she fancied he was creeping beneath the verandah, that he was trying the window. He wanted to come in and strangle her. She could feel his long hands closing round her throat, and put up her own to draw them, finger by finger, away. It was not the killing she would mind, but the pollution of his touch.

Through the day she wandered from room to room—now looking at the table at which he had sat the last night of all; or seeing him, with his back to the buttery-hatch, eating the sole and the chicken she had brought from

London; or standing in the doorway, when he came afterwards and asked her for the evening paper. She went to the window and looked at the garden, and the pathway down to the dip; but this was more than she could bear, and she would turn away and sit down by the empty fireplace again. She grew hungry once; a terrible craving for food came over her. She gathered some sticks together, and made a fire, all the time seeing strange visions and grinning fiends that mocked her. She took them to be the punishment of her sin—for sin she counted all that she had done—but in reality they were but signs of the illness and starvation that were contending for the mastery of her. She put a little water on to boil over the blazing sticks, and watched it greedily. She made some tea, with trembling eagerness, and found a new excitement in the strength it gave her; but when the fire had died away, and an hour had passed, she was prostrate again. Gradually she became so ill that she could scarcely drag herself from the drawing-room to the kitchen; the sense of being unfit to stay in the world grew upon her—a dread of seeing people, a haunting fear of some one coming to the door. But no one came through all those terrible days except, once or twice, Jane Mitchell, only to be told that “her services were not required.”

She thought of Walter and Florence sometimes, and was afraid of their coming back. She could never look them in the face again, or dare to speak to them, or see the children. Just as before she had exaggerated her own importance in the world and her own virtue, now she exaggerated her own disgrace. She knew what the women she had once despised felt like—“I was never lenient,” she said to herself. “I was very harsh, as if they had gone out of their way to do wrong. I ought to have shown them more clemency”—and as she said this, there came before her the face of Mrs. North. She sat and looked at it. “She was young, and there was excuse for her; and I am old, yet could not forgive her. I will make atonement now. I will write and tell her.” Her fingers were so weak she could hardly hold the pen, but she managed to put down a little entreaty for forgiveness. “I ought to have been more gentle to you,” she wrote. “I know that now, for I have been as frail”—she stopped and gave a sad little wink at the word—“as you. I know what your sufferings have been by my own, and can pity your humiliation.” The letter remained on the table—she almost forgot it; fever and blackness filled her life—she could scarcely walk across the room.

The morning brought the postman, with a letter from Walter and Florence. “Would you put a postage-stamp on this for me?” she said, giving him the one for Mrs. North. “I will repay you the next time you come; I have no change for the moment.”

She put the letter with the Monte Carlo postmark on the mantelpiece, and stood looking at the familiar handwriting, and imagining them together beneath the blue sky, Walter in high spirits, and Florence with her pretty hair plaited round her head. "Dear children," she said. "He is growing more and more like his father." She closed her eyes for a moment; her limbs swayed and gave way beneath her; and she fell from sheer weakness, and could make no effort to rise. Presently she pulled the cushion down, and lay on the rug again as she had on the night of Alfred Wimple's departure. She did not know how the day passed—probably most of it went in forgetfulness. The next afternoon came, and she had not noticed the hours.

The click of the gate, and footsteps coming towards the house—Aunt Anne struggled up, panting, and listened—a quick knock at the door. She hesitated, raised herself to her feet by the armchair, and went out, but could not gather courage to undo the lock.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Let me in," cried a voice that was familiar enough, though she could not identify it. She bowed her head—she was about to be looked at in all her humiliation—and, with trembling hands, opened the door.

Mrs. North walked in, with a happy laugh. She was perfectly dressed, as usual, and carried a white basket.

"My dear old lady," she said, "what is the matter? Your letter frightened me out of my senses. I came off the moment it arrived. You poor old darling, what is the matter? Why, you can't stand—I must carry you." She supported the old lady back into the drawing-room—cheerless and cold enough it looked; that was the first impression Mrs. North had of it—and sat down beside her on the sofa.

"My love," the old lady said, "I wrote to ask your forgiveness; it was due to you that I should, for I am worse than you. If I was harsh to you once, you may be harsh to me now."

Mrs. North pressed her hand.

"But you are ill, dear Mrs. Wimple," she said.

Aunt Anne looked up, with a start of horror.

"I must ask you never to call me by that name again; it is not mine. It is the symbol of my disgrace. It is my greatest punishment to remember that I ever for a single moment bore it." And then she broke down, and, dropping her head on Mrs. North's shoulder, sobbed as if her heart would break.

“You dear—you poor old dear,” Mrs. North said, stroking the scanty gray hair; “I can’t bear to see you cry—you mustn’t do it; you are ill. Who is here with you?”

“There is no one here. I am not fit to have any one with me. I am all alone.”

“All alone!”

“Yes”—and she shook her head.

“Then I shall stay and take care of you, and nurse you, and make you quite well again. You know I always cared for you, dear old lady”—and Mrs. North kissed her tenderly.

“And I treated you with so much severity,” Aunt Anne said ruefully.

“It was very good for me. And now,” Mrs. North said, in her sweet, coaxing voice, “put your feet up on the sofa; you are trembling and shaking with cold. Why, you have no fire; let us go into another room where there is one.”

“There is no fire in the house,” Aunt Anne answered. “The weather is very mild; moreover, the coal-cellar needs replenishing. I have not been sufficiently well to do it.”

“No fire!—and you evidently suffering from bronchitis. Oh, you do indeed need to be looked after. Have you no servant here?” Mrs. North was rapidly taking in the whole situation.

“No, my dear. I wished to be alone.”

“But this is terrible. We must set everything to rights. You appear to be killing yourself. I don’t believe you have anything to eat and drink in the house.”

“No. I have been too ill to require nourishment; I regret that I cannot ask you to stay——”

“Oh, but I am going to stay——”

“No, my love, I cannot allow it——” Aunt Anne began tremblingly.

Mrs. North looked at her, almost in despair. Then she took off her hat and gloves, and stood for a moment, a lovely picture in the middle of the dreary room, before she knelt down by Aunt Anne.

“Let me stay with you,” she pleaded, taking the two thin hands in hers; “you were always so good to me. I know that something terrible has

happened to you; you shall tell me what it is by-and-by, when you are better. Now I want to take care of you; and you will let me, won't you?"

"You shall do anything you like, my dear," Aunt Anne gasped, too weak to offer resistance.

Then Mrs. North went out to the fly, which was still waiting at the gate, and found Jane Mitchell, who, attracted by the unusual sight, was talking to the driver.

"I want some coals sent at once, and a servant."

"I was the servant, if you please, ma'am; only Mrs. Wimple said she didn't want me," remarked Jane.

"Then go in immediately and make a fire," answered Mrs. North, imperiously; "and if there are no coals get some, from a shop or your mother's cottage or anywhere else. There must be shops in the village. Order tea and sugar, and everything else you can think of. I will send to London for my maid and cook, to come and help you. Make haste and light a fire in the drawing-room. Where is my shawl? Here, driver, take this telegram; and order these things from the village, and say they are wanted instantly"—she had written the list on the leaf of a note-book; "and this is for your trouble," she added.

"Now, you dear old lady," she said, going back to her, "let me put this shawl over your feet first, for we must make you warm. Consider that I have adopted you." In a moment she ran upstairs, and searched for a soft pillow to put under Aunt Anne's head, and then produced some grapes and jelly from the basket which, with a certain foresight, she had brought with her. Aunt Anne sucked in a little of the jelly almost eagerly, and as she did so Mrs. North realized that she had only just come in time. "We must send for a doctor," she thought; "but I am afraid that everything is too late."

In twenty-four hours the cottage looked like another place. Mrs. North's cook had taken possession of the kitchen; a comfortable-looking, middle-aged maid went up and down the stairs; the windows were open, though there were fires burning in all the grates. There were good things in the larder, and an atmosphere of home was everywhere. Aunt Anne was bewildered, but Mrs. North looked quite happy.

"I have taken possession of you," she explained, the second morning after she came. "You ought to have sent for me sooner. In fact, you ought never to have left me. You only got into mischief, and so did I."

"Yes, my dear," said Aunt Anne, feebly, "we both did."

Mrs. North's lips quivered for a moment.

"It shows that we ought to have stayed together," she said, half crying. "Perhaps I should have been better if you had not gone. Oh, I shall never forget all you told me this morning."

For Aunt Anne, in sheer desperation, as well as in penitent love and gratitude, had poured out the whole history of her life since she left Cornwall Gardens, and Mrs. North's keen perception and quick sympathy had filled in any outlines that had been left a little vague.

"We know each other so well now, I don't think I ought to call you Mrs. Baines any longer. I want to call you something else."

"Let it be anything you like, my dear."

"What does the Madon—Mrs. Hibbert, call you? But I know; she calls you 'Aunt Anne.' Let me do the same?"

"Yes, dear, you shall call me Aunt Anne."

"Oh, I am so glad to be with you," Mrs. North went on. "I have longed sometimes to put down my head on your lap and cry. I have been just as miserable as you have—more, a thousand times more; for my shame"—she liked indulging Aunt Anne in her estimate of her own conduct—"has been all my own wicked doing, but yours was only a sad mistake. I don't think we ought to be separated any more, Aunt Anne; we ought to live together, and take care of each other."

"My dear," said the old lady, still lying on the sofa, "there will be no living for me; I am going to die."

"Oh no," Mrs. North answered, with a little gasp, "you are going to live and be taken care of, and loved properly. I wish the doctor would come again. Then I should speak on medical authority. Go to sleep a little while; I will sit by you."

An hour passed. Aunt Anne opened her eyes.

"Could you put me by the fire, my dear? I am very cold."

"Yes, of course I can; but wait a moment. Clarke will come and help me. Clarke," she called, "I want you to come and help me to move Mrs. Baines."

"Now you look more comfortable," she said, when it was done. "There is a footstool for your feet, and the peacock beside you to keep you company."

Aunt Anne sat still for a moment, looking at the fire.

“My dear,” she said presently, “I have been thinking of what you said; we have both suffered very much; we ought to be together. Only now you have the hope of a new life before you. But we have both suffered,” she repeated.

Mrs. North knelt down beside her with a long sigh. “Suffered,” she said. “Oh, dear old lady, if you only knew what I have suffered; the loneliness of my girlhood, the misery of my marriage, the perpetual hunger for happiness, the struggle to get it. And oh! the longing to be loved, and the madness when love came, and then—then—but you know,” she whispered, passionately—“I need not go over it; the shame, and the publicity, and the relief I dared not to acknowledge even to myself, when I was set free. And then the awful dread that even he, the man for whom I did it all, would perhaps despise me as the rest of the world did. I am not wicked naturally, I am not, indeed; I don’t think any woman on this green earth has loved beautiful things and longed to do righteous things, more than I have, or felt the misery of failure more bitterly.”

“It will come right now, my love,” Aunt Anne said gently. “You are young; it will all come right. You said you had a telegram, and that he was coming back?”

“Yes, he is coming back,” Mrs. North answered, in a low voice; “but I do not want him to set it right because I did the wrong for him, or just to make reparation from a sense of honour. I do not want to spoil his life; for some people will cut him if he marries me; it is only—only—if he loves me still, and more than all the world, as I do him—that is the only chance of it all coming right. It is time I had a letter. But here is your beef-tea. Let us try and forget all our troubles, and get a little peace together.” She looked up with an April-day smile, took the beef-tea from Clarke, and, holding it before Aunt Anne, watched with satisfaction every mouthful she took.

“I fear I give you a great deal of trouble,” the old lady said gratefully.

“It isn’t trouble”—and the tears came to her eyes; “it is blessedness. I never had any one before to serve and wait on whom I loved; even my hands are sensible of the happiness of everything they do for you. It is new life. But now we have talked too much, and you must go to sleep.”

“Yes, my love,” and Aunt Anne put her head back on the pillow; “I will do as you desire, but you are very autocratic.”

“Of course.” Mrs. North laughed at hearing the familiar word, and then went to the dining-room for a little spell of quietness.

“Clarke,” she said to the maid who had been waiting there, “go in and watch by Mrs. Baines; she must not be left alone.”

Mrs. North sat down on the chair that Aunt Anne had pulled out for Alfred Wimple after her return from London.

“Oh, I wonder if it will come right?” she said to herself. “If it does—if it does—if it does! But I ought to have had a letter by this time; it is long enough since the telegram from Bombay. Something tells me that it will come right; I think that is the meaning of the happiness that has forced itself upon me lately. It is no use trying to be miserable any longer. Happiness seems to be coming near and nearer. I have a sense of forgiveness in my heart; surely I know what it means? Perhaps, as Aunt Anne says, all I have suffered has been an atonement for the wrong. One little letter, and I shall be content. The dear old lady shall never go away from me; she shall just be made as happy as possible.” She got up and went to the window, and leaned out towards the garden. “Those trees at the end,” she said to herself, “surely must hide the way down to the dip, where she listened. It is very lovely to-day”—and she looked up at the sky; “but I wish the doctor would come, I should feel more satisfied.” There was a footstep. “Yes, Clarke; is anything the matter? Why have you come? You look quite pale.”

“Mrs. Baines is going to die, ma’am; I am certain of it.”

“Going to die?” Mrs. North’s face turned white, and she went towards the door.

“I don’t mean this minute, ma’am; but just now she opened her eyes and looked round as if she didn’t see, and then she picked at her dress as dying people do at the sheet—it’s a sure sign. Besides, she is black round the mouth. I don’t believe she will live three days.”

Mrs. North clasped her hands, with fear.

“I wish she would stay in bed; the doctor said she ought to do so yesterday; but she seemed better, and begged so hard to come down this morning that I gave way.”

“It’s another sign,” said the maid; “they always want to get up towards the last.”

“The doctor promised he would be here by twelve, and now it is nearly two.”

He came an hour later. "She must be taken upstairs at once," he said; so they carried her up, Clarke and the doctor between them, while Mrs. North followed anxiously; and all of them knew that Aunt Anne would never walk down the stairs again.

Then a telegram was sent to Florence and Walter at Monte Carlo.

But she was a little better in the evening, and Mrs. North brightened up as she saw it. Perhaps Clarke was a foolish croaker, and signs were foolish things to trouble one's self about. The old lady might live, after all, and there would be some happiness yet.

"No, Aunt Anne, you are not going to get up yet," she said next morning, in answer to an inquiring look; "you must wait until the doctor has been; remember it is my turn to be autocratic."

"Yes, my love," and she dozed off. Half her time was spent in sleep. Since Mrs. North's arrival there had stolen over her a gradual contentment, as if a crisis had occurred, and the blackness of the past grown dim. Perhaps it was giving place to all that was in her heart, or to the sound of Mrs. North's fresh young voice, and the loving touch of her hand. Be it what it might, Alfred Wimple and the misery that he had caused seemed to have gone farther and farther away, while peacefulness was stealing over her. "It is like being with my dear Florence and Walter," she said to Mrs. North once—"only perhaps you understand even better than they could, for you have gone through the pain."

"Yes, dear Aunt Anne, I have gone through the pain"—and Mrs. North sat waiting for the doctor again, not that she was very uneasy to-day, for the old lady was a little better, and hope grows up quickly when youth passes by.





CHAPTER X.

THE sound of the door-bell, and of some one being shown into the drawing-room.

“The doctor has come, Aunt Anne,” Mrs. North said. “I will invigorate myself with a talk before I bring him to you, and tell him that you are much better.” But instead of the doctor she found a little, dried-up-looking old gentleman standing in the middle of the room, holding his hat and umbrella in one hand. She looked at him inquiringly.

“I understood that Mrs. Baines was here,” he said. Mrs. North looked up, with expectation. “I have come from London expressly to see her on important business. I was solicitor to the late Sir William Rammage,” he added. Mrs. North’s spirits revived. This looked like a new and exciting phase of the story.

“Are you Mr. Boughton?”

“I am Mr. Boughton,” and he made her a formal little bow. “I see you understand——”

“Oh yes,” she said eagerly; “and the ex-Lord Mayor was the old lady’s cousin. I regret to say that she is very ill in bed, and cannot possibly see you, but I should be happy to deliver any message.” Mr. Boughton looked at her, with benevolent criticism, and thought her a most beautiful young woman. She meanwhile grasped the whole situation to her own satisfaction. That horrid Lord Mayor, as she mentally called Sir William, had probably told his solicitor all about Alfred Wimple; and the little dried-up gentleman before her, who was (as she had instantly remembered) the uncle, had come to see how the land lay. Mrs. North felt as convinced as Sir William had done that the whole affair was a conspiracy between the uncle and nephew, and she promptly determined to make Mr. Boughton as uncomfortable as possible.

“I quite understand the business on which you have come to see Mrs. Baines,” she said, with decision, but with a twinkle of mischief she could not help in her eyes. “You have heard, of course, that the conduct of your delightful nephew, Mr. Alfred Wimple, is entirely found out.”

“God bless my soul!” said Mr. Boughton, astonished out of his senses. “What has he to do with Mrs. Baines?”

“You perhaps approved of his romantic marriage?” Mrs. North inquired politely. She was enjoying herself enormously.

“His romantic marriage!” exclaimed the lawyer. “I know nothing about it. My dear madam, what do you mean? Is that scoundrel married?”

“Most certainly he is married,” Mrs. North went on; “and, as far as I can gather particulars from Mrs. Baines, your charming niece is a dressmaker at Liphook.”

“At Liphook!” exclaimed Mr. Boughton, more and more astonished; “why—why——”

“Where she lives with her grandmother,” continued Mrs. North, in the most amiable voice. “Her mother, I understand, lets lodgings in the Gray’s Inn Road, and it was Mr. Wimple’s kind intention to pay the amount he owes her out of Mrs. Baines’s fortune.”

“Good gracious!—that was the woman who came to me the other day. I never heard of such a thing in my life. How did he get hold of Mrs. Baines?” There was something so genuine in his bewilderment that Mrs. North began to believe in his honesty, but she was determined not to be taken in too easily.

“The details are most exciting, and will be exceedingly edifying in a court of justice. Now may I inquire why you so particularly wish to see the old lady?”

“I came to see her about the late Sir William Rammage,” Mr. Boughton said, finding it difficult to collect his scattered wits after Mrs. North’s information.

“Is he really dead, then?” she asked politely.

“Most certainly; he died on the fifth, and Mrs. Baines——”

“She is much too ill to see anybody; and as I understand he burnt his will, and has not left her any money, it is hardly worth while to worry her with particulars of his unlamented death.”

“Burnt his will? Yes, for some extraordinary reason he did—so Charles, the man-servant, tells me—he did it in her presence. He had no time to make another, for the agitation caused by her visit killed him.”

“Or perhaps it was the mercy of Providence,” remarked Mrs. North.

Mr. Boughton did not heed the remark, but asked—

“May I inquire if you are in Mrs. Baines’s confidence?”

“Entirely,” she answered decisively.

“Then I may tell you that no former will has been found, and she is next-of-kin. There are no other relations at all, I believe, and she will therefore inherit about three times as much as if the burnt will had remained in existence.”

“Really!”—and Mrs. North clapped her hands for joy. And then the tears came into her eyes. “Oh, but it is too late, for she is dying; nothing can save her; she is dying. I have telegraphed to her nephew and niece to come back from Monte Carlo. She has had a terrible shock, from which she will never recover; and besides that she has virtually starved herself and taken a hundred colds. She has not the strength of a fly left. I know she is dying,” Mrs. North added, with almost a sob.

“Don’t you think that the good news I bring might save her life?”

“No; and I am not sure that it would be good to save her life, she has suffered so cruelly. What a wicked old man Sir William Rammage was!” she burst out, and looked up sympathetically at Mr. Boughton.

“He was my client,” the lawyer urged.

“He allowed the poor old lady to starve for want of money, and now that he is dead and she is dying it comes to her.”

“Yes, it is very unfortunate—very unfortunate.”

“Everything seems to be a point of view,” Mrs. North went on, in the eager manner which so often characterized her. “Poverty is the point of view from which we look at the riches we cannot get; from vice we look at virtue which we cannot attain; from hell we look at the heaven we cannot reach. Perhaps Sir William Rammage would appreciate the latter part of the remark now”—she said the last words between laughter and tears.

“My dear madam,” Mr. Boughton exclaimed, in rather a shocked voice, “pray don’t let us begin a discussion. To go back to Mrs. Baines, I think if I could see her——”

“It is quite impossible; you would remind her of your horrible nephew, and that would kill her.”

“What on earth has she got to do with my nephew?”—and this time his manner convinced Mrs. North that he was not an impostor.

“Mr. Boughton,” she said gravely, “the old lady is very, very ill. The doctor says she cannot live, and I fear that the sight of you would kill her straight off; but, if you like, I will go and sound her, and find out if she is strong enough to bear a visit from you”—and, the lawyer having agreed to this, Mrs. North went upstairs.

“Dearest old lady”—her girlish voice had always a tender note in it when she spoke to Aunt Anne—“I have some good news for you—very good news. Do you think you could bear to hear it?”

“Yes, my love,” Aunt Anne answered wheezily, “but you must forgive me if I am sceptical as to its goodness.”

Mrs. North knelt down by the bedside, and stroked the thin hands. “Mr. Boughton is downstairs; he has come to tell you that Sir William Rammage is dead.”

“Then it is true,” Mrs. Baines said sadly. “Poor William! My dear, we once lay in the same cradle together, while our mothers watched beside it—what does Mr. Boughton say about Alfred?”

“He doesn’t appear to know anything about his wickedness.”

“I felt sure he did not; I never believed in the depravity of human nature.”

“Then how would you account for Mr. Wimple?” she asked, with much interest.

The old lady considered for a moment.

“Perhaps he was my punishment for all I did in the past. I have thought that lately, and tried to bear it—only it is more than I can bear. It has humiliated me too much. Tell me why Mr. Boughton has come; is it anything about Alfred?”

“Nothing,” was the emphatic answer; “and if you see him I advise you not to mention Mr. Wimple’s name.”

“My dear,” Aunt Anne said impressively, “except to yourself, his name will never pass my lips again. I feel that it is desecration to my dear Walter and Florence to mention it in their house. I shall never forgive myself for having brought him into it. But perhaps all I have suffered is some expiation; you and I have both felt that about our frailty”—and she shook her head. “What is the good news?”

“Mr. Boughton brought it, and it is about Sir William’s money.”

Mrs. Baines was silent for a moment; then she looked up, with a little wink, and a smile came to her lips. "I should like to see him," she said. "But will you help me to get up first? I think if I could sit by the open window I should be better."

"Perhaps you would, you dear; it's warm enough for summer. Let me help you into your dressing-gown. Stay, you shall wear mine. It is very smart, with lavender bows; quite proper half-mourning for a cousin. There—now—gently"—and she helped the old lady into the easy-chair by the window. It was a long business, but at last she was safely there, with the sunshine falling on her, and the soft lace and lavender ribbons of Mrs. North's dressing-gown about her poor old neck.

"And are you sure it's good news, my love?" she asked Mrs. North.

"I am quite sure," Mrs. North answered, as she tucked an eider-down quilt round Aunt Anne. "He has come from London on purpose to bring it to you."

"Has he partaken of any refreshment since he arrived?"

"No; but I will have some ready for him when he comes down from his talk with you. Now you shall have your *tête-à-tête*"—and Mrs. North went back to the lawyer.

"You must break it to her very, very gently, and you mustn't be more than five or ten minutes with her," she said, as she took him up to the bedroom door.

Aunt Anne was so much fatigued with the exertion of getting up that she found it a hard matter to receive Mr. Boughton with all the courtesy she desired to show him. She took the news of her fortune very quietly; it did not even excite her.

"It is too late," she said. "Nothing can solace me for what I have lost; but it will enable me to make provision for my dear Walter and Florence." Her eyes closed; her head sank on her breast; she put out her hand towards the window, as if to clutch at something that was not there.

Mr. Boughton saw it, and understood.

"I cannot repay you for your kindness and consideration," she went on presently. "Even when I have discharged my pecuniary obligation I shall still remain your debtor. But there are some things I should like to do. I wish Mrs. North to have a sum of money; I will tell her my wishes in regard to it."

“Perhaps I had better return in a day or two. You must forgive me for saying, my dear madam, that, with the vast sum that is now at your disposal, you ought to make a will immediately. I could take instructions now if you like.”

“Instructions?” she repeated, with a puzzled air; “I will give them all to Mrs. North, and you can take them from her. You will not think me inhospitable if I ask you to leave me now, Mr. Boughton? I am very tired. Tell me, did they send for you when William Rammage died?”

“They telegraphed for me immediately, and when I got to the office I found your letter waiting for me—the one you wrote before you left London, giving me your address here.” She did not hear him; her eyes had closed again, and her chin rested down on the lavender ribbons; the sunshine came in and lighted up her face, and that which Mr. Boughton saw written on it was unmistakable.

“You are quite right, my dear madam,” he said to Mrs. North, as he sat partaking of the refreshment Aunt Anne had devised for him; “it has come too late.”

He looked at his watch when he had finished. “I have only a quarter of an hour to stay,” he said. “Before I go, would you give me some explanation of the extraordinary statements you made on my arrival?”

“You shall have it,” Mrs. North answered eagerly; “but wait one moment, till I have taken this egg and wine to Mrs. Baines and seen that the maid is with her.”

“That’s a remarkably handsome girl,” the lawyer thought, when she had disappeared; “I wonder where I have heard her name before, and who she is?” But this speculation was entirely forgotten when he heard the story of his nephew’s doings of the last few months. “God bless my soul!” he exclaimed; “why, he might be sent to prison with hard labour—and serve him right, the scoundrel.”

“I am delighted to hear you say it,” Mrs. North answered impulsively. “Please shake hands with me. I am ashamed to say I thought it all a conspiracy, even after you came, and that is why I was so disagreeable.”

“Conspiracy, my dear madam?—why, the last thing I did to Wimple was to kick him out of my office; and I have been worried by his duns ever since. As for the will she made in his favour, get it destroyed at once, or he may give us no end of trouble yet. She has virtually given me instructions for a new one. I told her I would come in a day or two, but I think it would be

safer to come to-morrow. It will have to be rather late in the day, I am afraid, but I can sleep at the inn. In the meantime get the other will destroyed. Why, bless me! if she died to-night it might make an awful scandal; I would not have it happen for all I am worth.”

Mr. Boughton departed; and the doctor came, and gave so bad a report that Mrs. North sent off yet another telegram to Walter and Florence—this time in London—asking them not to waste a moment on their arrival, but to come straight to Witley. And then the second post brought her the morning’s letters which had been sent on. Among them was one with the Naples postmark, which she tore open with feverish haste and could scarcely read for tears of joy.

“I could not write before,” it said. “I am detained here by a friend’s illness; but now that I am thus far I send you just a line to say I shall be with you soon, and I shall never leave you again. I hate to think of it all. The fault was mine, and the suffering has been yours. But I love you, and only live to make you reparation.”

“It is too much happiness to bear,” she said, with a sob. “It is all I wanted, that he should love me—I must write this minute, or he will wonder”—and she got out her blotting-case, just as she did at the hotel at Marseille—it seemed as if that scene had been a suggestion of this—and, kneeling down by the table, wrote—

“I am here with Mrs. Baines, and she is dying. I have just—just had your letter. Oh, the joy of it! What can I say or do?—you know everything that is in my heart better than words can write it down.”

She sealed it up; and, seizing her hat, went once round the garden, for the cottage seemed too small a house to hold so great a happiness as that which had come upon her. She looked up to the sky, and thought how blessed it was to be beneath it, and away at the larches and fir-trees, and wondered if he and she would ever walk between them. Something told her that they would if—if all came right, if she found that he loved her so much that he could not live without her. They would lead such ideal lives; they would do their very best for every one, and make so many people happy, and cover up the past with all the good that love would surely put it into their hearts to do. “It would be too much to bear,” she said to herself; “it is too much to think of yet. I will go back to my dear old lady, and comfort her.”

Aunt Anne was much better for her interview with Mr. Boughton. The excitement had done her good, and some of her little consequential ways had returned with the knowledge of her wealth.

“I am glad to see you, my love,” she said to Mrs. North; “I have many things to discuss with you if you will permit me to encroach on your good nature. Would you mind sitting down on the footstool again beside me, as you did yesterday?” The maid had lifted her on to the old-fashioned sofa at the foot of the bed. She was propped up with pillows, and looked so well and comfortable it seemed almost possible that she might live.

“I will,” Mrs. North answered, still overcome with her own thoughts—“I will sit at your feet, and receive your royal commands. But first permit me to say that you are looking irresistible—my lavender ribbons give you a most ravishing appearance.”

“You are in excellent spirits,” Aunt Anne said, with a pleased smile; “and so am I,” she added. “It has done me a world of good to hear that William Rammage’s iniquitous intentions have been frustrated.”

“I trust he is aware of it,” Mrs. North answered, “and that his soul is delightfully vexed by the enterprising Satan.”

“My love,” said the old lady, with a shocked wink, “you hardly understand the purport of your own words.”

“Yes, I do,” Mrs. North said emphatically; “but now I want to speak about something much more important. I hope you are going to get well—yes, in spite of all the shakes of your dear old head; and that you are going to live to be a hundred and one, in order to scold me with very long words when I offend you.”

“I will endeavour to do so, my love; but I hope that some one else will do it better”—she stopped and closed her eyes.

“I believe you are a witch, and you know about my letter. It has just come, and has made me so happy,” Mrs. North said, between laughing and crying.

“What does he say?” the old lady asked, without opening her eyes.

“He says he is coming,” Mrs. North answered, almost in a whisper. “It’s almost more than I can bear. I think it will all come right. The other was never a marriage—it was cruel to call it one; it was a girl’s body and soul made ready for ruin by those who persuaded her——” and she put her face down.

“My dear, I understand now; I think I was very unsympathetic. But purity counts before all things”—and Aunt Anne’s lips quivered. “Tell me, my love, have you heard—I know it is painful to you to hear his name, but

have you heard anything of Mr. North lately?" Mrs. North looked up with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, which a moment before had been full of tears, and answered demurely—

"I am told that he is casting his eyes on an amiable lady of forty-five. She is the sister of an eminent Q.C., has read Buckle's 'History of Civilization,' and her favourite fad is the abolition of capital punishment. But I don't want to talk of my affairs, Aunt Anne; I want to talk of yours—they are more momentous." Mrs. North prided herself on picking up Aunt Anne's words, and using them with great discretion.

"Yes, my love, I am most grateful to you."

"I am certain—as I tell you—that you are going to live and get well." Mrs. North meant her words at the moment, for, with the sweet insolence of youth, she was incredulous of death until it was absolutely before her eyes. "But at the same time," she went on, "now that you are enormously rich, you ought to take precautions in case of an accident. If the cottage were burned down to-night, and we were burned with it, who would inherit your money?"

"I told Mr. Boughton that I would give my instructions to you, and he is coming the day after to-morrow."

"But have you destroyed the will you made in favour of Alfred Wimple?"

"I have not got it; he took it away with him." Mrs. North looked quite alarmed.

"We must make another, this minute," she said; "if the conflagration took place this evening he would get every penny. Let me make it this minute. I can do it on a sheet of note-paper. Don't agitate your dear old self, I shall be back directly"—and in a moment she had fled downstairs and returned with her blotting-book, and once more she knelt down by a table to write. "You want to leave everything to the Hibberts, don't you?"

"Yes; but if you would permit me, my love, I should like to leave you something."

"Then I couldn't make the will, for it would not be legal; besides, I am rich enough, you kind old lady. Shall I begin?"

"Stop one moment, my dear; will you give me a little *sal volatile* first, and let me rest for five minutes?"

She closed her eyes, but it was not to sleep; she appeared to be thinking of something that disturbed her. When she looked up again she was almost panting with excitement as well as weakness, and there was the fierce, yet frightened, look in her eyes that had been in them when she opened the front door to turn Alfred Wimple out of the house.

“I want you to do something for me,” she said, almost in a whisper—“I want you to have a sum of money, and to get it to him”—she could not make herself utter his name—“on condition that he goes out of the country with it. Let him go to Australia with the woman——”

“Yes,” Mrs. North said, seeing she hesitated.

“She is not in his position, and could never be received in society.”

“No, dear,” Mrs. North said, reflecting that Mr. Wimple’s own position was not particularly exalted.

“I want him to go out of the country,” Aunt Anne went on—“as far away as possible; I cannot breathe the same air with him, or bear to think that he is beneath the same sky. It is pollution; it is hurrying me out of life; it is most repugnant to me to think that when I am dead he will frequently be within only a few miles of this cottage and of my dear Walter and Florence”—she stopped for a moment, and shuddered, and put her thin hands, one over the other, under her chin. “When I am dead and buried,” she went on, “I believe I should know if his body were put underground, too, in the same country with me, and feel the desecration. It has killed me; it has made me eager to die. But I want to know that he will go away—that none of those I care for will ever see his face again; it will be a sacrilege if he even passes them in the street. I want him to have a sum of money, and to go away.”

“I will take care that he has it,” Mrs. North said gently, “I will speak to the Hibberts. But, Aunt Anne,” she asked, “don’t you think you might forgive him? He shall go away, but you would not like to die without forgiving him?” Mrs. North did not for a moment expect her to do it, or even wish it, but she felt it almost a duty to say what she did from a little notion, as old-fashioned as one of Aunt Anne’s perhaps, about dying in charity with all men.

“No, you must not ask me to do that”—and her voice was determined. “I cannot; it was too terrible.”

“And I am very glad,” Mrs. North said, having eased her conscience with the previous remark—“a slightly revengeful spirit comforts one so much.”

“Don’t let us ever speak of him again, even you and I. I want to shut him out of the little bit of life I have left.”

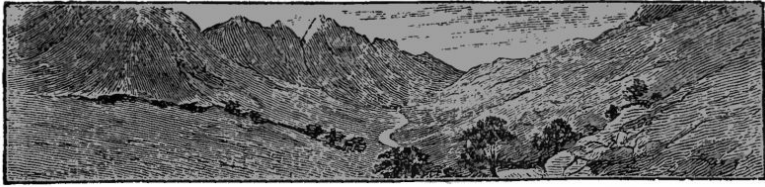
“We never will,” Mrs. North said. “Let this be the Amen of him. Now I will make the will. Here is a sheet of note-paper and a singularly bad quill pen.”

“This is the last Will and Testament of me, Anne Baines (sometime called Wimple). I revoke all other wills and codicils, and give and bequeath everything that is mine or may be mine to my dear nephew and niece, Walter and Florence Hibbert.”

The maid came and stood on one side and Mrs. North on the other, while Aunt Anne gave a little wink to herself, and pushed aside the end of the lavender ribbon lest it should smudge the paper, and signed “Anne Baines,” looking at every letter as she made it with intense interest.

“I am glad to write that name once more,” she said, and fell back, with a sigh.





CHAPTER XI.

IT was a long night that followed. A telegram had arrived from the Hibberts. They were on their way, and coming as fast as possible, they said; but through the dark hours, as Mrs. North sat beside Aunt Anne, she feared that death would come still faster.

Her bronchitis was worse at times; she could hardly breathe; it was only the almost summer-like warmth that saved her. She talked of strange people when she could find voice to do so—people of whom Mrs. North had never heard before; but it seemed somehow as if they had silently entered—as if they filled the house, and were waiting. At midnight and in the still small hours of the morning she could fancy that they were going softly up and down the stairs; that they peered into the room in which Aunt Anne lay—the one to the front that looked down on the long white road stretching from the city to the sea. “Oh, if the Hibberts would come,” Mrs. North said, a dozen times. “I want her to die with her own people. I love her, but I am a stranger.”

So the night passed.

“My dear,” Aunt Anne asked, opening her eyes, “is it morning yet?”

“Yes,” Mrs. North answered tenderly, “and a lovely morning. The sun is shining, and a thrush is singing on the tree outside. We will open the window presently, and let the summer in.” An hour passed, and the postman came, but he brought no news of those who were expected. Later on the doctor looked in, and said her pulse was weaker.

“She must live a little longer,” Mrs. North said, in despair; “she must, indeed.”

“I will come again this afternoon,” he said; “perhaps she may have a little rally.”

While Aunt Anne dozed and the maid watched, Mrs. North, unable to sit quietly any longer, wandered up and down the house, and round the little drawing-room, bending her face over the pot-pourri on the corner cupboard, opening the piano and looking at the yellow keys she did not venture to

touch. And then, restlessly, she went into the garden, and gathered some oak and beech boughs, with the fresh young leaves upon them, and put them in pots, as Aunt Anne had once done for the home-coming of Florence.

“I cannot feel that she is going to die,” she thought, “but rather as if she were going to meet the people she knew long ago; it will be a festival for them.” She looked down the road, and strained her ears, but there was no sound of a carriage, no sign of Walter and Florence. She could hardly realize that she was watching for the Hibberts and that Aunt Anne upstairs lay dying. “It is all such a tangle,” she said to herself, “life and death, and joy and sorrow, and which is best it is difficult to say.” Aunt Anne’s little breakfast was ready, and she carried it up herself, and lovingly watched the old lady trying to swallow a spoonful.

“You look a little better again, Aunt Anne.”

“Yes, love; and I shall be much better when I have seen those dear children. I am not quite happy about my will. I wanted you to have some remembrance of me.”

“Give me something,” Mrs. North said, “something you have worn; I shall like that better than a legacy, because I shall have it from your own two living hands.”

“I have parted with all my possessions, but Florence and Walter shall be commissioned to get you something.”

“The thing I should have liked,” Mrs. North answered, “was a little brooch you used to wear. It had hair in the middle, and a crinkly gold setting around it.”

“My dear,” said Aunt Anne, dreamily, “it is in a little box in my left-hand drawer; but it needs renovating—the pin is broken, and the glass and the hair have come out. It belonged to my mother.”

“Give it to me,” Mrs. North said eagerly. “I will have it done up, and wear it till you are better, and then you shall have it back; let me get it at once”—and in her eager manner she went to the drawer. “Here it is,” she said. “It will make a little gold buckle. I have a canary-coloured ribbon in the next room; I will put it through, and wear it round my neck. Aunt Anne, you have made me a present.”

“I am delighted that it meets with your approval, my dear”—and there was a long silence. The morning dragged on—a happy spring morning, on which, as Mrs. North said to herself, you could almost hear the summer walking to you over the little flowers. Presently Aunt Anne called her.

“I was thinking,” she said, “of a canary-coloured dress I had when I was a girl. I wore it at my first ball—it was a military ball, my dear, and the officers were all in uniform. As soon as I entered the room, Captain Maxwell asked me to dance; but I felt quite afraid, and said, ‘You must take off your sword, if you please, and put it on one side.’ Think of my audacity in asking him to do such a thing; but he did it. Your ribbon made me remember it”—and again she dropped off to sleep.

Mrs. North went to the window, and looked out once more. “I feel like sister Anne on the watch-tower,” she said to herself. “If they would only come.” Suddenly a dread overcame her. Florence and Walter knew nothing of Alfred Wimple’s conduct. They might arrive, and, before she had time to tell them, by some chance word cause Aunt Anne infinite pain. The shame and humiliation seemed to have gone out of the old lady’s life during the last day or two. It would be a cruel thing to remind her of it. She had made herself ready to meet death. It was coming to her gently and surely, with thoughts of those she loved, and a remembrance of the days that had been before the maddening shame of the past year. Mrs. North went downstairs. Jane Mitchell was in the kitchen.

“Is there any way of sending a note to the station?” she asked.

“Why, yes, ma’am; Lucas would take it with the pony-cart.”

“Go to him, ask him to get ready at once, and come to me for the letter.” As shortly as possible she wrote an account of all that had taken place at the cottage, and explained her own presence there.

“Take this at once to the station-master, and ask him to give it to Mr. and Mrs. Hibbert the moment they arrive, and to see that they come here by the fastest fly that is there.” And once more she went up to the front bedroom. Aunt Anne was sleeping peacefully; a little smile was on her lips. Mrs. North went to the window, and looked up and down the long straight road, and over at the fir-trees. Presently Lucas came by with the pony-cart; he touched his hat, pulled the note out of his pocket to show that he had it safely, and drove on in the sunshine. The birds were twittering everywhere. A clump of broom was nearly topped with yellow; some spots of gold were on the gorse. Half an hour. Aunt Anne still slept. Mrs. North put her arms on the window-sill, and rested her head down on them with her face turned to the road that led to the station. “If only the Hibberts would come,” she said. “Oh, if they would come.”

The long morning went into afternoon. A change came over Aunt Anne. It was plain enough this time. She spoke once, very gently and so

indistinctly that Mrs. North could hardly make out the words, though she bent over her, trying to understand.

“Aunt Anne, dear, do you know me?” A smile came over the old lady’s face. She was thinking of something that pleased her.

“Yes, dear Walter,” she said, “you must get some chocolates for those dear children, and I will reimburse you.” Then the little woman, who had watched so bravely, broke down, and, kneeling by the bedside, sobbed softly to herself.

“Oh, they must come; oh, they must come,” she whispered. “Perhaps I had better rouse her a little,” she thought after a little while, and slipped her arm under the old lady’s shoulder.

“Aunt Anne—Aunt Anne, dear,” she said, “Walter and Florence are coming; they are hurrying to you, do you hear me?”

“Yes, my love,” the old lady said, recovering a little, and recognizing her. “You said it was morning time, and a thrush was singing on the tree outside. I think I hear it.”

“You do; listen, dear, listen!” and Mrs. North turned her face towards the window, as though she were listening, and looked at Aunt Anne’s face, as if to put life into her. And as she did so there came upon her ears a joyful sound, the one she most longed to hear in the world—the sound of carriage wheels.

“They have come,” she said; “thank God! they have come.”

Aunt Anne seemed to understand; an expression of restfulness came over her face; she closed her eyes, as if satisfied. Mrs. North was in despair; it seemed as if they would be a moment too late.

“Dearest old lady, they have come! they are in the garden! Wake up—wake up, to see them. Stay, let me prop you up a little bit more.” She could scarcely say the words, her heart was so full. “There, now you can see the fir-trees and the sunshine. Kiss me once, dear Aunt Anne; I am going to fetch your children”—and she gently drew her arms away. The Hibberts were in the house—they were on the stairs already. Mrs. North met them. “You are just in time,” she whispered to Florence—“she has waited.”

Mrs. Hibbert could not speak, but she stopped one moment to put her arms round Mrs. North’s neck, and then went on.

“Come with us,” Walter said.

“No,” Mrs. North answered chokingly, while the tears ran down her face. “She is waiting for you. Go in to her. I have no business there.”

Without a word they went to Aunt Anne. Like a flash there came over Florence the remembrance of the day when she had first entered the room, and had thought that it looked like a room to die in. The old lady did not make a sign. For a moment they stood by her silently. Florence stooped, and kissed the coverlet.

“Dear Aunt Anne,” they said tenderly, “we have come.” Then a look of joy spread over the old lady’s face. She made one last struggle to speak.

“My dear Walter and Florence,” she said, and stopped for a moment. “I have not been able—to make any preparation for your arrival—but Mrs. North——” She stopped again, and her eyes closed. They went a little nearer to each other, and stood watching.

The scent of the fresh spring air filled the room. The sunshine was passing over the house. But all was still—so still that Florence looked up, with a questioning look of fear upon her face. Walter bent over the bed for a moment, then gently put his arm round his wife’s shoulder. Aunt Anne had journeyed on.

THE END

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[The end of *Aunt Anne, Vol. 2*, by Mrs. W. K. Clifford]