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A TRUE FRIEND.

A NOVEL.

BY ADELINE SERGEANT

Author of "The Luck of the House," "A Life Sentence," etc., etc.

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A TRUE FRIEND

CHAPTER I.

AN UNSUITABLE FRIENDSHIP.

Janetta was the music governess—a brown little thing of no particular importance, and Margaret Adair was a beauty and an heiress, and the only daughter of people who thought themselves very distinguished indeed; so that the two had not, you might think, very much in common, and were not likely to be attracted one to the other. Yet, in spite of differing circumstances, they were close friends and allies; and had been such ever since they were together at the same fashionable school where Miss Adair was the petted favorite of all, and Janetta Colwyn was the pupil-teacher in the shabbiest of frocks, who got all the snubbing and did most of the hard work. And great offence was given in several directions by Miss Adair's attachment to poor little Janetta.

"It is an unsuitable friendship," Miss Polehampton, the principal of the school, observed on more than one occasion, "and I am sure I do not know how Lady Caroline will like it."

Lady Caroline was, of course, Margaret Adair's mamma.

Miss Polehampton felt her responsibility so keenly in the matter that at last she resolved to speak "very seriously" to her dear Margaret. She always talked of "her dear Margaret," Janetta used to say, when she was going to make herself particularly disagreeable. For "her dear Margaret" was the pet pupil, the show pupil of the establishment: her air of perfect breeding gave distinction, Miss Polehampton thought, to the whole school; and her refinement, her exemplary behavior, her industry, and her talent formed the theme of many a lecture to less accomplished and less decorous pupils. For, contrary to all conventional expectations, Margaret Adair was not stupid, although she was beautiful and well-behaved. She was an exceedingly intelligent girl; she had an aptitude for several arts and accomplishments, and she was remarkable for the delicacy of her taste and the exquisite discrimination of which she sometimes showed herself capable. At the same time she was not as clever—"not as *glaringly* clever," a friend of hers once expressed it)—as little Janetta Colwyn, whose nimble wits gathered knowledge as a bee collects honey under the most unfavorable circumstances. Janetta had to learn her lessons when the other girls had gone to bed, in a little room under the roof; a room which was like an ice-house in winter and an oven in summer; she was never able to be in time for her classes, and she often missed them altogether; but, in spite of these disadvantages, she generally proved herself the most advanced pupil in her division, and if pupil-teachers had been allowed to take prizes, would have carried off every first prize in the school. This, to be sure, was not allowed. It would not have been "the thing" for the little governess-pupil to take away the prizes from the girls whose parents paid between two and three hundred a year for their tuition (the fees were

high, because Miss Polehampton's school was so exceedingly fashionable); therefore, Janetta's marks were not counted, and her exercises were put aside and did not come into competition with those of the other girls, and it was generally understood amongst the teachers that, if you wished to stand well with Miss Polehampton, it would be better not to praise Miss Colwyn, but rather to put forward the merits of some charming Lady Mary or Honorable Adeliza, and leave Janetta in the obscurity from which (according to Miss Polehampton) she was fated never to emerge.

Unfortunately for the purposes of the mistress of the school, Janetta was rather a favorite with the girls. She was not adored, like Margaret; she was not looked up to and respected, as was the Honorable Edith Gore; she was nobody's pet, as the little Ladies Blanche and Rose Amberley had been ever since they set foot in the school; but she was everybody's friend and comrade, the recipient of everybody's confidences, the sharer in everybody's joys or woes. The fact was that Janetta had the inestimable gift of sympathy; she understood the difficulties of people around her better than many women of twice her age would have done; and she was so bright and sunny-tempered and quick-witted that her very presence in a room was enough to dispel gloom and ill-temper. She was, therefore, deservedly popular, and did more to keep up the character of Miss Polehampton's school for comfort and cheerfulness than Miss Polehampton herself was ever likely to be aware. And the girl most devoted to Janetta was Margaret Adair.

"Remain for a few moments, Margaret; I wish to speak to you," said Miss Polehampton, majestically, when one evening, directly after prayers, the show pupil advanced to bid her teachers good-night.

The girls all sat round the room on wooden chairs, and Miss Polehampton occupied a high-backed, cushioned seat at a centre table while she read the portion of Scripture with which the day's work concluded. Near her sat the governesses, English, French and German, with little Janetta bringing up the rear in the draughtiest place and the most uncomfortable chair. After prayers, Miss Polehampton and the teachers rose, and their pupils came to bid them good-night, offering hand and cheek to each in turn. There was always a great deal of kissing to be got through on these occasions. Miss Polehampton blandly insisted on kissing all her thirty pupils every evening; it made them feel more as if they were at home, she used to say; and her example was, of course, followed by the teachers and the girls.

Margaret Adair, as one of the oldest and tallest girls in the school, generally came forward first for that evening salute. When Miss Polehampton made the observation just recorded, she stepped back to a position beside her teacher's chair in the demure attitude of a well-behaved schoolgirl—hands crossed over the wrists, feet in position, head and shoulders carefully erect, and eyes gently lowered towards the carpet. Thus standing, she was yet perfectly well aware that Janetta Colwyn gave her an odd, impish little look of mingled fun and anxiety behind Miss Polehampton's back; for it was

generally known that a lecture was impending when one of the girls was detained after prayers, and it was very unusual for Margaret to be lectured! Miss Adair did not, however, look discomposed. A momentary smile flitted across her face at Janetta's tiny grimace, but it was instantly succeeded by the look of simple gravity becoming to the occasion.

When the last of the pupils and the last also of the teachers had filed out of the room, Miss Polehampton turned and surveyed the waiting girl with some uncertainty. She was really fond of Margaret Adair. Not only did she bring credit to the school, but she was a good, nice, lady-like girl (such were Miss Polehampton's epithets), and very fair to look upon. Margaret was tall, slender, and exceedingly graceful in her movements; she was delicately fair, and had hair of the silkiest texture and palest gold; her eyes, however, were not blue, as one would have expected them to be; they were hazel brown, and veiled by long brown lashes—eyes of melting softness and dreaminess, peculiarly sweet in expression. Her features were a very little too long and thin for perfect beauty; but they gave her a Madonna-like look of peace and calm which many were ready enthusiastically to admire. And there was no want of expression in her face; its faint rose bloom varied almost at a word, and the thin curved lips were as sensitive to feeling as could be desired. What was wanting in the face was what gave it its peculiar maidenly charm—a lack of passion, a little lack, perhaps, of strength. But at seventeen we look less for these characteristics than for the sweetness and docility which Margaret certainly possessed. Her dress of soft, white muslin was quite simple—the ideal dress for a young girl—and yet it was so beautifully made, so perfectly finished in every detail, that Miss Polehampton never looked at it without an uneasy feeling that she was *too* well-dressed for a schoolgirl. Others wore muslin dresses of apparently the same cut and texture; but what the casual eye might fail to observe, the schoolmistress was perfectly well aware of, namely, that the tiny frills at neck and wrists were of the costliest Mechlin lace, that the hem of the dress was bordered with the same material, as if it had been the commonest of things; that the embroidered white ribbons with which it was trimmed had been woven in France especially for Miss Adair, and that the little silver buckles at her waist and on her shoes were so ancient and beautiful as to be of almost historic importance. The effect was that of simplicity; but it was the costly simplicity of absolute perfection. Margaret's mother was never content unless her child was clothed from head to foot in materials of the softest, finest and best. It was a sort of outward symbol of what she desired for the girl in all relations of life.

This it was that disturbed Miss Polehampton's mind as she stood and looked uneasily for a moment at Margaret Adair. Then she took the girl by the hand.

"Sit down, my dear," she said, in a kind voice, "and let me talk to you for a few moments. I hope you are not tired with standing so long."

"Oh, no, thank you; not at all," Margaret answered, blushing slightly as she took a seat at Miss Polehampton's left hand. She was more intimidated by this unwonted kindness of address than by any imaginable severity. The schoolmistress was tall and imposing in appearance: her manner was usually a little pompous, and it did not seem quite natural to Margaret that she should speak so gently.

"My dear," said Miss Polehampton, "when your dear mamma gave you into my charge, I am sure she considered me responsible for the influences under which you were brought, and the friendships that you made under my roof."

"Mamma knew that I could not be hurt by any friendship that I made *here*," said Margaret, with the softest flattery. She was quite sincere: it was natural to her to say "pretty things" to people.

"Quite so," the schoolmistress admitted. "Quite so, dear Margaret, if you keep within your own grade in society. There is no pupil in this establishment, I am thankful to say, who is not of suitable family and prospects to become your friend. You are young yet, and do not understand the complications in which people sometimes involve themselves by making friendships out of their own sphere. But *I* understand, and I wish to caution you."

"I am not aware that I have made any unsuitable friendships," said Margaret, with a rather proud look in her hazel eyes.

"Well—no, I hope not," said Miss Polehampton with a hesitating little cough. "You understand, my dear, that in an establishment like mine, persons must be employed to do certain work who are not quite equal in position to—to—ourselves. Persons of inferior birth and station, I mean, to whom the care of the younger girls, and certain menial duties, must be committed. These persons, my dear, with whom you must necessarily be brought in contact, and whom I hope you will always treat with perfect courtesy and consideration, need not, at the same time, be made your intimate friends."

"I have never made friends with any of the servants," said Margaret, quietly. Miss Polehampton was somewhat irritated by this remark.

"I do not allude to the servants," she said with momentary sharpness. "I do not consider Miss Colwyn a servant, or I should not, of course, allow her to sit at the same table with you. But there is a sort of familiarity of which I do not altogether approve——"

She paused, and Margaret drew up her head and spoke with unusual decision.

"Miss Colwyn is my greatest friend."

"Yes, my dear, that is what I complain of. Could you not find a friend in your own rank of life without making one of Miss Colwyn?"

"She is quite as good as I am," cried Margaret, indignantly. "Quite as good, far more so, and a great deal cleverer!"

"She has capabilities," said the schoolmistress, with the air of one making a concession; "and I hope that they will be useful to her in her calling. She will probably become a nursery governess, or companion to some lady of superior position. But I cannot believe, my dear that dear Lady Caroline would approve of your singling her out as your especial and particular friend."

"I am sure mamma always likes people who are good and clever," said Margaret. She did not fly into a rage as some girls would have done, but her face flushed, and her breath came more quickly than usual—signs of great excitement on her part, which Miss Polehampton was not slow to observe.

"She likes them in their proper station, my dear. This friendship is not improving for you, nor for Miss Colwyn. Your positions in life are so different that your notice of her can but cause discontent and ill-feeling in her mind. It is exceedingly injudicious, and I cannot think that your dear mamma would approve of it if she knew the circumstances."

"But Janetta's family is not at all badly connected," said Margaret, with some eagerness. "There are cousins of hers living close to us—the next property belongs to them——"

"Do you know them, my dear?"

"I know *about* them," answered Margaret, suddenly coloring very deeply, and looking uncomfortable, "but I don't think I have ever seen them, they are so much away from home——"

"I know *about* them, too," said Miss Polehampton, grimly; "and I do not think that you will ever advance Miss Colwyn's interests by mentioning her connection with that family. I have heard Lady Caroline speak of Mrs. Brand and her children. They are not people, my dear Margaret, whom it is desirable for you to know."

"But Janetta's own people live quite near us," said Margaret, reduced to a very pleading tone. "I know them at home; they live at Beaminster—not three miles off."

"And may I ask if Lady Caroline visits them, my dear?" asked Miss Polehampton, with mild sarcasm, which brought the color again to Margaret's fair face. The girl could not answer; she knew well enough that Janetta's stepmother was not at all the sort of person whom Lady Caroline Adair would willingly speak to, and yet she did not like to say that her acquaintance with Janetta had only been made at a Beaminster dancing class. Probably Miss Polehampton divined the fact. "Under the circumstances," she said, "I think I should be justified in writing to Lady Caroline and asking her to remonstrate a little with you, my dear Margaret. Probably she would be better able to make you understand the impropriety of your behavior than I can do."

The tears rose to Margaret's eyes. She was not used to being rebuked in this manner.

"But—I don't know, Miss Polehampton, what you want me to do," she said, more nervously than usual. "I can't give up Janetta; I can't possibly avoid speaking to her, you know, even if I wanted to——"

"I desire nothing of the sort, Margaret. Be kind and polite to her, as usual. But let me suggest that you do not make a companion of her in the garden so constantly—that you do not try to sit beside her in class or look over the same book. I will speak to Miss Colwyn herself about it. I think I can make *her* understand."

"Oh, please do not speak to Janetta! I quite understand already," said Margaret, growing pale with distress. "You do not know how kind and good she has always been to me——"

Sobs choked her utterance, rather to Miss Polehampton's alarm. She did not like to see her girls cry—least of all, Margaret Adair.

"My dear, you have no need to excite yourself. Janetta Colwyn has always been treated, I hope, with justice and kindness in this house. If you will endeavor only to make her position in life less instead of more difficult, you will be doing her the greatest favor in your power. I do not at all mean that I wish you to be unkind to her. A little more reserve, a little more caution, in your demeanor, and you will be all that I have ever wished you to be—a credit to your parents and to the school which has educated you!"

This sentiment was so effusive that it stopped Margaret's tears out of sheer amazement; and when she had said good-night and gone to bed, Miss Polehampton stood for a moment or two quite still, as if to recover from the unwonted exertion of expressing an affectionate emotion. It was perhaps a reaction against it that caused her almost immediately to ring the bell a trifle sharply, and to say—still sharply—to the maid who appeared in answer.

"Send Miss Colwyn to me."

Five minutes elapsed before Miss Colwyn came, however, and the schoolmistress had had time to grow impatient.

"Why did you not come at once when I sent for you?" she said, severely, as soon as Janetta presented herself.

"I was going to bed," said the girl, quickly; "and I had to dress myself again."

The short, decided accents grated on Miss Polehampton's ear. Miss Colwyn did not speak half so "nicely," she said to herself, as did dear Margaret Adair.

"I have been talking to Miss Adair about you," said the schoolmistress, coldly. "I have been telling her, as I now tell you, that the difference in your positions makes your present intimacy very undesirable. I wish you to understand, henceforward, that Miss Adair is not to walk with you in the garden, not to sit beside you in class, not to associate with you, as she has hitherto done, on equal terms."

"Why should we not associate on equal terms?" said Janetta. She was a black-browed girl, with a clear olive skin, and her eyes flashed and her cheeks glowed with indignation as she spoke.

"You are not equals," said Miss Polehampton, with icy displeasure in her tone—she had spoken very differently to Margaret. "You have to work for your bread: there is no disgrace in that, but it puts you on a different level from that of Miss Margaret Adair, an earl's grand-daughter, and the only child of one of the richest commoners in England. I have never before reminded you of the difference in position between yourself and the young ladies with whom you have hitherto been allowed to associate; and I really think I shall have to adopt another method—unless you conduct yourself, Miss Colwyn, with a little more modesty and propriety."

"May I ask what your other method would be?" asked Miss Colwyn, with perfect self-possession.

Miss Polehampton looked at her for a moment in silence.

"To begin with," she said, "I could order the meals differently, and request you to take yours with the younger children, and in other ways cut you off from the society of the young ladies. And if this failed, I could signify to your father that our arrangement was not satisfactory, and that it had better end at the close of this term."

Janetta's eyes fell and her color faded as she heard this threat. It meant a good deal to her. She answered quickly, but with some nervousness of tone.

"Of course, that must be as you please, Miss Polehampton. If I do not satisfy you, I must go."

"You satisfy me very well except in that one respect. However, I do not ask for any promise from you now. I shall observe your conduct during the next few days, and be guided by what I see. I have already spoken to Miss Adair."

Janetta bit her lips. After a pause, she said—

"Is that all? May I go now?"

"You may go," said Miss Polehampton, with majesty; and Janetta softly and slowly retired.

But as soon as she was outside the door her demeanor changed. She burst into tears as she sped swiftly up the broad staircase, and her eyes were so blinded that she did not even see a white figure hovering on the landing until she found herself suddenly in Margaret's arms. In defiance of all rules—disobedient for nearly the first time in her life—Margaret had waited and watched for Janetta's coming; and now, clasped as closely together as sisters, the two friends held a whispered colloquy on the stairs.

"Darling," said Margaret, "was she very unkind?"

"She was very horrid, but I suppose she couldn't help it," said Janetta, with a little laugh mixing itself with her sobs. "We mustn't be friends any more, Margaret."

"But we will be friends—always, Janetta."

"We must not sit together or walk together——"

"Janetta, I shall behave to you exactly as I have always done." The gentle Margaret was in revolt.

"She will write to your mother, Margaret, and to my father."

"I shall write to mine, too, and explain," said Margaret with dignity. And Janetta had not the heart to whisper to her friend that the tone in which Miss Polehampton would write to Lady Caroline would differ very widely from the one that she would adopt to Mr. Colwyn.

CHAPTER II.

LADY CAROLINE'S TACTICS.

Helmsley Court was generally considered one of the prettiest houses about Beaminster; a place which was rich in pretty houses, being a Cathedral town situated in one of the most beautiful southern counties of England. The village of Helmsley was a picturesque little group of black and white cottages, with gardens full of old-fashioned flowers before them and meadows and woods behind. Helmsley Court was on slightly higher ground than the village, and its windows commanded an extensive view of lovely country bounded in the distance by a long low range of blue hills, beyond which, in clear days, it was said, keen eyes could catch a glimpse of the shining sea. The house itself was a very fine old building, with a long terrace stretching before its lower windows, and flower gardens which were the admiration of half the county. It had a picture gallery and a magnificent hall with polished floor and stained windows, and all

the accessories of an antique and celebrated mansion; and it had also all the comfort and luxury that modern civilization could procure.

It was this latter characteristic that made "the Court," as it was commonly called, so popular. Picturesque old houses are sometimes draughty and inconvenient, but no such defects were ever allowed to exist at the Court. Every thing went smoothly: the servants were perfectly trained: the latest improvements possible were always introduced: the house was ideally luxurious. There never seemed to be any jar or discord: no domestic worry was ever allowed to reach the ears of the mistress of the household, no cares or troubles seemed able to exist in that serene atmosphere. You could not even say of it that it was dull. For the master of the Court was a hospitable man, with many tastes and whims which he liked to indulge by having down from London the numerous friends whose fancies matched his own, and his wife was a little bit of a fine lady who had London friends too, as well as neighbors, whom she liked to entertain. The house was seldom free from visitors; and it was partly for that very reason that Lady Caroline Adair, being in her own way a wise woman, had arranged that two or three years of her daughter's life should be spent at Miss Polehampton's very select boarding-school at Brighton. It would be a great drawback to Margaret, she reflected, if her beauty were familiar to all the world before she came out; and really, when Mr. Adair would insist on inviting his friends constantly to the house, it was impossible to keep the girl so mewed up in the schoolroom that she would not be seen and talked of; and therefore it was better that she should go away for a time. Mr. Adair did not like the arrangement; he was very fond of Margaret, and objected to her leaving home; but Lady Caroline was gently inexorable and got her own way—as she generally did.

She does not look much like the mother of the tall girl whom we saw at Brighton, as she sits at the head of her breakfast-table in the daintiest of morning gowns—a marvelous combination of silk, muslin and lace and pale pink ribbons—with a tiny white dog reposing in her lap. She is a much smaller woman than Margaret, and darker in complexion: it is from her, however, that Margaret inherits the large, appealing hazel eyes, which look at you with an infinite sweetness, while their owner is perhaps thinking of the *menu* or her milliner's bill. Lady Caroline's face is thin and pointed, but her complexion is still clear, and her soft brown hair is very prettily arranged. As she sits with her back to the light, with a rose-colored curtain behind her, just tinting her delicate cheek (for Lady Caroline is always careful of appearance), she looks quite a young woman still.

It is Mr. Adair whom Margaret most resembles. He is a tall and exceedingly handsome man, whose hair and moustache and pointed beard were as golden once as Margaret's soft tresses, but are now toned down by a little grey. He has the alert blue eyes that generally go with his fair complexion, and his long limbs are never still for many minutes together. His daughter's tranquillity seems to have come from her mother; certainly it cannot be inherited from the restless Reginald Adair.

The third person present at the breakfast-table—and, for the time being, the only visitor in the house—is a young man of seven or eight-and-twenty, tall, dark, and very spare, with a coal-black beard trimmed to a point, earnest dark eyes, and a remarkably pleasant and intelligent expression. He is not exactly handsome, but he has a face that attracts one; it is the face of a man who has quick perceptions, great kindness of heart, and a refined and cultured mind. Nobody is more popular in that county than young Sir Philip Ashley, although his neighbors grumble sometimes at his absorption in scientific and philanthropic objects, and think that it would be more creditable to them if he went out with the hounds a little oftener or were a rather better shot. For, being shortsighted, he was never particularly fond either of sport or of games of skill, and his interest had always centred on intellectual pursuits to a degree that amazed the more countrified squires of the neighborhood.

The post-bag was brought in while breakfast was proceeding, and two or three letters were laid before Lady Caroline, who, with a careless word of apology, opened and read them in turn. She smiled as she put them down and looked at her husband.

"This is a novel experience," she said. "For the first time in our lives, Reginald, here is a formal complaint of our Margaret."

Sir Philip looked up somewhat eagerly, and Mr. Adair elevated his eyebrows, stirred his coffee, and laughed aloud.

"Wonders will never cease," he said. "It is rather refreshing to hear that our immaculate Margaret has done something naughty. What is it, Caroline? Is she habitually late for breakfast? A touch of unpunctuality is the only fault I ever heard of, and that, I believe, she inherits from me."

"I should be sorry to think that she was immaculate," said Lady Caroline, calmly, "it has such an uncomfortable sound. But Margaret is generally, I must say, a very tractable child."

"Do you mean that her schoolmistress does not find her tractable?" said Mr. Adair, with amusement. "What has she been doing?"

"Nothing very bad. Making friends with a governess-pupil, or something of, that sort—"

"Just what a generous-hearted girl would be likely to do!" exclaimed Sir Philip, with a sudden warm lighting of his dark eyes.

Lady Caroline smiled at him. "The schoolmistress thinks this girl an unsuitable friend for Margaret, and wants me to interfere," she said.

"Pray do nothing of the sort," said Mr. Adair. "I would trust my Pearl's instinct anywhere. She would never make an unsuitable friend!"

"Margaret has written to me herself," said Lady Caroline. "She seems unusually excited about the matter. 'Dear mother,' she writes, 'pray interpose to prevent Miss Polehampton from doing an unjust and ungenerous thing. She disapproves of my friendship with dear Janetta Colwyn, simply because Janetta is poor; and she threatens to punish Janetta—not me—by sending her home in disgrace. Janetta is a governess-pupil here, and it would be a great trouble to her if she were sent away. I hope that you would rather take *me* away than let such an injustice be done.'"

"My Pearl hits the nail on the head exactly," said Mr. Adair, with complacency. He rose as he spoke, and began to walk about the room. "She is quite old enough to come home, Caroline. It is June now, and the term ends in July. Fetch her home, and invite the little governess too, and you will soon see whether or no she is the right sort of friend for Margaret." He laughed in his mellow, genial way, and leaned against the mantel-piece, stroking his yellow moustache and glancing at his wife.

"I am not sure that that would be advisable," said Lady Caroline, with her pretty smile. "Janetta Colwyn: Colwyn? Did not Margaret know her before she went to school? Are there not some Colwyns at Beaminster? The doctor—yes, I remember him; don't you, Reginald?"

Mr. Adair shook his head, but Sir Philip looked up hastily.

"I know him—a struggling man with a large family. His first wife was rather well-connected, I believe: at any rate she was related to the Brands of Brand Hall. He married a second time after her death."

"Do you call that being well-connected, Philip?" said Lady Caroline, with gentle reproach; while Mr. Adair laughed and whistled, but caught himself up immediately and apologized.

"I beg pardon—I forgot where I was: the less any of us have to do with the Brands of Brand Hall the better, Phil."

"I know nothing of them," said Sir Philip, rather gravely.

"Nor anybody else"—hastily—"they never live at home, you know. So this girl is a connection of theirs?"

"Perhaps not a very suitable friend: Miss Polehampton may be right," said Lady Caroline. "I suppose I must go over to Brighton and see Margaret."

"Bring her back with you," said Mr. Adair, recklessly. "She has had quite enough of school by this time: she is nearly eighteen, isn't she?"

But Lady Caroline smilingly refused to decide anything until she had herself interviewed Miss Polehampton. She asked her husband to order the carriage for her at once, and retired to summon her maid and array herself for the journey.

"You won't go to-day, will you, Philip?" said Mr. Adair, almost appealingly. "I shall be all alone, and my wife will not perhaps return until to-morrow—there's no saying."

"Thank you, I shall be most pleased to stay," answered Sir Philip, cordially. After a moment's pause, he added, with something very like a touch of shyness—"I have not seen—your daughter since she was twelve years old."

"Haven't you?" said Mr. Adair, with ready interest. "You don't say so! Pretty little girl she was then! Didn't you think so?"

"I thought her the loveliest child I had ever seen in all my life," said Sir Philip, with curious devoutness of manner.

He saw Lady Caroline just as she was starting for the train, with man and maid in attendance, and Mr. Adair handing her into the carriage and gallantly offering to accompany her if she liked. "Not at all necessary," said Lady Caroline, with an indulgent smile. "I shall be home to dinner. Take care of my husband, Philip, and don't let him be dull."

"If they are making Margaret unhappy, be sure you bring her back with you," were Mr. Adair's last words. Lady Caroline gave him a kind but inscrutable little smile and nod as she was whirled away. Sir Philip thought to himself that she looked like a woman who would take her own course in spite of advice or recommendation from her husband or anybody else.

He smiled once or twice as the day passed on at her parting injunction to him not to let her husband be dull. He had known the Adairs for many years, and had never known Reginald Adair dull under any circumstances. He was too full of interests, of "fads," some people called them, ever to be dull. He took Sir Philip round the picture-gallery, round the stables, to the kennels, to the flower-garden, to his own studio (where he painted in oils when he had nothing else to do) with never-flagging energy and animation. Sir Philip's interests lay in different grooves, but he was quite capable of sympathizing with Mr. Adair's interests, too. The day passed pleasantly, and seemed rather short for all that the two men wanted to pack into it; although from time to time Mr. Adair would say, half-impatiently, "I wonder how Caroline is getting on!" or "I hope she'll bring Margaret back with her! But I don't expect it, you know. Carry was always a great one for education and that sort of thing."

"Is Miss Adair intellectual—too?" asked Sir Philip, with respect.

Mr. Adair broke into a sudden laugh. "Intellectual? Our Daisy?—our Pearl?" he said. "Wait until you see her, then ask the question if you like."

"I am afraid I don't quite understand."

"Of course you don't. It is the partiality of a fond father that speaks, my dear fellow. I only meant that these young, fresh, pretty girls put such questions out of one's head."

"She must be very pretty then," said Sir Philip, with a smile.

He had seen a great many beautiful women, and told himself that he did not care for beauty. Fashionable, talkative women were his abomination. He had no sisters, but he loved his mother very dearly; and upon her he had founded a very high ideal of womanhood. He had begun to think vaguely, of late, that he ought to marry: duty demanded it of him, and Sir Philip was always attentive, if not obedient, to the voice of duty. But he was not inclined to marry a girl out of the schoolroom, or a girl who was accustomed to the enervating luxury (as he considered it) of Helmsley Court: he wanted an energetic, sensible, large-hearted, and large-minded woman who would be his right hand, his first minister of state. Sir Philip was fairly wealthy, but by no means enormously so; and he had other uses for his wealth than the buying of pictures and keeping up stables and kennels at an alarming expense. If Miss Adair were so pretty, he mused, it was just as well that she was not at home, for, of course, it was possible that he might find a lovely face an attraction: and much as he liked Lady Caroline, he did not want particularly to marry Lady Caroline's daughter. That she treated him with great consideration, and that he had once overheard her speak of him as "the most eligible *parti* of the neighborhood," had already put him a little on his guard. Lady Caroline was no vulgar, match-making mother, he knew that well enough; but she was in some respects a thoroughly worldly woman, and Philip Ashley was an essentially unworldly man.

As he went upstairs to dress for dinner that evening, he was struck by the fact that a door stood open that he had never seen opened before: a door into a pretty, well-lighted, pink and white room, the ideal apartment for a young girl. The evening was chilly, and rain had begun to fall, so a bright little fire was burning in the steel grate, and casting a cheerful glow over white sheepskin rugs and rose-colored curtains. A maid seemed to be busying herself with some white material—all gauze and lace it looked—and another servant was, as Sir Philip passed, entering with a great white vase filled with red roses.

"Do they expect visitors to-night?" thought the young man, who knew enough of the house to be aware that the room was not one in general use. "Adair said nothing about it, but perhaps some people are coming from town."

A budget of letters was brought to him at that moment, and in reading and answering them he did not note the sound of carriage-wheels on the drive, nor the bustle of an

arrival in the house. Indeed, he left himself so little time that he had to dress in extraordinary haste, and went downstairs at last in the conviction that he was unpardonably late.

But apparently he was wrong.

For the drawing-room was tenanted by one figure only—that of a young lady in evening dress. Neither Lady Caroline nor Mr. Adair had appeared upon the scene; but on the hearthrug, by the small crackling fire—which, in deference to the chilliness of an English June evening, had been lighted—stood a tall, fair, slender girl, with pale complexion, and soft, loosely-coiled masses of golden hair. She was dressed in pure white, a soft loose gown of Indian silk, trimmed with the most delicate lace: it was high to the milk-white throat, but showed the rounded curves of the finely-moulded arm to the elbow. She wore no ornaments, but a white rose was fastened into the lace frill of her dress at her neck. As she turned her face towards the new comer, Sir Philip suddenly felt himself abashed. It was not that she was so beautiful—in those first few moments he scarcely thought her beautiful at all—but that she produced on him an impression of serious, virginal grace and innocence which was almost disconcerting. Her pure complexion, her grave, serene eyes, her graceful way of moving as she advanced a little to receive him stirred him to more than admiration—to something not unlike awe. She looked young; but it was youth in perfection: there was some marvelous finish, delicacy, polish, which one does not usually associate with extreme youth.

"You are Sir Philip Ashley, I think?" she said, offering him her slim cool hand without embarrassment.

"You do not remember me, perhaps, but I remember you perfectly well, I am Margaret Adair."

CHAPTER III.

AT HELMSLEY COURT.

"Lady Caroline has brought you back, then?" said Sir Philip, after his first pause of astonishment.

"Yes," said Margaret, serenely. "I have been expelled."

"Expelled! *You?*"

"Yes, indeed, I have," said the girl, with a faintly amused little smile. "And so has my great friend, Janetta Colwyn. Here she is: Janetta, I am telling Sir Philip Ashley that we have been expelled, and he will not believe me."

Sir Philip turned in some curiosity to see the girl of whom he had heard for the first time that morning. He had not noticed before that she was present. He saw a brown little creature, with eyes that had been swollen with crying until they were well-nigh invisible, small, unremarkable features, and a mouth that was inclined to quiver. Margaret might afford to be serene, but to this girl expulsion from school had evidently been a sad trouble. He threw all the more kindness and gentleness into his voice and look as he spoke to her.

Janetta might have felt a little awkward if she had not been so entirely absorbed by her own woes. She had never set foot before in half so grand a house as this of Helmsley Court, nor had she ever dined late or spoken to a gentleman in an evening coat in all her previous life. The size and the magnificence of the room would perhaps have oppressed her if she had been fully aware of them. But she was for the moment very much wrapped up in her own affairs, and scarcely stopped to think of the novel situation in which she found herself. The only thing that had startled her was the attention paid to her dress by Margaret and Margaret's maid. Janetta would have put on her afternoon black cashmere and little silver brooch, and would have felt herself perfectly well dressed; but Margaret, after a little consultation with the very grand young person who condescended to brush Miss Colwyn's hair, had herself brought to Janetta's room a dress of black lace over cherry-colored silk, and had begged her to put it on.

"You will feel so hot downstairs if you don't put on something cool," Margaret had said. "There is a fire in the drawing-room: papa likes the rooms warm. My dresses would not have fitted you, I am so much taller than you; but mamma is just your height, and although you are thinner perhaps——But I don't know: the dress fits you perfectly. Look in the glass, Janet; you are quite splendid."

Janetta looked and blushed a little—not because she thought herself at all splendid, but because the dress showed her neck and arms in a way no dress had ever done before. "Ought it to be—open—like this?" she said, vaguely. "Do you wear your dresses like this when you are at home?"

"Mine are high," said Margaret. "I am not 'out,' you know. But you are older than I, and you used to teach——I think we may consider that you *are* 'out,'" she added, with a little laugh. "You look very nice, Janetta: you have such pretty arms! Now I must go and dress, and I will call for you when I am ready to go down."

Janetta felt decidedly doubtful as to whether she were not a great deal too grand for the occasion; but she altered her mind when she saw Margaret's dainty silk and lace, and Lady Caroline's exquisite brocade; and she felt herself quite unworthy to take Mr.

Adair's offered arm when dinner was announced and her host politely convoyed her to the dining-room. She wondered whether he knew that she was only a little governess-pupil, and whether he was not angry with her for being the cause of his daughter's abrupt departure from school. As a matter of fact, Mr. Adair knew her position exactly, and was very much amused by the whole affair; also, as it had procured him the pleasure of his daughter's return home, he had an illogical inclination to be pleased also with Janetta. "As Margaret is so fond of her, there must be something in her," he said to himself, with a critical glance at the girl's delicate features and big dark eyes. "I'll draw her out at dinner."

He tried his best, and made himself so agreeable and amusing that Janetta lost a good deal of her shyness, and forgot her troubles. She had a quick tongue of her own, as everybody at Miss Polehampton's was aware; and she soon found that she had not lost it. She was a good deal surprised to find that not a word was said at the dinner table about the cause of Margaret's return: in her own home it would have been the subject of the evening; it would have been discussed from every point of view, and she would probably have been reduced to tears before the first hour was over. But here it was evident that the matter was not considered of great importance. Margaret looked serene as ever, and joined quietly in talk which was alarmingly unlike Miss Polehampton's improving conversation: talk about county gaities and county magnates: gossip about neighbors—gossip of a harmless although frivolous type, for Lady Caroline never allowed any talk at her table that was anything but harmless, about fashions, about old china, about music and art. Mr. Adair was passionately fond of music, and when he found that Miss Colwyn really knew something of it he was in his element. They discoursed of fugues, sonatas, concertos, quartettes, and trios, until even Lady Caroline raised her eyebrows a little at the very technical nature of the conversation; and Sir Philip exchanged a congratulatory smile with Margaret over her friend's success. For the delight of finding a congenial spirit had brought the crimson into Janetta's olive cheeks and the brilliance to her dark eyes: she had looked insignificant when she went in to dinner; she was splendidly handsome at dessert. Mr. Adair noticed her flashing, transitory beauty, and said to himself that Margaret's taste was unimpeachable; it was just like his own; he had complete confidence in Margaret.

When the ladies went back to the drawing-room, Sir Philip turned with a look of only half-disguised curiosity to his host. "Lady Caroline brought her back then?" he said, longing to ask questions, yet hardly knowing how to frame them aright.

Mr. Adair gave a great laugh. "It's been the oddest thing I ever heard of," he said, in a tone of enjoyment. "Margaret takes a fancy to that little black-eyed girl—a nice little thing, too, don't you think?—and nothing must serve but that her favorite must walk with her, sit by her, and so on—you know the romantic way girls have? The schoolmistress interfered, said it was not proper, and so on; forbade it. Miss Colwyn would have obeyed, it seems, but Margaret took the bit in a quiet way between her teeth.

Miss Colwyn was ordered to take her meals at a side table: Margaret insisted on taking her meals there too. The school was thrown into confusion. At last Miss Polehampton decided that the best way out of the difficulty was first to complain to us, and then to send Miss Colwyn home, straight away. She would not send *Margaret* home, you know!"

"That was very hard on Miss Colwyn," said Sir Philip, gravely.

"Yes, horribly hard. So Margaret, as you heard, appealed to her mother, and when Lady Caroline arrived, she found that not only were Miss Colwyn's boxes packed, but Margaret's as well; and that Margaret had declared that if her friend was sent away for what was after all *her* fault, she would not stay an hour in the house. Miss Polehampton was weeping: the girls were in revolt, the teachers in despair, so my wife thought the best way out of the difficulty was to bring both girls away at once, and settle it with Miss Colwyn's relations afterwards. The joke is that Margaret insists on it that she has been 'expelled.'"

"So she told me."

"The schoolmistress said something of that kind, you know. Caroline says the woman entirely lost her temper and made an exhibition of herself. Caroline was glad to get our girl away. But, of course, it's all nonsense about being 'expelled' as a punishment; she was leaving of her own accord."

"One could hardly imagine punishment in connection with her," said Sir Philip, warmly.

"No, she's a nice-looking girl, isn't she? and her little friend is a good foil, poor little thing."

"This affair may prove of some serious inconvenience to Miss Colwyn, I suppose?"

"Oh, you may depend upon it, she won't be the loser," said Mr. Adair, hastily. "We'll see about that. Of course she will not suffer any injury through my daughter's friendship for her."

Sir Philip was not so sure about it. In spite of his intense admiration for Margaret's beauty, it occurred to him that the romantic partisanship of the girl with beauty, position, and wealth for her less fortunate sister had not been attended with very brilliant results. No doubt Miss Adair, reared in luxury and indulgence, did not in the least realize the harm done to the poor governess-pupil's future by her summary dismissal from Miss Polehampton's boarding-school. To Margaret, anything that the schoolmistress chose to say or do mattered little; to Janetta Colwyn, it might some day mean prosperity or adversity of a very serious kind. Sir Philip did not quite believe in the compensation so easily promised by Mr. Adair. He made a mental note of Miss Colwyn's condition and

prospects, and said to himself that he would not forget her. And this meant a good deal from a busy man like Sir Philip Ashley.

Meanwhile there had been another conversation going on in the drawing-room between the three ladies. Margaret put her arm affectionately round Janetta's waist as they stood by the hearthrug, and looked at her mother with a smile. Lady Caroline sank into an easy-chair on the other side of the fireplace, and contemplated the two girls.

"This is better than Claremont House, is it not, Janet?" said Margaret.

"Indeed it is," Janetta answered, gratefully.

"You found the way to papa's heart by your talk about music—did she not, mamma? And does not this dress suit her beautifully?"

"It wants a little alteration in the sleeve," said Lady Caroline, with the placidity which Janetta had always attributed to Margaret as a special virtue, but which she now found was merely characteristic of the house and family in general, "but Markham can do that to-morrow. There are some people coming in the evening, and the sleeve will look better shortened."

The remark sounded a little inconsequent in Janetta's ear, but Margaret understood and assented. It meant that Lady Caroline was on the whole pleased with Janetta, and did not object to introducing her to her friends. Margaret gave her mother a little smile over Janetta's head, while that young person was gathering up her courage in two hands, so to speak, before addressing Lady Caroline.

"I am very much obliged to you," she said at last, with a thrill of gratitude in her sweet voice which was very pleasant to the ear. "But—I was thinking—what time would be the most convenient for me to go home to-morrow?"

"Home? To Beaminster?" said Margaret. "But you need not go, dear; you can write a note and tell them that you are staying here."

"Yes, my dear; I am sure Margaret cannot part with you yet," said Lady Caroline, amiably.

"Thank you; it is most kind of you," Janetta answered, her voice shaking. "But I must ask my father whether I can stay—and hear what he says; Miss Polehampton will have written to him, and——"

"And he will be very glad that we have rescued you from her clutches," said Margaret, with a soft triumphant little laugh. "My poor Janetta! What we suffered at her hands!"

Lady Caroline lying back in her easy chair, with the candle light gleaming upon her silvery grey and white brocade with its touches of soft pink, and the diamonds flashing

on her white hands, so calmly crossed upon the handle of her ivory fan, did not feel quite so tranquil as she looked. It crossed her mind that Margaret was acting inconsiderately. This little Miss Colwyn had her living to earn; it would be no kindness to unfit her for her profession. So, when she spoke it was with a shade more decision than usual in her tones.

"We will drive you over to Beaminster to-morrow, my dear Miss Colwyn, and you can then see your family, and ask your father if you may spend a few days with Margaret. I do not think that Mr. Colwyn will refuse us," she said, graciously. "I wonder when those men are coming, Margaret. Suppose you open the piano and let us have a little music. You sing, do you not?"

"Yes, a little," said Janetta.

"A little!" exclaimed Margaret, with contempt. "She has a delightful voice, mamma. Come and sing at once, Janetta, darling, and astonish mamma."

Lady Caroline smiled. She had heard a great many singers in her day, and did not expect to be astonished. A little governess-pupil, an under-teacher in a boarding-school! Dear Margaret's enthusiasm certainly carried her away.

But when Janetta sang, Lady Caroline was, after all, rather surprised. The girl had a remarkably sweet and rich contralto voice, and it had been well trained; and, moreover, she sang with feeling and passion which were somewhat unusual in one so young. It seemed as if some hidden power, some latent characteristic came out in her singing because it found no other way of expressing itself. Neither Lady Caroline nor Margaret understood why Janetta's voice moved them so much; Sir Philip, who came in with his host while the music was going on, heard and was charmed also without quite knowing why; it was Mr. Adair alone whose musical knowledge and experience of the world enabled him, feather-headed as in some respects he was, to lay his finger directly on the salient features of Janetta's singing.

"It's not her voice altogether, you know," he said afterwards to Philip Ashley, in a moment of confidence; "it's soul. She's got more of that commodity than is good for a woman. It makes her singing lovely, you know—brings tears into one's eyes, and all that sort of thing—but upon my honor I'm thankful that Margaret hasn't got a voice like that! It's women of that kind that are either heroines of virtue—or go to the devil. They are always in extremes."

"Then we may promise ourselves some excitement in watching Miss Colwyn's career," said Sir Philip, dryly.

After Janetta, Margaret sang; she had a sweet mezzo-soprano voice, of no great strength or compass, but perfectly trained and very pleasing to the ear. The sort of voice, Sir Philip thought, that would be soothing to the nerves of a tired man in his own house.

Whereas, Janetta's singing had something impassioned in it which disturbed and excited instead of soothing. But he was quite ready to admire when Margaret called on him for admiration. They were sitting together on a sofa, and Janetta, who had just finished one of her songs, was talking to, or being talked to, by Mr. Adair. Lady Caroline had taken up a review.

"Is not Miss Colwyn's voice perfectly lovely?" Margaret asked, with shining eyes.

"It is very sweet."

"Don't you think she looks very nice?"—Margaret was hungering for admiration of her friend.

"She is a very pretty girl. You are very fond of each other?"

"Oh, yes, devoted. I am so glad I succeeded!" said the girl, with a great sigh.

"In getting her away from the school?"

"Yes."

"You think it was for her good?"

Margaret opened her lovely eyes.

"For her good?—to come here instead of staying in that close uncomfortable house to give music lessons, and bear Miss Polehampton's snubs?——" It had evidently never occurred to her that the change could be anything but beneficial to Janetta.

"It is very pleasant for her, no doubt," said Sir Philip, smiling in spite of his disapproval. "I only wondered whether it was a good preparation for the life of hard work which probably lies before her."

He saw that Margaret colored, and wondered whether she would be offended by his suggestion. After a moment's pause, she answered, gravely, but quite gently—

"I never thought of it in that way before, exactly. I want to keep her here, so that she should never have to work hard at all."

"Would she consent to that?"

"Why not?" said Margaret.

Sir Philip smiled and said no more. It was curious, he said to himself, to see how little conception Margaret had of lives unlike and outside her own. And Janetta's brave but sensitive little face, with its resolute brows and lips and brilliant eyes, gave promise of a determination and an originality which, he felt convinced, would never allow her to become a mere plaything or appendage of a wealthy household, as Margaret Adair

seemed to expect. But his words had made an impression. At night, when Lady Caroline and her daughter were standing in the charming little room which had always been appropriated to Margaret's use, she spoke, with the unconscious habit of saying frankly anything that had occurred to her, of Sir Philip's remarks.

"It was so odd," she said; "Sir Philip seemed to think that it would be bad for Janetta to stay here, mamma. Why should it be bad for her, mamma, dear?"

"I don't think it will be at all bad for her to spend a day or two with us, darling," said Lady Caroline, keeping somewhat careful watch on Margaret's face as she spoke. "But perhaps it had better be by-and-bye. You know she wants to go home to-morrow, and we must not keep her away from her duties or her own sphere of life."

"No," Margaret answered, "but her duties will not always keep her at home, you know, mamma, dear."

"I suppose not, my dearest," said Lady Caroline, vaguely, but in the caressing tone to which Margaret was accustomed. "Go to bed, my sweetest one, and we will talk of all these things to-morrow."

Meanwhile Janetta was wondering at the luxury of the room which had been allotted to her, and thinking over the events of the past day. When a tap at the door announced Margaret's appearance to say good-night, Janetta was standing before the long looking-glass, apparently inspecting herself by the light of the rose-tinted wax candles in silver sconces which were fixed on either side of the mirror. She was in her dressing-gown, and her long and abundant hair fell over her shoulder in a great curly mass.

"Oh, Miss Vanity!" cried Margaret, with more gaiety of tone than was usual with her, "are you admiring your pretty hair?"

"I was thinking," said Janetta, with the intensity which often characterized her speech, "that *now* I understood you—now I know why you were so different from other girls, so sweet, so calm and beautiful! You have lived in this lovely place all your life! It is like a fairy palace—a dream-house—to me; and you are the queen of it, Margaret—a princess of dreams!"

"I hope I shall have something more than dreams to reign over some day," said Margaret, putting her arms round her friend's neck. "And whatever I am queen over, you must share my queendom, Janet. You know how fond I am of you—how I want you to stay with me always and be my friend."

"I shall always be your friend—always, to the last day of my life!" said Janetta, with fervor. The two made a pretty picture, reflected in the long mirror; the tall, fair Margaret, still in her soft white silk frock, with her arm round the smaller figure of the

dark girl whose curly masses of hair half covered her pink cotton dressing-gown, and whose brown face was upturned so lovingly to her friend's.

"And I am sure it will be good for you to stay with me," said Margaret, answering an unspoken objection in her mind.

"Good for me? It is delicious—it is lovely!" cried Janetta, rapturously. "I have never had anything so nice in my whole life. Dear Margaret, you are so good and so kind—if there were only anything that I could do for you in return! Perhaps some day I shall have the chance, and if ever I have—*then* you shall see whether I am true to my friend or not!"

Margaret kissed her, with a little smile at Janetta's enthusiasm, which was so far different from the modes of expression customary at Helmsley Court, as to be almost amusing.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE ROAD.

Miss Polehampton had, of course, written to Mr. and Mrs. Colwyn when she made up her mind that Janetta was to be removed from school; and two or three letters had been interchanged before that eventful day on which Margaret declared that if Janetta went she should go too. Margaret had been purposely kept in the dark until almost the last moment, for Miss Polehampton did not in the least wish to make a scandal, and annoyed as she was by Miss Adair's avowed preference for Janetta, she had arranged a neat little plan by which Miss Colwyn was to go away "for change of air," and be transferred to a school at Worthing kept by a relation of her own at the beginning of the following term. These plans had been upset by a foolish and ill-judged letter from Mrs. Colwyn to her stepdaughter, which Janetta had not been able to keep from Margaret's eyes. This letter was full of reproaches to Janetta for giving so much trouble to her friends; "for, of course," Mrs. Colwyn wrote, "Miss Polehampton's concern for your health is all a blind in order to get you away: and if it hadn't been for Miss Adair taking you up, she would have been only too glad to keep you. But knowing Miss Adair's position, she sees very clearly that it isn't fit for you to be friends with her, and so she wants to send you away."

This was in the main true, but Janetta, in the blithe confidence of youth, would never have discovered it but for that letter. Together she and Margaret consulted over it, for when Margaret saw Janetta crying, she almost forced the letter from her hand; and then it was that Miss Adair vindicated her claim to social superiority. She went straight to

Miss Polehampton and demanded that Janetta should remain; and when the schoolmistress refused to alter her decision, she calmly replied that in that case *she* should go home too. Miss Polehampton was an obstinate woman, and would not concede the point; and Lady Caroline, on learning the state of affairs, at once perceived that it was impossible to leave Margaret at the school where open warfare had been declared. She accordingly brought both girls away with her, arranging to send Janetta to her own home next morning.

"You will stay to luncheon, dear, and I will drive you over to Beaminster at three o'clock," she said to Janetta at breakfast. "No doubt you are anxious to see your own people."

Janetta looked as if she might find it difficult to reply, but Margaret interposed a remark—as usual at the right moment.

"We will practice our duets this morning—if Janetta likes, that is; and we can have a walk in the garden too. Shall we have the landau, mamma?"

"The victoria, I think, dear," said Lady Caroline, placidly. "Your father wants you to ride with him this afternoon, so I shall have the pleasure of Miss Colwyn's society in my drive."

Margaret assented; but Janetta became suddenly aware, by a flash of keen feminine intuition, that Lady Caroline had some reason for wishing to go with her alone, and that she had purposely made the arrangement that she spoke of. However, there was nothing to displease her in this, for Lady Caroline had been most kind and considerate to her, so far, and she was innocently disposed to believe in the cordiality and sincerity of every one who behaved with common civility.

So she spent a pleasant morning, singing with Margaret, loitering about the garden with Mr. Adair, while Margaret and Sir Philip gathered roses, and enjoying to the full all the sweet influences of peace, refinement, and prosperity by which she was surrounded.

Margaret left her in the afternoon with rather a hasty kiss, and an assurance that she would see her again at dinner. Janetta tried to remind her that by that time she would have left the Court, but Margaret did not or would not hear. The tears came into the girl's eyes as her friend disappeared.

"Never mind, dear," said Lady Caroline, who was observing her closely, "Margaret has forgotten at what hour you were going and I would not remind her—it would spoil her pleasure in her ride. We will arrange for you to come to us another day when you have seen your friends at home."

"Thank you," said Janetta. "It was only that she did not seem to remember that I was going—I had meant to say good-bye."

"Exactly. She thinks that I am going to bring you back this afternoon. We will talk about it as we go, dear. Suppose you were to put on your hat now. The carriage will be here in ten minutes."

Janetta prepared for her departure in a somewhat bewildered spirit. She did not know precisely what Lady Caroline meant. She even felt a little nervous as she took her place in the victoria and cast a last look at the stately house in which she had spent some nineteen or twenty pleasant hours. It was Lady Caroline who spoke first.

"We shall miss your singing to-night," she said, amiably. "Mr. Adair was looking forward to some more duets. Another time, perhaps——"

"I am always pleased to sing," said Janetta, brightening at this address.

"Yes—ye—es," said Lady Caroline, with a doubtful little drawl. "No doubt: one always likes to do what one can do so well; but—I confess I am not so musical as my husband or my daughter. I must explain why dear Margaret did not say good bye to you, Miss Colwyn. I allowed her to remain in the belief that she was to see you again to-night, in order that she might not be depressed during her ride by the thought of parting with you. It is always my principle to make the lives of those dear to me as happy as possible," said Margaret's mother, piously.

"And if Margaret had been depressed during her ride, Mr. Adair and Sir Philip might have suffered some depression also, and that would be a great pity."

"Oh, yes," said Janetta. But she felt chilled, without knowing why.

"I must take you into my confidence," said Lady Caroline, in her softest voice. "Mr. Adair has plans for our dear Margaret. Sir Philip Ashley's property adjoins our own: he is of good principles, kind-hearted, and intellectual: he is well off, nice-looking, and of a suitable age—he admires Margaret very much. I need say no more, I am sure."

Again she looked keenly at Janetta's face, but she read there nothing but interest and surprise.

"Oh—does Margaret know?" she asked.

"She feels more than she knows," said Lady Caroline, discreetly. "She is in the first stage of—of—emotion. I did not want the afternoon's arrangements to be interfered with."

"Oh, no! especially on *my* account," said Janetta, sincerely.

"When I go home I shall talk quietly to Margaret," pursued Lady Caroline, "and tell her that you will come back another day, that your duties called you home—they do, I am

sure, dear Miss Colwyn—and that you could not return with me when you were so much wanted."

"I'm afraid I am not much wanted," said Janetta, with a sigh; "but I daresay it is my duty to go home——"

"I am sure it is," Lady Caroline declared; "and duty is so high and holy a thing, dear, that you will never regret the performance of it."

It occurred dimly to Janetta at that point that Lady Caroline's views of duty might possibly differ from her own; but she did not venture to say so.

"And, of course, you will never repeat to Margaret——"

Lady Caroline did not complete her sentence. The coachman suddenly checked the horses' speed: for some unknown reason he actually stopped short in the very middle of the country road between Helmsley Court and Beaminster. His mistress uttered a little cry of alarm.

"What is the matter, Steel?"

The footman dismounted and touched his hat.

"I'm afraid there has been an accident, my lady," he said, as apologetically, as if he were responsible for the accident.

"Oh! Nothing horrible, I hope!" said Lady Caroline, drawing out her smelling-bottle.

"It's a carriage accident, my lady. Leastways, a cab. The 'orse is lying right across the road, my lady."

"Speak to the people, Steel," said her ladyship, with great dignity. "They must not be allowed to block up the road in this way."

"May I get out?" said Janetta, eagerly. "There is a lady lying on the path, and some people bathing her face. Now they are lifting her up—I am sure they ought not to lift her up in that way—oh, please, I must go just for one minute!" And, without waiting for a reply, she stepped, out of the victoria and sped to the side of the woman who had been hurt.

"Very impulsive and undisciplined," said Lady Caroline to herself, as she leaned back and held the smelling-bottle to her own delicate nose. "I am glad I have got her out of the house so soon. Those men were wild about her singing. Sir Philip disapproved of her presence, but he was charmed by her voice, I could see that; and poor, dear Reginald was positively absurd about her voice. And dear Margaret does *not* sing so well—it is no use pretending that she does—and Sir Philip is trembling on the verge—oh, yes, I am sure that I have been very wise. What is that girl doing now?"

The victoria moved forward a little, so that Lady Caroline could obtain a clearer view of what was going on. The vehicle which caused the obstruction—evidently a hired fly from an inn—was uninjured, but the horse had fallen between the shafts and would never rise again. The occupants of the fly—a lady, and a much younger man, perhaps her son—had got out, and the lady had then turned faint, Lady Caroline heard, but was not in any way hurt. Janetta was kneeling by the side of the lady—kneeling in the dust, without any regard to the freshness of her cotton frock, by the way—and had already placed her in the right position, and was ordering the half-dozen people who had collected to stand back and give her air. Lady Caroline watched her movements and gestures with placid amusement, and went so far as to send Steel with the offer of her smelling salts; but as this offer was rejected she felt that nothing else could be done. So she sat and looked on critically.

The woman—Lady Caroline was hardly inclined to call her a lady, although she did not exactly know why—was at present of a ghastly paleness, but her features were finely cut, and showed traces of former beauty. Her hair was grey, with rebellious waves in it, but her eyebrows were still dark. She was dressed in black, with a good deal of lace about her; and on her ungloved hand Lady Caroline's keen sight enabled her to distinguish some very handsome diamond rings. The effect of the costume was a little spoiled by a large gaudy fan, of violent rainbow hues, which hung at her side; and perhaps it was this article of adornment which decided Lady Caroline in her opinion of the woman's social status. But about the man she was equally positive in a different way. He *was* a gentleman: there could be no doubt of that. She put up her eye-glass and gazed at him with interest. She almost thought that she had seen him somewhere before.

A handsome man, indeed, and a gentleman; but, oh, what an ill-tempered one, apparently! He was dark, with fine features, and black hair with a slight inclination to wave or curl (as far at least as could be judged when the extremely well-cropped state of his head was taken into consideration); and from these indications Lady Caroline judged him to be "the woman's" son. He was tall, muscular, and active looking: it was the way in which his black eyebrows were bent above his eyes which made the observer think him ill-tempered, for his manner and his words expressed anxiety, not anger. But that frown, which must have been habitual, gave him a distinctly ill-humored look.

At last the lady opened her eyes, and drank a little water, and sat up. Janetta rose from her knees, and turned to the young man with a smile. "She will soon be better now," she said. "I am afraid there is nothing else that I can do—and I think I must go on."

"I am very much obliged to you for your kind assistance," said the gentleman, but without any abatement of the gloom of his expression. He gave Janetta a keen look—almost a bold look—Lady Caroline thought, and then smiled a little, not very pleasantly. "Allow me to take you to your carriage."

Janetta blushed, as if she were minded to say that it was not her carriage; but returned to the victoria, and was handed to her seat by the young man, who then raised his hat with an elaborate flourish which was not exactly English. Indeed, it occurred to Lady Caroline at once that there was something French about both the travelers. The lady with the frizzled grey hair, the black lace dress and mantel, the gaudy blue and scarlet fan, was quite foreign in appearance; the young man with the perfectly fitting frock-coat, the tall hat, the flower in his button-hole, was—in spite of his perfectly English accent—foreign too. Lady Caroline was cosmopolitan enough to feel an access of greater interest in the pair in consequence.

"They have sent to the nearest inn for a horse," said Janetta, as the carriage moved on; "and I dare say they will not have long to wait."

"Was the lady hurt?"

"No, only shaken. She is subject to fainting fits, and the accident quite upset her nerves, her son said."

"Her son?"

"The gentleman called her mother."

"Oh! You did not hear their name, I suppose?"

"No. There was a big B on their traveling bag."

"B—B—?" said Lady Caroline, thoughtfully. "I don't know any one in this neighborhood whose name begins with B, except the Bevans. They must have been merely passing through; and yet the young man's face seemed familiar to me."

Janetta shook her head. "I never saw them before," she said.

"He has a very bold and unpleasant expression," Lady Caroline remarked, decidedly. "It spoils him entirely: otherwise he is a handsome man."

The girl made no answer. She knew, as well as Lady Caroline, that she had been stared at in a manner that was not quite agreeable to her, and yet she did not like to endorse that lady's condemnation of the stranger. For he was certainly very nice-looking—and he had been so kind to his mother that he could not be entirely bad—and to her also his face was vaguely familiar. Could he belong to Beaminster?

As she sat and meditated, the tall spires of Beaminster Cathedral came into sight, and a few minutes brought the carriage across the grey stone bridge and down the principal street of the quaint old place which called itself a city, but was really neither more nor less than a quiet country town. Here Lady Caroline turned to her young guest with a question—"You live in Gwynne Street, I believe, my dear?"

"Yes, at number ten, Gwynne Street," said Janetta, suddenly starting and feeling a little uncomfortable. The coachman evidently knew the address already, for at that moment he turned the horse's heads to the left, and the carriage rolled down a narrow side-street, where the tall red brick houses had a mean and shabby aspect, and seemed as if constructed to keep out sun and air as much as possible.

Janetta always felt the closeness and the shabbiness a little when she first came home, even from school, but when she came from Helmsley Court they struck her with redoubled force. She had never thought before how dull the street was, nor noticed that the railings were broken down in front of the door with the brass-plate that bore her father's name, nor that the window-curtains were torn and the windows sadly in need of washing. The little flight of stone steps that led from the iron gate to the door was also very dirty; and the servant girl, whose head appeared against the area railings as the carriage drove up, was more untidy, more unkempt, in appearance than ever Janetta could have expected. "We can't be rich, but we might be *clean*!" she said to herself in a subdued frenzy of impatience, as she fancied (quite unjustly) that she saw a faint smile pass over Lady Caroline's delicate, impassive face. "No wonder she thinks me an unfit friend for dear Margaret. But—oh, there is my dear, darling father! Well, nobody can say anything against him at any rate!" And Janetta's face beamed with sudden joy as she saw Mr. Colwyn coming down the dirty steps to the rickety little iron gate, and Lady Caroline, who knew the surgeon by sight, nodded to him with friendly condescension.

"How are you, Mr. Colwyn?" she said, graciously. "I have brought your daughter home, you see, and I hope you will not scold her for what has been *my* daughter's fault—not your's."

"I am very glad to see Janetta, under any circumstances," said Mr. Colwyn, gravely, as he raised his hat. He was a tall spare man, in a shabby coat, with a careworn aspect, and kindly, melancholy eyes. Janetta noticed with a pang that his hair was greyer than it had been when last she went back to school.

"We shall be glad to see her again at Helmsley Court," said Lady Caroline. "No, I won't get out, thank you. I have to get back to tea. Your daughter's box is in front. I was to tell you from Miss Polehampton, Mr. Colwyn, that her friend at Worthing would be glad of Miss Colwyn's services after the holidays."

"I am much obliged to your ladyship," said Mr. Colwyn, with grave formality. "I am not sure that I shall let my daughter go."

"Won't you? Oh, but she ought to have all possible advantages! And can you tell me, Mr. Colwyn, by any chance, *who* are the people whom we passed on the road to Beaminster—an oldish lady in black and a young man with very dark hair and eyes? They had B on their luggage, I believe."

Mr. Colwyn looked surprised.

"I think I can tell you," he said, quietly. "They were on their way from Beaminster to Brand Hall. The young man was a cousin of my wife's: his name is Wyvis Brand, and the lady in black was his mother. They have come home after an absence of nearly four-and-twenty years."

Lady Caroline was too polite to say what she really felt—that she was sorry to hear it.

CHAPTER V.

WYVIS BRAND.

On the evening of the day on which Lady Caroline drove with Janetta Colwyn to Beaminster, the lady who had fainted by the wayside was sitting in a rather gloomy-looking room at Brand Hall—a room known in the household as the Blue Drawing-room. It had not the look of a drawing-room exactly: it was paneled in oak, which had grown black with age, as had also the great oak beams that crossed the ceiling and the polished floor. The furniture also was of oak, and the hangings of dark but faded blue, while the blue velvet of the chairs and the square of Oriental carpet, in which blue tints also preponderated, did not add cheerfulness to the scene. One or two great blue vases set on the carved oak mantel-piece, and some smaller blue ornaments on a sideboard, matched the furniture in tint; but it was remarkable that on a day when country gardens were overflowing with blossom, there was not a single flower or green leaf in any of the vases. No smaller and lighter ornaments, no scrap of woman's handiwork—lace or embroidery—enlivened the place: no books were set upon the table. A fire would not have been out of season, for the evenings were chilly, and it would have had a cheery look; but there was no attempt at cheeriness. The woman who sat in one of the high-backed chairs was pale and sad: her folded hands lay listlessly clasped together on her lap, and the sombre garb that she wore was as unrelieved by any gleam of brightness as the room itself. In the gathering gloom of a chilly summer evening, even the rings upon her fingers could not flash. Her white face, in its setting of rough, wavy grey hair, over which she wore a covering of black lace, looked almost statuesque in its profound tranquillity. But it was not the tranquillity of comfort and prosperity that had settled on that pale, worn, high-featured face—it was rather the tranquillity that comes of accepted sorrow and inextinguishable despair.

She had sat thus for fully half an hour when the door was roughly opened, and the young man whom Mr. Colwyn had named as Wyvis Brand came lounging into the room. He

had been dining, but he was not in evening dress, and there was something unrestful and reckless in his way of moving round the room and throwing himself in the chair nearest his mother's, which roused Mrs. Brand's attention. She turned slightly towards him, and became conscious at once of the fumes of wine and strong tobacco with which her son had made her only too familiar. She looked at him for a moment, then clasped her hands tightly together and resumed her former position, with her sad face turned to the window. She may have breathed a sigh as she did so, but Wyvis Brand did not hear it, and if he had heard it, would not perhaps have very greatly cared.

"Why do you sit in the dark?" he said at last, in a vexed tone.

"I will ring for lights," Mrs. Brand answered quietly.

"Do as you like: I am not going to stay: I am going out," said the young man.

The hand that his mother had stretched out towards the bell fell to her side: she was a submissive woman, used to taking her son at his word.

"You are lonely here," she ventured to remark, after a short silence: "you will be glad when Cuthbert comes down."

"It's a beastly hole," said her son, gloomily. "I would advise Cuthbert to stay in Paris. What he will do with himself here, I can't imagine."

"He is happy anywhere," said the mother, with a stifled sigh.

Wyvis uttered a short, harsh laugh.

"That can't be said of us, can it?" he exclaimed, putting his hand on his mother's knee in a rough sort of caress. "We are generally in the shadow while Cuthbert is in the sunshine, eh? The influence of this old place makes me poetical, you see."

"*You* need not be in the shadow," said Mrs. Brand. But she said it with an effort.

"Needn't I?" said Wyvis. He thrust his hands into his pockets and leaned back in his chair with another laugh. "I have such a lot to make me cheerful, haven't I?"

His mother turned her eyes upon him with a look of yearning tenderness which, even if the room had been less dimly lighted, he would not have seen. He was not much in the habit of looking for sympathy in other people's faces.

"Is the place worse than you expected?" she asked, with a tremor in her voice.

"It is mouldier—and smaller," he replied, curtly. "One's childish impressions don't go for much. And it is in a miserable state—roof out of repair—fences falling down—drainage imperfect. It has been allowed to go to rack and ruin while we were away."

"Wyvis, Wyvis," said his mother, in a tone of pain, "I kept you away for your own sake. I thought you would be happier abroad."

"Oh—happier!" said the young man, rather scornfully. "Happiness isn't meant for me: it isn't in my line. It makes no difference to me whether I am here or in Paris. I should have been here long ago if I had had any idea that things were going wrong in this way."

"I suppose," said Mrs. Brand, carefully controlling her voice, "that you will not have the visitors you spoke of if the house is in so bad a state."

"Not have visitors? Of course I shall have visitors. What else is there for me to do with myself? We shall get the house put pretty straight by the 12th. Not that there will be any shooting worth speaking of on *my* place."

"If nobody comes before the 12th, I think we can make the house habitable. I will do my best, Wyvis."

Wyvis laughed again, but in a softer key. "You!" he said. "You can't do much, mother. It isn't the sort of thing you care about. You stay in your own rooms and do your needle-work; I'll see to the house. Some men are coming long before the 12th—the day after to-morrow, I believe."

"Who?"

"Oh, Dering and St. John and Ponsonby, I expect. I don't know whether they will bring any one else."

"The worst men of the worst set you know!" sighed his mother, under her breath. "Could not you have left them behind?"

She felt rather than saw how he frowned—how his hand twitched with impatience.

"What sort of friends am I likely to have?" he said. "Why not those that amuse me most?"

Then he rose and went over to the window, where he stood for some time looking out. Turning round at last, he perceived from a slight familiar movement of his mother's hand over her eyes that she was weeping, and it seemed as if his heart smote him at the sight.

"Come, mother," he said, kindly, "don't take what I say and do so much to heart. You know I'm no good, and never shall do anything in the world. You have Cuthbert to comfort you—"

"Cuthbert is nothing to me—*nothing*—compared with you, Wyvis."

The young man came to her side and put his hand on her shoulder. The passionate tone had touched him.

"Poor mother!" he said, softly. "You've suffered a good deal through me, haven't you? I wish I could make you forget all the past—but perhaps you wouldn't thank me if I could."

"No," she said, leaning forward so as to rest her forehead against his arm. "No. For there has been brightness in the past, but I see little brightness in the future either for you or for me."

"Well, that is my own fault," said Wyvis, lightly but bitterly. "If it had not been for my own youthful folly I shouldn't be burdened as I am now. I have no one but myself to thank."

"Yes, yes, it was my fault. I pressed you to do it—to tie yourself for life to the woman who has made you miserable!" said Mrs. Brand, in a tone of despairing self-accusation. "I fancied—then—that we were doing right."

"I suppose we were doing right," said Wyvis Brand sternly, but not as if the thought gave him any consolation. "It was better perhaps that I should marry the woman whom I thought I loved—instead of leaving her or wronging her—but I wish to God that I had never seen her face!"

"And to think that I persuaded you into marrying her," moaned the mother, rocking herself backward and forward in the extremity of her regretful anguish; "I—who ought to have been wiser—who might have interfered——"

"You couldn't have interfered to much purpose. I was mad about her at the time," said her son, beginning to walk about the room in a restless, aimless manner. "I wish, mother, that you would cease to talk about the past. It seems to me sometimes like a dream; if you would but let it lie still, I think that I could fancy it was a dream. Remember that I do not blame you. When I rage against the bond, I am perfectly well aware that it was one of my own making. No remonstrance, no command would have availed with me for a moment. I was determined to go my own way, and I went."

It was curious to remark that the roughness and harshness of his first manner had dropped away from him as it did drop now and then. He spoke with the polished utterance of an educated man. It was almost as though he at times put on a certain boorishness of demeanor, feeling it in some way demanded of him by circumstances—but not natural to him after all.

"I will try not to vex you, Wyvis," said his mother, wistfully.

"You do not vex me exactly," he answered, "but you stir my old memories too often. I want to forget the past. Why else did I come down here, where I have never been since I was a child? where Juliet never set foot, and where I have no association with that miserable passage in my life?"

"Then why do you bring those men down, Wyvis? For *they* know the past: *they* will recall old associations——"

"They amuse me. I cannot be without companions. I do not pretend to cut myself off from the whole world."

As he spoke thus briefly and coldly, he stopped to strike a match, and then lighted the wax candles that stood on the black sideboard. By this act he meant perhaps to put a stop to the conversation of which he was heartily tired. But Mrs. Brand, in the half-bewildered condition of mind to which long anxiety and sorrow had reduced her, did not know the virtue of silence, and did not possess the magic quality of tact.

"You might find companions down here," she said, pertinaciously, "people suited to your position—old friends of your father's, perhaps——"

"Will they be so willing to make friends with my father's son?" Wyvis burst out bitterly. Then, seeing from her white and stricken face that he had hurt her, he came to her side and kissed her penitently. "Forgive me, mother," he said, "if I say what you don't like. I've been hearing about my father ever since I came to Beaminster two days ago. I have heard nothing but what confirmed my previous idea about his character. Even poor old Colwyn couldn't say any good of him. He went to the devil as fast as ever he could go, and his son seems likely to follow in his footsteps. That's the general opinion, and, by George, I think I shall soon do something to justify it."

"You need not live as your father did, Wyvis," said his mother, whose tears were flowing fast.

"If I don't, nobody will believe it," said the young man, moodily. "There is no fighting against fate. The Brands are doomed, mother: we shall die out and be forgotten—all the better for the world, too. It is time we were done with: we are a bad lot."

"Cuthbert is not bad. And you—Wyvis, you have your child."

"Have I? A child that I have not seen since it was six months old! Brought up by its mother—a woman without heart or principle or anything that is good! Much comfort the child is likely to be to me when I get hold of it."

"When will that be?" said Mrs. Brand, as if speaking to herself rather than to him. But Wyvis replied:

"When she is tired of it—not before. I do not know where she is."

"Does she not draw her allowance?"

"Not regularly. And she refused her address when she last appeared at Kirby's. I suppose she wants to keep the child away from me. She need not trouble. The last thing I want is her brat to bring up."

"Wyvis!"

But to his mother's remonstrating exclamation Wyvis paid no attention in the least: his mood was fitful, and he was glad to step out of the ill-lighted room into the hall, and thence to the silence and solitude of the grounds about the house.

Brand Hall had been practically deserted for the last few years. A tenant or two had occupied it for a little time soon after its late master's withdrawal from the country; but the house was inconvenient and remote from towns, and it was said, moreover, to be damp and unhealthy. A caretaker and his wife had, therefore, been its only inhabitants of late, and a great deal of preparation had been required to make it fit for its owner when he at last wrote to his agents in Beaminster to intimate his intention of settling at the Hall.

The Brands had for many a long year been renowned as the most unlucky family in the neighborhood. They had once possessed a great property in the county; but gambling losses and speculation had greatly reduced their wealth, and even in the time of Wyvis Brand's grandfather the prestige of the family had sunk very low. In the days of Mark Brand, the father of Wyvis, it sank lower still. Mark Brand was not only "wild," but weak: not only weak, but wicked. His career was one of riotous dissipation, culminating in what was generally spoken of as "a low marriage"—with the barmaid of a Beaminster public-house. Mary Wyvis had never been at all like the typical barmaid of fiction or real life: she was always pale, quiet, and refined-looking, and it was not difficult to see how she had developed into the sorrowful, careworn woman whom Wyvis Brand called mother; but she came of a thoroughly bad stock, and was not untouched in reputation. The county people cut Mark Brand after his marriage, and never took any notice of his wife; and they were horrified when he insisted on naming his eldest son after his wife's family, as if he gloried in the lowliness of her origin. But when Wyvis was a small boy, his father resolved that neither he nor his children should be flouted and jeered at by county magnates any longer. He went abroad, and remained abroad until his death, when Wyvis was twenty years of age and Cuthbert, the younger son, was barely twelve. Some people said that the discovery of some particularly disgraceful deed was imminent when he left his native shores, and that it was for this reason that he had never returned to England; but Mark Brand himself always spoke as if his health were too weak, his nerves too delicate, to bear the rough breezes of his own country and the brusque manners of his compatriots. He had brought up his son according to his own ideas; and the result did not seem entirely satisfactory. Vague rumors occasionally

reached Beaminster of scrapes and scandals in which the young Brands figured; it was said that Wyvis was a particularly black sheep, and that he did his best to corrupt his younger brother Cuthbert. The news that he was coming back to Brand Hall was not received with enthusiasm by those who heard it.

Wyvis' own story had been a sad one—perhaps more sad than scandalous; but it was a story that the Beaminster people were never to hear aright. Few knew it, and most of those who knew it had agreed to keep it secret. That his wife and child were living, many persons in Paris were aware; that they had separated was also known, but the reason of that separation was to most persons a secret. And Wyvis, who had a great dislike to chatterers, made up his mind when he came to Beaminster that he would tell to nobody the history of the past few years. Had it not been for his mother's sad face, he fancied that he could have put it out of his mind altogether. He half resented the pertinacity with which she seemed to brood upon it. The fact that she had forwarded—had almost insisted upon—the unfortunate marriage, weighed heavily upon her mind. There had been a point at which Wyvis would have given it up. But his mother had espoused the side of the girl, persuaded the young man to fulfill his promises to her—and repented it ever since. Mrs. Wyvis Brand had developed an uncontrollable love for strong drink, as well as a temper that made her at times more like a mad woman than an ordinary human being; and when she one day disappeared from her husband's home, carrying his child with her, and announcing in a subsequent letter that she did not mean to return, it could hardly be wondered at if Wyvis drew a long breath of relief, and hoped that she never would.

CHAPTER VI.

JANETTA AT HOME.

When Lady Caroline drove away from Gwynne Street, Janetta was left by the tumble-down iron gate with her father, in whose hand she had laid both her own. He looked at her interrogatively, smiled a little and said—"Well, my dear?" with a softening of his whole face which made him positively beautiful in Janetta's eyes.

"Dear, dearest father!" said the girl, with an irrepressible little sob. "I am so glad to see you again!"

"Come in, my dear," said Mr. Colwyn, who was not an emotional man, although a sympathetic one. "We have been expecting you all day. We did not think that they would keep you so long at the Court."

"I'll tell you all about it when I get in," said Janetta, trying to speak cheerily, with an instinctive remembrance of the demands usually made upon her fortitude in her own home. "Is mamma in?" She always spoke of the present Mrs. Colwyn, as "mamma," to distinguish her from her own mother. "I don't see any of the children."

"Frightened away by the grand carriage, I expect," said Mr. Colwyn, with a grim smile. "I see a head or two at the window. Here, Joey, Georgie, Tiny—where are you all? Come and help to carry your sister's things upstairs." He went to the front door and called again; whereupon a side door opened, and from it issued a slipshod, untidy-looking woman in a shawl, while over her shoulder and under her arm appeared a little troop of children in various stages of growth and untidiness. Mrs. Colwyn had the peculiarity of never being ready for any engagement, much less for any emergency: she had been expecting Janetta all day, and with Janetta some of the Court party; but she was nevertheless in a state of semi-undress, which she tried to conceal underneath her shawl; and on the first intimation of the approach of Lady Caroline's carriage she had shut herself and the children into a back room, and declared her intention of fainting on the spot if Lady Caroline entered the front door.

"Well, Janetta," she said, as she advanced towards her stepdaughter and presented one faded cheek to be kissed, "so your grand friends have brought you home! Of course they wouldn't come in; I did not expect them, I am sure. Come into the front room—and children, don't crowd so; your sister will speak to you by-and-bye."

"Oh, no, let me kiss them now," said Janetta, who was receiving a series of affectionate hugs that went far to blind her eyes to the general deficiency of orderliness and beauty in the house to which she had come. "Oh, darlings, I am so glad to see you again! Joey, how you have grown! And Tiny isn't Tiny any longer! Georgie, you have been plaiting your hair! And here are Curly and Jinks! But where is Nora?"

"Upstairs, curling her hair," shouted the child who was known by the name of Jinks. While Georgie, a well-grown girl of thirteen, added in a lower tone,

"She would not come down until the Court people had gone. She said *she* didn't want to be patronized."

Janetta colored, and turned away. Meanwhile Mrs. Colwyn had dropped into the nearest arm-chair, and Mr. Colwyn strayed in and out of the room with the expression of a dog that has lost its master. Georgie hung upon Janetta's arm, and the younger children either clung to their elder sister, or stared at her with round eyes and their fingers in their mouths. Janetta felt uncomfortably conscious of being more than usually interesting to them all. Joe, the eldest boy, a dusty lad of fourteen, all legs and arms, favored her with a broad grin expressive of delight, which his sister did not understand. It was Tiny, the most gentle and delicate of the tribe, who let in a little light on the subject.

"Did they send you away from school for being naughty?" she asked, with a grave look into Janetta's face.

A chuckle from Joey, and a giggle from Georgie, were instantly repressed by Mr. Colwyn's frown and Mrs. Colwyn's acid remonstrance.

"What are you thinking of, children? Sister is never naughty. We do not yet quite understand why she has left Miss Polehampton's so suddenly, but of course she has some good reason. She'll explain it, no doubt, to her papa and me. Miss Polehampton has been a great deal put out about it all, and has written a long letter to your papa, Janetta; and, indeed, it seems to *me* as if it would have been more becoming if you had kept to your own place and not tried to make friends with those above you——"

"Who are those above her, I should like to know?" broke in the grey-haired surgeon with some heat. "My Janet's as good as the best of them any day. The Adairs are not such grand people as Miss Polehampton makes out—I never heard of such insulting distinctions!"

"Fancy Janetta being sent away—regularly expelled!" muttered Joey, with another chuckle.

"You are very unkind to talk in that way!" said Janetta, addressing him, because at that moment she could not bear to look at Mr. Colwyn. "It was not *that* that made Miss Polehampton angry. It was what she called insubordination. Miss Adair did not like to see me having meals at a side-table—though I didn't mind one single bit!—and she left her own place and sat by me—and then Miss Polehampton was vexed—and everything followed naturally. It was not just my being friends with Miss Adair that made her send me away."

"It seems to me," said Mr. Colwyn, "that Miss Adair was very inconsiderate."

"It was all her love and friendship, father," pleaded Janetta. "And she had always had her own way; and of course she did not think that Miss Polehampton really meant——"

"

Her weak little excuses were cut short by a scornful laugh from her stepmother.

"It's easy to see that you have been made a cat's-paw of, Janetta," she said. "Miss Adair was tired of school, and took the opportunity of making a to-do about you, so as to provoke the schoolmistress and get sent away. It does not matter to her, of course: *she* hasn't got her living to earn. And if you lose your teaching, and Miss Polehampton's recommendations by it, it doesn't affect her. Oh, I understand these fine ladies and their ways."

"Indeed," said Janettha, in distress, "you quite misunderstand Miss Adair, mamma. Besides, it has not deprived me of my teaching: Miss Polehampton had told me that I might go to her sister's school at Worthing if I liked; and she only let me go yesterday because she became irritated at—at—some of the things that were said——"

"Yes, but I shall not let you go to Worthing," said Mr. Colwyn, with sudden decisiveness. "You shall not be exposed to insolence of this kind any longer. Miss Polehampton had no right to treat you as she did, and I shall write and tell her so."

"And if Janettha stays at home," said his wife complainingly, "what is to become of her career as a music-teacher? She can't get lessons here, and there's the expense——"

"I hope I can afford to keep my daughter as long as I am alive," said Mr. Colwyn with some vehemence. "There, don't be vexed, my dear child," and he laid his hand tenderly on Janettha's shoulder, "nobody blames you; and your friend erred perhaps from over-affection; but Miss Polehampton"—with energy—"is a vulgar, self-seeking, foolish old woman, and I won't have you enter into relations with her again."

And then he left the room, and Janettha, forcing back the tears in her eyes, did her best to smile when Georgie and Tiny hugged her simultaneously and Jinks beat a tattoo upon her knee.

"Well," said Mrs. Colwyn, lugubriously, "I hope everything will turn out for the best; but it is not at all nice, Janettha, to think that Miss Adair has been expelled for your sake, or that you are thrown out of work without a character, so to speak. I should think the Adairs would see that, and would make some compensation. If they don't offer to do so, your papa might suggest it——"

"I'm sure father would never suggest anything of the kind," Janettha flashed out; but before Mrs. Colwyn could protest, a diversion was effected by the entrance of the missing Nora, and all discussion was postponed to a more fitting moment.

For to look at Nora was to forget discussion. She was the eldest of the second Mrs. Colwyn's children—a girl just seventeen, taller than Janettha and thinner, with the thinness of immature girlhood, but with a fair skin and a mop of golden-brown hair, which curled so naturally that her younger brother's statement concerning those fair locks must surely have been a libel. She had a vivacious, narrow, little face, with large eyes like a child's—that is to say, they had the transparent look that one sees in some children's eyes, as if the color had been laid on in a single wash without any shadows. They were very pretty eyes, and gave light and expression to a set of rather small features, which might have been insignificant if they had belonged to an insignificant person. But Nora Colwyn was anything but insignificant.

"Have your fine friends gone?" she said, peeping into the room in pretended alarm. "Then I may come in. How are you, Janetta, after your sojourn in the halls of dazzling light?"

"Don't be absurd, Nora," said her sister, with a sudden backward dart of remembrance to the tranquil beauty of the rooms at Helmsley Court and the silver accents of Lady Caroline. "Why didn't you come down before?"

"My dear, I thought the nobility and gentry were blocking the door," said Nora, kissing her. "But since they are gone, you might as well come upstairs with me and take off your things. Then we can have tea."

Obediently Janetta followed her sister to the little room which they always shared when Janetta was at home. It might have looked very bare and desolate to ordinary eyes, but the girl felt the thrill of pleasure that all young creatures feel to anything that bears the name of home, and became aware of a satisfaction such as she had not experienced in her luxurious bedroom at Helmsley Court. Nora helped her to take off her hat and cloak, and to unpack her box, insisting meanwhile on a detailed relation of all the events that had led to Janetta's return three weeks before the end of the term, and shrieking with laughter over what she called "Miss Poley's defeat."

"But, seriously, Nora, what shall I do with myself, if father will not let me go to Worthing?"

"Teach the children at home," said Nora, briskly; "and save me the trouble of looking after them. I should like that. Or get some pupils in the town. Surely the Adairs will recommend you!"

This constant reference to possible aid from the Adairs troubled Janetta not a little, and it was with some notion of combatting the idea that she repaired to the surgery after tea, in order to get a few words on the subject with her father. But his first remark was on quite a different matter.

"Here's a pretty kettle of fish, Janet! The Brands are back again!"

"So I heard you say to Lady Caroline."

"Mark Brand was a cousin of your mother's," said Mr. Colwyn, abruptly; "and a bad lot. As for these sons of his, I know nothing about them—absolutely nothing. But their mother——" he shook his head significantly.

"We saw them to day," said Janetta.

"Ah, an accident of that kind would be a shock to her: she does not look strong. They wrote to me from the 'Clown,' where they had stayed for the last two days; some

question relative to the drainage of Brand Hall. I went to the 'Crown' and saw them. He's a fine-looking man."

"He has not altogether a pleasant expression," remarked Janetta, thinking of Lady Caroline's strictures; "but I—liked—his face."

"He looks ill-tempered," said her father. "And I can't say that he showed me much civility. He did not even know that your poor mother was dead. Never asked whether she had left any family or anything."

"Did you tell him?" asked Janetta, after a pause.

"No. I did not think it worth while. I am not anxious to cultivate his acquaintance."

"After all, what does it matter?" said the girl coaxingly, for she thought she saw a shadow of disappointment upon his face.

"No, what does it matter?" said her father, brightening up at once. "As long as we are happy with each other, these outside people need not disturb us, need they?"

"Not a bit," said Janetta. "And—you are not angry with me, are you, father, dear?"

"Why should I be, my Janet? You have done nothing wrong that I know of. If there is any blame it attaches to Miss Adair, not to you."

"But I do not want you to think so, father. Miss Adair is the greatest friend that I have in all the world."

And she found a good many opportunities of repeating; this conviction of hers during the next few days, for Mrs. Colwyn and Nora were not slow to repeat the sentiment with which they had greeted her—that the Adairs were "stuck-up" fine people, and that they did not mean to take any further notice of her now that they had got what they desired.

Janetta stood up gallantly for her friend, but she did feel it a little hard that Margaret had not written or come to see her since her return home. She conjectured—and in the conjecture she was nearly right—that Lady Caroline had sacrificed her a little in order to smooth over things with her daughter: that she had represented Janetta as resolved upon going, resolved upon neglecting Margaret and not complying with her requests; and that Margaret was a little offended with her in consequence. She wrote an affectionate note of excuse to her friend, but Margaret made no reply.

In the first ardor of a youthful friendship, Janetta's heart ached over this silence, and she meditated much as she lay nights upon her little white bed in Nora's attic (for she had not time to meditate during the day) upon the smoothness of life which seemed necessary to the Adairs and the means they took for securing it. On the whole, their life